

Sermon - Ephesians 4.25 - 5.20: Walking in the Light

Reviewing the letter up to this point

- Over the previous four Sundays we have worked through the letter to the Ephesians, from the beginning up to 4.24.
- I remind you briefly that the first three chapters focused on ensuring that the Gentile Christians understood that they were not second class members of God's Kingdom, but fully included.
- They have been assured that this was part of God's plan all along, that they should consider themselves to be adopted by God, and thus included in the inheritance of God's covenant with his people.
- Again and again they are assured that while they had formerly been treated as excluded Gentiles - that is, excluded from God's covenant with his chosen people, the Jews - that now both Jews who acknowledged Jesus as the anointed Son of God, and Gentiles who did the same, were reconciled together in and through Christ.
- Paul is careful to point out that formerly, as people who lived according to their self-centred desires, they were metaphorically dead, and that now, as people who have been baptised into Christ's death and resurrection, they are alive in a new way.
- Paul also makes much of the fact that as a group, and as individuals, they bring diversity into the Church community - and that God's wisdom is in fact revealed through this diversity.
- Having affirmed all this in the first half - the first three chapters of the letter - the second half spells out the consequences of this wonderful inclusion, adoption and inheritance.
- Of course the directions and encouragement provided are for all Christians - nevertheless, for the first recipients of the letter Paul contrasts their former self-centred way of life as Gentiles with an ideal of their new God-centred way of life as Christians.

Summary of 4.1-24

- So last Sunday we looked at chapter 4, verses 1 to 24.
- These verses continued with the theme of being united in Christ, but rather than focusing on the diversity *across* the wider Church, the focus narrows a bit to encompass the diversity *within* church communities.
- Christians are encouraged to recognise that there are a variety of gifts of ministry, given by Christ to all who are baptised in his name.
- All these different gifts are
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 4.12-13)
- Paul then contrasts the characteristics of their former way of life, which they might easily slip back into without realising, with the need to actively strive to grow up together into their new way of life:
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)

Outward niceness, or inner kindliness?

- The twenty-eight verses that make up today's passage are focused on 'Do's and 'Don't's.
- These are not intended to be a set of commandments, but rather a list of practical instructions.

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- We know that Jesus reminds us to '*Love your neighbour as yourself*' (Mark 12.31), but it can be all too easy to hear and agree with these words, and then talk or act with malice or even just inconsiderately without realising our own hypocrisy.
- Sometimes we understand the concept of loving others, but don't know what that looks like in practical terms.
- In another parish a member was complaining to me about someone's behaviour, and didn't know how to respond to them.
- I said that Jesus calls us to love, and so she should try to work out how to love this other person.
- Her immediate response was to say in exasperation: "I suppose I'm just going to have to be *nice* to them."
- But that's not what Jesus is calling us to do, because it's too easy to be nice while still holding malice in our hearts.
- Of course it *is* helpful to be nice and behave respectfully and appreciatively towards others.
- But Jesus kept reminding people not to focus on outward behaviour, but inner attitudes.
- Jesus did not teach us nice manners - instead he taught us the beatitudes - the attitudes of being.
- Get your inner attitude right - rightly aligned with God's attitude - and the outer behaviour will fall into line.

A fragrant offering and sacrifice

- So Paul tells us:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 5.1-2)
- Here's an interesting image - or rather sensory metaphor: *a fragrant offering*.
- Most of us know the faint smell of incense in a sacred space; the smell of a pine or eucalypt forest; perhaps the scent of some lovely perfume or cologne.
- Here we have an offering being associated with something that smells good - but a light, fragrant scent.
- Too often we might associate the concept of sacrifice with somebody dying to save the lives of others - but that is a very narrow understanding of the idea.
- A sacrifice is the giving of something of value, at one's own cost, as an acknowledgement of someone else's worth, or worthiness.
- Paul reminds us that Christ's action of sacrificial love was a '*fragrant offering ... to God*'.
- Again we might have a very narrow view of what constituted the sacrifice that Jesus made, limiting it only to his suffering and death.
- But if we expand our perspective, we might be able to see how the whole of his ministry, and perhaps the whole of his life, was *a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*.
- In most of his interactions with others Jesus was expressing his love - and thus God's love - for them, often at some cost to himself.
- So when we imitate God in Christ, *and live in love [just] as Christ loved us*, our lives too become *a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*.
- Indeed, in our liturgy we often tell God, 'We offer ourselves to you as a living sacrifice through Jesus Christ our Lord.'
- Maybe we should sometimes change the words 'living sacrifice' to 'fragrant sacrifice.'

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Put off your old self and put on the new

- Paul describes the practical details of how we might live in love towards others, and keeps warning us not to slip back into unloving habits.
- He repeatedly encourages us to put things away, and I'm reminded of a parent telling their child to put things away so as to be orderly and have space for useful activity, or even just regain some clearness of mind from clutter:
 - Put away falsehood and lies;
 - don't let your anger fester;
 - don't make room for unkind thoughts;
 - give up taking from others;
 - don't grieve the Holy Spirit;
 - put away bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, and malice.
- These are all easily recognisable patterns of behaviour that we should be able to see in ourselves when we slip up.
- Although it's helpful to be reminded of such lists every now and then, we don't need to remember all the points.
- I find it much easier to ask myself simply: Am I being kind, or trying to be kind-hearted, towards this person?
- Or am I being unkind towards them?
- Am I hitting out at them, or wanting them to suffer some kind of hurt, maybe because of how they're treating me?
- And when we realise that we are being hurtful or unkind towards another, then this is when we need to take a breath, and ask ourselves instead: How can I practise kindness towards them?
- So Paul helpfully also lists patterns of kindness:
 - Instead speak the truth;
 - attend to your anger;
 - work honestly, so that you can share with others;
 - speak so that your words may give grace to others;
 - be kind, tender-hearted, and forgiving of one another.

Walk as children of light

- Paul doesn't just describe patterns of behaviour - he also describes the kinds of behaviour in others that we might associate with -
- that we should *disassociate* ourselves from those who might mislead us, from those whose words are empty and have no real substance.
- And rather, we should

Live as children of light— for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true
(Ephesians 5.8-9)
- Paul then quotes from an early Christian hymn - one whose words we don't have anymore - but which would have been familiar to those he was writing to:

'Sleeper, awake!
Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you.' (Ephesians 5.14)
- Clearly a hymn to remind and inspire Christians that they had been metaphorically dead or asleep, but they were now to consider themselves alive and awake, and living in the light of Christ.

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- Paul ends this passage with a reminder to:
sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5.19-20)
- This connection with hymns continues with us, in our own hymns for this service.
- All the hymns chosen for today are inspired directly to a greater or lesser extent by the words from today's reading from Ephesians.

- As I bring this sermon to a close, I remind you that next Sunday we will be celebrating the feast day of Mary, Mother of our Lord, and then for the two Sundays following that, we will be attending to the final verses from chapters five and six of this letter.
- Some of the verses there are regarded controversially, so it will be good to engage with them thoughtfully.

- Nevertheless, today I end with two verses for you to particularly ponder on:
 - Verse 10: *Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.*
 - Verse 17: *So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.*
- And while you do this, don't forget to:
give thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5.20)

Note: all quoted Scripture is from the NRSV