

10th Sunday after Trinity, Year C

Col 3.1-17

Holiness isn't a word much used in Christian circles these days. To be called to a life of exacting but deeply fulfilling holiness isn't exactly in favour at the moment – especially when issue after issue crops in life demanding our attention. Not that many of those issues aren't worthy of our attention but if we haven't got the time to reset the compass or even the time to develop one in the first place, we're just going to get hopelessly lost. This is where Christian holiness comes in.

Now what's Christian holiness?

It's like taking off old clothes and putting on new ones. In baptism in the early church, candidates did exactly that. Off with the old clothes, baptised then on with the new clothes. And the fact that the new clothes happened to be a brilliant white wasn't lost on anybody who witnessed what was going on. The symbol matched the new life that was being entered.

In other words, the old clothes were the old patterns of behaviour – the lying, the cheating, the stealing, the lusting, the gossiping, the slandering, and the selfishness and so on – patterns of behaviour totally inappropriate for the new occasion of being Christian. The new clothes – the new patterns of behaviour of forgiveness, compassion, humility – must be put on in their place.

Today's reading from Colossians resonates right now in two areas: speech and sex. These are two central areas of human life, with great potential for good and for evil. But when they're abused – that's when the problems start. And the way to deal with is quite clear. There is to be no gentle, half-hearted approach to such things, no toying with them as continuing possibilities. They are like vermin that mustn't be allowed into the house in case they poison the food or the water supply. They are not to be pitied. They are to be killed off, put to death.

The catalogue of sexual misbehaviour includes both actions and thoughts. Fornication is essentially a catch-all term for 'Illicit sexual behaviour' is a wide term which includes sexual intercourse outside of marriage, whether or not it involves prostitution. The other terms in

the list aren't things that are completely different, but are overlapping ways of referring to sexual lust of all sorts and its gratification outside the God-given context of marriage.

We should be aware that greed (presumably sexual greed) is a form of idolatry. It's a way of worshipping a false god, the pagan dignity of erotic love. Like all pagan worship, this consists of giving one's allegiance to something in the transient world of present experience, rather than to the living God, the creator. The inevitable result is death.

But sexual sin is matched with sins of speech. Both alike inflict serious damage on the one commits them, those who are immediately affected by them, and the wider community. Again in verse 8 the list consists of overlapping words for angry and hurtful speech; and in verse 9 there is one danger in particular: the telling of lies. The Christian gospel is about truth, and there is no place for untruths in the Christian community.

Our individual behaviour counts but even greater than this, is the well-being of our whole community. Sexual misbehaviour can tear a community apart; so can malicious and abusive speaking. And the point of the new clothes we put on is that the new life is about unity, about the whole community coming together in love. Old divisions must be dumped. Jesus the king is present and active in everyone, and indeed in everything. Nothing lies outside the sphere of his sovereign rule.

The key to the new life which we're called to live is found in verse 10. The new self 'is being renewed in the image of the creator' and one of the results is new knowledge. Part of the renewal of every single one of us is to be able to see clearly, and understand, the deeper human issues involved behind apparently casual sexual behaviour and apparently casual talk. Contrary to the popular imagination, being a Christian means learning to think harder, not to leave the brain behind in the quest for new experiences. Thinking straight and knowing the truth are part of what it means to be a truly human being, the sort of human being the gospel is meant to create.

But it doesn't mean that being a Christian is to be weak-willed, joyless, and far too eager to say sorry.

Have you ever seriously tried to forgive someone who has wronged you?

Have you ever seriously tried to be compassionate and patient?

Have you ever tried to let Christ's peace, Christ's word, Christ's name be the reality around which you order your life?

If you have, you'll know that to do those things isn't easy. It takes serious prayer and real moral effort. And people who engage in that sort of effort tend to be people who are also capable of taking difficult decisions and engaging in challenging activities in other spheres as well. Christian behaviour in other words, makes you more human, not less. Self-indulgence, and habitual anger and lying may seem like fun for a while, but they will destroy you sooner or later – often sooner.

But I will say this: being compassionate doesn't mean being sentimental. Being kind doesn't mean being a soft touch. Humility isn't the same thing as low self-esteem. Being meek isn't being weak: it's what you get, when power is tamed and under your control. Being patient doesn't mean letting everyone do what they want to do to you. Christian virtue is life. It's dazzling. It's demanding. But it's worth it.

To be holy, is to be like Jesus. We can't simply select those parts of the gospel we like and leave out the others. If we do that, we're shaping the gospel around ourselves. Today's reading from Colossians asks the opposite: that we shape ourselves around the gospel. And that our behaviour matches our faith and belief. That everything we do or say must be able to have the words 'In the name of the Lord Jesus' written above it. Settle that in your hearts and minds and a great deal else will fall into place.