

“Together As One” (April 2016)

April 27, 2016

By Rev Paul Graham

It's not often that I engage in anthropomorphic studies, but every so often something on “the Human Condition” catches my eye and I dig a little deeper. The particular study that I engaged upon was a healthy dose of “people-watching” in a cafe.

I was aware that the clientele in this establishment fitted into various camps, or tribes, if you will. There was the “maternal tribe” with accompanying bundles of joy, changing bags and buggies designed to be just big enough to successfully block the gaps between the tables. There were various “executive tribes”, couples or triplets of be-suited earnest-looking types, communicating with each other in technological and managerial language to the exclusion of all others. Finally, there was the “shoppers guild tribe”, groups of people who mark their territory with bags stuffed full of the results of their hunting-and-gathering, all labelled and publicly declaring the location of their purchases.

Reflecting later, it struck me that we have been told that in this post-modern world we are now so individualistic, so self-centred, that our entire existence is one-episode-after-another on the path to self-fulfilment. Everything is geared around our needs as an individual, from the single-portion ready meal to the personalised gym programme, catering for me, me and only me.

But is that really the case?

Granted, there is much that champions the rights of the individual and its selfish siblings, the self-obsessed and the narcissistic. There is much that is positive about this as well; the rights of the individual in the face of the unjust multitude, the cry of the marginalised and the rise of fairness and equality.

But we also retain our “herd instinct,” as ably demonstrated in the cafe. We gravitate towards “tribes” and communities; we thrive in company and we find our identity in the group. Many of us label ourselves to belong to a wider group than ourselves: “I’m an EastEnders fan”, “I’m a Gooner”, “I’m a member of Weight Watchers”, “I’m a Christian”.

Research has shown that though there has been a drop in membership of traditional organisations such as Scouts, Brownies, etc., there has been a surge in popularity for organisations that are “cause-driven”, such as Greenpeace and the National Trust. People, it would seem, get more passionate when there is an aim in view, whether it is saving the whale or visiting stately homes for the next cream tea.

What we get is variety, a diversification of interest that has its outlet in all manner of spaces and places. There are groups set up for bus number collectors, for sci-fi fans, even for fans of WD-40, the multi-purpose DIY lubricant spray and healer of many a squeaky door hinge.

What we also get is a sense of how multi-coloured we all are as individuals. We may subscribe to the monthly WD-40 newsletter, we may also attend Weight Watchers, while also holding court among our Spock-eared fellows at a Star Trek convention. What we hold in common with one person in one place may become a cause of division in another group.

And it's this tension that makes our humanity all the richer; we will agree on some issues but not on others. We're not immune in church. Though it might suit me to have people who hang on my every word, nodding sagely in agreement at every theological nugget that drips from the pulpit (well, lectern), the reality is that even in the world of the church we disagree with each other.

In fact, Baptists are so good at disagreeing with each other they ought to make it a degree course. I remember at my ordination, Anthony Clarke, my former tutor and a very wise man, said that if you put ten Baptists in a room, you'll get 12 different opinions. Sometimes disagreements in church can be minor, resolved by a handshake, a recognition that "never the twain shall meet" and we move on; sadly some can be far from that and can cause splits, divisions and schisms.

Our own church here in Clare has had its fair share of disagreements between people and I'm sure that there are more to come. However, that's not what is important for now.

Now we are celebrating the church, not just for all its diversity and difference, but also for what we hold in common. Like those who are united by a common bond of family, we are united by a common bond under one Father. We are united by a common bond of community under the mystery that is the Three-in-One God that we worship. We are united by a common bond that is sealed each time we remember Jesus' death and resurrection at the Communion Table. We are united by a common bond as we seek God's forgiveness, mindful that we must also forgive others and ourselves. We are united by a common bond that seeks to work out in practice the command to love God and to love others as we love ourselves. We are united by a common bond that shouts of Good News from the rooftops and that we should reflect that same Good News in our daily lives. We are united by a common bond that lives life together as Easter People, declaring (in the words of an old children's song) that "God's not dead, no, He is alive!"

Our Baptist Christian tribe in Clare gathers together regularly; whether in pairs, small groups or in larger numbers on a Sunday. We declare in our words, worship and silence that we are united by God, joined to Him by His saving grace on the cross. What makes us different to the other many "tribes" that we may also be part of, is that as Christians we recognise that it's the living God who has done the applying for us, filled in our membership forms and paid for our subscriptions. Everything He offers is free to us; all He asks of us is everything in return.

Now that's a tribe that I want to be part of.

Paul Graham