

5 February 2017



"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 4 : 32)

Today marks the start of a short sermon series in the four weeks of ordinary time that we have between the presentation of Christ last week and the start of lent on Ash Wednesday, 1st March. Lent is a time of personal reflection on ourselves, our lives and the life of our church here in St Andrew's, so I thought it would be good to prepare ourselves for Lent by examining something about what our relationships in church should be like.

As the old poem goes

**To live above, With the saints I love,
O, wouldn't that be glory.
But to live below, With the saints I know,
That's another story.**

Yes, we know the ideals of the Christian faith, but the reality of life here and in our own hearts is somewhat different. Thankfully, the bible is brutally honest when it comes to the normal Christian life, it sets out how it should be, almost expects us to fail, but gives us the means by which we can pick ourselves up and start again by bringing our failures to Jesus at the cross. Just before our reading in Ephesians 4 it says this

"That is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another." (Eph 4:20-25)

So there is this constant putting off and taking up the life of Christ at the cross – leaving our old life behind and taking on the new life of the spirit.

The passage we are looking at today is the last verse of the reading, **"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 4: 32)** And today we are looking at the first part of that "Be kind and compassionate to one another," This should be the characteristic of the Christian church, as Jesus said, love one another as I have loved you. Why is this so

important? It is because of the way that people have been treated in the past by their circumstances, and that the church needs to be a place of healing and wholeness, so we must show that we ourselves are healed and whole by the way we treat each other.

You may have seen on the Channel 4 news the dreadful story of boys who were physically abused at a Christian camp. One of the people interviewed on the Channel 4 bulletin was Mark Stibbe, who I knew from his days in New Wine . He had experienced a dreadful time being sent away to boarding prep school at the age of 8 and had been extensively bullied. He then went to the Christian camp and was physically abused there as well. In later life he became a vicar, but his marriage failed, and he had to leave the ministry. Only then did he start to address some of the issues of his childhood painful experiences, and he found emotional healing, and he has written about this in his book. **“Coming Home - Healing from Boarding School Pain.”** He had tried to suppress the pain through hard work academic success, and then ordained ministry, and leading one of the largest Anglican churches in England. But the past caught up with him, affected his marriage and relationships, and he had the classic mid-life crisis- mainly caused by not dealing with the unhealed pain of the past.

How did it ever come to this? That schools, which were meant to care pastorally for children, became, for some, places of mental and physical, and to some, sexual abuse, from adults and older children who should have known better? A very good question - and thankfully these days we are much better at spotting the signs of abuse and, thankfully also, the Government are putting more resources into children's mental health to try to intervene earlier in children's lives when they have experienced a trauma. These things happen in families too and I have heard some dreadful things in my ministry as a vicar.

We are shocked, no doubt at the revelations we have heard and it is especially shocking that the acts have been perpetrated by people calling themselves Christians. It is nothing new. Some of you are aware that in the year before I went to Theological college, my home church in Shrewsbury was rocked by an abuse scandal involving a former churchwarden, (let's call him Tom, not his real name) who was sent to prison. It was a horrible time - a church that should have been a centre of love and kindness, healing and wholeness, and safety for the vulnerable. We all asked ourselves, **“how could this have happened, why did we not see the signs?”** Tom had become more and more controlling, but none of us spotted the abuse until it came out in the open when the police were called in. It was a great shock that

someone who had professed the Christian faith for so many years could behave in this way, and it split the church, especially among those who thought that church, and church leaders, should be perfect. Some painful healing had to take place, and the church needed to know that the dividing line between good and evil goes right through every human heart. We are all a mixture of good and evil, aren't we? Human kind has the enormous capacity for acts of great nobility, courage, kindness altruism, but it also has the capacity for great evil, as the Archbishop of Canterbury's recent visit to Auschwitz for the Holocaust Memorial Day has highlighted.

Thankfully as Christians we have the bible to teach us and it is brutally honest about human failings. Jesus said, he would not entrust himself to a human because he knew what was in a human, and the Gospels are littered with the failings of the disciples. And St Paul in Galatians writes

"The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions" and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." Gal 5:19-21

That is the human condition - what we are capable of if left to ourselves, and what we are sometimes like, even against our better nature - St Paul writes in Romans 7 that he does not understand why he behaves so badly, he does what he shouldn't do, and doesn't do what he should do. But he then shows where his hope is.

**""What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"
Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord! " (Romans 7 : 25)**

Or as hymn says it,

**"My hope is built on nothing less,
than Jesus Christ's own righteousness',
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
but wholly trust in Jesus name,
On Christ the solid rock I stand,
all other ground is sinking sand**

Our hope is in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, where Jesus died for our sins and was raised to life form our justification. Yes, your sins and my sins, past present and future, were taken to the cross and Jesus paid the price for them for all

time, and we were forgiven once and for all then, and we were raised to new life in the Holy Spirit then, and we now have a choice to walk in the spirit from now on putting our past life behind us.

So we have a daily choice – are we going to deal with sin in the appropriate way - by confessing it to God, and asking for forgiveness and making restitution to others where necessary, or are we going to pretend that now we are Christians we are perfect, or that by making a great effort we can live a life pleasing to God in our own strength. It is impossible, and it is actually denying the need for the cross, if you think that because you know the truth of the gospel you can, by your own efforts, please God. God does want us to make every effort to live a life pleasing to Him but the way of doing this is not through personal effort, that is the way of the Pharisees or what is called “works righteousness”.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” (Galatians 5: 22-23)

We must try to allow Jesus to change us and allow Him to put his finger on what He wants to deal with now, it may be something that you have been completely unaware of, but something that is actually causing you and those around you much grief. How do we start with God? By being honest with Him and recognising that we are sinners, not just from the outward sins but the inward sins of the mind, our attitudes to God, and to each other; our speech, our reactions to when things do not go our way, our retaliation to when we feel slighted. The catalogue is clearly stated in Galatians. Then we ask God to help us to bear fruit for Him in the areas described in Galatians.

It is all about having a humble attitude of mind towards God and not to be defensive when He confronts us with our sins. He will often do it through circumstances or other people, what is our reaction? Rearing up in defensive anger, or humbling ourselves at the cross, saying as the publican did “Lord, be merciful to me a sinner”.

In our Ephesians reading, Paul lists some of the things that are wrong – things to put aside. Then he sums it up in our text for today and the next two Sunday Communion sermons:

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 04 : 32)

What is it to be kind and compassionate? Kindness is the genuine thinking of someone else's situation, and doing something to show you understand and want to help. Compassionate is about having what is called a soft heart; one that aches for the pain of others, not a hard heart that says "serves them right." It is about not judging others, and trying to treat them as we would like to be treated if we were in the same situation. In this area particularly, as I have said many times, there are a lot of people who have been damaged by childhood experiences such as mental, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, especially women. We must have soft hearts, and reach out with compassion and love. What people need is understanding not judgement when they go wrong, and they sometimes do because they have not had the good role models in their families that some of us have had. We do not react with criticism, but with love, and we show that love in practical ways demonstrated in this Church with Foodbank, Open Door, Little Fishes and our pastoral work in the community. We show that St Andrew's is a place of healing, of forgiven sinners, who have come to know the love and grace of Jesus and want to show it to others. That is why we are kind and compassionate, because that is what we have found in the love and grace of Jesus Christ at the cross, where he dealt with our sins and failures.

Mark Stibbe's experiences in Boarding School are sadly not unique, although many have not had the extent of his problems. The author Roald Dahl, (100 years from his birth) who wrote many children's books such as 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory', 'Matilda', 'BFG', 'George's Marvellous Medicine', 'Fantastic Mr Fox' and many others, was sent away to private schools at the age of 8 and had a miserable time, including his last years at Repton School, which he recounts in his book "Boy". His abiding memory is of the savagery of the caning by the headmaster, a future Archbishop of Canterbury. His writings in his children's' books were unusual for their time, in that the adults usually behaved very badly and the children were the ones who subverted authority, except for a pied piper adult who broke all the rules – like Willy Wonka or Miss Honey, probably based on Roald Dahl. In Enid Blyton books, the adults were all good authority figures, and children were all respectful. In Roald Dahl, he speaks of adults behaving cruelly, stupidly and selfishly. There is a dark subversiveness in the books and perhaps that is why the children love them! I am sure that many children with dark pasts saw themselves in the stories and longed for a world where they were treated well, as they should have been. Roald Dahl said that in his view, the greatest attribute of an adult towards children should be kindness – perhaps to make up for the unkindness he had experienced as a child and young adult. If Roald Dahl who, as far as I am aware, was not a Christian can put kindness above all other versions, how much more should we in St Andrew's put

kindness and compassion as the characteristics of our relationships with one another and with those outside the church that we meet? Kindness in the way we speak to one another, kindness in overlooking faults and trying to reach out to those who are hurting, kindness in practical acts that show we care, and also putting aside the critical comments behind someone's back and refusing to retaliate. As Paul says

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." (1 Cor 13:4-8)

Can we in St Andrew's be the church that people say "the love we receive there is just like being in heaven with the saints in glory"? Well, perhaps not yet, perhaps not this side of glory but we can make a start now, by asking God which things he wants us to leave behind at the cross, and which of the attributes of the spirit he wants us to take up. As you came in you were given a piece of paper*, perhaps between now and receiving Holy Communion you could tear the paper in half – on the list of wrong things, circle one thing that you want to say sorry for and leave behind, screw it up and leave it at the sanctuary in a plate as you come up for communion. On the other half, circle the virtue you want God to give you more of, and take it home. Make this the day when you do business with God to leave behind sin, and take up kindness and compassion

So as the people of God hear Paul's admonition and challenge again

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 04 : 32)

**Let there be love shared among us,
Let there be love in our eyes;
May now Your love sweep this nation,
Cause us, O Lord, to arise.
Give us a fresh understanding
Of brotherly love that is real;
Let there be love shared among us,
Let there be love.**

*Circle one thing from the first list you want to say sorry for and one from the second list that you pray God would give you more of.

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious:

sexual immorality,

fits of rage,

impurity and debauchery;

selfish ambition,

idolatry and witchcraft;

dissensions,

hatred,

factions and envy;

discord,

drunkenness, orgies, and the like.

jealousy,

But the fruit of the Spirit is:

love,

goodness,

joy,

faithfulness,

peace,

gentleness

patience,

self-control

kindness