

An ethic of community

Community. Community ethics. In an era of individualism, it is easy to use, and overuse, and flog to death this idea of community. But whenever we hear that word – we tend not to hear what it actually means. Paul here, is unpacking what it means to live as part of a Christian community – and he looks at some of the internal dynamics of this communal way of being.

Therefore, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. These are all words that are part of the English language, and which are familiar enough to most of us. So familiar, in fact, so drilled into us as virtues that we jolly well ought to model, that I wonder if we miss the ground-shaking challenge they carry. Now, I have to say, that I am always very suspicious of word studies – of investing too much weight in individual words – and missing the point of the context in which they come. But what follows this evening, comes as something of a word study – because hopefully it will help us to hear the context a little more clearly.

Com-passion

What is compassion? Is it the ability to have sappy dog watery eyes when someone is telling you something sad? Is it the ability to feel sad at the suffering of others. Is it the necessity to do what I tend to do – and tune out of the Radio 4 appeal, or turn over when we see images on television that we find disturbing? Is compassion your ability to put your arm around someone who's having a hard time? Is it your ability to give them a big warm Christian hug? Is compassion your readiness to nod sympathetically, just to let the person know that they are cared for? What is compassion?

Before understanding compassion, it is probably best to understand Passion! Passion is your readiness to be on the receiving end of suffering. Com-Passion is to join someone else on the receiving end of suffering. To make their suffering – your suffering. Compassion – in order to be genuine compassion – hurts. When someone you love is hurt – you can't help but share that pain! You don't solve the problem, or take the pain away. You share it. It hurts.

Compassion is a million miles from being sentimental. Sentimentality is the ability to weep, to enjoy the tear-jerking movies, to be moved to tears when we see the suffering of others. But sentimentality leads nowhere. It requires nothing of us. It tweaks our emotions, releases something inside us that may need to come out through tears. But – it makes no difference in the world. Compassion, on the other hand, is a positive, salvific, healing, energetic, painful, liberating, world-affirming activity. And it is demonstrated nowhere more fully than on the cross of Christ. Therefore, clothe yourselves with compassion...

...With Kindness.

We all know what kindness is don't we. My six year old shocks me utterly yesterday, by taking Saturday sweets that were his own, and sharing them out amongst his brothers and sister. An act of kindness... Or is it? Sure it was a nice thing to do... so no harm in itself. But kindness is something rather different. The way that we understand kindness can actually be quite selfish. We can all-too-readily believe that kindness is simply about acting nicely from a position of power, towards someone without power.

We can give our loose change to a good cause, and call it kindness. I suppose, at some levels, in English, that is precisely what it is. But the word that Paul uses is much more hard core than that. It is one thing to use our power to act graciously towards others, in such a way as to remain in a position of power. It is quite another thing to abandon that power and to enter into someone else's suffering!

Think about the Lord's prayer that we pray every week... We do not pray that hungry people receive daily bread. We pray, 'give us this day our daily bread'. The assumption is that hungry people are no longer there, out there. But we take on that hunger for ourselves, that suffering becomes ours. It is a com-passionate kindness.

This year's Whitley Lecture focuses largely upon the question of how disabled people are welcomed into our churches. Do they remain 'they'? Do we talk about Disabled people as though they are the burden of their nearest and dearest, and bless God for those people who care for them? Or do we become members of one another – do we receive these people so as to have an impact upon who we are? Do we abandon ourselves to relationship with all members of the body of Christ? That is the level of kindness that Paul talks about here. Not and us and them, I'm being kind to you mentality – but rather a full-blown – we are members of one another – way of being. And you see this kindness, this losing yourself in others, demonstrated most fully on the cross of Christ. Therefore clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness...

And humility

Well, if compassion and kindness require a new way of being rather than a new set of rules to follow, so too does humility. The trouble with humility is that we regard it in pretty much the same way that we regard modesty – a self-deprecating I'm not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under your table kind of thing. French people laugh at English people constantly for that. 'Excusez moi de vous demandez pardon si vous plait' – excuse me for begging your pardon if you please.

But again, humility is a million miles from modesty. Humility presupposes confrontation. Not some negative fighting necessarily – but a confrontation – where we encounter otherness – where we encounter something or someone that requires us to change our position – to move our front. To be humble is, to encounter another person with the capacity to be changed by that encounter. And this is something we touched on this morning. To be changed by our encounter with others almost requires a miracle. Ultimately, we see this displayed nowhere more fully than on the cross of Christ – when Jesus – Paul says elsewhere – humbled himself to death, even death on a cross. Therefore, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, and...

Gentleness

Friends of mine tell me that I have a different voice when I speak to Alice. She has three big brothers – and most of them understand only one kind of language. But when I talk to Alice – I go all soft and gooey ... apparently. Well, it's nice not to have to talk hard to one of my children. But if I asked my boys to do something, in the way that I ask Alice to do something – they would just look at me, as if to say – "make me!" No point obeying a parent until your comfort's under threat. With Alice, I can be more gentle – because I don't have to exert quite so much force. Although... as time goes by... Anyway.

We tend to think of gentle as meaning soft – like triple velvet toilet paper or a good quality of cotton wool. But gentleness means a lot more than softness. It also means strength. Although I suppose you could say that of toilet paper – soft, strong and very long... Well – The philosopher Aristotle helps us out here. He defined this word as being the mean between excessive anger, and never getting angry. In other words, gentleness is the capacity to get angry at the right things!

William Barclay hit the nail on the head when he defined it as strength under control. And where do we see that more fully exemplified than on the cross of Christ? We read that the power was there, and the ability was there to take another course of action – but the utter strength that lay behind the willingness to suffer is the true gentleness of the cross. Therefore, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness

And Patience

If these are the virtues of living in a Christian community – then living as part of any community requires patience. My youngest boy was told off a few weeks ago – and told that he was not allowed his sweeties until Saturday. So he frowned, stamped his feet – and said “I’m leaving this family!” Of course, within one minute he was back as his usual affectionate self. But patience... Well, it’s not simply about counting to ten.

It is closer to the definition of stress that my squadron leader kept on his wall. Stress – the mind’s attempt to override the body’s desire to choke the living daylights out of someone that really deserves it. I think I caused him plenty of stress.

But literally, patience is restraining yourself from the ability to exact revenge – and about relinquishing the right to exact revenge. Not just your ability to tolerate someone. But your ability not to go taking revenge. That is what constitutes patience – and if you have ever been in a position when you jolly well know you need to be avenged – then foregoing that revenge is like being crucified. It hurts. And – hardly surprising, that we see it demonstrated nowhere more clearly than on the cross of Christ.

Conclusion

So Paul has not simply given us a nice set of values to try and measure up to so we can be a good Christian community. In the midst of his exhortation to be the body of Christ, he makes the most impossible, painful, almost intolerable demands. But these are not values to achieve, but virtues to embody. And the only way that learn to embody these virtues is in relationship with one another in the body of Christ.