

12.02.2017

Colossians 3: 1-17

Matthew 5: 1-16

During our vacancy we are looking at different ways of becoming like Christ. Last week Chris took us through different ways of becoming like Christ in Godliness, even when his family say he is in one of his grumpy periods.

Today I want us to consider ways of becoming like Christ in character.

Our oldest grandson Adam, will be 3 in a few weeks time and recently we were singing along in the car to nursery rhymes – something like this:

He sang:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
All the kings horses and the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again

I sang

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
All the kings horses and the king's men
Had scrambled eggs for breakfast again

What relevance has that to becoming like Christ in Character you might ask.....I'm afraid you'll just have to be patient..... All will become clear at the end of this talk.

My main responsibility here at HTS is funeral and bereavement ministry and one of the most frequent comments I hear when I meet families for the first time is 'there are no pockets in a shroud'. Indeed one of the church's authorised opening sentences at funerals is from 1 Timothy "We brought nothing into the world and we take nothing out".

Now, talking a deep breath and being unsure of the consequences....let me say that I will never use that sentence because I think it is incomplete. We do take something with us.....the character of Christ that we had developed in our earthly life.

I think Jesus makes that abundantly clear in his Sermon on the Mount, part of which we read this morning - that our eternal reward in heaven will be based on the Christ-like character we develop and live by here on earth. If you think this is a bit too whacky an idea, when you get home, check out the first 16 verses of Matthew chapter 5.

Who is going to inherit the earth? Whose is the kingdom of heaven? Who will be called children of God? - Those who have believed in and developed the character of Christ.

This means that the objective of the teaching from up here must be to change lives, not merely provide information. Character can never be built in a Sunday service. Yes, it can be a place where we can identify character qualities and teach how character is developed but character is built in the circumstances of life.

And, whilst those experiences will be different for all of us, character development will always involve choice. It is in situations where we are tempted to do the exact opposite of what is Christ-like character – that our spiritual character is built. When we make the right choice, our character grows more like Christ.

And, if you want to know what Christ-like character looks like, then look no further than our Colossian reading:

Verse 12: compassion; kindness, humility, meekness and patience

Verse 13: forgiveness

Verse 14: love

Verse 15: and let the Peace of Christ rule in your hearts

Another way, if you like, of expressing the nine qualities Paul enumerates in Galatians 5: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control”.

The fruit of the Spirit is a perfect picture of Christ. He embodied all nine qualities. If we’re going to develop Christ-like qualities then we too must possess these qualities in our daily life.

But here’s the rub, whenever we choose to respond to a situation in a Christ-like manner instead of following our own inclination, we develop character; but those character building circumstances more often than not come at times when we are out of our comfort zone; we are stressed out; we are in times of conflict, disappointment or temptation.

Little did I realise that committing to help during our vacancy would become so stressful; that I would have to live life constantly in the fast lane; that promises had to be made and deadlines kept whilst juggling with work and family commitments too; that I might get angry over comparatively trivial issues or an unguarded word spoken out of tiredness could so easily cause ill feeling. Just, in fact, what Paul warns against in verse 8. If you have been the recipient of one of my less distinguished moments, then I apologise unreservedly.

Character is not something we put into our lives, but it is what comes out of lives in those hurried times. I’ve come to the conclusion that character is God shaped but it is how you consistently deploy or fail to deploy that character in day to day situations that determines to what extent you are becoming like Christ.

I think everyone here realises that this church has been through difficult times in recent years; none of us know the full story or details of the areas of difficulty and I’m certainly not going to delve into any of them. What is done, is done. We can’t re-write history nor should we want to because that would deny all the wonderful, positive ministry that has been done.

But I consider myself to be fortunate to have seen at first hand the change in you, the church family, over the past nine or so months as you have corporately become more like Christ in character. Put simply the fruits of the Spirit as part of our DNA have become so evident.

A number of people have told me what I had sensed for myself, that there is often a joyfulness to our services which was not always the case. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit

Other people have come up to me and said something like: “I realise that my way of worshiping is not necessarily the way others want to worship” or “ I was wrong to say that we must worship only this way or that way”. That is the kind of humility that Paul meant in verse 12.

Some members who had left our church because of past difficulties have returned to our services on occasions and have said they felt overwhelmed by the kindness shown to them by people they hardly new. Kindness is a fruit of the Spirit.

Whilst some have asked the Peace to be scrapped, many others have been pressing for a long time to extend the time when we share the Peace, because now they feel it is more authentic. Peace is a fruit of the Spirit.

These changes have been subtle but slowly gathering momentum. But the sad reality is that we still have a very long way to go.

Recently I attended a funeral in this church – for once I was not actually taking it – and the family had chosen 1 Corinthians 13 as the bible reading. The chapter describes the type of love that is essential to the Christian way of life and tells of the many different ways love is given and received, including love does not insist on its own way nor is it irritable or resentful.

This was in stark contrast to one part of the Eulogy where great bitterness was expressed over an incident many years ago. I felt so sad that there seemed to be no forgiveness. It is this sort of mixed message which can be so damaging to our faith; because forgiveness is always at the heart of our faith. Isn't that what we prayed for at the start of this service? "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us".

And that may be a lesson for us all to bear in mind as we move on as a church. We cannot change the past, but we can forgive and shape our own future by remembering verse 14: "Above all clothe yourself with love"

I found in my notes from some seminar in the dim and distant past: "God is not like love, God is love" so it seems to me that the time we stop loving is the time we stop living.....stop living to become like Christ in character.

No matter what the past might have been; no matter where we as individuals or as a church family might be at today; the future is not orange as the TV ads used to tell us....it is to be like Christ in character.

And that is what our sermon series is trying to do; to reveal what it takes to start becoming like Christ in different ways.

So, finally. Remember the nursery rhyme?

Well thank you for being patient because patience is not only a virtue but also a fruit of the Spirit – your very own practical demonstration of that truth.

So.... Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
Humpty Dumpty shouted Amen
God can put Humpty together again

And what's good for Humpty Dumpty can be good for us all.

Amen