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# “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts”

A Sermon at Union Chapel

**Readings:** Deuteronomy 4:25–31  
Colossians 3:1–17  
Luke 12:22–34

9 September 2007

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Life is more than food, and the body more than clothing **Luke 12:23**

Words, here, that we may easily assent to: words that we have probably heard many times before, and that we have learned to assent to because we hear them many times, and which, therefore, we do not pay all that much mind to, apart from assenting to.

But step back a little: Paul says, in our reading today, “put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)”. A list of bad things, then, a list of things that Christians have no business doing: it is tempting to concentrate here on the individual bad things themselves, to analyse our behaviour and to see whether we, or others, do these things, and sincerely try to improve. But I think that would be a mistake: I don’t think that Paul was trying to say something new with this list (and if you look, you can find almost exactly similar lists in other authors of Paul’s time, some of these authors Jewish, some pagan). He was just taking this list of things and saying “you won’t do this anymore”. But what is he saying here? He is saying, firstly, that greed is idolatry: the worship of false gods. And, because he does this, he is saying that greed is the fundamental sin: it is fundamental because it has beneath it a wrong attitude to God. And because of this, we don’t just have a list any more: he is saying, well, there is this and this and this, but *then* there is greed; and greed is fundamentally wrong, because it means abandoning God and putting something else in God’s place.

Greed – well, translations vary, and sometimes you have the word translated as “greed”, and sometimes you have it translated as “ruthless greed”, and sometimes the translation is “always wanting to have more” – greed, here, is something more than simply wanting an extra helping of ice cream. It is something which involves desiring something simply for the sake of desiring it: as, for example, wanting clothes with labels on simply because they have the labels on them and not whether they are good clothes or not. We want more and more and more, simply for the sake of desiring them: and, in so doing, we give our lives over to these things that we desire. As in the passage from Deuteronomy that we read: our lives are now controlled by things “made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell”. Of course, it is easy to read this passage and think of quaintly dressed people in a temple bowing down in front of some statue or other: and, of course, that might be one form of idolatry. But Paul isn’t thinking of that sort of thing here. He is saying that there is an awful lot of idolatry in the world: whenever we give in to this sort of ruthless greed, whenever we find ourselves always wanting to have more, whenever we abandon ourselves into the power of the things we desire. All the time, whenever this happens. And, he says, whenever our lives are not centred on God, this happens.

But things can be different. Paul talks, later in the reading, of “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience”: a list of good things, to counteract a list of bad things. Again, we shouldn’t be too obsessed with the details of the list, but we *should* be aware of where this behaviour comes from: it comes about, Paul says, because we have “new selves”, because we set our minds on “things that are above”. This new way of being is directly opposed to the old way, the way dominated by greed: not being dominated by greed, the new way can also escape the consequences of greed. It can escape, for example, the distinctions that we – out of greed, out of suspicion, out of jealousy – make between each other. Distinctions such as those between Jew and Greek, between barbarian, Scythian, slave and free – those are the distinctions that Paul uses, but we can, of course, think of our own. Distinctions between old and young: distinctions between insiders and outsiders; on and on and on, with these things we always say and do to split ourselves off from others.

So, I hear you saying, all very well, but how does this happen? And are we not just taking refuge in pretty words, while we, and all around us, continue to behave in the bad old way? Here are some pointers. Firstly, Paul talks of us as “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved”, and that applies to us: if we see ourselves as being valued by God, then there is less temptation to enslave ourselves to other things. But there is an unmis-

takable echo here, too: the one who is chosen by God, who is holy and beloved, is, of course, Jesus, and it is no surprise that Paul goes on to write of virtues such as compassion, kindness, and humility, which are the virtues that Jesus preeminently possessed. So we are being directed to the example of Christ, and we are also told to let the peace of Christ dwell in our hearts: this new self, this new way of being, is something that we have because Christ had it before us.

But the next thing is this. We must not underestimate the difficulty of all this. We live in a world that is awash with greed and the objects of greed: awash with its superficial riches, with its brand names and gadgets and celebrities and all of that stuff. It is not easy to tear ourselves away from it. It is, then, no surprise that Paul talks of it very serious terms: he talks of the new life as being above, as being in heaven, as being created by God. And he talks about the passage from the old to the new as being like death, he says that we should put the old life to death. And – one final caution – he says that the new life is still hidden: “hidden with Christ in God”. This new life is something which is not always obvious, it is something which only arrives gradually, and it is something which God is still working at.

One final, practical point. We should talk to each other. Even though this new life is “in our hearts”, it is not something which is locked away in there privately: it is something which we have to work at in these very practical activities of teaching, admonishing, and forgiving: all of them things which we can only do to each other, and which have to be done in words. The fact that it has to be done in words, that we have to communicate with each other in this very physical way, is not a bad thing: we are, Paul keeps saying, the body of Christ, and bodies are physical. And even when our life is made new – as it is, hiddenly and fitfully, even now – even when our life is made new, it is still part of our life that we need words to explain ourselves to each other, to rejoice with each other, to give concrete and practical shape to the peace of Christ dwelling in our hearts. © Graham White 2007