

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

*Eph 5.1-2.*

One of the most important words to watch when you are reading your Bibles is the little word 'therefore'. It is that word which makes the crucial connections for us. Last week St Paul painted very marked contrasts: the way of the world and the way of God, living in darkness and living in light, what you once were (pagans) and what you are now (followers of Christ). Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the dramatic change in your own personal life known as conversion. At conversion you are changed. Your whole outlook on life, the very way you think, your values and priorities, the whole focus of your life are changed. Paul says that it is like taking off old grubby clothes and putting on new clothes; taking off the old selfish you, and putting on Christ, 4.22-24...

And of course there are consequences to this change. Conversion is not just some emotional experience, but is something that brings about a complete change of attitude and behaviour in you. This is where Christians are most vulnerable, for when Christians do not act in a Christlike way; when we do not practise what we preach, we are rightly condemned as hypocrites. And this is where our little word 'therefore' comes in. Let's turn to v25 of *Eph 4* on p1176 - 'therefore, [if you have put off the old selfish self and put on Christ; if your mind has been renewed in Christ; if you are now a new, changed, converted person in Christ], then you must also put off all falsehood, and anger, and greed, vv25-29...

Well, so far, so obvious. Preachers have been urging people to be good for 2000 years without too much success. What I want us to think about today is *why* we should be good, because it's more than just keeping us from killing each other and descending into chaos.

Do you remember that *Eph* is about that little word 'one', oneness? and what *Eph* is telling us is that God, who is one, has a plan to bring all the brokenness in the world back to oneness in Jesus Christ? 1.9-10... So that's what is happening at the macro-level. Our passage from ch4 today tells us what is happening at the *micro*-level. Each time an individual puts off the old selfish self and puts on Christ, that is another recruit for the army of love and peace and truth. As we come closer to Jesus, so we come closer to each other. So if God has his master plan to unite everything in Christ, this is what is happening on the ground at the micro-level. Let's look again at our passage in 4.25ff. *If* we have truly put on Christ, we must stop lying, v25... What is it that divides people but lies, cheating, dishonesty, spin? You will never again trust a person who has lied to you, will you? Lies divide; truth unites, because you cannot have trust without truth. Our society is divided because we don't tell the truth any more.

If lies divide people and break trust, so does anger. Seething resentment destroys relationships. That's why it is so important in our marriages not to let the sun go down on our anger. Get it out and settle the matter, even if it means flinging a few plates around. Ireland has its troubles because of anger and resentment. The whole of the Middle East is a

cauldron of anger, resentment and bitterness, where everyone blames someone else for all their woes. How the devil, whose job it is to divide us, is laughing his head off! By nursing your anger, and holding tight to your bitterness, you are giving the devil a foothold in your life. This is precisely how he operates, v26... and v31... The devil is very successful in causing division in the world, because we love to take offence, feel aggrieved and hard-done-to. But that is not Christ's way. Anger, bitterness, lies, harsh and over-critical comments, all pull people down and grieve the Holy Spirit, v29...

When we are converted to Jesus Christ; when we make *him* the centre of our lives, we start to see the devil for who he is and how he operates. Only Jesus can draw people back together, because only he is loving, forgiving and patient.

So if this daily Christ-like behaviour between individuals is the working out on the ground of the grand plan of God's in Christ to join us all together again, there is another reason why we should be good. It isn't just because it is useful, or even because God arbitrarily *tells* us. The clue is at 5.1-2: Be imitators of God, therefore (NB that word again!), as dearly loved children, and live a life of love.

We had a Moderator of the Irish Presbyterian General Assembly who took that as his theme for his moderatorial year, the 3 Ls: 'live a life of love'. This violent, unjust, divided world certainly needs more and more people to live a life of love. The people who live a life of greed, selfishness and hatred aren't doing a lot of good for the world, are they?

But *why* should we live a life of love? *Why* should we put ourselves out for others, caring for them and putting up with

irritating and boring people? Well, the reason is at 5.2; because Christ loved *us*, and gave himself up sacrificially for *us*, undeserving, irritating, boring sinners, on the Cross at Calvary... You see, at the heart of Christianity is a Cross, and that Cross is the place of sacrifice, where Jesus willingly sacrificed his life that we might be forgiven and have eternal life. Modern society does not understand this notion of sacrifice, of putting others first, of putting up with tiresome people, of giving up things for the greater good, of self-restraint. Modern society says, 'Be true to yourself. Do whatever you feel like. Don't hold back. Never mind what others think and how your behaviour affects them. It's your life. Insist on your rights and grab all your entitlements'.

Well, it sounds great, doesn't it, but look at the mess we're in as a result. Look at the mess we're in because we've forgotten to honour the truth and to forgive people. We should live a life of love, because Jesus loved us to the death. We didn't deserve it. We didn't ask him to, but he gave up the most precious thing he had - his own life - on the Cross so that we could know our sins are forgiven, our guilt removed, and life with God for ever beyond the grave. We live a life of love, because Jesus loved us when we didn't deserve it.

This sad, divided world badly needs to heed this word of scripture. Nothing in the Bible could be more relevant today in NI, in the Middle East, in Africa, in our personal lives, than this need to start living a life of love, of loving those who don't deserve it, just as Jesus loved *us*, the undeserving. *Then* we can be imitators of God himself who wills us all to one.