

Distinctiveness in Jesus – Ephesians 5:3-21

Last week Scott reminded us that as Christians, we are not to be like Chameleons. We are not to change our colours, the way we act and behave, in order to blend in. We have been given new spiritual clothes to wear, so we put off what we used to be and put on the new self, displaying our new identity in Jesus.

The illustration of a chameleon reminded me of something that I remember vividly from my youth. I used to spend a lot of time on the beach in Buckie. With my friends we loved discovering what we could find in the Rockpools, or under the seaweed when the tide went out.

One summer we managed to catch an octopus. In the excitement the octopus got itself stuck onto my black welly boot. In an attempt to camouflage itself, the octopus went through all the colours of the rainbow. It just kept cycling through lots of different colours, but just could not find a match with my black man made rubber boots! I am sure you will be pleased to know that we let the octopus go and it happily scooted off back into where it had been originally hiding.

The image of the chameleon, or the octopus trying to blend in is important for us this morning. We will return to this shortly. To get our brains going, I have got a question for us to think about for a few minutes.

*Thinking about people you know who would not call themselves Christian -
What kind of things do these friends talk a lot about?*

Much of the teaching from Ephesians 5 verses 3-20 is about Christians not being like those who blend in. Rather, Christians are to be distinctive in Christ. And as a church we are to demonstrate to those not yet part of the church how to really live. So in Christ, the church is to be a Contrast Community.

In the first block of teaching in Ephesians 5 verses 3-7 Paul gives instructions about sexual practice and speech. Here he wants to draw our attention to specific things that are improper for believers. So Paul moves from 'self-sacrifice' in verse 2 to the very opposite 'self-indulgence'. Hence he contrasts genuine love to the twisting or perversion or it – namely 'lust'. He uses the words sexual immorality, impurity and greed (or covetousness) in verses 3 and 5, and links these things with idolatry.

At the time Paul was writing to the Ephesians, he would have fully aware of the sexually permissive dangers that were confronting his readers. So he could talk to them quite clearly and straight to the point. In some ways, the world, the society that we are living in today is exactly the same.

Paul's use of the words sexual immorality can be summed up quite simply - They mean all the things that work against the life-long union of one man and one woman within the sanctity of the loving marriage commitment.

The other terms impurity and greed are also seen to be supportive in his argument. He is highlighting the things that are not to be found among believers in Jesus. All the things that twist and spoil what God has ordained and made good between man and woman.

It is likely that Paul adds covetousness here, to highlight how sexual immorality is really the coveting of someone else's body for selfish gratification. The beautiful, pure, God given gift of sexual union between man and women has been given right and proper boundaries. This is what Paul taught the Ephesian believers to maintain and cherish within marriage.

I am not going to dwell on this, but simply to highlight how today, pornography has done much damage and harm in this area of purity. Perhaps, more than ever before, there is a need to guard ourselves, and our children, from such influences, however subtle.

It may be that God has, or will, prompt some of us to pray specifically for God's power, presence and protection against these things. A simple, yet effective prayer could be to pray for holy, pure living within our married couples, their children, and also for those who are not married.

In verse 4 Paul develops his teaching on Christian distinctiveness – this time singling out our speech. He makes it very clear that obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking is not acceptable or fitting within the Christian community. In our society today, vulgar talk is commonplace in many of our day to day interactions with those outside of the church.

I would suggest that this is often found in the form of innuendo. Namely, the twisting of words or conversations to bring a double meaning, with a warped sexual connotation, is a real and present danger. In my last job I was really aware of this at work, and in social gatherings. I am sure that some of you are finding the same thing.

We are called to be different in the Church, and in our daily lives that we live for God outside of the gathered church. The sexual purity already mentioned can be reinforced by the way that we relate to one another in the church, and others outside of church.

Paul gives a positive alternative to wrong speech – that it should be replaced with thanksgiving. So we should look to give thanks to God for all that he has ordained as good. Amongst many other things, we can specifically thank God for what he ordained sex to be -- something to be cherished and therefore not to be cheapened.

To joke about any of God's gifts, including sex, is bound to degrade them. In comparison, to thank God for them is seen as a positive way to preserve their worth as the blessing of a loving Creator.

Jumping ahead to verse 18, Scott is going to say more about alcohol later on in the service. I just want to highlight that the consumption of alcohol in excess can lead

into wrong sexual practice and impact negatively the things we say. God has provided a much better and transforming way to live, to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

It is important to recognise that God has given us all our own individual personalities. When we become Christians we aren't given a personality transplant. Paul is certainly not saying that as Christians we cannot have a good, healthy, sense of humour. What he is highlighting is the type of talk, language that is not helpful or acceptable in the Christian community. We should always be seeking to build one another up in Christ.

It is not easy to talk about some of the things we have looked at so far this morning. And I certainly don't want anyone to go away this morning with the wrong understanding of what Paul is teaching in Ephesians 5.

Only Jesus Christ is perfect. Every one of us are guilty before God of wrong thoughts, words or deeds and that is why Jesus came and died for us on the cross, so that we could know God's forgiveness, rescue and restoration.

It may be that someone might feel that they have stumbled in one of the ways we have looked at this morning. When we come to God through genuine repentance, saying that we are truly sorry for what we have done, forgiveness, restoration and transformation is possible through Christ.

The powerful story of Jesus transforming the life of the woman who had been caught in adultery comes to mind. In John 8, Jesus does not condemn her, and after all her accusers had left, he tells her go, and from now on sin no more.

At the time Paul wrote Ephesians there were false teachers on the go, distorting the gospel, teaching things contrary to what was right, twisting things. From verse 6 we see that what they were actually bringing were 'empty words.' We are not immune from this today, so we need to always test what we are taught from God's word – hence how we encourage bibles to be opened and followed in Church.

It is possible that we will come across people who say that the bible is out of date, too extreme, too constraining. In verse 7, Paul is clear that such people are not to be entertained, or listened to.

We have been given the Holy Spirit to help us understand God's word correctly. There are also Christians who have been gifted by God to discern false teachers, so that the church can be guarded and protected from going astray. We looked at this briefly in Ephesians 4 a few weeks ago. False teaching is serious, and will be dealt with by God on the final day of reckoning, at God's judgement.

Moving to another question for us this morning -

Now that the clocks have changed, what have you noticed most with the increased daylight?

In verse 8 of Ephesians 5 Paul contrasts what we were (once darkness) and what we are now (light in the Lord). As Christians, as a result of our change in identity in and through Jesus, we now belong to God. So we are now encouraged to live lives that reflect who we now are – children of light.

Paul highlights three specific things that should radiate Christ's light that is now in our lives. These are found in verse 9 – goodness, righteousness and truth, and identified as fruit of the light. So, through the light of Jesus now in us, we bear fruit for him by displaying things that are right, good and true.

Goodness has the idea of a God given generous kindness, where we are enabled to joyfully go the extra mile for others.

A simple definition of Righteousness would be the avoidance of the evil things that God has forbidden. Importantly, it is through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit that we are enabled to live righteously.

And thirdly, the fruit of truth in our lives will be seen by sincerity, genuineness, with no sham or pretence being present.

In all our lives, interaction with others, or relationship is a key to healthy development and growth. In human relationships, whether in marriage, with our children, dating, or with our best friends, we want to know what people like, and also what they don't like. So as we spend quality time with them, talking, listening we find out what makes them tick. And from these times we learn more and more about the things that bring them joy.

In verse 10 Paul encourages the same in our relationship with Jesus. To find out what pleases Jesus involves us developing and deepening our relationship with him.

In Church, we learn each week from the bible teaching how we can grow in our walk with Christ – which is great and so important. The churches that Paul wrote to would also have known the same blessing.

But Paul was also encouraging the Ephesians to also learn from God themselves. This is the same for us today. So may we be encouraged to find time, in the different seasons of all our lives – times to pray and to read God's word.

These are also the times where we can listen and learn as the Holy Spirit shows us the things that please God. And in these times we may also be shown lovingly, some things that are not pleasing to God and that he wants to help us change.

All these things will have positive effects on God demonstrating in us our new identity - that we are under new management - that we belong to Jesus.

It may be that because of the light of Christ in us, God may stir us to speak out against things that are not right and of the darkness. For some of us God may be saying that it is through how we live that Christ's light is shown, so that our actions speak louder than words.

As we live for Jesus in our workplaces, families, social groups, school, we have the joy and privilege to radiate the light of Christ. This can make people curious, wanting what we have got that makes us distinctive, so we can be praying for opportunities to share Jesus with them as the Holy Spirit guides us.

We need to be aware that others may show a negative response to the light of Christ in us. This should not discourage us as, as it may be God is working through us to challenge someone positively.

So, as we live for God as children of light, we will experience different reactions from people around us. Some will be drawn to the light, some will hide away.

Contrasting light and darkness, Paul mentions things that are done in secret in verse 12. Specifically they are things that are shameful or associated with disobedience to God. In some of our lives, there may be things that go on behind the curtains. Things that we are involved with, maybe places that we go or attend, that are done in secret.

If things are going on in secret – this is possibly a good indicator that some of the things we may be involved with are perhaps not as they should be – there may actually involve darkness rather than the light of Christ.

May God be gracious to reveal anything in our lives that is shameful or disobedient to him, and to replace these things with what is pleasing to him.

As Christians we should not be afraid of the light, to allow the light of Christ to make all things visible for what they are. We see this from verses 13 and 14

I am sure that most of us will have turned over a stone, and seen all the creepy crawlies scurrying off, trying to find a dark place to hide because they have been exposed to the light.

As believers, the light test is a positive and helpful check on our spiritual lives. Who we are, what we do, when others are not around.

We do live in a fallen world. Christians are not made perfect once they come to Christ – so we do not become immune to sin and letting God down. Yet we have the light of Christ in us, and so we are drawn by the light to repent, receive God's forgiveness and continue to ask him to renew and transform our lives.

When we become Christians the contrast between darkness and light will begin to show, and continue to do so as we grow in Christ. For some of us, the initial changes might be more marked than with others, depending on our stories of how we have come to faith in Jesus.

But for those of us who perhaps came to Christ gradually, and have always been part of the church, there will have been, and will also continue to be, ongoing changes of darkness to light. These may be more subtle but will be there.

God is never finished with any of us, there is always something new, deeper, that he wants to do in each one of our lives to make us more and more like Jesus. For us God wants to make us more and more effective for him in the church and in the world. So, together in the church we demonstrate what it is to be a Contrast Community.

In verse 14 Paul links the light of Christ in a believer with these words

“Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”

There are some similarities with Isaiah 60:1, but they are not exactly the same words and hence a direct quotation.

It would appear that most modern bible scholars agree that this was in fact an early form or a baptismal hymn. This is a timely reminder about baptism and church membership this morning. We are thankful that God is at work here at St Columba, bringing folks to faith in Christ and also bringing believers into our catchment area.

I would encourage those of you who are interested in knowing more about baptism and church membership to really prayerfully consider coming along to the sessions that are being run by the church in the coming weeks. They will certainly be helpful to explore baptism and church membership in an informal way. Also to give time to find out what God may be saying to you specifically. Time is a precious commodity for all of us, but I am sure that if you are able to attend, this will be time well spent.

In verses 19-20, Paul includes some teaching on the corporate worship of the church. In some Church of Scotland congregations, the use of psalms in gathered worship is still very much used. Here at St Columba we have a mix of contemporary and traditional songs.

What Paul is advocating that in our worship we would have a balance of corporate worship that has worship of God – the upwards or vertical, and also the encouragement of the church – the outwards or horizontal.

When we read through the psalms we find examples of both these elements of worship. And if you look closely at the words of the songs that we have in our weekly corporate worship, you will find that the same here at St. Columba.

Worship is important in our corporate gathering in church. A lot of our theology, our doctrine, expressions of what we believe about Jesus, is actually expressed in our worship songs.

As I close this morning we have seen that God wants us to be distinctive in our lives in Christ. To demonstrate and share that that Life in Jesus is Infinitely Fuller.

The church is designed and chosen by God to be a contrast community. Our distinctiveness in Christ will mean that we are not to be like the chameleon, or octopus, blending in or conforming to the world and society around us.

How will this look in practice – through our holy living, in speech and practice. With thanksgiving, we are to demonstrate positive examples of the sanctity of sex within God's positively ordained marriage bond.

But also, our fullness in Christ is to spill out into our workplaces, social settings, families, schools, wherever God has placed us to have a sphere of influence for him.

May God bring his light into dark places as he sends us from this place to those he is drawing to himself.

Amen