

## Sermon - Ephesians 4.1-24: Growing to maturity

### Reviewing chapters 1, 2 and 3

- As we work through the whole of the letter to the Ephesians, Sunday by Sunday, it is helpful each time to have a brief review of the chapters that have come before.
- It is also helpful to bear in mind that this letter applies to our church today, as well as for the early church at the time it was written.
- The overall context is that Paul, as a Jewish Christian, is writing to communities of predominantly Gentile Christians.
- He acknowledges the deep division between Jews - those who understood themselves to be God's chosen people - and Gentiles - whom the Jews considered to be excluded from God's covenant, and thus from his blessing.
- However, Paul reaffirms, again and again, the assurance that although they had previously been excluded, they were now included, in that both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians were reconciled to God in Christ.
- He claims that as those who choose to follow the Son of God had been predestined to be adopted as God's children, they could thus share in the inheritance of the covenant of blessing - that they could also receive the same benefit brought to them by God's anointed one.
- Even though the way of sin - the way of living according to one's own desires rather than God's way of sacrificial love - made people metaphorically dead, they had been baptised into Christ's death and resurrection, and so were now alive in him.
- Thus they - and us here now - should see themselves as living stones, growing together - even with fundamental differences such as those between Jews and Gentiles - *being built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God. (Ephesians 2.22)*
- Paul describes that this joining together of people who had been excluded, with those who had been included, was part of God's mystery that had now been revealed.
- The mystery was fundamentally that disparate people, people who might normally have been opposed to each other, were given a common foundation that was beyond both groups.
- In that sense Christ is the mystery, because he is the foundation of unexpected unity.
- And the diversity that is then expressed within the church community reveals the wisdom of God.
- Much of the letter in the first three chapters is written either in the form of a prayer, or in the context of prayer.
- So these chapters effectively conclude with a prayer of both praise and acclaim, praying that the readers may know the depth of God's love for them in Christ Jesus.

### Live in the unity of the Spirit

- We now come to chapter 4, to the halfway point of the six chapters of the letter.
- Paul shifts his focus from reassuring his readers of their inclusion, to spelling out how they should behave as a consequence of being included.

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- Chapters 4, 5 and 6 describe these consequences, both in terms of each faith community as a whole, and subsequently in terms of individuals in their own relationships - with God, and with each other.
- In the first verses, Paul calls on them:  
*I therefore ... beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4.1-3)*
- One of the key themes that Paul keeps emphasising is their unity - and our unity - in Christ, or in the Spirit.
- Just as he has been reassuring them of their unity - as Gentile Christians united with the Jewish Christians - Paul now extends that achievement of unity as applying within their own local church community as well.
- He lists familiar fruits of the Spirit: humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, peace - and urges them: *make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit.*
- Unity is not something that happens automatically - it is something that we need to strive at, put effort into.
- He doesn't talk about unity in themselves - in ourselves - but always points beyond the individual and beyond the immediate community, to find unity in God's Spirit.
- This is such a powerful message in the Letter to the Ephesians, and one that needs to be claimed every time there is division and disunity in the Church - regardless of whether the disunity is in this or another parish church, or whether it is between dioceses, or between different parts of the Anglican Communion.
- Of course, while I'm conscious particularly of the Anglican Church at this time, the same applies to all Christian denominations - both within them and between them.
- Paul continues with the acclamation that we have as part of our own baptism liturgy:  
*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4.4-6)*
- Once again, in this, he reminds us of where our centre of unity with each other is.

### *In unity, but with different gifts of ministry*

- He then starts talking about the gifts we have been given.
- But in introducing them, he quotes from Psalm 68.18:  
*When you ascended the heights,  
you led the enemy captive,  
you received tribute from the peoples:  
but rebels shall not dwell in the presence of God.*
- Jewish scholars applied this Psalm verse to Moses going up Mt Sinai and receiving the gift of God's law.

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- In this letter, and in John's Gospel, this is reinterpreted as applying to Jesus:  
*But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said,*  
*'When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive;*  
*he gave gifts to his people.'* (Ephesians 4.7-8)
- Christ's gifts are described as gifts of ministry, rather than fruits of the Spirit:  
*The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. (Ephesians 4.11-13)*
- These gifts of ministry are described as for building up the body of Christ to achieve maturity - being the full stature of Christ - found in the unity of the faith and knowledge of Christ.
- Again and again Paul invokes Christ as central and key to our individual and corporate well-being.
- Christ is our point of reference, our foundation, our head, and our model of right-wiseness.

### The former life - easily resumed

- In the final section of our passage for today, the old life - our life before coming to our own personal faith in Jesus - is contrasted with the new life - the life that is centred on the way of Jesus.
- I am going to reorder these verses, and group them together according to which life they refer to: the former self-reliant way, or the new Christ-reliant way.
- Paul writes:  
*We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.*  
*You must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practise every kind of impurity.*  
*You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts (Ephesians 4.14, 17-19, 22)*
- Tossed to and fro and blown about by deceit, without understanding, being futile in mind, alienated from God through ignorance and hardness of heart - without sensitivity, and greedy to fulfil one's own selfish desires.
- That's quite a description of living unrighteously, foolishly.
- It's good to recognise that while Paul is talking to converted people - to Christians who have supposedly left these kinds of behaviours behind them, to us as well - there is an implied recognition that they might still find themselves slipping back into these kinds of foolish behaviour.

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- So this description actually provides a helpful checklist for ourselves: is any of our own behaviour described here?
- Remember, that there is no shame in acknowledging this, in order to attend to it.
- Rather, we would be foolishly deceiving ourselves if we refused to acknowledge where any of these might be true in our own behaviour.

### Growing into the new life

- Paul doesn't dwell on these negatives, but encourages us by once again using the image of the body growing together:

*But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Ephesians 4.15-16)*

- We are repeatedly encouraged, not simply to allow growth to happen, but to grow intentionally.
- It is not something that we participate in passively, but something that we undertake, actively.
- And we are encouraged to do this together, seeking for ourselves and each other to be actively part of a living, growing organism.
- This intentional action is described again, using a clothing analogy:

*For surely you have heard about [Christ] and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught ... to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4.21-24)*
- All of these are descriptions of engaging with change: the change that comes from learning, from being renewed, from taking on new behaviours and habits, that are aligned with God's right-wisdom, and that reveal Christ present in and amongst us.

So may you lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.

May you do so with all humility, gentleness and patience.

May you exercise forbearance towards each other, in love.

May you make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

And may you come to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.

In His name. Amen.

*Note: all quoted Scripture is from the NRSV*