What if the church really meant it?

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Psalm 133 (sung and read); *Acts* 4:32-35; *John* 17:20-23
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In 1995, just one year after the end of apartheid, South Africa hosted the Rugby World Cup. The national team, the Springboks, had long been a symbol of white Afrikaner identity, and many black South Africans saw the team as representing decades of exclusion and oppression. But President Nelson Mandela saw something else, an opportunity for healing.

Rather than reject the Springboks, Mandela embraced them. He learned the names of the players. He encouraged Black South Africans to support the team. And when the Springboks won the World Cup final against New Zealand, Mandela walked onto the pitch in a green and gold Springbok jersey, with the number 6 on the back, the number of team captain François Pienaar. When Nelson Mandela handed Pienaar the trophy, he said, 'Thank you, François for what you have done for South Africa.' Pienaar replied, 'No, Mr Mandela, thank you for what you have done.'

Pienaar later said that Mandela had become their talisman. He had come out of prison after 27 years, with forgiveness and the idea to build a rainbow nation. He understood the importance of rugby in his quest.

In that moment on the field, a symbol of division was transformed into a symbol of unity. Not by forgetting the past, but by reimagining the future. It was a moment of togetherness in a country beginning to heal from deep wounds.

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How wonderful it is, how pleasant,
for God's people to live together in harmony!
How very good and pleasant it is when kindred dwell together in unity.
How wonderful, how beautiful,
when brothers and sisters get along!

These different translations of the first line of Psalm 133 show the breadth of understanding, as scholars try to capture what this psalm says: wonderful, pleasant, very good, beautiful. No single translation can encapsulate how good it is when unity or harmony happens. But perhaps those amongst us today who saw Mandela on the field in Ellis Park have *experienced* Psalm 133.

Psalm 133 is one of the Songs of Ascent. These are 15 psalms that pilgrims sang as they journeyed up to Jerusalem for the 3 big festivals every year – the festival of Pentecost, the festival of Tabernacles, and Passover. Strangers from distant villages, different tribes, different customs, walked together towards Jerusalem, and up the sacred hill to worship in the Temple. These were people who didn't always agree, or even like each other, they became kindred for a time. Bound by the shared purpose of worshipping God.

Psalm 133 says unity is like precious oil on the head of Aaron. In the dry, dusty climate of Israel, oil was a gesture of honour and welcome. To anoint the head of a guest was to refresh them, to say, *you are valued here*. That image echoes through Psalm 23: 'You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.' Psalm 133 takes it further. It doesn't just speak of any oil, but of sacred oil, the kind reserved for priests.

Aaron, the first high priest, was anointed with this precious blend when he and his sons were set apart for priestly service in Exodus 29. The ceremony was rich with symbolism: special garments, sacrifices, and oil that marked them as belonging to God. In Exodus 30, God gives Moses the recipe for that oil - liquid myrrh, cinnamon, aromatic cane, cassia, and olive oil. Cassia, with its strong scent, symbolised dedication, holiness, and the lasting presence of God.

This special oil wasn't for ordinary use. It was sacred, set apart. And it was poured out in abundance, so much that it flowed down Aaron's head, soaked his beard, and ran onto his robes.

Psalm 133 says unity is like that, it is costly, consecrated, fragrant, and overflowing.

The psalm goes on to another image. Unity is like the dew of Mount Hermon falling on the hills of Zion. Mount Hermon is the highest mountain in the region. It's snow-capped, and moisture-rich, with water from the snow, and water from dew. The hills around Jerusalem are drier, lower, dusty in the summer. The distance between these areas is about 200 km, a week's walk in biblical times. Dew doesn't travel 200 kilometres. But the psalm imagines it anyway. This blessing, this unity, is miraculous, unlikely, and life-giving.

We begin to see how these two images the psalmist uses would have made quite an impact on the pilgrims as they walked to Jerusalem to worship together, singing this psalm:

How good it is, how pleasant,
for God's people to live together in harmony, in unity!
It is like the precious anointing oil
running down from Aaron's head and beard,
down to the collar of his robes.
It is like the dew on Mount Hermon,
falling on the hills of Zion.

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Bethany sits just over the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, about 3km from Jerusalem. Pilgrims would pass through Bethany on their final approach to Jerusalem for the festivals. From Bethany, the road climbs up the Mount of Olives, and at the ridge the view opens. The pilgrims would see Jerusalem spread out before them, with the Temple clearly visible. For those making the journey, it must have taken their breath away, the holy city finally in sight, the songs of ascent on their lips, the journey nearing its end. Jesus walked that path many times. In the last week of his life, he stayed in Bethany, and from there each day he would walk that short road, pass over the Mount of Olives, and see Jerusalem and the Temple, knowing what was to come.

While in Bethany, a woman came and anointed him with expensive, fragrant oil, a gesture so intimate, so extravagant, that the room was filled with the scent. Some protested the waste. But Jesus said, 'She has done a beautiful thing to me… she has anointed my body beforehand for burial.'

Imagine, just outside the house, pilgrims walking past on their way to Jerusalem, singing the Psalms of Ascent. Perhaps singing *this psalm* as they passed:

How good it is, how pleasant,
for God's people to live together in harmony, in unity!
It is like the precious anointing oil
running down from Aaron's head and beard,
down to the collar of his robes.

The scent of oil, the sound of the song, the pressure of the cross drawing near. In that moment, the symbols converge. Jesus, the anointed one, Messiah, receives this act of unity, of preparation, of love, and this psalm, perhaps, rises like a prayer through it all.

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In Jesus, the unity of Psalm 133 isn't just a hope, it takes on flesh. He is the anointed one. He enters Jerusalem not with oil and robes, but with a body soon to be broken and a life about to be poured out. And as the pilgrims sing of unity, Jesus walks toward a cross that will make it possible.

And on the night before that cross, Jesus prayed these words in John 17: 'My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.' The longing for unity in Psalm 133, the anointing at Bethany, all of it finds its deepest expression here, in Jesus' own prayer. Unity is not just harmony among friends, it is the very sign to the world that Jesus is who he says he is.

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We might be tempted to hear Psalm 133 as a quaint ideal, beautiful but unreachable. But Acts 4 insists otherwise. Just after the resurrection, a new community forms, and we heard this description read this morning:

'Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul… They held everything in common… There was not a needy person among them.'

This isn't theoretical unity. It's embodied, economic and costly. They didn't just get along, they gave everything - their possessions, their power, their priorities, because the resurrection had changed what mattered. That's what a resurrection community looks like in a world marked by fear, isolation, and individualism. It may seem like folly, people giving beyond reason, loving beyond sense, but it is there, in that holy and grace-shaped fellowship,

that God commands the blessing: life forevermore, walking together in unity with our brothers and sisters, and with God.

And still today, we glimpse that kind of community. In house churches that pool resources so no one is evicted. In congregations that cancel building projects to fund food banks. In churches where young and old eat together, worship together, and really listen to one another. The power of resurrection life is this, even as the world calls it foolishness, it moves from the tomb to the table.

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Psalm 133 shows us a vision - unity that is beautiful, holy, fragrant, and life-giving. But scripture also shows us that unity is fragile.

King David is an example. Tradition holds that he wrote this psalm when he was anointed king over all Israel after years of division and civil war. *How good and pleasant it is when kindred dwell together in unity.* And yet, his reign would later be scarred by fresh division, even among his own sons, as they vied for power.

The early church, too, didn't remain in the harmony of Acts 4. We forget that it came only after Acts 2, when the Spirit descended like fire and people from every nation heard the gospel in their own language at Pentecost. Unity began in the Spirit. It took root in generosity. But it didn't stay perfect.

That's why so many of Paul's letters are written to heal fractured communities, confronting pride in Corinth, legalism in Galatia, ethnic tension in Rome. He pleads with leaders in Philippi to agree in the Lord. He urges Christians not to judge each other over food, festivals, and background. The unity of the Spirit had to be fought for daily.

And still today, churches divide over theology, but also over the small stuff, the tea rotas, hymn choices, and emotional ties to buildings. We've seen it in the Church of Scotland during this time of change, with decisions about closure, leadership, and identity leaving people hurt and angry.

CS Lewis captures the fragility of unity in *The Screwtape Letters*, where a senior demon, called Screwtape, advises his apprentice, called Wormwood, on how to undermine a new Christian. This is what Screwtape says:

'When the new Christian gets to his pew and looks round him, he sees just that selection of his neighbours whom he has hitherto avoided… Make his mind flit between things like 'the Body of Christ' and the actual person sitting next to him in the pew… Provided that any of those neighbours sing out of tune or have boots that squeak, or have double chins, or odd clothes, the new Christian will easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous… Work hard, then, on the disappointment or anticlimax which is certainly coming to the Christian during his first few weeks as a churchman… All you then have to do is to keep out of his mind the question, 'Well, if I can be a Christian with all my foibles, why not these others?'"

Unity leaks away in the small things, the Body of Christ undone by quiet irritations and unspoken resentments. Even Spirit-born unity is vulnerable in human hands.

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The longing for unity isn't just found in scripture or in the church, it echoes across the world. Even in secular spaces, we try to imagine what peace and shared life could look like.
After two world wars, the global community tried to bottle a little of the unity described in Psalm 133, when the United Nations was formed in 1945.

Dag Hammarskjöld, the second secretary-general of the United Nations said,
'The United Nations was not created to take mankind to heaven, but to save humanity from hell.'

Haile Selassie was more specific when he said, 'The Charter of the United Nations expresses the noblest aspirations of man… safeguarding peace and freedom… without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.'

Even in a secular charter, even in the rubble of war, we knew that unity matters. Unity saves lives, it gives life.

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Psalm 133 goes further. Unity is more than the absence of conflict, it's the presence of something holy. It is ordained, anointed, blessed. Not managed by treaties, but soaked in grace. Not born of compromise, but born of the Spirit.

The United Nations can negotiate peace. But only the Spirit of God can make strangers into siblings.

That's why Psalm 133 is more than nice, it's necessary. The Spirit does not force us into unity. The Spirit invites us. And it's up to us to respond.

That Springbok victory in 1995 didn't undo centuries of injustice. Even François Pienaar later admitted, 'Things aren't perfect. South Africa still has corruption, still has inequality.' The unity Mandela modelled wasn't utopian. But it mattered. It gave the world a glimpse of what could be, not a fantasy, but a fragile, hard-won hope.

Unity doesn't always come with trumpets. Sometimes it comes with tired patience, hard conversations, repentance, and grace.

Nelson Mandela, once imprisoned by a regime that the Springboks had come to represent, did not choose revenge, but reconciliation. He stepped into a space of former hostility and reimagined it as a place of healing. He made unity visible, fragrant, and real.

That's the kind of unity Psalm 133 speaks of, not shallow agreement, but anointed life.
That's the kind of unity Acts 4 dares to live, it's Spirit-born surrender.

And it's the kind of unity Jesus himself prayed for on the night before the cross, that we would be one, just as he and the Father are one, so that the world may believe. His prayer still stands, waiting to be answered in us.

Again and again, through history, the church has glimpsed that prayer coming true. Communities like the one in Acts 4 remind us what is possible when the Spirit binds people together.

So, we keep asking:

What if the church really meant it?
What if Christians wore each other's colours, even when it costs us?
What if we shared more than worship, but life?
What if our unity wasn't a theory, but a testimony?

And what if, just maybe, the world looked over, as it did that day in Ellis Park Stadium, and saw something surprising. Not spectacle. Not power. But unity. Joyful, hard-won, and holy.