**Life on the frontline 3**

 When John F Kennedy visited the NASA space centre he noticed a man carrying a broom.

“What are you doing?” asked the president.

“Well Sir” the janitor replied, “I’m helping put a man on the moon.”

I read in a newspaper article that to get one astronaut up into space takes hundreds of people on the ground – all working together, pulling in the same direction, to safely achieve their mission.

It’s the same with many things in life.

A great football club is made up of an army of staff doing everything from physio to cleaning the boots to selling programmes, as well as the actual players themselves

A school relies on admin staff, cleaners and people to fix the photocopier as well as teachers and classroom assistants.

I always think it’s a shame when backroom staff in the NHS or police are derided as penpushers – people to be axed in the drive for greater efficiency.

Of course, it is possible for admin to run out of control, but do we really want our doctors answering the phone and ordering paperclips, when someone else can do it and free them up to treat sick people?

Today, as we continue our series looking at Life on the Frontline, we are thinking abut how it takes a whole church to create a Christian teacher, farmer, village hall bookings secretary, commodities trader, parish counsellor or mother of pre-school children.

Now, at first, this might seem like an odd statement.

Afterall, it isn’t often at church that we learn how to milk a cow, teach simultaneous equations or deal with a planning application.

But whilst church might not be the place to learn these sort of practical skills, the church family is the place where we can learn to become more like Jesus.

And as we become more like Jesus, we become better equipped to live well on our frontlines – the places where we engage with the world.

In our bible reading for today, St Paul writes to the Church in Colossae about how the Christians there should behave towards each other.

He talks about their *attitudes* and their *actions*.

Firstly, attitudes…

In verse 12: “cloth yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience”.

You can’t have compassion unless there is someone to have compassion on.

You can’t be patient unless there is someone to try your patience.

As proverbs 27.17 says: “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another”.

The church, the community of Christians, is supposed to be a place where we can develop these Godly characteristics and attitudes.

Where we can learn about them and try them out… learning by doing.

But it’s dangerous isn’t it?

Because we will get it wrong and hurt other people and they will get cross with us…

But what does Paul go on to say?

Verse 13: “bear with each other and forgive whatever grievance you may have against each other. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

I know we think church should be perfect – where everyone gets along great and never upsets each other… and then of course people leave when they discover it isn’t.

But Jesus said he came for the sick not the healthy (Mark 2.17).

Church is a collection of sinners in need of grace, not saints in need of adulation.

But church should be different from the rest of the world in this:

That we are gradually learning what we should be like, that God is gradually changing us, that we are all having a go together and we don’t hold it against each other when we get it wrong.

So, our developing Godly attitudes should lead, secondly, to Godly actions.

We are to put on love (verse 14), live in peace (verse 15) and teach and admonish each other in all wisdom (verse 16).

Note, not that we should all pitch up on a Sunday morning and listen to the vicar telling us what to do, (important as that is!) but that we should teach each other and encourage each other.

The bible is full of “each others”. 109 in the NIV translation!

Christianity is not meant to be a solo effort but a collective one.

Isn’t that what Paul said as he began this short section of his letter to the Colossians: “As God’s chosen people (plural), holy and beloved” (verse 12).

Now, you may be wondering what relevance all this has to living on our frontlines.

Afterall, aren’t we thinking about how we engage with the wider world, not just with other Christians?

Well, yes, but its what we learn *in* the church that enables us to be Christlike *out* in the world.

And its having fellow Christians who love us, who are on our side, who will support us, chat things through with us and pray for us, who give us the support and encouragement we need.

I find it really interesting that in rural areas we are shutting churches and encouraging people to travel out of their local context to meet with other Christians – in the interests of forming bigger gatherings. “No one wants to join a church of just a handful of people we say – it’s depressing!”

But big churches in towns are doing the exact opposite – encouraging people to join small groups of just a few people, where everyone can know each other and look out for each other… where they can do just what Paul said we should be doing.

Now I know that there are advantages to big gatherings. There is a real buzz when lots of people come together to worship.

You can get in a great preacher who will teach and inspire.

But the advantage of being small and local is that it’s possible to develop the kind of relationships Paul is urging the church in Colossae to develop.

A place where we know and are known; where we are loved and can love, where we can do life together.

A place from which we can go out into the world to make a real difference and come back to debrief, get prayed for and be encouraged to go out again.

Isn’t this what Jesus modelled with his disciples?

He gathered 12 people together, modelled what life should be, taught them about it, sent them out to do it and then collected them together again to see how it had gone.

As churches in the Two Rivers Mission Community, our aim is to “worship, pray, learn and go out in mission”.

The Diocesan motto is similar – “Pray, Grow, Serve”.

The challenge for us is, how are we going to do it?

How are we getting on now?

And is there anything we could do to do it better?

Maybe something we *can* all do is to ask each other how we are getting on?

To ask what others will be doing tomorrow, how we can pray for them?

To ask the following week, how they got on.

Maybe we can use prayer triplets to get to know a couple of other people really well and to support each other in our daily lives.

Maybe we can share books we’ve read or talks we’ve listened to which have helped us.

Maybe we could develop mentoring as those a bit further on in the faith help those who are just starting out.

The possibilities are many.

Let’s think, pray and chat them through together.

And whether we are the astronaut heading to the moon or the guy with the broom, lets recognise that we are in this together and we all have a part to play.