

Pentecost 11
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Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

Psalms 130

Ephesians 4:25-42

John 6:35, 41-51

Therefore be imitators of God: the ground of Christian living

Therefore be imitators of God [Eph 5:1]. The letter to the Ephesians offers us a series of ethical exhortations, many of which we know by heart: “don’t let the sun go down on your wrath”, “don’t steal”, “if you are angry, don’t let it lead to sin”, “don’t leave room for the devil, the slanderer.” This is good and practical advice. If we want to be moralistic, we can take a lot from these verses, but is that what the author of Ephesians is aiming to teach us, when it says: “be imitators of God”.

The letter of Ephesians was probably written to help the Pauline community deal with change and development that emerged after their leader’s imprisonment and death. Whether or not Paul wrote Ephesians has long been disputed, but its theology, tone and focus leads most people to say that in these writings, in a voice remarkably like Paul’s own, his legacy of encouragement and teaching was being transferred to a new generation of church communities, to assist them in their faith, and to help them resist deviant practices. The audience was probably a group of new generation churches of mostly gentile Christians who had less connection with the Jewish roots of the Christian movement.

The Ephesians seem to be an introverted group with sectarian tendencies who felt threatened by the influences of the outside world. They were suspicious of the powers they saw at work in everyday life, and saw them to be spiritual in nature, and potentially evil. They had sought refuge from the world in household groups where the armour that protected them against the menacing forces they feared was their good practice as Christians – their virtue.

Therefore be imitators of God [Eph 5:1]. Is this simply an exhortation about practice, aimed at protecting the community through more virtuous living? Not really. Just before our text begins the Ephesians were exhorted to put off their old life as people who were outside the covenant with Christ - and to put on their new life as if a garment, and walk in a new way. This is an appeal to Baptismal imagery, which means the ethical conduct urged upon the recipients flows from being reminded of their Baptism and their place in the living body of Christ. Everything that is to be done is grounded in membership of the community that was raised up in Christ (Eph 2:6). Baptismal imagery is like a quote that refers us to a whole range of ideas. In the profundity of the Father’s love, Christ entered into the depths of life in the world for us to join together what had been split apart by human sin. Ephesians sees evil in the world in the strongest terms, but its picture of salvation is stronger. Because Christ entered into the world, and was raised up, those who are “in Christ” already share in his exaltation, and in some strange way are already seated with him in the heavenly realms.

Blessed be the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every blessing in the heavenly places. (Eph 1:3)

Ephesians does exhort us to better ethical practice, but what is urged on us flows from the reconciliation of all things that God has accomplished for us in Christ. We are not dealing purely with precepts here. Rather, ethical action is urged upon people who are claimed by God, who already dwell “in Christ”. In a world disrupted and tormented by spiritual powers the Ephesians are being called to express their citizenship of heaven. Being “in Christ” translates into meaning that the human church already shares in the victory of God and is called to clothe itself in God’s power. The self-giving of God, demonstrated in the cross and resurrection, is what provides the basis for Christian living. And in this new life, the priorities that flow are not ours. They come from being “in Christ” and are demonstrated as peace, love and unity.

Having to think about the life of the Christian community reminded me of something Martin Luther is supposed to have said: “Others attack the life, I attack the doctrine”. Whereas those before him criticized the practices and life of the church, he sought to reform its doctrine. There are those who feel “others attack the life, I attack the doctrine” defined Luther’s distinctiveness as a Reformer. This priority did enter into the Lutheran understanding of the church, which was expected to be “always reforming” because it was listening to scripture and adjusting its doctrine, and therefore its structure and its life accordingly.

As with other things the church does, this principle can be corrupted. A few years ago I was talking with a Lutheran minister who said that the Lutheran Church in Australia had debated the issue of women’s ordination several times, and despite seeing no theological impediment to making the change, had decided not to embrace it in practice.

Ephesians is very doctrinal and Ephesians also ethical and practical. This letter expects that, as a Christian community what we know about God will flow into how we live our lives, so that word and deed, worship and mission, faith and works are a unity, not a world split apart. If that happens the gifts God seeks to give us: peace, love and unity, will be fostered among us, and become a healing force in the world.

Therefore be imitators of God...live in love as Christ loved us [Eph 5:1]. Love that imitates Christ is the virtue that actualises God’s gift of life to us. God’s love for us is the inspiration of all we are called to do. And the best news is, in Christ God enables us to be God’s imitators. In the strength God gives us our actions will be not stale or fetid odours, but will come forth as sweet, fragrant offerings of love to God, offered because we have received love from God, and seek to honour the gift.
