**Dorset South and West Circuit Service for Sunday 8 August 2021 by Tony Boyden**

**A Community that grows together**

*Part of the letter to the early Christian Church in Ephesus helps provide the focus of our worship today. Thought originally to be written by St. Paul it was probably the work of one of his followers but the style closely resembles that of his mentor. The membership of the Ephesus church had been in turmoil. The letter begins by stressing God’s purpose for those calling themselves Christians and then moves on to encourage the Ephesians to mature in their faith. It outlines how members should relate to one another and to the world beyond the church. It has as much relevance today as it did in the first century AD.*

**Call to worship**

God calls us together as church, as community, as ourselves.
God calls us to show his world what he is like.
We worship him, and seek to imitate him in all we do.
For his glory. **Amen.**

**Hymn: A Touching Place. (Tune: Dream Angus)**

1. Christ’s is the world in which we move;

Christ’s are the folk we’re summoned to love;

Christ’s is the voice that calls us to care,

and Christ is the one who meets us here.

Chorus: *To the lost Christ shows his face, to the unloved he gives his embrace, to those who cry in pain and disgrace, Christ makes, with his friends, a touching place.*

1. Feel for the people we most avoid-

strange or bereaved or never employed. Feel for the women and feel for the men who fear that their living is all in vain.

Chorus

3. Feel for the parents who’ve lost their child feel for the women whom men have defiled, feel for the baby for whom there’s no breast, and feel for the weary who find no rest.

Chorus

4. Feel for the lives by life confused, riddled with doubt, in loving abused; feel for the lonely heart conscious of sin, which longs to be pure but fears to begin.

Chorus

*John L. Bell (b 1949) and Graham Maule (b 1958)*

**A prayer of adoration and thanksgiving**

Lord God, we are so grateful that you are not a distant God,
who can only be worshipped from afar.
We thank you that we are your dearly loved children.
Through Jesus you came close to us,
so that we can truly know you.
Thank you, dear God,
that in Christ we are part of your great plan.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of confession**

Ephesians 4.32 speaks of us forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us

Thank you, Lord, for the wonder of your forgiveness. We turn back to you, having rebuffed you, rejected your wishes, pursued our own selfish desires. And yet, amazingly, you are always ready to forgive us. You are always there to give us the chance of a fresh start. And yet we cannot begin to comprehend the huge cost involved in forgiving us; nothing less than the death of your beloved son Jesus Christ on the cross.

And yet we still find it hard to forgive the people who have wronged us, by what they have said to us or done to us. We are intent on seeing them punished. Help us, Lord, to learn how to forgive as you constantly forgive us. Stop us from thinking we have some moral superiority and help us to shake off our grudges and past hurts. Guide us how to seek the path of reconciliation. And for our part, help us to confess the wrongs that we have committed, making us realise that we should remove the beam from our own eyes before we look for the speck in those of our brothers and sisters. Amen.

**Reading Ephesians 4.25-5.2 (GNB)**

No more lying, then! Each of you must tell the truth to one another, because we are all members together in the body of Christ.  If you become angry, do not let your anger lead you into sin, and do not stay angry all day.  Don't give the Devil a chance. Those who used to rob must stop robbing and start working, in order to earn an honest living for themselves and to be able to help the poor.  Do not use harmful words, but only helpful words, the kind that build up and provide what is needed, so that what you say will do good to those who hear you.  And do not make God's Holy Spirit sad; for the Spirit is God's mark of ownership on you, a guarantee that the Day will come when God will set you free.  Get rid of all bitterness, passion, and anger. No more shouting or insults, no more hateful feelings of any sort.  Instead, be kind and tender-hearted to one another, and forgive one another, as God has forgiven you through Christ.

Since you are God's dear children, you must try to be like him.  Your life must be controlled by love, just as Christ loved us and gave his life for us as a sweet-smelling offering and sacrifice that pleases God.

**Refection**

A common misconception is that there was once some golden age -some romantic past- when there wasn’t conflict and argument within the church. To think that is to forget that none of us is, in St Paul’s words to the Roman church, without sin. We all fall short. There is always the chance of disagreement and deep conflict in the church be it local, national or as a global body

It is clear from the letter to the Ephesians that all was not running smoothly with the congregation there. Why bother writing it otherwise? Tensions in the Ephesian congregation needed to be smoothed out or else the community risked not holding together.

Put in a nutshell the chief threat to that internal harmony was talk. Lying and anger were the main forms of talk destabilising the Ephesus church. Verse 31 gives a good summary of how members talked to one another in a harmful way.

And then in the last three verses of this reading we have the main point. The well-being of a Christian community is not just important because it makes us happier or helps us market our brand product in a better way. Much more important, if we cannot build a strong community what point is there to a worshipping community at all? A church at odds with itself shows ignorance of what God’s purpose is and is useless as his witness. We are called together to live as ‘imitators of God’. Our life together shows our family likeness and any behaviour that destroys the common life will “grieve the Holy Spirit’ whose task is to build us into the likeness of the Son so that we too can love the Father.

So the lovely and challenging commission set by the letter was to speak in a way that peoples’ words gave grace to those who heard them.

What a commission that is! We all know how words can be used to a devastating or devious purpose. Weasel words and half- truths used by those in authority to justify their actions. Euphemisms which disguise what in plain language we would call immoral behaviour. Appalling cyber bullying via the Internet, often with tragic consequences. The use of social media for abuse, most recently seen in the attacks on members of the England football team. Name calling and the shouting down of people whose opinions are different. The distortion of news by the popular media.

And some churches are not immune from this. People can sometimes read the first verse of this passage, for instance, and assume it instructs them to set their neighbour straight. There can be no alternative to what they consider their own inalienable truth!

But the letter to the Ephesians calls on us all to act with grace to those who hear us as part of God’s beloved children. Given that none of us is without sin it seems to me we all need to make an honest self-inventory before we express our ‘truths’ about the sins of others. That’s a real challenge!

When the letter allows us to be angry but not to sin, it means that as a community we should stick to battling the injustices, the inequalities and the inhumanity we see on a daily basis in the world. We would not be authentic followers of Jesus otherwise.

But it also means that we should act towards one another with grace. The author doesn’t expect the members of the Ephesus church to automatically agree on everything but to be *“kind to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”* In other words we should put aside bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander and malice.

The Cross where Jesus called on his father to forgive his tormentors *“for they know not what they do”* can be the only model for a Christian community. Christian community is not based so much upon reaching agreement but rather forgiveness. Here the one who thinks they are right extends unconditional acceptance to the one they think is wrong and deluded. Jesus knew the truth. Jesus was the innocent victim. Yet it was Jesus who looked upon those who were wrong and did not cut them off, but prayed that God might welcome them with openness and forgiveness.

Being right and mixing with people who agree with you all the time is easy. Staying part of a body in which people are challenged every day to be gentle, forgiving and forbearing is a lot more difficult. But as God’s beloved children we can do no other if we are to grow as true disciples of Christ. Amen

**Prayers of concern (***please use these as a framework for more specific prayers of your own. You may wish to say after each section: “****Help us to share******through our prayer******and through our care.”)***

Lord God, there are so many people who need the difference that only you can bring to their lives.
Sometimes we feel so useless when faced with the needs of our world that we forget the important part we play just by opening our livers to you: praying to you; being your hands and feet.

We pray today for our families, our friends, our peers, our teachers.

We pray for all who set up and work in charitable organisations:
bless them as they so freely give of their time and talents.

We pray for people who work together to bring healing,
for all who work in hospitals, homes, the community:
bless them as they bring blessing to others.

We pray for everyone who has helped us grow closer to you;
for our church family, and our ministers.

We pray for our community, the world in which we live and work and have our being.

We pray for people who feel they have nothing to share, nothing even to live for; the homeless, prisoners, people at the end of relationships, the sick and those who mourn.

We offer these prayers in Jesus’s name, our Lord and our Saviour Amen

**Lord’s Prayer**

Our father in heaven, hallowed be your Name your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen

**Hymn: SF686 Jesus, Lord, we look to thee**

4. Let us for each other care, each the other’s burden bear, to thy Church the pattern give, show how true believers live.

5. Free from anger and from pride, let us thus in God abide; all the depth of love express, all the height of holiness.

*John Wesley (1707-88)*

1. Jesus, Lord, we look to thee, let us in thy name agree; show thyself the Prince of Peace; bid our jarring conflicts cease.

2. By thy reconciling love, every stumbling-block remove; each to each unite, endear; come, and spread thy banner here.

3. Make us of one heart and mind, courteous, merciful and kind, lowly, meek in thought and word, altogether like our Lord.

**Blessing:** May the Lord be with you as you seek to follow his example in your lives and to spread the news of his wonderful love to all you meet. Amen

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