

Reflection for Pentecost 9 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

What is a disciple?

The simple definition - a student, pupil, or learner. In the Gospels we think of those who followed Jesus as his disciples, and this refers not only to the twelve but also a much wider group of followers. But there is also a much deeper definition - the idea of being a disciple, not just a student but one who is looking to become like their teacher: in Christian terms, becoming "Christ like". Take that definition, pause for a moment and reflect on what that means, in daily life, for you and me.

St Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, (although it is generally considered a circular letter that went to a number of churches, not just the church in Ephesus), tries to give some practical answers to exactly this question.

As the 4th chapter begins Paul urges those he is writing to, Christians from a gentile, non-Jewish background, to abandon all their old ways and practices which originate from an unredeemed nature and replace it with their new Christian nature, saying, *"lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called."*

One characteristic of that new life which the apostle highlights is unity – something the church is not always good at: unity that reflects the unity that we see in God – Father, Son & Holy Spirit *"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."*

The process of change, of leading *"a life worthy of our calling,"* may be easy to say and fairly straightforward to understand but, when it comes to putting it into practice, can be a very a different matter, with all the pressures of life pulling us here and there.

The same is true for the people Paul is writing to - they still live in the same community with the same pagan temples and brothels just down the street.

Let me illustrate; think of someone who has been driving for years and then they decide to take some advanced driving lessons - lessons that will not only remind them of the basics, the fundamentals of driving, but also bring into focus all the bad habits they have developed. Identifying these habits is one thing correcting them is another, because you are removing what has become very natural – a habit.

To achieve such this transformation within our Christian lives Paul, in the section we will read over the next few weeks, does not focus on a list of negatives – stop do this or that - rather he focuses on the positive. He names or identifies particular aspects of the old nature and then contrasts them positively with what should replace them. That's the old - this is the new – look at the comparison.

Focus on self being replaced with the unity of the body.

- Lying needs to be replaced by truthfulness.
- Stealing by supplying the needs of others.
- Cynical and depressing conversation by words which bring encouragement and hope.

What the apostle is doing is exactly what we see Jesus do time and again in the gospels. He goes behind the Jewish law to the principle that underpins it. Having focused on the principle, Jesus then focuses not on rules but on practice that is good, positive and brings benefit to others, drawing them closer together. It is not simply about evil being opposed with good, rather it is about replacing it altogether.

Let me highlight a couple of Paul's examples that we see in the next few chapters of Ephesians.

“Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another.”

Here we have a plea for the Christian’s life to be characterised by truthfulness, rather than lies or deceit. Paul’s words are a direct quote from the O/T prophet Zechariah who goes one step further than the apostle: *“Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace”*: a reminder that one of things at the centre of any working and growing relationship is trust; trust that is built primarily on being truthful.

One of the most damaging things in any relationship or community is to discover that not only has someone cheated but also that the truth has been withheld or even lied about - covered. The result is that all sense of trust evaporates along with it. The Christian and the Christian community need to be characterised by trust; and from that flows unity.

We find this being reiterated time and again in the New Testament: Jesus says this *“Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”* This is reiterated in James *“Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “Yes” be yes and your “No” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.”*

Truth is about trust, about loving and caring for one another and that should be one of the practical characteristics of the church – a place of trust, a place of truth, a place of safety.

Another of Paul’s examples is anger. *“Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.”* The apostle here is not pointing out that anger is wrong, although he does not encourage it, but rather that anger, if it not dealt with, does provide the perfect opportunity for the devil to work. It is fertile ground.

Think of the example of Jesus. You will see him get angry from time to time Mark 10 is an example. *“Some people brought children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples scolded the people. When Jesus noticed this, he was angry and said to his disciples, “Let the children come to me,”* Jesus is angry, but his anger is not directed against an injustice he has suffered, but to against something getting in the way or acting as a barrier to others coming to God. It is what we might call righteous indignation or anger.

What the Paul is warning against is the sort of anger that is more personal, the sort of anger that smolders overnight, becoming an open wound that will not heal and so often leading to division, hatred, violence and bitterness.

Paul accepts anger will develop from time to time within the Christian community, but it should be characterized by dealing with that anger before it smolders and gets worse; again, for the good of the body as whole.

The need for each of us to support, help and encourage one another in all aspects of the our lives lies at the very heart of what the apostle is saying, so we can shine as the brightest lights we can be for Christ.

At the very heart of all Paul’s practical suggestions for living out the Christian life lies love: love for Christ, love for one another, love that is prepared to support not destroy because that is the nature of Christ’s love for us. He could have criticised and condemned humanity, but no, he loved humanity enough to die for it. If we want to know what in practical terms it means to walk in the light of Christ - to be his disciples - we have to ask: Where is love?

“I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called”