

Sunday 25 October 2020

Encourage One Another

Ephesians 4:32 Forgive one another

Lord of all,

help us to come to you not just as an outward gesture,
but in heart and mind and soul.

Help us to make space in our hectic lives
to be still in your presence,
and so may we live in you and you in us.

Accept us now as we come to you,
and use us for your kingdom.

As I come into God's presence, I choose to praise him in the words of Psalm 92:1-4.

- ¹ It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
- ² to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,
- ³ to the music of the lute and the harp,
to the melody of the lyre.
- ⁴ For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

Last week we paused to look at a passage we might on other occasions pass by as tedious or irrelevant. This week we turn to a passage which we might also wish to avoid, but for wholly different reasons.

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul draws up very practical instructions for Christian living. This section concludes with a short list of vices to be avoided and virtues to be cultivated (4:25-32). Each exhortation describes what is to be done and provides a reason for such conduct. This list concludes with a short summary that places a challenge before us that many of us, perhaps all, would prefer not to hear.

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 4:30-5:2)

The challenge to forgive is found throughout Scripture. A similar instruction is found in Colossians 3:13, but it is also a core part of Jesus' teaching (see Matthew 6:14f and Mark 11:25f) and a petition in the prayer Jesus taught (Matthew 6:12; Luke 11:4). Forgiving one another

plays a key role in many Bible stories, in both the Old and New Testaments. From its central role in the Bible we understand that forgiveness is crucial to our faith. From the frequency such instructions are repeated and underscored we discover it is a difficult lesson to learn. It appears that we are not a naturally forgiving people, that we prefer to hold on to our grievances and to reserve the right to pass judgement on others.

But that is not the way God treats us. We are told repeatedly that we are to be a *forgiving* people because we are a *forgiven* people. What God has done in Christ for us, which has been a major theme of Paul's letter so far, provides both the norm and the grounds for our own behaviour.

Paul's instruction to forgive does not stand alone, it is part of a package that contains both negative and positive elements. We are encouraged to 'put away' certain behaviours and attitudes: bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, malice. In their place we are to be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another. In an age that is chiefly concerned with the individual it is well to remind ourselves that the Bible's focus is often on community, what damages it, how God works to restore it and what we must do to preserve it. Forgiving one another is at the heart of this.

Jesus said, "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses." (Mark 11:25) Who do I need to forgive as I pray now?

Pause and pray

We close with the prayer Jesus taught us to pray:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

(Matthew 6:9-13)

Gracious God,
take our faith, flawed though it is,
our love, poor though it may be,
and our commitment, for all its imperfections,
and use us in your service
to make known your gracious purpose,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.