

First Thoughts on Epistle Passages from the Lectionary - William Loader  
Pentecost 11B  
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Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2

Let's spell it out! Ephesians wants hearers to make the connections between the new relationship they have with Christ, with each other (including with Jews), on the one hand, and real living, concrete behaviour, on the other. It is important to see both aspects. Otherwise a passage like this week's can turn into a set of rules. They are more than that. They assume a new state of being which makes such changes possible. On the other hand, if we concentrate only on the new state of being and expect changes, we are being naive. There is often a big time lag between inner change and outer change and for some people it lasts an eternity! People need help to make the connections. Preaching can descend into moralising or it can remain aloof from addressing behaviour as though behaviour will happen automatically. It needs both and needs to make the connections between both.

The instructions begin with snippets of the Old Testament which are glossed with further interpretation. Speaking the truth (Zech 8:16) gets a new basis: we are each other's limbs. We need each other! Deliberate lying is much easier to avoid than giving false messages and representing oneself falsely. Many people struggle even to know their own truth; manipulation and self-deceit have at some stage been the coping mechanism and then formed a habit of life. You need a lot of love to let go playing games and projecting false personae.

Get angry, but don't sin (Ps 4:5 - as the Greek version has it). In 4:31 we read that bitterness, temper, anger, rage are to be set aside. Jesus' instructions in Matt 5:21-23 that anger is like murder have led to much confusion in the Christian tradition, which also knows stories about Jesus getting angry. The issue is not semantics but mental health. People need to hear that it is not wrong to feel anger, any more than it is wrong to feel appetite, whether sexual or in relation to food. It is always useful to get people to reflect on the fact that anger is usually a second feeling, preceded by pain, hurt, grief or the like, and to teach them to make that self discovery so that they can understand their anger. But anger treated in any other way, such as uncontrolled or buried or allowed to build up or fester, is destructive both for the person and for others. Anger gets transferred to others, sometimes immediately, sometimes after long periods of build up until it is explosive and out of proportion. Or it gets swallowed, even forgotten, and we live in a state of self-directed anger, a recipe for depression and a form of self harm. Addressing immediate response to anger is also important, so that people can learn to take responsibility for how they respond to their feelings and not violate others. There is plenty of that. Not letting the sun go down on one's anger (4:26) is about dealing with anger: truthfully with ourselves and truthfully with others, but not destructively. It is worth opening up these issues because there is still much in Christianity which leads people to believe that Christian peace means lying about anger and hurt by always being 'nice'. Giving place to the devil is a stern warning that phoney treatment of anger and conflict sets us going in exactly the opposite direction to God and to love.

The exhortation about theft in 4:28 might seem quite uncontroversial, until we realise that it is pitting theft against generosity towards people in need. There is no middle position called goodness. There is only love or theft. Incorporation into the body of Christ is incorporation into a body that is bent on filling the world with love and compassion. Our engagement in theft is so much more subtle and complex that we prefer to describe it in terms which obfuscate the need, not least of the two-thirds world of have nots and of those disadvantaged within our own community. We need help to stop being thieves.

On responsible use of language and discourse the ancient world was very aware of the potential destructivity of human communication. We need to be using our communication for good not for harm (4:29). Speech is powerful. We should probably read the following verses, 4:30-32, as still part of this theme of human communication. Compassion, generosity, goodness need to become our way of life. 4:32 reminds us that the foundation is God's grace and generosity towards us. Grieving the Spirit is disappointing the Spirit. The Spirit is disappointed when we opt for the alternative way of life. Elsewhere we read of quenching the Spirit. It is the same idea: don't block the Spirit in your life. The Spirit wants to bear the fruits of love in you and through you. Fundamental to all of this is forgiveness. It means giving, not holding oneself back and holding something against people. Let it go, embrace them; God embraced us.

The foundation for all of these practical exhortations comes through most clearly in 5:1-2. Not only should we imitate God - what a thought! We should also be absolutely clear about what most characterises God: love. Otherwise our imitation could end up being a disaster! The author points to Christ's death as the defining moment. A life poured out in love is better than all the elaborate rituals of sacrifice and sweeter than all the finest incense. The use of this imagery belongs to the overall theme of moving the focus away from Israel and onto something new which now includes both Israel and the Gentiles. It becomes a form of holiness open to all - living in love which informs both our own sense of identity as individuals and together and gives us our common goal and meaning in life.