

**A Sermon preached on the 11th Sunday after Trinity 2018 at St Andrew's Church Soham by Revd Eleanor Whalley
Ephesians 4: 25-5: 2; John 6: 35-51**

May I speak and may we hear in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

A few thoughts this morning rather than a full-blown sermon:

I want to share with you a few thoughts about our first reading, the reading from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians.

I've put the text of that reading on our notice-sheets.

That first reading struck me as being very much like a sermon in itself.

I was struck, when I sat down with it earlier this week, that that first reading –

words written nearly 2000 years ago in a very culture and a very different part of the world –

I was struck that those words could've been written yesterday.

They could've been written not to the Christians in Ephesus but to us.

They could've been written to any group of Christians – any church – anywhere.

They're as relevant and as applicable and as comprehensible to us today as they were to their audience 2000 years ago.

They're relevant to us as individuals –

they're certainly relevant to me –

and they're relevant to us as a church.

That's why I've given you the text –

You might like to take it home and think about it and pray with it.

See if there's anything in that first reading that speaks particularly to you.

The reason why those words are relevant -

the reason why they don't need the kind of translation and explanation

I try to give us for many of our other Bible readings -

the reason this reading doesn't need that kind of explanation is that this is a reading about human behaviour.

It's about human relationships.

It's about how we get on with one another -

how we live as members of Christ's body, the Church.

And whilst cultures and traditions have changed in 2000 years,

human beings have pretty much stayed the same:

our struggles are the same old struggles;

We're the same as we always were .

I did a bit of research into the letter of Paul to the Ephesians yesterday.

What I found out –

and hope this doesn't shock any of you -

What I found out was that the letter of Paul to the Ephesians

Probably wasn't written by Paul,

and probably wasn't written to the Ephesians –

or at least not to the Ephesians alone.

Some scholars think - not all scholars, but some scholars –

Some scholars think that the letter was written some time after Paul was writing,

but written in the style of Paul.

It was a common thing in those days – and a perfectly acceptable in those days –

for someone to write in the name of someone else if they shared their style and shared their principles.

I suppose using someone else's name gave their work credibility. It would also encourage people to read it.

The way scholars can tell the Letter to the Ephesians probably wasn't by Paul

is the same way that those of you who've been teachers would know if a child hadn't done their own homework:

the style of writing is different, the sentences are longer, the grammar is more complicated

than that of the letters it's certain Paul wrote.

As to whom the letter was first written to,

in some of the earliest manuscripts of the letter –

in some of the very first versions –

the place in the first verse of the first chapter where my Bible says 'Ephesus' is left blank.

The notion is that the letter to the Ephesians was a kind of 1st Century Round Robin –

a kind of Christmas letter –

rather than being addressed to just one church, it was sent to lots of churches,

and the sender would fill in the name of the church they were sending it to.

When the Bible was compiled, 'Ephesus' got put in in the gap,

because Ephesus was one of the largest church communities of its day –

they'd certainly've received a copy of the letter

And so we ended up with 'the letter to the Ephesians'.

Personally I'm not worried about who wrote the letter and which church it was sent to originally.

I'm happy to accept that those who put the Bible together considered it worth including – considered it a text that would help us in our faith.

The point is that the advice written here is generic – it's as relevant to Christians today as it was to Christians back then - and so it's relevant to us.

I want to pick out just two things which might benefit from some explanation.

The first is in the opening sentence of the passage as it's printed – v. 25 of chapter 4.

Paul says: 'we are members of one another'

He comes back to that later in v 30, a bit further down, when he says

'Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of your redemption'.

Paul is talking about baptism.

Baptism is the point at which we become members of God's family -

brothers and sisters of our fellow Christians,

members of Christ's body the Church,

members not just of Christ, but members of one another.

They say, don't they – you can choose your friends but you can't choose your family.

At our baptism, we become one family.

Baptism means we are stuck with one another.

Our first reading passage offers us some tips about how to get on.

The other thing that drew my attention

is there in that last verse.

Paul says: 'be imitators of God as beloved children'.

In Paul's day – as in Jesus' day –

children had very little status.

So it's interesting, isn't it,

that very often in the New Testament

we're told to become like children.

It's worth thinking what it is about children

we might be called to copy?

Now most of you know I'm very fond of children.

One of the things I like most about children

is the way they say what they think -

Children don't beat around the bush.

With children you know where you are.

Children say it how it is.

And maybe that's a lesson for us adults –

once you've said how things are, you can deal with it.

Connected with that, perhaps, children, are capable, in my experience,

of falling out with someone one minute and being the best of friends the next.

Children are great at moving on.

I had a very lovely thing at a St Andrew's School assembly the other week:

we'd been doing Paul's missionary journeys,

and the children acted out the bit in Acts where Paul and Barnabus have a row.

Barnabus wants to take John Mark with them,

and Paul says he can't come because he hasn't been with them from the beginning.

So Paul goes off with Silas in one direction, and Barnabus goes off with John Mark in the other.

At the end of that assembly, a little girl came up to me,

and she said 'Why did they have an argument when they were best friends?'

I said, 'Well, you know, sometimes even best friends have arguments.'

And she looked so worried I thought I couldn't leave it like that,

so I said 'You know, maybe after a little while Paul and Barnabus met up again, and maybe Paul said "I'm sorry I was cross", and maybe Barnabus said "I'm sorry I was cross" and they got to be friends again'.

And she got that – children are great at moving on.

And Paul says 'be imitators of God as beloved children'.

Not only be like children, but be like children who are imitators of God.

God, our faith tells us, is always ready to wipe the slate clean - always ready to offer a new start.

And we – as God's children – are called to be like him.

I'm going to take this home and pray with it. Maybe you'd like to do the same. Amen.