

Tidenham and Tutshill 11/8/24

## Ephesians 4: 25-32 – Practical Christianity

Prayer

It's our wedding anniversary today – and it's very easy to know how many years since Anna and I married in 2000. Anna is also celebrating the end of the Olympics; sadly she is no fan of sport. I shall break it gently that the football season starts shortly! Over 24 years we get to know each other pretty well; it's hard to maintain a 'face' over that time. In the hymn 'What a friend we have in Jesus' there's the line – *Jesus knows our every weakness...* Anna knows most of mine by now.

Being a Christian is not about maintaining a face. I have a great cartoon at home where the Vicar is about to leave home to go to church with his wife saying: *Here's an idea; how about a change – you be grumpy at church and charming at home?*

We're looking at Ephesians and come to the end of chapter 4, and part of Paul's message is encouraging the Christians of Ephesus – and us – to be consistently Christian in the way that they, that we live. Just an obvious point to begin with. It is not if we live like Paul describes then we can call ourselves Christians. No, we become a Christian through putting our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour. That is something we receive as a free gift. Being a Christian is never something we can earn or deserve. Our passage this morning though goes on from there. Paul is writing very practically about how being a Christian works out in the nitty-gritty of daily life. How can we be consistently Christian?

Our passage teaches us that it has a great deal to do with the words we speak. What we say can do so much good and cause so much damage; sometimes it's a wonder we say anything at all. I am sure we can all think of occasions when we desperately wish that we could have pulled back our words before someone else heard them. Last Thursday I gave the tribute at my mother's funeral and my brother, sister and I had to work quite hard to find the right words for the occasion. But we don't always get the chance to think before opening our mouths.

Paul tells us to speak the truth with each other because we are neighbours and members of each other. He was writing primarily to the Christian community. Now clearly he wasn't saying that we should speak truthfully with fellow believers, but outside this community it doesn't matter. His point was that as a Christian community we should be truthful with one another. Towards the end of the passage he makes it more explicit what this means in practice – *let no evil talk come out of your mouths*. Put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander together with all malice. It's worth looking a little more closely at that unedifying list. *Bitterness* – a sour spirit and sour speech. Sometimes we can talk about a *sourpuss*, but there are some sour tomcats as well. I'm 70 this year so I can say it – this is a particular temptation for us oldies – to be negative and critical and cynical about everything and everyone. *Wrath* and *anger* – similar. *Wrath* is more passionate rage – losing our temper, perhaps, whereas *anger* – more of a sullen hostility, more controlled perhaps but equally deadly. *Wrangling* – some people get excited and raise their voices and even scream at each other. We've seen far too much of that on the streets of some of towns and cities recently. *Slander* – speaking bad things of others behind their backs, undermining their reputation. It includes what people now call gaslighting or dog whistles – not exactly saying it, but we all know...And the last word is *malice* – ill will, wishing and even plotting bad things about others. There is no place for any of things in any Christian community. But why am I reminded of one or two PCCs (Church Councils) I have known?

So what makes for a truthful and open community? Paul doesn't just give the negatives, but he does tell us the qualities that should describe God's people. We are to be *kind to one another*. There's a fine pun here – unfortunately it's in the original Greek, where the word for kind is *χρηστος* which sounds very like *Χριστος*, which we translate as Christ. So the early Christians of the Mediterranean world always associated Christ with kindness. Indeed Jesus used the same word in the Sermon on the Mount for the way in which God is kind even towards the ungrateful and selfish. It's more important to be kind than to win. That's hard if you're a competitive sports lover like me. Paul goes on to commend being *tender-hearted*. This is categorically not to do with being soft or sentimental. It's so easy for us to make excuses for our own shortcomings and come down very hard on other people's shortcomings, whereas the Biblical order is completely the opposite – to be generous to others while being harder on ourselves. And then, *forgiving one another*. Literally that's acting in grace towards each other as God in grace has acted towards us. So here we are at the heart of what it means to be a Christian community – treat each other as God has treated you, forgiving us and not holding grudges.

How we speak of each other is so important for our Christian witness. Our passage reminds us *Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear*. The word *evil* here is the word for rotten – as in rotten trees or rotten fruit. I like my fruit pristine or processed; Anna is much more tolerant of bits that I reject. But once fruit starts to go off, it spreads... We should never use words to hurt others but always to encourage and build them up. How about this as an ambition? Christians should cultivate a higher standard of conversation than some we hear around us. There's a lot in the Old Testament book of Proverbs about the way we should speak. I love the proverb contrasting the speech of the wise person and the fool: *There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing*.

Our witness as a Christian community is so dependent on how we speak – to each other and of each other. It matters. But notice that little phrase at the end of our passage – *as God in Christ forgave you*. When it comes to speaking we all fall short and fail, but there is forgiveness from God. So when we fail each other and say things that perhaps would have been better left unsaid, let's be kind and forgive – as God is kind and forgiving.

Perhaps we can see now why Proverbs also commends silence over babble and burble. So I'll shut up now and we can sit for a couple of minutes, saying nothing at all... and then maybe ensuring our words for the rest of the day are kind.