Stowe Sermon 6th October 2024

Ephesians 4:17 – end

In Paul’s wonderful letter he concentrates and emphasises the importance of Christian unity and the importance of the church as the body of Christ. And our reading is often labelled as ‘instructions for Christian living’ and it is as relevant to us today as it was to the Christians who read it almost 2000 years ago.

Firstly, Paul writes that we must put off our old way of life. As Christians, when we follow Jesus our sins are forgiven and we start a new life living in relationship with God. This new life should be very different from a life with the values and behaviours of the world. The desire for power and material things should be left behind as we focus on how God wants us to be, our priority should be to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves – this is how Jesus told us to live.

Then Paul goes on to write a clear list of instructions on how we are called to live and be with each other:

As members of the body of Christ we should speak the truth to one another – it may seem obvious to say don’t tell lies, and that is important. But speaking the truth means more than not lying, if we speak the truth then it means we should not keep quiet if keeping quiet prevents the truth being known. In today’s world of spin and image it is harder perhaps to speak the truth, to straight forwardly say what we mean, but it important – trust is based on truth and of course we can still be kind and understanding whilst being honest.

Paul says we are to be angry, but not if our anger is a sin. Being bad tempered and irritable is not a good thing, it hurts other people and causes a bad atmosphere and so we should try hard to be patient and have self control. I think St Paul is writing here about righteous anger – Jesus was angry with the money lenders in the temple, William Wilberforce was angry at the slave trade. This is justified anger and leads to action and change for the good. But how we act when we feel this anger is important. Jesus deliberately drove out the money lenders and cleansed the temple, he didn’t hurt them or just fly of the handle, what he did was considered and purposeful.

Paul continues that we should not let the sun go down on our wrath – if we have had an argument with someone we should mend it and reconcile, if we can, perhaps we need to say sorry or agree to disagree, the quicker we act the easier something is to mend. Harbouring resentment and hurt is not what God wants for us, and it certainly does not make us happy.

Paul instructs a thief to no longer steal, I think we would all find that easy to agree with. Instead Paul says, that person must work hard so that they can help another who is in need. To stop stealing means that person is not hurting others by taking from them, but instead they are to work AND look to help others, turning selfishness into selflessness.

We are not to be foul mouthed, so no swearing, but more than that we should not offend others by how we speak, how we speak should be a positive experience to others. Are we positive, constructive and kind? If we look (or choose not to look!) at social media today this feels incredible relevant.

Paul instructs us not to grieve the Holy Spirit, He ultimately is the guide of how we should live so if we grieve Him we are not living how God wants us to, and if we are prayerful and truly listen I think the Holy Spirit prompts our conscience to know when we have done wrong.

Then Paul list things we are to leave behind us in our Christian life. He says that we should not be bitter, not harbour resentment. This leads us to the key concept of forgiveness so important in our Christian life. Bad things do happen, people will hurt us and I don’t think that Paul means for a second that these bad things are ok. God cares for us and does not want us to be hurt, or to hurt someone ourselves. It depends a lot on what has happened to hurt us but we can address the issue by speaking the truth and if appropriate looking for a way forward of reconciliation. Perhaps it will be necessary to act to protect ourselves from future hurt. We can definitely pray and ask for God’s healing and protection. And along with talking about it and acting to protect ourselves if necessary we are also called to forgive, and this is not always easy, far from it. But harbouring resentment hurts us, and hurts those around us, and may affect our words and actions going forward. We are called to forgive, even though we may be right believing that something was wrong and should not have happened. If we look at the world today and our society we can see the damage bitterness and resentment and a lack of forgiveness causes.

Paul continues that we should leave behind outbreaks of passion and long lived anger, both implying a loss of control and unkindness to those around us. Instead as Christians we need that amazing fruit of the spirit self control, and gentleness.

We should not talk loudly or be insulting, raising our voice is rarely a sign that we are communicating well, its often the point where discussion turns into argument. Insulting others is not kind and is not necessary, we are called to love each other which means accepting each other for who we are – not always agreeing of course – but being tolerant to difference because all are equally loved by God.

Paul concludes that we should be kind, merciful and forgiving to each other because God in Jesus forgave us. God by sending Jesus gave us the ultimate example of loving kindness and forgiveness, and we are called to try and grow more in his image, following his example. AND we do not need to face this challenge alone – we have each other, our church is the body of Christ united together by faith and we have the Holy Spirit to guide and help us.

This passage in Ephesians seems so appropriate, so necessary for our world today. This is how we should be, how God wants us to be, how he intended his creation to be. Our world is crying out for the saving power of Jesus and I pray for his message of saving love to be loudly proclaimed AND HEARD