

Ephesians week 6

24/07/22 09:30 & 11:15

Our journey with St Paul's letter to the Ephesians is helping us think what it means to be more Christ-like. So far I have reflected on how Paul reminds us

- That we are a Church or Ekklesia – a community of communities of faith
- That our hope and salvation is found in God's love for us, not in how much we try to please God, or do good things
- That God's great riches – his healing and forgiveness – are available to all; no one is beyond God's mercy.
- That our priority is therefore building and equipping the Church, particularly amongst those new to us and the young
- And how being Christ-like leads us away from untruth and anger and towards love

Today is the 6th sermon in a series of 7. And perhaps it is on not only the trickiest bit of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, but one of the trickiest bits of scripture in the whole of the Bible. For we hear about two subjects, amongst other things, that have been used to oppress for generations: women submitting to men, and men having headship over women within marriage.

I don't want to shy away from this difficult text. To a modern congregation these may well seem very outdated thoughts. And we will instantly hear this language of Paul's in terms of the oppressions they have brought to women, as century after century patriarchal society has not granted women the equality they deserve. I do not want, for a moment, to excuse what has happened in the past, and to some extent what still exists today. Women in our society, and in too many around the world, are still held back – paid unequally to men, not able to hold down the same jobs as men, in some countries not afforded the same basic rights as men. Women in marriages for too long were kept at home to bring up children. So when St Paul says "Wives, be subject to your husbands" and "for the husband is the head of the wife" we cannot but think that is not right.

But can we suspend our own reaction to what we think about the role of women and men for a moment?

This part of Paul's letter begins with this call to mutual submission: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ". It seems for Paul, in marriage, there is to be a mutual submission. Now think of this word "submission". Sub means "under" and "mission" means "to send". In marriage for the Christian, both husband and wife are under another. Who is that other? Jesus Christ. They are under Christ's authority. He is the one who sends them, through the sacrament of marriage on a mission. What is that mission? From their wedding day, wife and husband are sent into the world by Jesus to live a life that is a reflection of Jesus' relationship to the Church. So Paul is trying to say, out of reverence for who Jesus is to you, live in submission to each other so as to reflect Jesus' relationship to the Church. And how does Christ love the Church? He loves Her with a sacrificial love. So husband and wife must be sacrificial one to another. Marriage is not about 'I' but 'we' and 'you'.

Secondly I am not sure originally this text was designed to subjugate women, but to raise them up. Paul was writing, as we know, to the community in Ephesus. Women at that time did not have an abundance of human rights; they were not considered equal to men. As backwards as this text might sound to contemporary ears, it was in fact pretty progressive in its original context. It's easy to get stuck on the part about wives being subject to husbands. But the mutual reverence for Christ was entirely out of step with the mores of ancient Greek society. Given that wives were essentially the property of their husbands, it is no small thing that Paul encourages men to love their wives. As radical as the other parts of this section of the letter – asking men to be kind to their slaves, to be gentle with their children, to love their wives. He addresses the most powerless in a patriarchal society—the women, the children, the slaves. So might we learn to give Paul the benefit of the doubt?

Paul is trying to teach is that understanding the priority of Jesus in our lives invites us to reflect on how we model our human relationships, and most centrally our marriages. Are they as Christ love us his church – abundant in love, putting the other first? Do we need to learn to reflect on the more that we could do for our partners, our children, and those on the margins of our society? “Be careful then how you live” Paul opens this section of his letter. Might we live as though we see Christ in the other person, and in serving our partner, children and stranger we are serving Christ.