Abbey Baptist Church, Reading

Sunday Worship Service - 10.30 am 18th October 2026

Led by Bridget Gurney and Revd Zoltan Biro preaching

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Unity: Refusing to choose sides

Call to Worship

Awesome God, we come to sing your praises

Hallelujah, what a mighty God

Almighty Saviour, we come to learn from you

Hallelujah. Open our hearts and minds to your word

Holy Spirit, descend on each of us that we can praise you as we ought

Hallelujah to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Song MP 38 / BPW 3
As we are gathered, Jesus is here;
one with each other, Jesus is here;
joined by the Spirit, washed in the blood,
part of the body, the Church of God.
As we are gathered, Jesus is here;
one with each other, Jesus is here.
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Song MP 1 / BPW 470
A new commandment I give unto you:
that you love one another as I have loved you,
that you love one another as I have loved you.
By this shall all know that you are my disciples,
if you have love one for another.
By this shall all know that you are my disciples,
if you have love one for another.
Anon / based on John 13: 3a / Untraced / CCL Licence Number: 1763

Family time

Song BPW 471 *During the song the collection will be taken*
Bind us together, Lord,
bind us together
with cords that cannot be broken.
Bind us together, Lord,
bind us together,

O bind us together with love.

There is only one God,
there is only one King,
there is only one body,
that is why we sing:

Made for the glory of God,
purchased by his precious Son.
Born with the right to be clean,
for Jesus the victory has won.

You are the family of God,
you are the promise divine,
you are God's chosen desire,
you are the glorious new wine.
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Children and young people leave for their classes

Prayer

Bible Reading 1: 1Corinthians 1 v10-17 **Bible Reading 2:** 1 Corinthians 3 v1-9

Sermon - Unity: Refusing to Choose Sides - 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 and 3:1-17

As a minister I often come across different versions of this same story. Two brothers or sisters who grew up in the same house and both were very close to their mother. When she died, they argued about inheritance and her belongings. Things were said that shouldn't have been said. When the funeral came, they sat on opposite sides of the room and refused to talk with each other. Years later at family gatherings their chairs stayed empty. Neither sibling planned to lose the other. It happened over time, through small hurts, long silences and lack of forgiveness.

Maybe you also heard similar stories. Sometimes we can even experience this in church. We misunderstand each other and rather than talk about it we may consider leave our church family, or we stop talking with our brothers or sisters. When tension grows in a church, people stop trusting each other and act with suspicion.

I am not pointing fingers this morning, but I want to include myself in everything I say. Today we begin a series on respect, from Paul's two letters to the church in Corinth. We start with one question: how do we keep unity when everything in us wants to give up on our brothers and sisters?

Corinth sat on a narrow strip of land that connects the Peloponnesus peninsula with the mainland. It had two harbour on each side of the city. Merchants saved about a week at sea by carrying their goods across it, so the city was always full: sailors, dock workers, rope makers, blacksmiths, sail makers and a busy sex industry. People came from every part of the known world. Corinth was a truly international metropolis.

Paul came there at a hard time in his life. He had been laughed at in Athens, his co-workers had gone ahead, and he had no money, so he worked as a sail and tentmaker with Aquila and Priscilla to pay for his food. From that weakness, God started a church. Paul stayed eighteen months. Soon after he left, Apollos arrived and helped it grow.

The church was just like the city: Jews and non-Jews, rich and poor, and people with very different beliefs, because ideas travel on foot. That diversity in the Corinthian church could have been a gift. Instead, it slowly ripped them apart.

Paul begins warmly, calling them brothers and sisters. Then he uses two strong words.
Schisma means a tear, like cloth ripped down the middle: something that was whole and is now divided. Our word "schism" comes from it. The other word e*ris*, usually translated "quarrels," is stronger. It means, bitterness, a settled state of conflict. With *schisma* you can still be polite. You disagree, you go separate ways, you say "God bless you". With *eris* you cannot be polite, because respect is already gone. You no longer see a brother or sister who thinks differently. You see an enemy you cannot trust.

Disagreement is not the problem; every healthy family has it. The trouble starts when a difference of opinion becomes a difference of value, and I stop seeing you as family.

I. Four Parties, One Mistake (1 Corinthians 1:12)

Paul tells us what people were saying: "I follow Paul," "I follow Apollos," "I follow Cephas," "I follow Christ." As we look at each group, try to imagine yourself being in that party. "Where do I feel at home, and what temptation comes with that?" Every group began with something good.

1. **The Paul party, the traditionalists.** Paul had founded the church, so for them his word was final. It is right to honour those who laid the foundations. The danger comes when we say "this is how we have always done it", and tradition or protocol becomes more important than what God is doing now.
2. **The Apollos party, the intellectuals.** Apollos came from Alexandria, a great centre of learning, and he spoke beautifully. Some members admired the polished words and began to look down on people they saw as uneducated and simple. Wisdom is a gift. The danger comes when sounding impressive matters more than being faithful.
3. **The Cephas party, the legalists.** Peter had learned at Cornelius's house that God welcomes everyone, yet some of his followers still saw the old rules as the sign of maturity. Order is good. The danger comes when rules decide who belongs, and people feel they are being judged instead of feeling relaxed like being at home.
4. **The Jesus party, the "only Christ" group.** Nothing is wrong with following Christ, so this is the hardest one to talk about. The trouble was their answer to every challenge: "I don't have to listen to you, I only listen to Jesus." It is like a child saying "Dad said I could," when nobody can check and the conversation is over. Today it can sound like "This is God's will for our church," and then a careful question is treated as resistance to God. But God's will is something we discern together, with prayer, patience and honest questions.

So which group is right? Paul's answer is that none of them is. Each took one piece of the truth and made it a reason to stand apart from everyone else. If you see yourself in one of these, you are not alone. I see myself in more than one. This is not about shame. It is about seeing clearly, so that we can find our way back to each other.

II. Restoring Unity: Three Questions (1 Corinthians 1:13-17)

Paul asks three questions, and each one leads back to Christ.

1. **"Is Christ divided?"** You cannot cut Christ into pieces. No group has more of him, and no group has less. Imagine a family photograph torn in half, each person keeping one side and saying, "This is our real family." Both halves are missing someone. We do not become one by choosing the right half. We become one when we remember that Christ is whole, and that he has made us part of him.
2. **"Was Paul crucified for you?"** Only Jesus died for us, not Paul, not Apollos, not Peter, and not any leader we admire or find difficult. At the cross, every one of us stands in the same place: as someone who needed forgiveness and has received it. The person I find hardest to respect has received the same mercy I have. When I remember how much I have been forgiven, it becomes harder to hold on to a grudge.
3. **"Were you baptised in the name of Paul?"** Two weeks ago we celebrated the baptisms of Vian and Irene. We said that baptism is like a citizenship ceremony for God's Kingdom, where we promise loyalty to a new King. His name is Jesus: not Paul, Apollos or Peter, and not a group, style or tradition. If Jesus is our King, then everyone here is a fellow citizen of his Kingdom, and none of us is a stranger to the others.

III. Keeping Unity: Three Pictures (1 Corinthians 3:1-17)

Unity is not something we restore once. We look after it, week by week. In chapter 3, Paul gives three pictures about this

1. **Unity requires maturity (3:1-4).** Paul says he had to feed them milk, not solid food, because of their "jealousy and quarrelling." Think of two toddlers with one toy, both shouting "Mine!" It is less funny when adults do it over a title, a decision or an opinion. Paul is saying that maturity is measured not by how much we know, but by how well we love and listen. A mature believer can say "I might be wrong," can disagree and still stay in the room, and can hear something hard without walking away.
2. **Unity requires diverse gifts (3:5-9).** Paul planted, Apollos watered, and God made it grow. Nobody asks whether the sower or the one who waters matters more, because without both there is no harvest. Or think of an orchestra tuning up: the violins sound nothing like the drums. What feels like friction in a church is often the sound of different gifts in one room. The question is not whether we are alike, but whether we are playing the same piece.
3. **Unity requires Christ as our foundation (3:10-17).** A house can have beautiful windows, but if the foundation is wrong it will not last. What holds a church together is not the best programme or the strongest leader, but Christ himself. Then Paul says something serious: "you" is plural, and together we are God's temple, where his Spirit lives. God is at home among us, and that makes our unity precious.

Conclusion: Refusing to Take Sides

Look at how Paul responds. Some criticise him, and others use his name against their neighbours. He could have said, "Those who are with me, stand with me." He does not. He keeps calling them brothers and sisters, he refuses to fight any of the groups, and he gives up his own following.

Paul does not ask everyone to think the same. Unity begins when I notice a division forming, in the church, in a conversation or in my own heart, and decide not to take a side against a brother or sister. Often what is really happening is inside us: anger that wants to be heard, bitterness we have carried for a long time, selfishness, insecurity, pride. We are invited to name these honestly and leave them at the cross. The cross is safe, because the cost has already been paid.

So, this week:

1. **Pray** for the person you find hardest to respect, that you will see them as Christ does.
2. **Take one step** toward someone. Jesus said to be reconciled first, then worship (Mat 5:23-24).
3. **Ask before you assume.** Speak with people, not about them.
4. **Lay it down.** Bring anger or hurt to the cross and ask for grace to forgive as you were forgiven (Col 3:13).

On the night before he died, Jesus prayed that his followers would be one, so that the world would know the Father had sent him (John 17:21). The world will notice whether we care for one another.

Do we have empty chairs in our church? Probably, but let me tell you, those empty chairs do not have to stay empty. It may take a phone call, a hard conversation and a lot of time. But the God who welcomed us when we had nothing to offer can help us welcome one another.

Let us pray. *Lord Jesus, you are not divided, and you died for each one of us. Forgive us for the times we have taken sides. Show us the anger, hurt, pride and fear we have been carrying. We leave them with you. Give us courage to take the first step toward those we have drifted from, and humility to listen. Be the foundation of this church and the King of our hearts. Amen.*

Song MP 137

Father make us one
Father make us one
That the world may know
Thou hast sent the Son
Father make us one

Behold how pleasant
And how good it is
For brethren to dwell in unity
For there the Lord
Commands the blessing
Life forevermore
Rick Ridings

Communion

Invitation

Come everyone who wants to: Come if you can recite the creeds,

Come if you can’t remember the words to Jesus loves me;

Come if you’ve been in the church since birth,

Come if you’ve lost your way a few times but found your way today;

Come if you like to study theology, Come if you like to finger paint;

Come if you like tradition and ritual and ceremony,

Come if you like balloons and laughter and jumping in puddles.

Come if you like all these things and find the wonder of heaven in them all.

Come as you are: old and young.

Just as you are: one family, right now, each of you, every one of you,

and have a seat right here.

Welcome

It looks like bread, and it is bread. But God is incredibly imaginative.

There is a surprise in this bread, for within each crumb,

God has folded nothing less, than heaven.

And when we break it, and everyone has a piece, what we are doing is saying,

"Let's share together the story of Jesus."

It looks like a goblet of wine, and it is wine,

but God, being God, didn't leave it there,

and has squeezed into each drop, a promise for the whole world.

And when we pass it among us, and everyone has a taste,

it sort of whispers to our souls, and sort of tangles with memories,

telling us: God loves us, God loves us, God loves us, completely.

So, let's break bread and listen to the story, and share wine and hear the promise…

Story

One-night Jesus and the disciples were sitting in a room and the meal table was spread before them. There was lamb and herbs and bread and soon they were all filled. They were all talking to each other about the days and months that had passed. Peter, was telling them about how he felt when he stepped out of the boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee … do you remember that? Andrew talked about the time he found a small boy with two fish and five barley loaves and presented the boy and his meal to Jesus in front of that crowd of 5000. And how on that day everyone had enough. All the other disciples told their memories of what had happened to them while they were following Jesus.

Eventually Jesus himself interrupted them all and said, "Here's another story" and he lifted the bread lying on the table. He paused as everyone fell silent and listened, and he said, "This bread, this is the most important reminder you have of me. More than all these stories. This bread is an image of my body. I break it to show you that my own body will break. I want you all to break this bread so you all understand what's happening to me and remember what I have done for you: dying because I love you all so, so much."

All the disciples were speechless as Jesus passed the broken bread around. They didn't understand in the same way that none of us fully understand. And while the bread was passed Jesus lifted up the cup and for a moment while everyone fell silent again. "This wine," he said, "is another reminder of me. But it is a symbol of my blood that will be spilled when I die. But do not be afraid because placed within this is a promise, that I will be with you always wherever you go. I will never let you go, because I love you so much even death cannot separate us!"

And again, Jesus passed the wine round them all. They all took a sip and still none of them understood just as none of us could with honesty say we fully understand.

So today we share the very same meal that Jesus did with his friends: the bread and the wine that remind us of our stories of Jesus and what he did for us because he loves us so much.

“This bread is my body,” says Jesus. “Eat of it, all of you.”

Sharing bread

“This wine is my blood and within it is a promise. Drink of it, all of you.”

Sharing wine

Prayer of Intercession – Angel Yu

1. World Peace
Lord, we pray for the United States, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Yemen, and all nations affected by conflict. Please end the violence, protect innocent civilians, and guide world leaders to seek peace through wisdom and diplomacy. Comfort those who are grieving or displaced.

Lord Jesus, may Your peace overcome hatred, fear, and division. Amen.

2. The United Kingdom
Father, we pray for our country and its leaders. Grant them wisdom to promote justice, peace, and the well-being of all. Help those facing financial difficulties, rising living costs, housing pressures, and loneliness.

Lord Jesus, help us build caring communities filled with kindness, compassion, and practical support. Amen.

3. Our Church and Ministries
Lord, bless Abbey Baptist Church and all our ministries. Fill us with the Holy Spirit, and strengthen our pastors, leaders, volunteers, and teachers. Help us share the Gospel, make disciples, and grow in faith, unity, and love.

Lord Jesus, may our church bring glory to Your name. Amen.

4. Our Church Family
Loving Father, we pray for those seeking jobs, facing health problems, financial difficulties, waiting for immigration decisions or British citizenship, and supporting their children through school, university, and life decisions. Provide for their needs and guide their steps. Bring healing to the sick, comfort to the grieving, and strength to the weary. Especially guide and protect our young people and graduates, leading them to the right opportunities.

Heavenly Father, may Your Kingdom come and Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Let Your peace prevail and Your love shine through us.

In the precious name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Song BPW 473

Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you
in the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping;
when you laugh I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow
till we've seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven
we shall find such harmony,
born of all we've known together
of Christ's love and agony.

Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.

RICHARD GILLARD (b. 1953) / © 1977 Scripture in Song/ Thankyou Music / CCL Licence Number: 1763

Blessing

As we go out of Church today, may the Love of God bind us together. The Father bless us and keep us until we meet again. **Amen**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen

Events this week

Wednesday 21st	10.30	Renew Wellbeing
	12.00	Bible Study
	2.00	Discipleship course in the Upper Room (with Farsi translation)
Thursday 22nd	10.30	Bible Study – Listening to the Bible
	10.30	Toddlers
Friday 23rd	4.30	Table Tennis Club

Sunday 25th October 10.30 **Worship**
Humility: Putting Away the Need to Win
1 Corinthians 6:1–8; 4:6–7

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