

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon Text: Ephesians 4:22 – 5:2

Theme: “*Live as renewed children of God*”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The sermon for today is based on the New Testament reading from Ephesians, but I would like to pick it up from verse 22. Let me read verses 22-24 then bookend the reading with the final two verses 5:1-2. “Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the Spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Heavenly Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

The Old Person

St Paul encourages all Christians to put off their old self. Like a jacket that no longer fits or is no longer the proper style. Or better still, like a sporting jumper or uniform, it is no longer appropriate, nor does it make sense to keep wearing it – so we put off the old uniform and we wear the new teams colours with pride and honour. Put off your old self because it is corrupt and moth-eaten and no longer fitting for a child of God to be wearing.

Who is this ‘old person’ that Paul is referring to? It is the old Adam or the old Eve who was made in the image of God, but had that image tainted or damaged when the first couple ate the forbidden fruit. Since that original sin, all humanity is naturally turned in on themselves rather than towards God, and certainly before being turned towards other people. From the moment a beautiful baby child is born, it wants other people to notice them and pay attention to them and to meet their needs. It is for this reason that Jesus died for the sins of *all* people, not just those who recognise they need a saviour.

How do people continue living according to the ‘old person’? They remain self-centred, self-absorbed. They live their lives as though they are the centre of all that is happening and they expect others to make way for them. There are numerous examples you could think of but some that come to my mind are:

- a. Watch how people move through a crowd at the marketplace, or show, or any large gathering. Do people watch out for others, or do they blindly forge ahead on *their* chosen path, expecting others to get out of their way?
- b. When you are driving along a busy dual carriageway and you indicate to change lanes. Do people politely make room or do they speed up to close the gap? Do their actions reflect a care and respect for other drivers or do they reflect an attitude of, ‘this road was made for me; and you’re just lucky I let you use it?’
- c. Or for those who like the movies. Last week one of the TV stations screened the movies, “The Devil wears Prada”, starring Meryl Streep as the domineering boss who expects instant and complete obedience to her exactly standards. Her character’s personal assistants long-suffering boyfriend makes the cutting observation: The person whose phone calls you always take is the one with whom you have a relationship.

So who are you taking calls from? Are they first and foremost God, reading and hearing his Word to guide us each day, or do we first tune into any old magazine, breakfast TV show, or internet website to start our day off?

As Christians, you are encouraged to put off the old self with all the dross and baggage this entails and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and putting on the self, which is like putting on the new team uniform – one that bears the image of God.

The new person grows

As Christians who are being renewed it is worth noting that this is written in the passive form in the Greek. Being renewed is something that is being done for us and to us. The spirit of our minds is being called and renewed by God’s Holy Spirit and we are clothed with Christ’s righteousness. Through the work of the Triune God we are once more made right with God and we are made holy for his work in the world.

This work of being renewed is God’s alone and it is here we can say with confidence that we are truly born-again Christians. We are reborn not because of a decision we made but because of God’s grace alone. Luther describes this new person as one who has the spirit and truth, by which the heart is lit up for righteousness and holiness so the new person follows the guidance of God’s Words and feels a desire for a godly walk and good life.

Here we will find ourselves bound, not to sin and evil desires but bound firmly to God and his will for our lives. The problem is that our nature doesn't take too kindly to the idea of being bound to anyone or anything. We want to be free spirits, free to make our own decisions and to chart our own course. But what most people don't realise is being bound securely to God now gives us the freedom to grow according to his will and to grow stronger in and through him.

So how is this new life lived out? What might it look like? Well for each person it will be different but instead of always looking inward, being focussed on yourself, you will be turned towards God and you will hear his Word for you. Armed with God's Word, you will turn towards your neighbour and consider how you might help them in their daily lives. Now this is not an invitation to take over, but to be aware of how you might be able to help them in their time of need.

It is here that Luther's explanation of what the Ten Commandments means for us is so very helpful. Our legalistic nature is so quick to grab hold of the commandments and ask what do I have to do to satisfy them. We want to know where the benchmark is set so we can do our best to make God happy. This will always be the law at work in our hearts. Luther quite rightly develops our understand of how we as born again Christians live with God's commandments as gospel. The law says, "Thou shalt not." Living out the gospel says, "Not only will I not despise God's name, I'll gladly use it in every time of need and I'll use it to bless others." Or it might say, "Not only will I not steal, I'll pick up that money that was dropped and return it to it's owner."

Paul is developing the idea that you are to live a new life as Christian people. This new life is to reflect the unity that we have with Christ. The old self-centred person that always sought advantage for themselves is gone and the new person looks to build up the whole body. The new person speaks the truth in love to their neighbour, doesn't dwell in anger towards others, doesn't speak in a bad way about others. Paul encourages us to, "be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (v32).

Be imitators of Christ

A transition has taken place here. You who were clothed with rags of sin and brokenness have been given new robes of righteousness, not because of your good deeds, but because of Christ's perfect work on the cross. So Paul says to you, act in a manner that is befitting of those who have been born again. Live as though you really have and as though you really believe you have been renewed in the spirit of your minds. *Be imitators of Christ.*

Be imitators of Christ – what does that mean? Perhaps the most familiar idea is summed up as WWJD – What Would Jesus Do? This is not a bad way of reminding yourself of the choice you have every time you make a decision. Do you wonder whether you should crib a little on your tax return? Do you wonder if you should pinch the extra biscuit? Do you wonder if you should apply for that new job or not? Well the answers are easy aren't they? What would Jesus do? So armed with Jesus on our side we might search the Scriptures to try and imagine just what Jesus would do if he were in our shoes. The problem is we risk reducing Jesus to a moral policeman. Like the old cartoon, we have Jesus on one shoulder giving good advice and we have the devil on the other shoulder, tempting us with false promises, but oh they seem so good. Which way will you choose? And here's the problem. The question, "What would Jesus do?" puts you in the driving seat. Ultimately you will be the one who decides which counsel you will listen to. You're the boss.

Could it be that Paul has another type of imitation in mind? Consider the life of Jesus who descended from heaven, was baptised and anointed with the Holy Spirit, died on the cross and was raised to new life. As Christian people, you too have died in the waters of baptism, you have been anointed and filled with the Holy Spirit and you have been raised to new life. Here you are imitators of Christ, not by your actions but through Jesus' work. So Paul writes, be imitators of God *as beloved children*. As Jesus is God's own Son, you have been adopted by God as his beloved children.

Through Christ the relationship between you and God has been restored. This is the first table of the Commandments. Paul now encourages you to walk in love, walk in the Christian love of action in support of others. Here you live out the second table of commandments which address the relationships you forge with your neighbours, those whom God puts before you. Live now as renewed children of God, living as God wants you to, not because you wonder what Jesus might do if he were in your shoes. Live as God wants you to because Jesus has already made you right with him.

And the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.