

## Imitating God

*Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2*

There was a bit of a dirge-like chorus popular a few decades ago that had the title, *'They will know we are Christians by our love.'* It picked up some of the themes of Paul's letter to the Ephesians: oneness in the Spirit, walking and working together 'side by side', and praise for that unity as a gift of a gracious God.

One of the constant thrills when I read the Bible is to understand that though 2,000 years have passed since the time of the New Testament writers, Paul's Letter to the Ephesians still speaks out of its ancient pages to the contemporary Church, and the present-day Christian in so many ways. Paul writes about a God Whose plan is to embrace all humanity, and all creation. He faces the reality of evil which still presses upon human life for the individual and society. Paul shows how worship suffuses his world-view, with snatches of hymns, creeds, prayer and the images of the sacrament. It is a pastoral letter and sermon because it demonstrates Paul's compassion for those first Christians who were wondering what it meant to follow Jesus and how to imitate God. Paul was writing not to only to that one Church in Ephesus, but probably to a number of churches in Asia Minor, or modern-day Turkey. He might as well have been writing to us today.

Paul uses that challenging phrase to get us to look and think and wonder and do something about who we are as Christians: "...be imitators of God..." he writes.

Imitators – not in the sense of cheap copies, or impersonation, but in the sense of trying to follow, be like, *do* the things that God, in Jesus, did. No-one denies this is a tall order. Jesus Himself tells us that we are to be perfect, "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."<sup>i</sup> Well, good luck with that, we might be tempted to think. But we can't shrug it off or dismiss it as spiritually impossible. We have to try; we have to aspire. When we look in the mirror of faith, even if we are looking in a glass darkly, we should see looking back at us something of the image of Jesus. If we are made in the image of God, we're not simply to look like God, we are to act in the way that God would want us to act. 'Imitating God' means putting our focus on the *actions* that flow from God's character. Those actions that are grand ones, that are noble, even heroic,

and played out in the real world where we live. You might not always feel it, but every single one of you here, at some time in your lives, will have been noble, will have been heroic in your care, your compassion, your dedication, your commitment, your generosity, your love. Such actions are not only for the great and the good. They are for the ordinary and the everyday people that we are. And thank God for them. Thank God for *you!*

What does Paul say in his letter? Let's go through it.

Imitating God: Paul says we should put, "...away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another." This is where the transformed and transforming individual and community begins. We don't lie to ourselves, so we shouldn't lie to others. The call to truth as a hallmark of community is a call to honesty about the individual, and the individual within the community and church.<sup>ii</sup> What do you think that might mean for you?

Imitating God: Paul says you should sometimes be angry, but not sin, and that you should, "...not let the sun go down on your anger." Amazon.com currently lists more than forty thousand religious titles that touch on the subject of anger. That tells you a lot about how difficult we find handling that emotion. Whether it's active anger, or passive aggression (the pursed Morningside lips way!) it is destructive when expressed, or corrosive when suppressed. We *can* be angry about injustice, food and fuel poverty, falsehood telling among politicians and leaders, the ecological defiling of our planet; but not the petty bickering, squabbling, and feuding that often represents our anger, or the sullen, foot-dragging resentment when we don't speak out loud but seethe inside. God sometimes demonstrates righteous anger but turns it into positive action against injustice. What do you think that might mean for you?

Imitating God: Paul says stop stealing, and work hard, and share what you have when you can. We work for ourselves for and with others. The work ethic is not simply about ensuring our financial security it is also about contributing towards the financial well-being of our community, our country, our world, our church. That's an interesting thought. Those of us who have slightly more than we need, in time, in talents, in money, if we withhold, if we keep to ourselves, then are we stealing from those whose needs are all around us? Take that up with Paul and the Bible! What do you think that might mean for you?

Imitating God: Paul says, "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up...so that your words may give grace to those who hear...Put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice..." I need a holiday, and when I get tired, I get mean in my thinking and in my speaking. I suspect that's not just me. If you have developed a default mode of this kind of bitter speaking, that's not imitating God. We need to deal with it. What do you think that might mean for you?

Imitating God: Paul says, '...be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving...as God in Christ has forgiven you.' During lockdown there has been a meme going around that has virtually copied Paul's words. "If you can be anything, be kind." How kind are you: to others, to God, to yourself? Being kind is no sentimental twaddle. Being kind is hard work. Being kind is about generosity of thought, spirit, word, and action. Being kind has to do with being tender-hearted which has to do with being forgiving at the heart of who you are and what you do. Who do you need to be kind to today? When you leave the Church shortly and go home, who do you need to forgive? Equally, do you need to be kinder to yourself, more tender-hearted to yourself, more forgiving to yourself? What do you think that might mean for you?

What does it mean to be a Christian today? How do we follow Jesus today? How do we attempt to imitate the personality and Spirit of God today? There it all is in some writing that is nearly 2,000 years old. In the Bible, that mirror that we hold up; that we carry into the pulpit every Sunday; that we read from and listen to every Sunday; that we too often leave behind in Church every Sunday.

Christian living for you and for me isn't simply about loving God, praising God, worshipping God, thanking God. It is also about imitating God and thinking about what that means for us and closing the gap between God's behaviour and our own. Imitating God for the baptised followers of Jesus is about action, not just in the church in which we find ourselves, but on the stage of our global village and on the front lines of every human relationship we have.<sup>iii</sup> If we get that, we get it all.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 5:48

<sup>ii</sup> Paul V Marshall, *Feasting on the Word, Year B Vol 3*, p326

<sup>iii</sup> Richard F Ward, *ibid* p331