

Dear Friends,

*Grace in disagreement and chatting over the font?*

At a recent meeting of the local cub and scout group they took part in a “listening” exercise. In groups of three, one person was to expound a view on the topic of their choice while the other two listened and sought to understand the view being expressed. I attached myself to a promising group of cubs, so relatively young people, to watch. By chance the speaker decided to argue the position that “plastic straws were better than paper straws.” As I said these were young auditors and the idea seemed so provocative to one of the cubs, that absolutely convinced that paper was always better, they surely never heard a word of the proposition for right from the start with undisguised emotion they said “No - that can’t be right!” They continued to interrupt throughout the five minutes of the persuasion getting hotter and hotter under the toggle.

There has been much talk recently of “bringing the country together”, some think that “getting Brexit done” will work the magic, others that asking the question again in one way or another will bring resolution but it seems at least to me that neither one will change the simple fact of disagreement. People have opinions about plenty of things, about capitalism, about science, about climate change, about God.

By the time this letter is published something will have happened; it is impossible now to say what, even if on the 31st October nothing has happened this in itself will be something - something over which people will disagree. The question is can there be *good* disagreement?

Well, there needs to be a way of disagreeing with grace and that cannot be done with megaphones. That people sincerely disagree about Europe is not in question but is it possible to better understand opposing views? Here may be the key to bringing the country together - we need to have a conversation. A conversation is not a debate, the idea is not for participants to seek to change the minds of others for then no real exchange will take place, a conversation is a real attempt to explore the beliefs of others with a view to understanding them.

The paradox is that although the basis of such discussions is that we are not required to change our mind, to benefit from them we enter them as if we might! My friend the cub would have been so much better off if they had had that approach: “OK I know the speaker is wrong and wild horses would not drag me to drink through a plastic straw but ... let us really try to understand why this person thinks this.” Of course we expect the same attentive listening and respect when we express our point of view too.

You may be asking if any of this is of value. I think that coming together to discuss what concerns us and looking forward and sharing anxieties and immediate needs and really putting yourself in another’s slippers is always beneficial. On Wednesday mornings we have a Communion service in All Saints Sutton - after which at the back of church by the font there is coffee - maybe a Communion service is a step too far for you but why not come for coffee - at 10.00 where you will find wide ranging conversation gracefully held.

With blessings

Steve