

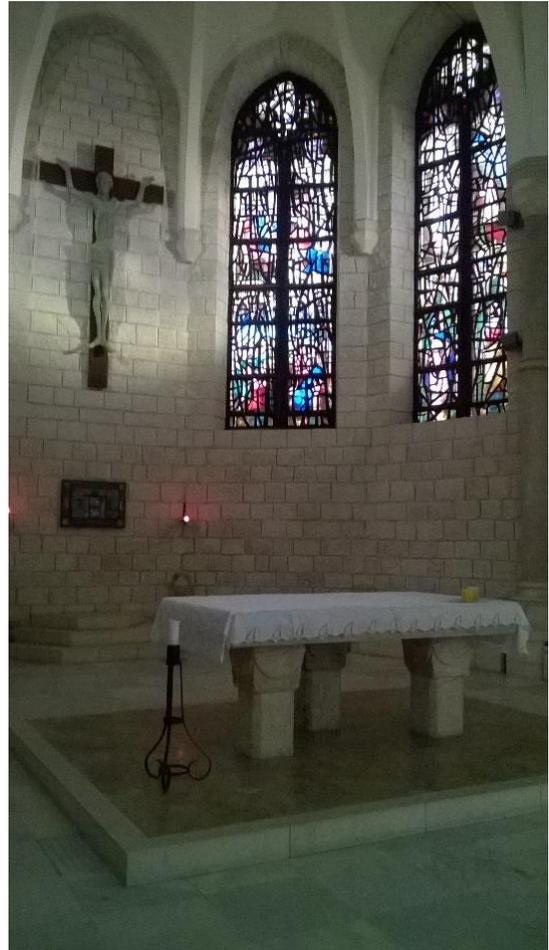
Living in Christ: Living the Christian Life

Reflections for the 17th May 2020

Key verses

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.

You yourselves used to be in darkness, but since you have become the Lord's people you are in the light. So you must live like people who belong to the light (Ephesians 5:2 & 8)



Photograph taken in the Sisters of Nazareth Convent

Introduction: *We continue on our six-week series following themes from the Circuit Lectionary series, under the overall heading of 'Living in Christ'. This is Week 4: Living the Christian life. This material has been prepared by Rev Roberta Topham*

A prayer: Christ, transform our lives in light and love. Through your suffering and resurrection we are called to be a new people. We are sorry for not seeing you at work within each of us. Help us to always see you and thank you for being with us.

Amen.

Today's Bible passage is Ephesians 4:17- 5:20. I recorded a talk on this passage on May 8th. This was just before the government was due to update us with the plans to begin moving out of the current lockdown. In the event, the information we were given makes it clear that this move will be very gradual. Changes will happen slowly and in different ways for different people. The questions I raised in my talk about how we will live in the future still apply but the pace of movement towards that future is to be even slower than we might have imagined. Nonetheless how we live now and how we will live as Christians in the future are important questions to ask. **My short talk about our passage can be found here:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=byRtovvRryg>

A written reflection: Our passage for today comes from St Paul's letter to the Ephesians (4:17- 5:20) and is full of opposites. I thought as a way in to that we might have a bit of fun with a "think of the opposite" puzzle:

Entrance _ _ _ _ _
Night _ _ _ _

Full _ _ _ _ _
Knowledge _ _ _ _ _

Transparent	-----	Unite	-----
Create	-----	Light	-----

As people we do have a tendency to think in opposites. The first part of today's Bible passage from Ephesians chapter four verses 17-32 contains the following opposites as Paul emphasises the difference between life before knowing Christ and after:

Before	After
Gentiles/heathen	- the way of Christ
Deceitful desires	- true life that is upright and holy
Lying	- tell the truth
Holding on to anger	- letting it go before sun-set
Thieving	- earn an honest living & help the poor
Harmful words	- only helpful words that build a person up
Hateful feelings	- be kind, tender-hearted & forgive

Ephesians 5: 1-20 shifts the focus even more onto the positive aspects of what it is to follow Jesus and so "live in Christ". This is how St Paul puts it:

"Since you are God's dear children, you must try to be like him. ²Your 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. ³Since you are God's people, it is not right that any matters of sexual immorality or indecency or greed should even be mentioned among you. ⁴Nor is it fitting for you to use language which is obscene, profane, or vulgar. Rather you should give thanks to God. ⁵You may be sure that no one who is immoral, indecent, or greedy (for greed is a form of idolatry) will ever receive a share in the Kingdom of Christ and of God. ⁶Do not let anyone deceive you with foolish words; it is because of these very things that God's anger will come upon those who do not obey him. ⁷So have nothing at all to do with such people. ⁸You yourselves used to be in the darkness, but since you have become the Lord's people, you are in the light. So you must live like people who belong to the light, ⁹for it is the light^[a] that brings a rich harvest of every kind of goodness, righteousness, and truth. ¹⁰Try to learn what pleases the Lord. ¹¹Have nothing to do with the worthless things that people do, things that belong to the darkness. Instead, bring them out to the light. (¹²It is really too shameful even to talk about the things they do in secret.) ¹³And when all things are brought out to the light, then their true nature is clearly revealed; ¹⁴for anything that is clearly revealed becomes light.^[b] That is why it is said, "Wake up, sleeper, and rise from death, and Christ will shine on you."¹⁵ So be careful how you live. Don't live like ignorant people, but like wise people. ¹⁶Make good use of every opportunity you have, because these are evil days. ¹⁷Don't be fools, then, but try to find out what the Lord wants you to do. ¹⁸Do not get drunk with wine, which will only ruin you; instead, be filled with the Spirit. ¹⁹Speak to one another with the words of psalms, hymns, and sacred songs; sing hymns and psalms to the Lord with praise in your hearts. ²⁰In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, always give thanks for everything to God the Father."

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Our circuit theme of thinking about living the Christian life seems very appropriate just now as we are all having to learn to live very differently.

In the first half of his letter to the early Christians in Ephesus Paul celebrates the salvation which he has experienced. The second half of the letter is about the practicalities of living the Christian life. Paul's use of opposites here is a dramatic and strong rhetorical device, perhaps used to help his listeners remember in the days before books and computers.

From the way Paul writes about the old life of the Ephesians it is clear that he believes they were in a dire state before encountering Christ. In chapter four he writes of getting rid of their old selves and putting "on a new self", "which is created in God's likeness" (Ephesians 4: 22-24). In chapter five Paul focuses more on the positives of the new way of life and the inspiration for it. They, and we, are "God's dear children" who "must try to be like him". The use of the word "try" here may indicate that for the Ephesians, as for us, changing to be like God is not a simple flick of a switch. Perhaps the key to living the Christian life is found in verse chapter 5 verse 2, "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".

Father Richard Rohr (a contemporary Franciscan Friar and writer) has famously talked about Christianity as a life-style. This is true. And yet it is surely a life-style that would be hard, if not impossible to adopt, if we did not have first have the power of Christ dwelling in our lives. In chapter four Paul has written of how followers of Christ have the mark of God's Holy Spirit upon us, a guarantee of our freedom. It is surely our openness to God and the indwelling of God's Spirit that enables us do the opposite of what our human nature might otherwise lead us to do.

Living the Christian life does involve doing the opposite to all the negative things Paul outlines. It does involve living with love, light (transparency), wisdom and praise. Doing these things and sustaining them is fed by our encounter with God. I wonder, if we start where today's passage ends, in singing songs to God with praise and thanks whether everything else is more likely to fall into place?

Some questions to ponder: Paul writes of living in love, light and wisdom.

With regard to **sacrificial love**, what sacrifices have you seen being made by people across our country (now and in times past)? Given that there are times when we expect some people to act sacrificially and not others, how might we address this to be more fair? What loving sacrifices have you had to make during this time? How might it help to recognise that in so doing we are imitating God our parent and Christ our saviour?

With regard to **living in light**, where do you think a lack of transparency leads to mistrust? Given that there are instances where some of those leading our nation's guidance on lockdown have failed to keep the guidelines themselves how does this feel? Does this affect trust? Are we tempted to judge them and let ourselves off? Should we? Going forward, how can we individually and as churches be more clearly people of openness and light?

With regard to **wisdom**, how do we make the best use of our time? What have you learnt about best use of time (and other resources) during this crisis? Is there anything you think we should change in how we live as a nation when the crisis ends? If so what are you going to do to make that happen? Is there anything you have learnt during lockdown about living the Christian life that you would like to take forward as the restrictions are gradually lifted?

Perhaps you might like to use this box below or another paper to jot down your thoughts: -

I would like God to help me live differently in these ways: -

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Helping the poor was one of the positive actions Paul writes about in Ephesians chapter 4. Followers of Jesus see this as part of living the Christian life. Christian Aid is one of the

agencies which enables us to do this effectively. Sunday 17th August marks the end of Christian Aid week.

The following prayers have been provided by Christian Aid:



Love never fails

Even in the darkest moments, love gives hope. Love compels us to fight against coronavirus alongside our sisters and brothers living in poverty. Love compels us to stand together in prayer with our neighbours near and far. Love compels us to give and act as one. Now, it is clear that our futures are bound together more tightly than ever before. As we pray in our individual homes – around the nation and around the world – we are united as one family. So, let us pause and find a moment of peace, as we lift up our hearts together in prayer.

Prayers of thanksgiving and intercession

For the health workers tending the seriously ill
for the scientists working on a vaccination
for the researchers analysing data and identifying trends
for the media outlets working to communicate reality
for the supermarket workers, hygiene and sanitation providers
for the good news stories of recoveries and effective planning
for the singing from balconies by locked-down communities
for the recognition that isolation doesn't need to mean loneliness
for the notes through letterboxes offering help and support
for the internet and telephones and technology that connects

for the awakened appreciation of what is truly important

Thanks be to God.

For those who are unwell and concerned for loved ones
for those who were already very anxious
for those immune suppressed or compromised
for those vulnerable because of underlying conditions
for those in the 'most at risk to coronavirus' categories
for those watching their entire income stream dry up
for those who have no choice but to go out to work
for those who are afraid to be at home
for those who are more lonely than they've ever been
for those who are bereaved and grieving. God be their healer, comfort and protection,
be their strength, shield and provision
be their security, safety and close companion
And raise up your Church
to be your well-washed hands and faithful feet
to be present to the pain
to respond with love in action
if even from a safe distance.

God, in your mercy,
Hear our prayer. Amen.

Blessing: May God's blessing of light be upon us, light inside us to welcome others and light outside to guide us. So may Christ shine upon us and those we love, this day and evermore. Amen.