

Sunday 26th May 2012.

I wonder if you have ever had this experience? You perhaps grew up in a city that you came to know well. You then left, to go to college or moved away for another reason. Then, some years later you visit it again. And though you know how the place should look, it now looks entirely different. Some buildings have been knocked down and communities destroyed. In their place new roads and houses have been built. What should have been easily recognisable, now is not.

I think in many ways the church is a bit like that, we know what it should look like, but over the 2000 years since Jesus walked this earth, the church has changed. It is not now what it was first meant to be and some would say they struggle to see any likeness to the original.

I wonder what your view of the church is this morning? As you look around at the church in this country today, is it an attractive thing to you, or does it leave you feeling cold and dissatisfied? Maybe you look at the multitude of denominations and that leaves you feeling slightly confused, or maybe you look at the division and argument within the church and that really puts you off- how can there be something worth hearing if the Christians themselves disagree so much about what the message is!

Well this morning I want to go back to one of the founding members of the Christian church- to the Apostle Paul and to His letter to the church in Rome. And I want us to try and capture again a sense and an understanding of what the church was meant to be like.

We've been looking together at some of the teaching of Paul and we are now in chapter 12 of Romans where Paul begins to apply some of the teaching of the first 11 chapters and show how this doctrine or teaching will work itself out in the lives of believers in Jesus.

One of the great themes of these chapters is the grace of God and particularly His grace shown in the salvation of sinners. We were graciously made by God at the beginning of time and sadly we rebelled. We did not want Him to be the ruler of our lives, rather we wanted to live our own way and make our own rules, but God has graciously intervened by sending His Son Jesus and has made us His children, brought us into His family, forgiven our sins, and is in the process of changing us to be more like Him. He is renewing the image of God in us, restoring what was lost at the beginning when we turned against Him.

And one of the key things here, one of the key messages of Romans is this- that it is all of grace. It is NOT about our own efforts, NOT about what we do to reach God but about Him reaching us and saving us. It is Him drawing near to us, not us trying to be good enough to reach Him. The message of Romans is very clear, there is NO way that you or I can make ourselves good enough for God. NO way we can ever approach Him claiming our own righteousness or goodness or anything else. It is ALL of Gods grace, it is ALL of Gods kindness to us.

Romans 9 v 16 says- "therefore it does not depend on mans effort, but on Gods mercy".

And so when we reach Romans 12 and we read there about the good lives that we are to be leading, about the kindness and goodness that should characterize our lives and our church, we need to remember that it is only because of Gods grace that we can live these lives. It is in response to His grace to us, and through the power of His Spirit in us, that we behave differently. It is because of Gods grace that the church will look different from any other society or community or club, because it has at its root, a different motivation and a different energy or power.

So with that in mind lets read the verses now.

Romans 12.9-12

These are very beautiful verses and I put it to you that if you saw a community of people living like this, would you not want to be part of it. There would be something deeply attractive, very sweet-smelling about a church that lived like this wouldn't there?

But as well as being a very beautiful description of what the church should look like, as you read these words you realize that it is not all plain sailing and sunny days for the church. No, it seems that the church is under pressure. The church is even facing persecution. Look at the words again: v 12 be patient in affliction, v14- Bless those who persecute you. V 17 Do not repay evil for evil. V19 Do not take revenge. V 21 overcome evil with good.

The church is under pressure. There is persecution, there is evil, there is a temptation to get revenge, there is a reminder to overcome evil with good... so it is not plain sailing for the church, it is hard, the church is under attack both from inside and outside, there is pressure to conform and there may be persecution.

And if you think back to Rome in the time Paul was writing, it was not a time when Christians were viewed with a great deal of enthusiasm! Indeed, it was about that time that the Emperor Nero decided that one of the new games for the Olympics was going to be seeing whether Christians make good food for hungry lions! So it was evidently not an easy time to be a Christian back then.

And if we think about our own culture, we may not face such physical persecution, but there are many who are speaking out quite loudly and publicly against the church. There are divisions within the church and for the those who are determined to hold on to biblical truth there is opposition.

And if we think about our own church, coming closer to home, we are under pressure too. We are facing trouble and difficulty at this time. Whether it is the sadness of bereavement,

or the stress of illness or the hard work of the gospel which can sometimes be discouraging, we are under pressure.

So how must we respond? What will this church, which is under pressure, look like? When we are facing stress and difficulty and perhaps opposition, how should we respond?

Well, I think we must respond by continuing to live the life that Paul outlines for us here. It is the life that is characterized by grace, characterized by love.

So in the time we have left let's just look at these verses under the following headings:

1. The church must be a people who love God
2. The church must be a people who love each other
3. The church must be a people who love their enemies.

The key I think is in the first verse we read- verse 9 and this seems to headline the rest of the verses.

Love must be sincere. Love must be genuine, without any pretense. Love is the key here.

The church must be a people who love God

Verse 11

Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.

This must come first. It is our love for the Lord that sets the tone for the rest of our lives. And this surely must be in response to the love that He has shown us. Romans 5 says "while we were still sinners Christ died for us". He gave His life for us. He took on himself the just punishment that was ours and saved us. Our response must be to love Him, to serve Him, to give our lives for Him.

God does not want half-hearted followers. He wants all of us, all of the time in loving service of Him.

I have been struck recently by Jesus's call to discipleship which involves a call to take up your cross. He who loses His life for my sake and the gospels, will find it. There is a call to complete commitment, wholehearted devotion to God, sacrificial living.

Are we lacking in zeal, perhaps having lost our spiritual passion and fervor?

Perhaps we need to go again to the cross and remember the all-out grace and love of God in sending His Son so that all who call on His name will be saved. And as we do that we may regain our zeal and our spiritual, Spirit-given enthusiasm in serving Him.

So the church must be a people who love God. But it is also clear that

Secondly, they must be a people who love each other.

And we saw this when we looked at John 21 together a few weeks ago, that our response to Gods love for us is not simply that we love Him in return, but that we love our brothers and sisters in Gods family. And these verse are where we see how that works out practically.

Notice verse 10- be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Verse 13 Share with Gods people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

There is an openness here. Open with our hearts, open with our hands and open with our homes.

We are to love each other warmly, affectionately, faithfully, just as we would our own family. We are to love the women of the church like sisters, and the men of the church like brothers. We are to love the older men and women as we might have affection for our fathers and mothers. We are a church family and that is how we are to live. And as such there will be times when loving like this is sacrificial. Notice that we are to mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice. We must feel the pain of those who are going through painful times- and this is not going to be comfortable.

You know, in ourselves we maybe find this hard. Particularly perhaps, rejoicing with those who rejoice. This might be very hard. It may be very difficult to be truly joyful for those who have children, when you are facing the sadness of infertility. It may be very difficult to rejoice with those who are relishing the joys of marriage when you struggle yourself with singleness. It may be very difficult to rejoice with those who have promotions or find stable employment, when you yourself are still unemployed or signed off sick. But Paul challenges us, we are one body, a family and we are to be happy when one of us is happy.

John Stott in his commentary says this:

“Love never stands aloof from other peoples joys or pains. Love identifies with them, sings with them and suffers with them. Love enters deeply into their experiences and their emotions, their laughter and their tears, and feels solidarity with them, whatever their mood.”

Then, also, we must share, we must have open hands. Prepared to give, to lend and to listen. We will remember how generous God has been to us and we will respond generously to our fellow believers in the family.

The story is told of Samuel Bradburn one of John Wesley's Methodist preachers. Bradburn was very poor, and Wesley wrote to him, "Dear Sammy, "Trust in the Lord and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land and verily thou shalt be fed." Yours affectionately, John Wesley. With the letter he enclosed two £5 notes- which was a lot of money in those days.. Bradburn replied: "Reverend and dear Sir, I have often been struck with the beauty of the passage of scripture quoted in your good letter, but I confess that I never saw such useful expository (explanatory) notes on it before!"

Then we are also to be open with our homes. "Practice hospitality", it says. Now for some of us, hospitality may not be our natural strong point. We perhaps quite literally do need to practice our hospitality. We need to get better at it! Nevertheless, we are to be often welcoming people into our homes.

But notice too that our love is to be completely indiscriminate. There are to be no cliques in the church. We are to be living in love towards those who are high and those who are low, those who are well-known and those who are not, those who are shy and quiet and those who are loud and out-going, those who we like and those who we do not, those who we find easy company and those who seem to be hard work!

The church must be a place which is inclusive and where ALL are honored. As Vincent reminds us often at communion time, the ground is level at the foot of the cross. We are all sinners, none of us have more right, more reason to be here than any other because we are all saved by the same grace, loved by the same Lord Jesus, and we each have the same hope for eternity where we will be together with Jesus. So do not be proud. Do not be conceited!

Thirdly, the church must be a people who love their enemies.

We are to be a people who do not fight back, who do not respond in kind. When we are spoken to harshly, we do not respond harshly. If we are treated unfairly, we do not try and get even, however subtly and cleverly that may be. We are to continue to do good and to live with kindness and grace, even when we are treated badly, or unfairly. When we face injustice, we will respond with grace. And in so doing, we will overcome evil with good. We may even persuade some to turn from their evil and injustice because of the great kindness they have been shown.

Now you may have some objections to this. You may be wondering then- does that mean Christians are just doormats for others to wipe their feet on? Or even- does that mean then that we don't work against injustice when we see it in our world?

Well I think, No, to both those questions!

If I (for example) am treated badly at work then there is still a place to confront my boss and perhaps to involve the appropriate HR people. Ultimately though, I must trust myself to God. He is the one who will judge. His verdict is the one that matters. And, at the same time, I must pray for my boss who has mistreated me, and I should work at responding with grace and kindness to him or her. Why, because I know that I have been shown grace and kindness from God.

And it is not that we should tolerate injustice in our communities or that we do not work against injustice. It is not that we are unconcerned or dispassionate about unfairness and injustice. No, for God is a God of justice and we must seek to see that justice worked into our society... but when we as a church or as individuals are faced with situations that are not just, that are evil, directed against us, we should not respond in kind.

So, again, if you receive that email at work which seems harsh in its tone, don't respond with an equally harsh sounding email. Take some time and go and speak to the person instead.

When you feel that someone has behaved inflexibly or unreasonably, don't bear a grudge against them. And don't bad mouth them to others either. You may need to confront them, but you must also forgive and seek to bless them!

And surely the ultimate example of good overcoming evil is seen at the cross of Christ. And that is where I want to finish this morning. The cross is the ultimate example of good overcoming evil. It seemed that evil had triumphed. A perfect man had been horrifically killed on a cross. The Son of God, nailed to a cross, his life over, His disciples bereft. But remember the prayer that Jesus prayed as He died on the cross: "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing".

At that moment, as Jesus hung on the cross, death itself was defeated, the ultimate evil was defeated by the ultimate good, the sacrifice of one man provided the way of forgiveness and reconciliation for all who call on His name. And His death was not the end of the story as we know. On the third day he rose from the dead and that last great enemy, death itself was defeated. So yes, good truly overcame evil on that day.

So as we close this morning lets just reflect again on these verses and ask- does our church look like this description Paul has given us in these verses?

Are we a church that is characterized by this loving gracious spirit; a church known for its devotion to God and His work and service; a church characterized by openness of heart and hand and home; a church that is distinct because of its counter-cultural attitude to those that oppose us?

And perhaps the verse to leave you with is verse 12, because I think this sums up for us the pattern for our lives from now.

“Rejoice in hope, be patient in affliction, faithful in prayer,” We can live lives of joy, because of the hope that God has given us, and so we stick at it, we will endure, we remain patient when facing times of trouble and in all this we pray, we pray constantly together and alone. Our habit is to pray.

Lets pray now.