

Last week we mentioned that in this later part of the epistle to the Romans the apostle Paul turns to some very pragmatic aspects of the Christian life. In particular, in Romans 12, Paul focusses on how the Christian is to live their life as a member of society and how kingdom relationships work. The purpose is two-fold. Firstly, to be able to truly utilise all of the powerful gifts of the Spirit that Paul has been speaking of then that same Christian needs to develop the Jesus-like character that reflects the Father. Gifts used without a Jesus-like character can become a self-serving disaster. Secondly, with a Christ-like character, the Christian is able to go out into the world and be truly useful to God in helping God reconcile the world to Himself, achieving God's mission in the world. The development of character and the ability to use God's gifts are intrinsically relational. None of this comes naturally or without training, experience and reflection. Like Jesus, the Christian is made perfect through the Spirit guided life, through joyous and difficult times and character and the appropriate use of the gifts of the Spirit is the outward sign of this development. This character, echoing Jesus, is both incredibly attractive and, at the same time, to some, confrontational as it challenges the essence of who and what a person is.

We start by reflecting on the impact of Christians who have lived this life. I'm going to read a text from the third century. I used part of this a few years ago and for years this has stayed with me. The words, almost two millennia old, reflect the impact of the early Christian community on the villages and cities they lived in and the words ring just as clearly today as a challenge to us.

This text, written by a man named Mathetes, is titled *The Christians in the World* and was written to Diognetus in the late 2nd or early 3rd century. Mathetes writes:

"Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life. Their teaching is not based upon reveries inspired by the curiosity of men. Unlike some other people, they champion no purely human doctrine. With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign.

And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labour under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share their meals, but not their wives.

They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law. Christians love all men, but all men persecute them. Condemned because they are not understood, they are put to death, but raised to life again. They live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally destitute, but possess an abundance of everything. They suffer dishonour, but that is their glory. They are defamed, but vindicated. A blessing is their answer to abuse, deference their response to insult. For the good they do they receive the punishment of malefactors, but even then they rejoice, as though receiving the gift of life. They are attacked by the Jews as aliens, they are persecuted by the Greeks, yet no one can explain the reason for this hatred.

To speak in general terms, we may say that the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body. As the soul is present in every part of the body, while remaining distinct from it, so Christians are found in all the cities of the world, but cannot be identified with the world. As the visible body contains the invisible soul, so Christians are seen living in the world, but their religious life remains unseen. The body hates the soul and wars against it, not because of any injury the soul has done it, but because of the restriction the soul places on its pleasures. Similarly, the world hates the Christians, not because they have done it any wrong, but because they are opposed to its enjoyments.

Christians love those who hate them just as the soul loves the body and all its members despite the body's hatred. It is by the soul, enclosed within the body, that the body is held together, and similarly, it is by the Christians, detained in the world as in a prison, that the world is held together. The soul, though immortal, has a mortal dwelling place; and Christians also live for a time amidst perishable things, while awaiting the freedom from change and decay that will be theirs in heaven. As the soul benefits from the deprivation of food and drink, so Christians flourish under persecution. Such is the Christian's lofty and divinely appointed function, from which he is not permitted to excuse himself."

What Nathetes so starkly and willingly points out is the Christian situation: we are in the world but not of it. We come from all over the world today. So many languages, cultures, backgrounds, but called together as one in Christ. As Mathetes points out, culture, food, clothing style, manner of life in general, even national and political borders are no hindrance to us but cultural attitudes to the value of human life and sexual propriety are. Suffering is accepted as a trial on a journey to a destination worth the price, even when persecution comes from all quarters. Above all else Christians, he says, are known by their love, even for those who hate and malign them and oddly, Christians flourish under persecution. Christians he says live amongst the perishable with eyes for the freedom and joys of the eternal. Thus, Christians are, in the character and lives, salt and light in a dark world. This is what Paul would have dreamed of: the church having being seen in the world as a power of good reflecting God and to His glory.

So, what does Paul tell us? He gives us a few quick, pithy exhortations as to how we are to be ourselves in our attitudes and approach to life.

- ***Our love must be sincere.*** This is the Love of God ministered to the world in the power of the Holy Spirit. The language of the word *sincere* in Greek speaks of an honesty without hypocrisy. In other words, the love language has to match the believer's own life. Walk the talk. We can't get away with "*do as I say, not what I do*". Our love has to be genuine and only the Holy Spirit can give us this love for others and keep it fresh. Jesus said, **tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.... if you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ... if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.** (Matt 5:44-48 abridged.) Jesus calls us to love those of His family, His body and then even more widely and that's not always so easy. This is something of what we were talking about last week in being perfect in the place we are at in our walk. Who is God calling you to love? When we can do this well, we can make a powerful witness to the power of the gospel to the world. Furthermore, as the Quaker theologian Richard Foster observed, "*If we truly love people, we will desire for them far more than it is within our power to give them, and this will lead us to prayer.*"
- ***We are to hate evil and to cling to Good.*** The Scriptures and Jesus regularly use hyperbole, extremes to make a point. But in this case, it is literally what is meant. In contrast

to the holiness and purity of God, the life example Jesus has given us, and the experience of the love the Holy Spirit places in our lives, that which is not of God, or worse in opposition to the will of God, should become absolutely abhorrent to us. Therefore, we hate evil and all its works and hold fast to what is truly good.

- ***We are to be devoted to one another and honour others above yourself.*** These two are inextricably linked. The first refers particularly to those of the family of believers and the second more generally. As we put others before ourselves, we care for them, we are willing to make sacrifices for them, we do things for them, we truly care. We become the hands, the heart, the voice-piece of Jesus in everyday practical life to those around us. Those with whom we serve the Lord together we are to particularly care for as close family.

In all of this in the challenges and successes we share we are further encouraged:

- ***Not to lack in zeal but to keep our zeal serving in the Lord.*** The Christian is like the perpetual Eveready battery advert – never giving up when all others fall by the wayside. Our energy is not lithium but the power of the Holy Spirit Himself constantly filling and refreshing us as we return to the tap.
- The last exhortations of this group : ***joyful in hope, patience in affliction, faithfulness in prayer, sharing with the Lord's people who are in need and practice hospitality ...*** are all very much about the attitude we take into life and the support we give each other. Our attitude reflects the fact we keep our eyes on the Lord and the long-term goal and this built on the confidence we have in Jesus. Our sharing with each other and invitation to those outside reflects the love and joy receive and the heart we develop to bring others to the Lord's Table.

When we think and reflect on these attributes and exhortations we have to ask ourselves: does this reflect me? Is this what I am like? When Paul wrote the book of Romans from Corinth in preparation for his trip to the West. He had already written numerous letters to communities he had founded but he had never been or taken the gospel to Rome. Here he sums up the most critical aspects that he wants the new believers in Rome to know about. These were the attitudes Paul had learned would be fundamental in changing the world. Attitudes and approaches every Christian needs to embrace. Have we?

We are not going to go through the rest of the exhortations in detail, but these are worth taking the time to reflect on in the same manner in our quiet time:

- Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.
- Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.
- Live in harmony with one another.
- Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.
- Do not be conceited.
- Do not repay anyone evil for evil.
- Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.
- If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.
- Do not take revenge.
- If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
- Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Do these statements reflect the attitudes we carry in life, the way we actually live? In each of these our character is formed and as we live out the good, we model Jesus.

It is not infrequent to be asked what Jesus meant in this text by the comment ***"In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."*** Jesus quotes from Proverbs 25:21-22 and the

imagery of burning coals refers to shaming. Unless a person has so seared his or her conscience with evil, when an individual comes to engage with someone acting in the true genuine love, in the face of their hostility, aggression, violence or deceit they are shamed – literally a burning of the face – and their conscience challenges them to rise to the occasion and become a better person. Furthermore, if the person they are dealing with is a Christian one might well expect that the Holy Spirit will be further seriously challenging them to change their lives around, to repent to use the classical term. In coming to Jesus, they too can be like the loving person they see before them and be embraced by the family of God. This is what the apostle has in mind ... our loving witness gives way to the opportunity for mission. This too is what the writer Mathesis saw when he saw the Christian community at work in the world of the early first and second centuries ... a community built on the love of God that overcame the challenges that every culture, setting and challenge in the world. Loving attitudes and responses that were admired, if not always understood, but that made the Christian community a truly appealing community of which to be a part.

Christian living then is to live increasingly selflessly, increasingly lovingly, increasingly engagingly and increasingly alongside each other, all empowered by the Spirit of our Loving Father. This is what fascinated and attracted the ancients, that encouraged them to come to God and it continues to do so with people all over the world and right next door today.

Amen.