

**Sermon – Colossians 3:1-17**  
**Ecclesiastes 1.2, 12-14; 2.18-23, Luke 12:13-21**

Clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony, and let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. Amen.

You may have noticed that over the last four weeks we have had readings from Paul's Letter to the Colossians so I thought, on this last week, and the week that we farewell Philip and Soraya, it would be good to preach on this passage, especially as I know that Philip loves the writings of Paul, and I hope that I can do some small justice to scripture today. Mind you this is one of the letters whose authorship is disputed, but we don't need to go into that today. I think these verses are beautiful and quite inspirational, so I hope that you don't mind taking a deep dive into verses 1-17 of chapter 3 of the letter to the Colossians.

Well this letter is only 4 chapters long, so worth a read during the week in your busy lives. The second half of the letter, chapters 3 and 4, contain as complete a picture of practical Christianity that we find anywhere in scripture. In a very ordered way, Paul sets out, how the rule of Christ shapes our various relationships, including our relationship with Him, our local church, our families, our daily life and even with the outsider. The section we have today deals with these first two relationships, with verses 1-8 being about our relationship with Christ and verses 9-17 being about our relationship with our local church.

So what do the first eight verses of chapter three say? Well in broad terms, Paul maintains that the primary business of the Christian is to maintain his or her relationship with Christ. In a way, this scripture is a great follow on

from our last two weeks which were also focused on our relationship with Jesus. Hopefully you remember the story of Martha and Mary, and getting distracted from our Christian service, and this was followed last week with the Lord's prayer. And in these first 8 verses, Paul gives us some imperatives for Christian spirituality. He says Seek the things from above, Set your mind on things above, put to death what is earthly in you and get rid of the life you once lived. It's quite strong language isn't it? He doesn't pack any punches, but what does he actually mean by this?

Well verse 1 says "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God." When we are baptized, we die to sin and rise to newness of life in Christ. This miracle of conversion sets us free from the norms and obsessions of the world. As Christians, we are to seek Christ, to pursue and develop that relationship and to hold fast to Christ as the centre and source of our joy. And Paul reconfirms this when he says again "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God." So our first imperative as a Christian is our personal devotion to Christ and the study and growing understanding of his will for us.

Paul's next imperative is that we "put to death what is earthly in you" and he then gives us a rather long list of the least palatable of human behaviours, exhorting us to "get rid of all such things". We are to decisively change our lives, to strip off our old selves and clothe ourselves with the new self, which is being renewed according to the image of our creator. And we are then led into this most famous of verses, "In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!" Here is a complete rejection of the way the

world segregates and judges people. In Christ we are one and this is the entry point to Paul's framework for relationship with each other, the body of Christ.

The theme of this part of Paul's letter is Christian unity. And how apt is that today when we see such disunity across our world. You see in Christ, in the new creation, we have a society in which the barriers of division are abolished. When Christ is all and in all, the walls of separation come down. And in those very well known words, there is indeed no longer, Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, slave and free. And these 3 verses, using the "clothe yourselves" metaphor, show us Paul at his most motivational, using positive language and of course another list. Let's have a closer look.

So what are the hallmarks of a united people? Well Paul tells us to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. That's quite a list isn't it? It's a Christ like list. How often have we heard Jesus described in the Gospels by these qualities, or himself talk about these qualities as essential for Godly living? And how hard is it for us to keep ourselves focused on them? In fact we all fail so often. And have you noticed that one of the most divisive human traits is impatience. Nothing cuts quite as sharp as someone being impatient with you when you are not quite up to the game, for whatever reason. And after that experience, you are perhaps a little less likely to put yourself out for that person. That wall of separation rises. Our human nature doesn't want to be hurt again. But we have Jesus! Jesus heals us, forgives us, and encourages us to keep relationships alive and thriving. And it's only through Jesus' grace that we can move forward, with him and with each other.

Paul agrees with this when he says “Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive.” Not only are we to clothe ourselves with these Christ-like qualities, we are to forgive each other when we are hurt, just as we are forgiven by God. This is an essential feature of living in Christian unity. Forgiveness: the capacity to forgive and to be forgiven. And you can see how this is crucial. We all live in community, many of us circulate through multiple communities and we are so different, with different personalities, different gifts and different backgrounds. Some people get on better with other people. Some people rub each other up the wrong way. It’s our human frailty coming to the fore. What Paul is saying is that if we focus on the qualities like compassion, kindness and patience, and nurture our ability to forgive, and be forgiven, we will be able to live more fully in community with each other.

And then comes the punchline. Paul says “Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony, and let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.” Isn’t that beautiful? And I love the links he makes between the concept of love binding everything together in perfect harmony, leading to peace in our hearts. You see it is through Christ that we are renewed in the image of God, as God intended us to be at the time of creation. Our journey is one of constant renewal, as we strive to be Christ like in our words and deeds. We need to put off our old ways and put on the new ways if we are to be in unity, as one body in Christ.

And be thankful. In our modern day secular world, it’s quite trendy to practice gratitude. It often gets taught hand in hand with meditation. In fact, I used to

have an app on my phone that guided me through various meditation exercises and gratitude practices. I just love that these concepts are right here, part of our scripture. The Gospels tell us that Jesus would regularly withdraw to a quiet place to pray and meditate. And here Paul tells us to be thankful. To be thankful for the peace of Christ which dwells within us when we accept him as our Lord and Saviour.

Paul says “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God”. Paul is once again focusing on us as the body of Christ, as community. I love it that as community, fully living with the Word of Christ embedded within us, we all have a part in teaching, with wisdom and joy. Paul even talks about singing with gratitude. And don’t we just love singing as part of worship!

And the last verse of our reading today summarizes this section of scripture. “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him”. With Paul, the focus is always on Jesus. It is through Jesus that we are reconciled to and renewed in God. And it is only through the peace of Christ that we are able to exist as community, as one body in Christ. Without that peace, the barriers go up and we fragment pretty quickly.

So as we prepare for Holy Communion today, as we partake in the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, remembering that he died for us, let us clothe ourselves in love for one another and for God, remembering to forgive each other, just as Christ forgives us. Let us sing songs of joy, and let us enjoy

each other in all our diversity, remembering that we are all part of the body of Christ.

Let us pray.

Loving God, we give you thanks for the body of Christ here in Lara and Little River and for the great variety of gifts given to us through the Holy Spirit. Guide and help us to know where our ministry will lead us. Help us to live joyful lives as members of your body. In Jesus name we pray, **Amen.**