

## ROM 15.13: A THREEFOLD BLESSING

[Chelmsford 2 March 2014]

Today I preach my last sermon as pastor of Central Baptist Church  
Next Sunday afternoon my friend Nick Mercer preaches me out  
And the following Sunday the church wants to give me a surprise  
So this is the final Sunday as a preacher. What should I say?

### 1. MAY GOD BLESS YOU

Should my sermon focus on the challenge of saying goodbye?  
Should I take as my text Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders at Miletus – there we read that when Paul had finished his sermon **“they were all crying as they hugged him and kissed goodbye”** (Acts 20.37). Yes, saying goodbye is never easy.

Certainly I am not going to find the next two weeks easy. But maybe that is a good sign.  
In this respect I came across two words of wisdom when preparing this sermon:

- *“Don't cry because it's over. Smile because it happened”* (Theodor Seuss Geisel).
- *“How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard”* (Carol Sobieski & Thomas Meehan)

Yes, it is precisely because God has blessed us in our life together that I shall find moving on difficult. My one consolation is that there will come a time hopefully when Caroline and I can come back and worship with you again.

Or should my sermon focus on the opportunities for the Gospel before us?

My very first sermon as pastor of this church, preached on Sunday morning 14 March 1993, was based had this focus. **“There is a real opportunity for great and worthwhile work”** (1 Cor 16.8). This was the text God used to confirm my sense of call to Chelmsford.  
And over the years God has proved the truth of these words.

Or should I preach a ‘Gospel’ sermon and focus on the Lord Jesus and all that he has done for us?

Indeed, what about repeating the sermon I preached on my first Sunday evening here?  
1 Cor 1.23-24: **“We proclaim the crucified Christ, a message that is offensive to the Jews and nonsense to the Gentiles; but for those whom God has called, both Jews and Gentiles, this message is Christ, who is the power of God and the wisdom of God”**.  
Yes, there is a lot to be said for preaching on the difference that Jesus makes.

But in the end, I have decided to focus on the blessing found in Rom 15.13:

**“May God, the source of hope, fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in him, so that your hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit”**

Or in what may be the more familiar words of the NRSV:

**“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”**

## 2. MAY GOD BLESS CENTRAL BAPTIST CHURCH

Before I begin to unpack this wonderful blessing, please note that this is not a blessing for individual believers, but a blessing for a church.

In the first place, it was a blessing for the church for the church at Rome.

But as I have reflected on this text I believe that Paul's words are very apposite to the church here at Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford.

Over the years I have often said, '*a text without a context is a pretext*'.

And this is particularly true of this text.

Paul has been celebrating the amazing way in which Jesus can break down barriers.

The barriers Paul had in mind were those between Jews and Gentiles.

In his day, Jews and Gentiles had as much in common as cheese and chalk.

Their values were so different that neither community had any respect for one another.

The Jews viewed their Gentile neighbours as a godless and immoral bunch fit only for the fires of hell; while the Gentiles dismissed the Jews as a bunch of narrow-minded religious pedants. Both groups despised one another.

Friendships between Jews and Gentiles were almost unknown.

But then something amazing happened.

At Pentecost the church was born – and within a matter of a few years Jews and Gentiles found themselves worshipping together.

As the NT documents make clear, this coming together of two cultures created all kinds of tensions. They were one in Christ – but boy they had their differences too!

Throughout the whole of Romans 14 Paul spells out in very practical ways how these differences should be resolved.

At this point let me read to you Paul's concluding argument in Rom 15.5-13:

Paul is here celebrating the wonder of unity in diversity.

Just listen to Eugene Peterson's paraphrase in *The Message* which I think gets to the heart of what Paul is saying.

**“May our dependably steady and warmly personal God develop maturity in you so that you get along with each other as well as Jesus gets along with us all. Then we'll be a choir – not our voices only, but our very lives singing in harmony in a stunning anthem to the God and Father of our Master Jesus**

**So reach out and welcome one another to God's glory.... Just think of all the Scriptures that will come true in what we do! For instance:**

**‘Then I'll join outsiders in a hymn-sing; I'll sing to your name!**

**And this one: ‘Outsiders and insiders, rejoice together!**

**And again: ‘People of all nations, celebrate God! All colours and races, give hearty praise!’.....**

**Oh! May the God of green hope fill you up with joy, fill you up with peace, so that your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over with hope!”**

### 3. MAY GOD BLESS YOU BY KEEPING YOU ONE

Paul's prayer of blessing on the church at Rome was linked with his concern for the church's unity. Just a few verses earlier Paul had written: "**Accept one another for the glory of God, as Christ has accepted you**" (Rom15.7).

This is the context in which Paul says: "*May God bless you*".

In effect, he is saying '*May God bless you by keeping you one*' – for it is only as you are one that you will know the blessings of joy, peace, and hope.

It is precisely at this point that Paul's prayer of blessing becomes amazingly relevant to us here in Chelmsford.

Let me explain. In many ways our church is very different from the church at Rome. As far as I am aware there is not one Jew amongst us. We are a bunch of Gentiles, of non-Jews, with the result that the issues which the church faced in Rome are not ours. And yet, we are in some ways very similar to the church in Rome.

For we, like the church in Rome, are a very diverse church.

- We have young people – and we have older people
- We have some people doing fairly well for themselves – and other people finding it difficult to make ends meet
- We have people who have been blessed with university education – while others had to leave school at 16, if not before
- We have people of colour, and people of no colour
- We have true blue Tories, red hot socialists, and even some Lib-Dems to boot
- We have some died-in-the-wool Baptists who are more than counter-balanced by people of other backgrounds and none
- We have people who rave over Mozart, Haydn and Vivaldi – and others who like anything but classical music
- We have people who love to sing traditional hymns played on the organ – and others who much prefer worship bands and modern songs

Compared to many a church we are unusually diverse.

And yet we are one in Christ.

Indeed, we are not just brothers and sisters to one another – we even make a pretty good first of loving one another as brothers and sisters.

True, we are not a perfect church – but frankly if there were such a thing as a perfect church none of us would dare to join it, because we would spoil it.

And yet, in spite of our warts and imperfections, we have a lot going for us.

So much so, that we don't have to cross our fingers when in the words of our strap-line we say '*Central Baptist – a church to belong*'

It is this amazing combination of unity and diversity which has made me so proud to be your pastor. This is a very special church.

True, if we go back into the distant past, there was a time when we were not so united.

Indeed, in the early years of my ministry, we were a somewhat dysfunctional church.

When changes were proposed, there was a good deal of conflict and disagreement.

But all that is long past. Today there is a unity of spirit and purpose which is second to none.

And as I now contemplate leaving you, my deepest desire is that this shall remain so.

I have no idea what kind of person will succeed me  
It will certainly be a person who is a younger than me – and rightly so.  
As a younger person, my successor will undoubtedly have different ideas from me – and again, rightly so. Changes are needed.  
Some of those changes may not be to my taste – but so what?  
If this church is to grow and develop it has got to attract a younger generation with views and tastes very different from my own.  
However different my successor will be, I will back him and her.  
And I trust that you will do the same

Yes, more than anything else I want to see this church remain one  
For it is this unity in diversity which is such a marvellous sounding board for the Gospel  
This is the reason that I have chosen Rom 15.13 as my text for my final sermon  
**May God, the source of hope, fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in him, so that your hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit” [GNB]**  
**"May the God of hope fill you will all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" [NRSV]**

So with this long preamble, let me briefly look at Paul’s three-fold blessing:-

#### 4. MAY GOD BLESS YOU ALL WITH JOY

“Joy”, it has been said, *“is the infallible sign of the presence of God”*  
The Kingdom of God says Paul in Rom 15.17 is marked by **joy**  
Peter in his First Letter writes: **“You rejoice with a great and glorious joy which words cannot express, because you are receiving the salvation of your souls”** (1 Pet 1.8).

Joy is absolutely central to the Christian experience. A gloomy Christian is a contradiction.  
William Tyndale described the Christian gospel as *"good, merry, glad and joyful tidings, that makes a man's heart glad and makes him sing, dance and leap for joy"*.

Time and again, when people come to faith, they experience a deep sense of joy.

- The **Ethiopian eunuch**, after he had come to faith & been baptised by Philip, went on his way **"full of joy"** (Acts 8.39)
- **Blaise Pascal**, the French philosopher, described his initial encounter with Jesus on 23rd Nov 1654 as *"joy, joy, joy, tears of joy"*
- **CS Lewis**, the Oxbridge don and Christian apologist, called his autobiography **"Surprised by Joy"** - there he tells the story of how he moved from complete disbelief to faith in Christ, and in so doing was overwhelmed by joy.

**“May God fill you with joy”**, says Paul.

But this is not just a prayer for individuals. Paul is using the second personal plural.  
May God fill you as a church with **“joy”**. May you in our life together know that **"indescribable and glorious joy"** (NRSV) of which the Bible speaks!

When you worship God, worship him joyfully.

To quote George Carey, a former Archbishop of Canterbury, let’s not *“sing glorious hymns like 'Praise my soul the King of Heaven' as if we were paying the milk bill; or, if we are Anglicans... sing the 'Te Deum'... as if we are taking a dose of cod liver oil!"*

Yes, of course, there is more to Christian joy than swinging from the chandeliers - but frankly if there is never a time when we want to swing from the chandeliers, then I wonder whether we have ever discovered joy in the first place.

Don't be afraid to express your joy in Christ. Don't repress your true feelings. Be real and express your feelings of joy in Christ. Smile & be joyful together.

The German theologian Helmut Thielicke once said: "*A church is in a bad way when it banishes laughter from the sanctuary and leaves it to the cabaret, the night club and the toastmasters*". I believe that he was right.

Worship is not intended to be a miserable experience.

Worship is intended to be a joyful experience.

**“May God... fill you with joy”**

## **5. MAY GOD BLESS YOU ALL WITH PEACE**

**Peace** is the sister of **joy**.

God's Kingdom is a matter of **“peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”** (Rom 14.17)

**Peace**, together with **joy**, is one of the seven fruits of the Spirit.

In Rom 5.1 we read: **“Now that we have been put right with God through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”** (Rom 5.1). Yes, when we put our trust in God we discover that peace of heart which the Lord Jesus alone can give.

But we also discover that we have peace with one another.

For Jesus has made us one – we have become members of a new family, the church.

Paul with Jews and Greeks in mind wrote in Eph 2.16: **“By his death on the cross Christ destroyed their enmity; by means of the cross he united both races into one body and brought them back to God”**

True, we may still have different perspectives. But they need be no longer divisive.

I particularly like the NRSV version of Rom 15.5, 6:: **“May the God of steadfastness & encouragement grant you to live in HARMONY with one another... so that together you may with one voice glorify the God & Father of our Lord Jesus Christ”**.

Here is a reminder that when we praise God with one voice, we are not all necessarily singing the same notes - rather we combine to harmonise with one another!

**“May God fill you with peace”**

## **6. MAY GOD BLESS YOU ALL WITH HOPE**

The hope that Paul has in mind is **“the hope of sharing God's glory”** (Rom 5.2).

This hope is not wishful thinking. Christian hope has nothing in common with the false hope which accompanies the first four hours of a diet.

It is the resurrection which makes our hope sure and certain.

As the Apostle Peter wrote: **“God gave us new life by raising Jesus Christ from death.**

**This fills us with a living hope”** (1 Peter 1.3)

It is because of Jesus that we can look death in the face; because of him for us death is not the end, but rather the gateway into a fuller life.

Christians by definition are people of hope. What’s true of us as individuals is also true of us as a church. In our life together we are called to overflow with hope.

William Barclay tells the story of a church meeting called to consider some emergency which had arisen. The chairman of the meeting began with a formal prayer in which he addressed God as the "*Almighty & eternal God, whose grace is sufficient for all things*".

However, unfortunately he seemed to be unable to relate his faith to the world in which he was living. For immediately after having prayed his prayer the chairman introduced the business of the evening by saying: "*Ladies and gentlemen, the situation in this church is completely hopeless, and nothing can be done*".

Barclay went on to say: "*There are no hopeless situations; there are only people who have grown hopeless about them... There is something in Christian hope that nothing can kill, that not all the shadows can quench - and that something is the conviction that God is still alive*".

I have no idea what the challenges will lie before this church in the future.

But my prayer is that God will enable you to be people of hope.

But to be people of hope, you will need to be people of faith.

Listen again to Paul’s prayer: **“May God, the source of hope, fill you with all joy and peace by means of your faith in him, so that your hope will continue to grow by the power of the Holy Spirit”**.

There are two almost parallel phrases here:

- **“by means of your faith”**
- and **“by the power of the Holy Spirit”**.

In the words of one commentator: *“openness to God and unreserved reliance on God is the fundamental presupposition of all human good”* (James Dunn).

My prayer for you is that in your future life together you will never give up hope, but rather that you will be filled to overflowing with hope – hope not just for the future, but also hope for the here and now

## **IN CONCLUSION**

So, in conclusion, let me encourage you to put your trust in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then, in the words of Eugene Peterson's paraphrase: ***“May the God of green hope fill you up with joy, fill you up with peace, so that your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over with hope!”***