

Sermon August 18 2024 - Rev Don Owers

Last Thursday evening the church in Adelaide gathered in St Peter's Cathedral to celebrate the consecration of the Rev Sophie Relf-Christopher as a bishop in God's church. I was so pleased to hear Sophie was to be made a bishop because she is an intelligent and kind person with plenty of energy and vision, and she is committed to serve the church as people rather than as institution. We need to keep her in prayer as she takes on a very challenging task.

The service for her consecration was magnificent. The cathedral was packed, the choral music was sublime, the organ superb, there were bishops aplenty and other dignitaries all attired in splendour. It was pomp and circumstance worthy of a coronation. Here, you might think, was the church in all its glory.

In Eph 3 Paul prays for the church in these words:

***20** Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, **21** to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen*

It's an astounding prayer if you think about it. Paul is praying that God's glory might be known – experienced and demonstrated – in the church.

But, brothers and sisters, the glory that Paul writes of here is not the glory we saw last Thursday evening, it's not the glory of pomp and circumstance, it's glory of a different kind. In many ways it must be of a different kind, because the church for which St Paul prays was nothing like the institutional church we saw gathered last Thursday. The church at Ephesus was a small group of people who were seeking to follow the Lord Jesus Christ in the midst of a culture that regarded them as rather odd and out of step with the mainstream. A bit like us really. So, what is the glory Paul prays might be experienced and seen in this little group of people? Well, I'll tell you, it's the glory of human hearts that have been changed in the power of the Holy Spirit as people come to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and seek to follow him; it's the glory of a new community called into being by God and in which the grace of God is experienced in daily relationships.

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In the letter to the Ephesians, everything that follows Paul's prayer in ch 3 is, in some ways, an outworking of that prayer. All the commands, instructions advice etc which follows in chs 4, 5 and 6 are simply practical instruction on how to live out God's glory in the local church. All of these directions must be seen not as legalistic commands, but as expressions of hearts changed by grace

Our New Testament reading today was the whole of Eph 5. It's impossible to cover all of that in one sermon so I thought I'd concentrate on the few verses that, for probably 50% or more of the congregation, would have jumped off the page! I want to emphasise though, that the principles I use to interpret these verses, apply to the whole of chapter 5, and much of ch 4 and ch 6 as well. Well, no prizes for guessing what is probably the most controversial passage in the chapter. In 5.22 – 24 Paul writes: (Slide 1)

²² Wives, be subject^[e] to your husbands as to the Lord, ²³ for the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. ²⁴ Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

Many women rebel – or at least bristle – at these words because they seem to assign an inferior position to married women and, by extension, to all women. This instruction seems to surrender or call into question, hard won freedoms, and it seems incongruous that the word of God should align itself with a patriarchal view of life that has oppressed women for centuries, and which our culture now comprehensively rejects.

Well, let me reassure you, no part of this passage (including the later instructions in ch 6 regarding the behavior of fathers and children) seeks to reinforce a 'men behaving badly' view of society – whether in marriage or in other relationships. In fact, it's quite the opposite. Actually, this passage carefully and very cleverly subverts patriarchal oppression. To understand its real purpose, we have to stand back and look firstly at the main theme of the whole letter to the Ephesians, and secondly, we need to need to recognize how this passage would have confronted prevailing attitudes in the society of

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the time, and then and only then can we discern the insights this passage holds for us today. These are the principles for interpretation I referred to earlier.

We live in a world that is blighted by division. Differences and variety in human life are good things – God created differences and variety, and humanity would be dull without them. But we human beings seem to be able to create division over just about any difference – race, skin colour, gender, social status, marital status, occupation, politics, and so on – and we know that these divisions too often generate prejudice and bitterness and real harm and sometimes violence. This is true today and it was also true when St Paul wrote this letter to the Ephesians.

One of the key arguments that Paul puts in the letter to the Ephesians is that these divisions within humanity – and the hostility that goes with them – are overcome through the cross of Christ.

In the first part of Eph 2, Paul describes humanity apart from Christ as alienated from God and alienated from each other. The first great turning point of Ephesians comes at ch2.13 where, reflecting that alienation, and the grace that the early Christians had come to know through the cross and resurrection of Jesus, Paul declares (slide 2):

***13** But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. **14** For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. **15** He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, **16** and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross,*

Paul has in mind principally the division between Jews and Gentiles and the hostility between them – but that is simply an example – it's representative of all human divisions.

How is this reconciliation supposed to work? Well, it's quite straightforward really. If you and I are standing together at the foot of the cross – and we recognize that we are both

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justly condemned as having failed before God – and we both then receive free and full forgiveness through the death of Jesus for us, then neither of us has any room for pride, neither of us can claim any special status. We share a new unity, a new status as forgiven sinners.

Now, here's the thing – this new unity – this overcoming of division and hostility that we experience as together, we stand at the foot of the cross – this new unity *is to be*

demonstrated in the church! That's how the glory of God is to be seen in the church!

We, brothers and sisters, are called to be a living demonstration of God's new possibility for humanity – the possibility of a humanity that is no longer divided and alienated by differences. In Christ our differences remain but rather than being a cause of division they become an opportunity to exercise care and commitment toward one another.

But this is a lofty ideal – and we need some practical instruction – so Paul then turns, in chs 4,5 and 6 to provide instructions as to how to put our new life in Christ into practice in the church.

Think about the society into which this message came. Greek and Roman society at the time was based on hierarchy and status – and was fearful of the chaos that might ensue if this social order was disturbed. Part of that order was the place of women – within their own social level they were always subordinate to men. Any attempt to upset this social order – especially by a marginalized group like the early Christians – could provoke a counter-productive and possibly violent reaction by the civic authorities or by the mob.

In one of his earliest letters, the letter to the Galatians Paul has already declared the theological truth that 'In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free – but all are one in Christ' - so he has a very clear vision of the unity and by implication, the equality of all who trust in Jesus - BUT – and it's an important 'but' - he has to be careful how he puts things when speaking of the jealously guarded social order, and especially that of the family. So, in giving these instructions to the Ephesians, he cleverly subverts the language of submission. Rather than standing

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on our dignity, all of us are to choose to submit to one another. 'Submit to another, he tells the Ephesian Christians, 'out of reverence for Christ'. Wives are simply included in this – they choose to submit themselves out of reverence for Christ. Note that what Paul is speaking of here is not the submission required of a subordinate but the choice of one who, in Christ, has been set free from the need to defend his or her dignity (Slide 3). We choose to submit, we choose to serve, all of us, not because we're inferior, but out of reverence for Christ.

(Slide 4) For the Christian, you see, identity is not found in status but through our relationship with the one who died for us and rose again, and called us to himself in love. And what's more we recognize that, as we choose to serve in this way, we are allowing the Holy Spirit to work in us and thus we're doing our part to build the church as God's new possibility for humanity.

Returning to our passage, up to end of v23 everything is going quite nicely for the men in the congregation – the less discerning among them would have heard the part about wives submitting to them – that was all fine, everyone knew that was how things should be – and they would have heard the part about the husband being the head of the wife (even though Paul subverts that too by linking headship to Christ's death for us) but then comes the command (Slide 5):

'Husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave up his life for her!'

Now, for a good many men in the congregation this would have been quite radical and challenging. There was nothing in the social order to prevent this, and no doubt many husbands did love their wives – but it wasn't something that was seen as a necessary part of the marriage relationship. Wives could be useful, and one needed to look after them, but to love one's wife (the word is the same as that used of God's love for us) and give one's life for her . . . ie to make sacrifices for her sake - this is radical stuff! But again, for Christian husbands, this is not a duty to be obeyed but an exercise of the freedom we have in Christ.

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(Slide 6) For all Christians then, including for those who are married, both wives and husbands, choosing to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ does not imply any kind of inferiority or subservience – on the contrary, it is an exercise of the freedom we have in Christ, an expression of being filled with the Holy Spirit, of being empowered to help build a new community – God’s new humanity. It involves a splendid vision and a noble task – and each of us, brothers and sisters is called to be part of it.