Sunday 25 November: Be what you are!

Colossians 3.1-17

Sometimes in life you come across people who are trying very hard to be people they clearly are not. Paul in writing to the Colossian Christians is telling them the exact opposite - to be what they are! You are Christians – so live like them! Be what you are!

Who are you?

If you are a Christian here today – then what Paul writes about the Colossians will be true of you V1-4; 12.

We are people who have been raised with Christ (V1).

Paul uses picture language – he alludes to the symbol of baptism that the Christians at Colossae would have experienced after they became Christians and put their faith in Christ. Baptism as practised by the Christians in Paul's day would have been what we call believers baptism – a baptism following a person's faith in Jesus – done in a public place as a declaration of the fact that they were now a follower of Jesus. The believer's baptism is an outward sign of an interior change. As the Christian goes under the water – it is as if he/she is buried in death; as they come up from the water – it is as if they are being resurrected to a new life. Regardless of whether Christians have experienced believers baptism – if they have trusted in Christ – accepted the free gift of God's forgiveness - then the truth of what it represents is equally true.

Ie we have a new life "hidden with Christ in God" as Paul puts it v3. He puts it another way in 2 Corinthians. 5.17 "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

(He says you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. (v3) The old way of life gone. We are secure in Christ. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour - But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical death to present you holy in his sight – reconciled to God (1.22))

But that's not all! In v12 Paul says we are Chosen – Holy – Dearly loved - All terms that used to be used in reference to the Jews – but now Paul uses them with reference to the Gentiles – God's grace and mercy is now open to all. That's our position in Christ! That's who we are!

Chosen - from before the foundation of the world – to be holy and blameless in his sight (Eph 1.4) What a mystery! What a privilege!

Holy – Set apart – dedicated to God

Dearly loved – valued, precious – so precious that Jesus died for us.

But now we have come to Christ like the Colossians – been raised to new life through our faith in Jesus and his sacrifice on the cross – we are now united with Christ through our faith. Chosen, set apart, dearly loved. If all this is true Paul says certain consequences should follow.

So what?

Why were we reconciled? So that we might live a holy life – set apart for God. (1.22)

Paul says that we should:

a) Have a different set of goals and affections – “set your hearts on things above”

What truly motivates us? What do we have a heart for? What are we passionate about? -

Money? Sport? Family? Clothes? Entertainment? Work?

Easy to tell – what do you spend most of your time, money and energy on?

b) Have a different mind set - “Set your minds on things above”

What influences our attitudes and values?

Do we value people over things? Reconciliation over revenge? Choosing to serving others rather than want pride of place? What’s best for others than what’s best for ourselves?

He says if it truly is our experience then – certain consequences must follow. we must BE what we ARE!

What is the point of being a Christian? Surely it is so that we can BE Christian. That Christ can live his life through us – what a challenge! What a privilege!

We who have trusted in Christ – most of us here I’m sure – were reconciled to God

Why? So that he might present us holy in his sight! (v22)

God may regard us as forgiven and clean because of our faith in Jesus but he wants us to make that an actual reality in our lives.

I went to a private school George Heriots in Edinburgh. When you became a pupil at the school, put on the uniform or rugby strip – certain standards of behaviour were expected.

You were a Herioter – so had to behave like one!

So it is with us. We are God’s new creations. We should behave as such! Paul is very practical. Spells out in plain detail what behaviour is expected and what is not.

We need to kill off and take off!

Radical action called for. He carries on with the idea of Christians having died to their old way of life and says we need to kill off what belongs to our old pre – Christian selves. This requires an act of our will!

Does not hesitate to give a very frank list of things in v 5 that might result from having our affections set on the wrong things –

Sexual immorality, impurity, lust (very relevant to our highly sexualised culture), evil desires – (doing whatever you feel like whenever you feel like it – The Message), greed – a Greek word which really means the desire to have more – an insatiate desire that the Greeks said was like trying to fill with water a bowl with a hole in it. (The person whose life is dominated by the desire to get things has set up things in the place of God – and that is precisely what idolatry is – replacing God with something else.)

We might think surely you won't find these things in the church. But let's not fool ourselves. Paul knows what human nature can be like. Let's be honest – Christians are just as susceptible to sexual temptation as others. Many Christian men struggle with on-line pornography – you may be one of them. Also in our highly consumer driven society – easy to get caught up in the desire to have more and more, better and better, the most up to date. Paul says this is greed and a form of idolatry – because in effect – other things are more important to you than God.

Then he moves on in v 8 & 9 to perhaps less salacious but equally damaging forms of wrong behaviour. Much of it the result of what we say. Firstly – anger – the Greek word is used for the type that suddenly blazes up and then quickly dies, whereas the word translated rage means an anger that is slow burning, which refuses to be pacified and in fact is deliberately nursed and kept alive. There is no place for either. Malice – deliberately making wrong and evil choices. Slander, filthy language, lying.

It was very encouraging at our church meeting on Wednesday night that although people clearly had different points of view – that people were polite and civil to each other. Sad to say I have heard of church meetings which were anything but – and where the most unkind and unChristian things were said to follow believers.

JAMES was right when he warned about how much damage can be done by something so small as the tongue – "consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue is also a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body". 3.5,6. For good reason he wrote: "be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry" 1.19

May God help us to guard our tongues!

Paul's aim in all this is that in our personal relationships we should exemplify what the gospel has done in our lives and show that no matter the human

differences between us that we have a unity which crosses over all barriers. Human society is great at creating different groups. Paul lists some of the main ones with which he was acquainted – some based on ethnicity others on religion. The ancient world was a very barrier ridden place – barriers that restricted people to certain positions in society from which it was extremely difficult to move.

The coming of the Christian gospel destroyed these fist century barriers.

The barriers of nationality – as people of different nationalities who might otherwise have tried to kill each other sat side by side at the Lord's table.

The barriers of ceremony and ritual. Circumcised and uncircumcised together. The Jew and the Gentile. To a Jew every person of another race was unclean. When he/she became a Christian, every person regardless of nationality became a brother or sister.

The barriers of culture. The Scythian was the ignorant barbarian of the ancient world – the Greek a member of the educated elite. Both can sit in perfect fellowship in the Church of Christ.

The barriers of class. The slave and the free came together in the Church. There are examples of churches where the slave was the leader and the master the humble member.

However in addition to some of these we have plenty of our own. Divisions between young and old, male and female, rich and poor, black and white, middle class and working class, pro Scottish independence and anti Scottish independence – not forgetting the Strictly Come Dancing fans v the fans of the X Factor. Sadly the same is true in today's church – we have so many divisions. One was just revealed this week in the C of E – those pro women bishops and those anti women bishops – but there are so many others Catholic and Protestant, Liberal and Conservative, Charismatic and anti-charismatic, even those who raise their hands in worship and those who don't. Paul wants there to be no divisions – but simply that Christ should be all and in all.

Interesting that a number of other Christian leaders on hearing about our talks about a possible union with PVC have commented on how encouraged they have been by them - to hear about two churches coming together to state the unity of their faith – rather than another example of churches dividing and going their separate ways.

These forms of behaviour says Paul are the ones that need to be put off. Maybe you feel that there's a few things there you need to work on. If so, - be encouraged! Paul reminds us that it's a process. He says (v9,10) you have taken off the old self and put on the new self – WHICH IS BEING RENEWED in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

We're all a work in progress – BE PATIENT WITH ME –GOD'S NOT FINISHED WITH ME YET!"

But he says that if we've got behaviour to throw off – so we have some to put on!

Compassion – kindness – humility – gentleness – patience – v12

Don't know about you, but are these not qualities we associate with Jesus? Jesus wants to live them out in our body and personality.

V 13 Bearing with each other – ie putting up with each other! So practical! Paul knew how people can rub each other the wrong way and annoy each other and so he knew if we are to get along we would need to forgive each other.

Now doesn't part of you wish he'd stopped there?

But he adds – forgive as the Lord forgave you!

Forgiveness isn't easy. If you've been hurt or offended by someone – or even if someone close to you – a friend, a family member, some other member of the body of Christ – has been hurt – it can be very hard to forgive. You might feel they don't deserve forgiveness.

Mayb e that's why Paul added this command. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

How has the Lord forgiven us? TOTALLY UNRESERVEDLY UNDESERVEDLY

If he hadn't – we would not be here today

That's why we must forgive. We forgive because we have been forgiven. Because we realise we have received God's undeserved love, mercy and forgiveness – and so we in our turn offer it to others. If we do not forgive others – we do not appreciate God's mercy and grace to us – and says Jesus we cannot expect to be forgiven.

Isn't that why Jesus told the story of the servant who was forgiven millions of pounds and yet although he was forgiven the entire amount – would not forgive his mate who owed him a measely £50. Because he did not appreciate God's generous love and mercy to him – the king changed his mind and refused to forgive him. Isn't that why Jesus taught his disciples to pray – forgive our sins as – in the same way – as we forgive those who have wronged us.

We have a wonderful message to share with the world. Many outside the church – and even some within it have a picture of God very unlike the God of we see in Christ. Think of the most strict teacher you could have at school– the one everyone wanted to avoid – always getting people into trouble for the smallest thing – so demanding and impossible to please. That's many peoples idea of God. So different from the God of the New Testament who says "You don't have to earn my favour. I've done it all for you. Jesus has died . Come as you are. Receive my love and forgiveness." If those outside the church are ever going to believe in such a wonderful – almost too good to be true message of forgiveness - , then we in the church need to embody it. We need to live it out in our relationships – and demonstrate the power of Christ to forgive.

And of course – the characteristic above that should mark our lives and relationships – “binds them all together in perfect unity” – love!

Less pause for a moment. What do behaviours do you and I need to take off today?

Wrong actions or thoughts in our sex life

Greed –

Wrong use of the tongue - leading to wrong angry words – hateful words – attacks on other people’s character and behaviour - untrue statements about others – lies

What do you need to put on?

Compassion – kindness- humility- gentleness- patience- the ability to put up with others who annoy you – forgiveness – are there people you need to forgive from your heart – love.

Ask God now to show you what action you need to take. Ask him to give you no peace until you have dealt with whatever needs to be dealt with and to continue to speak to you through the scripture so that you may indeed BE WHAT YOU ARE!

Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. Let the Word of Christ – the Message – have the run of your house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! Let every detail of your lives – words, actions, whatever – be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way.