

Year A Bible Sunday 2020

"Whatever you do in Word or Deed"

Collect

Merciful God, teach us to be faithful in change and uncertainty, that trusting in your word and obeying your will we may enter the unfailing joy of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen

Colossians 3:12-17

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. **And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.**

Matthew 24:30-35

³⁰ Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see 'the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven' with power and great glory. ³¹ And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

³² "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ³³ So also, when you see all these things, you know that he^a is near, at the very gates. ³⁴ Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³⁵ **Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.**

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Whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Many years ago when I was at theological college, this was the grace that we said before every meal. The food was a bit variable to be honest. Sometimes it was fantastic. For special guest nights all the stops were pulled out. Breakfast was brilliant when it was sausages, but every alternate days we had eggs – and, well I never quite worked out how you make eggs that rubbery – but take it from me – eggs weren't a good day.

But regardless of whether it was eggs or sausages, inedible moussaka or long awaited rhubarb crumble, the words of thanks giving were always the same:

Whatever you do in word or deed, do it all in the name of Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

I have talked a lot over the last few weeks about thankfulness - this has been partly because it is Harvest time, and partly because thankfulness is the best remedy I know against doubt and despair, and it is thankfulness, I think, that can lead us into peace.

Paul is speaking into a very specific situation in Colossae - but his words still have universal significance. The Colossians were struggling with their faith; it had become muddled with other ideas about secret knowledge and mysterious festivals, but there were other issues that that community was dealing with too. Most significantly, Colossae had lost its status as an important vibrant city by the time Paul wrote to them, and had become more of a small provincial Roman town. It is always hard to lose prestige and respect, and there was, some scholars suppose, a fragile sense of identity amongst the people - they felt the need to be something more special again. But Paul reminds them that it is in the ways that they come together and care for one another as a Christian community that mark them as special and chosen, not in being elite and distinctive. And so he urges them to turn away from the Gnostic rituals that reassure them how special and clever they are, and instead to turn towards practical service and acts of love.

“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

This, Paul urges them to understand, is where their specialness lies - it lies in their understanding that they are called to love as Jesus loves.

This message is both disturbing and reassuring to the Church. It is reassuring because it opens up faith to every single one of us - new life in Jesus is not restricted to a certain few who are gifted with special understanding or secret knowledge - it is available to all who have love in their hearts - and we all have love in our hearts.

But it is disturbing because when we read this, we are aware of how far we fall short. I know I certainly do. Which one of us can honestly say that we express compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience in all our communications and endeavours. To consistently embody these things requires strength that we simply do not have. Where, then, does this leave us? Like the rich young man in an earlier gospel story, do we just disappear into the middle of the night in despair?

We do not.

Paul’s next line is “**And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts**, to which indeed you were called in the one body”

“Be reassured”, he is saying, to the Colossians and to us - “you are called - you belong to Christ - not because you deserve it, but because of who he is”. And what he has called us to, continues Paul, is **peace of mind**, and **thankfulness**.

At a time when our minds are troubled and anxious about the present and the future, peace of mind can seem a rare and fragile thing. Paul gives us a clue as to how we might achieve it by pointing his readers back to the idea that it is together - as a body - as a Church - that we are called to peace - and we might consider, as we go forward, the responsibility we bear to guard and support one another’s mental health, as well as each other’s physical health, as we tread these waters together.

And Christ’s peace, we are told throughout the Gospel, is a peace which the world cannot give. It is a peace (as our final blessing each Sunday reminds us) that passes all understanding - a peace that is incomprehensible by any normal rationalisation. It is a peace that the Saints of God have found in war time, in poverty, in persecution, in illness - indeed - in pandemics. It is a peace that can only be found in prayer and in thankfulness, and it is a peace which can be supported and grown within the body of the Church.

May the peace of the Lord be with us all - and may we find some thankfulness to carry us through these times. And may we know how much we are loved, and find ourselves able to demonstrate that love to our neighbour, for Jesus Christ’s sake, Amen