

Sunday 28th June 2009 Christ Church 9.00 am

Live a new life – Ephesians 4:17- 5:2 (Luke 9:18-27)

Let us pray. Heavenly father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the truth that is in Jesus. Help us by your spirit this morning to see more clearly the calling you have on our lives and what our response should be to your word. We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

What a powerful and wonderful instruction Paul poses to the church at Ephesus this morning – “Be imitators of God”. We heard it in our reading right there at the start of chapter 5. “Be imitators of God”.

I guess the best imitators I regularly come across are children. They can so easily imitate both good and bad practices as they learn to live and they explore the world and the people in it. My latest encounter with the imitating behaviour of children was during our recent holiday when visiting friends in Bideford in Devon. Living the other end of the country is not the best way to keep a friendship alive, but somehow we do seem to manage a visit during our holiday!

Anyway two weeks ago we were visiting our friends and I was listening to how their children imitate the pronunciation of certain words. Although they do speak English in Devon, it is somewhat different to the English we are used to hearing here in Moreton. They appear to have a problem with their TH’s – the “th” sound. The number three becomes “free”, Jonathan, their 1 year old has become “Jonafan” and here is the most grating to my ears – thing has become “fing” hence you hear “somefing, anyfing and nofing!”

Now I’ve no idea why all this has started, but it very nicely illustrates children’s capabilities when it comes to imitating their peers in order to “fit into” a society.

So if our children are excellent imitators, whether it be good or bad habits, who do you imitate in your daily walk with God?

Well fortunately for us, we have the bible which, although does not have every answer to every question, does provide us with something more wonderful than imitating just to fit in to society. Indeed, starting at chapter 4 and verse 17 we enter into a whole new phase of Paul’s letter. Prior to verse 17, we have been looking at the themes of worship and of prayer, and now Paul starts to write about the abandonment of an old non-Christian life and to live according to the new life available to those who put their trust in Jesus. Over the next few weeks we will see Paul deliberately deal with a number of careful instructions for Christian living.

So this morning we start with Paul reminding us that Jesus embodies the truth, and just as we heard in our gospel reading, being a Christian is not just something that happens on one day in our lives, it is a daily sacrifice to a wonderful saviour and loving God. Each day we are taught not to rebel against this new life, but as verse 22 puts it “put off your old life, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires.”

Paul is encouraging the readers to be renewed in mind and allow God to be at work in us. We see in these first few verses Paul revealing one of the most powerful and challenging aspects of following Jesus, literally as our gospel reading put it, “take up his cross daily and follow me”. If you’ve given your

life to Jesus, if you've made that commitment to want to change your old way of life, literally "a new self" as Paul says in verse 24, then you will see God at work within you.

The life of a Christian should be characterised by a holy, God given righteousness that is only available through Jesus. I know many of you will have heard this before, but every day a Christian should remember that the old sinful humanity has been crucified, put to death by Jesus on the cross, and to live a new creation – to live a life in the truth revealed in Jesus as verse 21 puts it.

So what does Paul tell us about what we should be like? Here today in Christ Church in Moreton in 2009? What is Paul's message and how should it affect our lives?

Well as I look around this morning, I don't appear to see much bitterness, anger, rage, slander and indeed I think this is probably the least likely place to see a brawl! Although I am rather concerned that Graham will one day persevere with his rowing machine, we heard about last week, walk into church displaying a fine physique, ready to break up an out of control argument.

But living a life worthy of the calling each of us has received is not always that easy to live out in practice in our modern world. Whilst we may look at our lives and not see any anger, rage and slander here this morning, we do come across stealing, we do hear "unwholesome" talk and can we honestly say that everything we do is actually undertaken with the same humble and self sacrificing compassion that God chose to show us through Jesus?

I know I fall way short of the standard these few verses asks of us, NO – let's look at verse 17 again, the word Paul uses here is "insist" not ask – it is to be one of our highest priorities. God has given us everything we need to "put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.", as verse 24 puts it. And yet so often we fail to fully rid ourselves of the anger of our old life, the bitterness of broken relationships, the slander that so easily flows when we trust in our own judgement.

As far as I know, there is only Jesus that has been able to perfectly imitate God. No matter how hard I try, I will never be able to imitate God on my own. Verse 21 shows that only when we are "in him" – in Jesus, can we imitate God. The way to imitate God is to be in Jesus. If I am struggling to give up the anger of my old life, it is my relationship with Jesus that I need to look at.

Paul is writing to the Ephesians about such behaviour, and I guess, that shows us what can so easily happen to a group of people when anger and sin take over. As a church we need to be aware of anger and in verse 31 we read "get rid of all rage and anger".

That is a real challenge for us as a group of people here to do God's work in Moreton. In our society anger is seen as a sign of manliness, of strength, indeed righteous anger has been used in the past with usually disastrous consequences, but I will leave that subject for another sermon. If God is at work in us, if we as a church are truly serious about our calling to live out his plan for our lives, then as verse 32 puts it quite clearly, "being kind and compassionate, forgiving one another" are the characteristics we should see when we look at ourselves and look at each other.

But how can the people we live and work with see that we are living a new life? What do they need to see? Is it our appearance? Is it the way we dress? Is it the length or colour of our hair? Is it anything to do with our outward appearance? I suppose, what we wear and how we look may have some bearing on the way that people look at us, but that is not the way God judges whether a man or woman walks

with Him. Whilst we can only look on our outward appearance, God looks and sees our hearts and minds. Now that doesn't mean that our outward appearance is unimportant, but it does mean that what's going on inside us is important to God.

And that is why I think in verse 30 Paul writes "do not grieve the Holy Spirit" which is quite a statement given that Paul is writing to a church of early Christians. What I think Paul is saying here is, do not oppose the will of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit in a Christian community should bring about a people with a unified purpose, as a body heading in the same direction together. It should enable reconciliation within our relationships to be, as verse 32 puts it "forgiving each other, just as in Jesus, God forgave you". It should be building up new Christians in our community with the main focus of the church being to teach and helping people grow spiritually in recognising Jesus as the only way to a new creation and relationship with God. The Holy Spirit is not there to enable us to say "thing" instead of "fing", neither is it to make us look attractive. It is there to change our hearts and minds, so that when God looks in, he can see someone ready to do his work.

Part of filling in our "using my gifts" questionnaire is to ensure we have a unified purpose going together in the same direction. That our mission here is based upon serving and honouring Jesus. That the whole body grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Once you've given your life to God and allowed his Holy Spirit to be at work in you, you've put off your old self of deceitful desires, you will then be able to imitate God. What a wonderful thing to pray for this morning – that our lives can be changed to imitate God.

As we continue over the next few weeks to look further at Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus we will see Paul clearly contrasting the then and now state of a non-Christian existence and a Christian life.

Which is it to be for you this morning? A life of darkness and alienation from God, or being an imitator of God?

Let us pray. Heavenly father, we pray that you will be at work in each one of us, that you will show in us kindness, compassion and you will help us to forgive one another. That every day you will be at work in us, changing our desires, changing our old attitudes and behaviours. We pray this morning you will change our lives to be imitators of you. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.