

Submitting to one another

Sunday 11 December 2016

Introduction

Lord, may your Spirit of truth and love fill our hearts, so that we may recognise the power of your Word and truly live our lives to your praise and glory. Amen

A few months ago I mentioned that I thought I had drawn the short straw because I had to preach on the Fall. Well, I think I need to look more closely at the rota and the order of topics, because look what my subject is today!!! Most of my life I have been surrounded and outnumbered by strong-willed women so imagine my enthusiasm for taking on this topic around the family lunch table... I think it is fair to assume that what I am about to say has not been seen by any of the family, nor is it (I suspect) a coincidence that none of them are here to give me support this morning. In particular, those of you who know Emma well and her chosen career of working on women's rights in the Middle East might (quite rightly) anticipate that everything I have written has been with one eye over my shoulder ... Normally I empty a room by talking about the different roles I have had so far – consultant, banker, fund manager, theologian. But today could well be among the several times in my life to empty a church ... So here goes:

The first thing I would like to point out, and again I hold Andrew personally responsible for this, is that the key verse in this passage which provides the real context for what we heard just now is verse 21 – which Andrew omitted – “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ”. In other words, the whole passage is written as a series of examples of the relationships that should be

characterised by this submission. And it is with this in mind that I would like to explore what Paul writes, its relevance to the early Christian communities of the time and of course its relevance to us today.

In the final decades of the first century, Christians were grappling with the problem of how to live as children of the light, as inheritors of the kingdom, eagerly awaiting the irruption of heaven on earth but at the same time as respectful members of society. In the very first years after Christ's death and resurrection, many of the earliest Christians (the Thessalonians in particular) expected the Parousia – Jesus' second coming – at any moment. The kingdom would come like a thief in the night, when you least expect it. For those in the immediate aftermath of the crucifixion there was a very real temptation to ignore everyday life – what was the point since the kingdom was at hand imminently. And, as we know, for example at Corinth, this immediacy of expectation led to all sorts of confrontation – almost a 'live for today for tomorrow we are saved' approach.

Gradually, as the days, months and years passed, the need to work out how to live in the world but not of the world became an ever pressing requirement. The Christian communities came under ever greater pressure to conform, to fit in, to behave as normal citizens. The longer the Parousia, the second coming, is delayed, the more challenging this becomes. Moreover, with waves of persecution against Christians because of civil society's fear of the different, of the unknown, of those not like us (sound familiar) and with allegations spreading that Christians were cannibals (eating the body of Christ), were committing incest (all the talk of loving brothers and sisters) etc. the more intense the need to behave like everyone else.

So it is unsurprising, therefore, that the later Pauline letters, such as Ephesians, try to tackle aspects of daily life, in the already revealed kingdom but not yet at the right hand of the father. And a critical element in this is of course the relationships between people – between husbands and wives, parents and children, and (because that was the nature of society at that time) between slaves and their masters. Now you don't need me to tell you how controversial these verses of Ephesians have become over the centuries, how they have been used – or rather misused – to justify oppression and all manner of injustice over the centuries. But you have to understand the context in which Paul is writing.

Furthermore, Paul's discussion here about relationships within the family structure also need to be placed in the context of what Jesus taught and how he behaved to others. A key element of Jesus' teaching is to illustrate how traditional relationships are completely overturned in the reality of God's kingdom, in life in Christ. 'These are my brothers and sisters' he says, gesturing to those around him. In his teaching and the relationships he seeks out, deliberately seeks out, with those on the margins of society – tax collectors, prostitutes, the outcast – he is fundamentally subversive of the status quo.

Which is precisely why this passage from Ephesians is so problematic. At one level it can be read (and frequently has been read) as an apologetic for the traditional order – women obey your husbands, children obey your parents, slaves obey your masters. These verses have been used to justify slavery, abuse and oppression. But nothing could be further from what I think Paul is trying to convey.

'Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ'. The opening sentence of the passage sets the tone for what follows. The relationships that we should

have for one another are those which are characteristic of Christ-like behaviour. The Christ who washes the feet of his disciples, the Christ who sees to the needs of others before his own, the Christ who suffers death on the Cross to save us sinners. Submitting to one another is to put on Christ as we interact with one another, and this very act of submission is in fact profoundly subversive, now as it was then. By behaving in this way, by choosing to submit in reverence to the other, to another, is to make a radical choice. For the early Christians, such a choice fundamentally undermines society's norms whilst at the same time outwardly appearing to conform. Slaves sitting as equals, men and women sharing bread together around a table in memory of Christ crucified is a scene that shatters the conventions of the time. As Paul writes so powerfully in Galatians 3 verse 28: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for all are one in Christ Jesus'.

Time and again Paul reminds us in his letters that we are to put on Christ, through faith, through our shared belief in Christ Crucified, we all participate in Christ's kingdom. And the kingdom rules are different from society's rules. As we heard in the reading from Matthew's gospel, Jesus rebukes the disciples who are childishly vying with each other for pride of place in the kingdom. He makes it so very clear that such talk betrays a very poor understanding of his teaching – 'it shall not be so among you'. The kingdom approach is to show humility, to focus on the needs of others, to serve.

To argue that these verses of Ephesians support the subordination of women, justify slavery and other equally appalling things is, to me, to misunderstand completely Paul's teaching and the heart of the Christian message.

So what are we to think? What are we to make of these ‘problem’ passages? Maybe a couple of examples might help. Alice and I were watching the Crown the other evening on Netflix, the very first episode which showed the royal wedding and the death of the King. In the wedding ceremony, Princess Elizabeth promises to obey Philip. The custom of the time, you might say, but actually I think it illustrates a profound understanding of faith. She, the future Queen, whom Philip will of necessity obey, chooses to obey him in the context of their relationship together as man and wife. To be honest, trying to get around the challenges of this verse by changing obey to submit, does not escape the problem which I think is better tackled head on. But, the future Queen’s use of ‘obey’ illustrates very well what the spirit of this passage is meant to convey. I choose to put you first, I choose to put your needs before mine, I choose to respect and honour you as I do myself.

The second example is a bit closer to home, at least for me. I am privileged to belong to one of the livery companies in the City – the Haberdashers, one of the great twelve, the oldest such companies, whose work today is almost totally focused on charitable causes, particularly education. The motto of the Haberdashers is ‘serve and obey.’ As you can imagine, this is not the most modern of mottos and when the Master stands up in front of 1000 teenagers at prize giving at one of our Academy schools in south-east London or in Telford on a sink estate and tells them to be proud of being part of the Haberdasher family, it is quite a tall order to persuade them of the virtues of this motto. But, as one Master put it recently, the motto does not mean, keep your head down and stay out of trouble. Quite the contrary, the Haberdasher philosophy, built on Christian principles unsurprisingly as an early 15th century organisation, is that of service for others, of using one’s gifts for the support of others, of building up the common good.

But of course, the example we are all called to follow is the obedience of Jesus, submitting to the will of the Father, even to death on the Cross. That submission, that obedience is in the DNA of faith. Paul articulates this so eloquently in that wonderful passage in Philippians:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

And a few verses later: Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

This is exactly what Paul means in Ephesians: in all your relationships with one another have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. If we all did that, wouldn't the world be a better place? Would it not resemble more closely the kingdom of heaven? Wouldn't that be something? So I pray this morning for all of us, in the words of St Francis:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace

Where there is hatred let me sow love

Where there is injury, pardon

Where there is doubt, faith

Where there is despair, hope

Where there is darkness, light

Where there is sadness, joy.
O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
To be consoled, as to console,
To be understood, as to understand,
To be loved, as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive
It is pardoning, that we are pardoned
It is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen