

“LIVING LIFE WITH ATTITUDE”

Colossians 3:12-17

Christmas and New Year – it’s a time for writing letters. Before Christmas you get all those letters that come with the Christmas cards containing news of all those people you’d forgotten to get a card for. And after Christmas there’s the thank-you letters for all those presents from aunties and grandmothers. I suspect that during the rest of the year very few of us actually write proper letters any more – most of us use the telephone or e-mail. The exceptions are those people who regularly write to the newspapers to express their displeasure at some aspect or other of modern life. But however often we do it, we write letters for a reason. No-one just writes random letters to other people without any particular purpose.

The New Testament – apart from the four Gospels and the book of *Acts*, which tell the story of the life of Jesus and the beginnings of the Church, and the book of *Revelation*, which is all about John’s dream of the end of the world – is made up of letters. They were written by some of the first followers of Jesus – Peter, John, James and Jude, and Paul (who wrote most of them). They wrote their letters to other Christians in order to help them out with the things that they were learning and doing as the Church began to grow and spread around the world.

The reading we’ve just had this morning was from one such letter – to the Christians at Colosse, the *Colossians*. If you have a look at the very beginning of it and at the end, you’ll see all the usual greetings and so on. But Paul felt he had to write to these people because he had heard that things weren’t going too well in their church and he wanted to offer some advice. When he wrote it he was in prison in Rome, so he couldn’t actually go and see them in person. The problem with the *Colossians* was that, although they called themselves Christians, they weren’t really living like it. Some people had been trying to teach them the wrong things about Jesus and many of them had been living in such a way that there was no real difference between them and anyone else.

So the first part of the letter is all about how great Jesus is and what being a Christian is all about. It’s stuff they would have heard many, many times before (as we have). I’m sure they, like us, would have said “Amen” to everything Paul had written. But then Paul begins chapter 3 with these words (this is from *The Message*): “*So if you’re serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, **act** like it.*” You see, it’s not enough just to *know* the stuff. Most of us here would say we know about Jesus and what the Bible teaches – indeed, some of us tell others about it, either in the Junior Church or Mob or by preaching here and in other churches. The important thing is actually *doing* something about it, allowing it to make a difference in our lives. So the first question we can ask ourselves in 2006 is “Am I really serious about being a Christian?”

Paul goes on to tell them a bit about what it will entail. He starts by telling them what they need to **stop** doing – that’s in *vv5-11*. They have to stop having dirty thoughts, using dirty words, being greedy, being aggressive and lying. Fair enough: we’d probably all accept that and agree with it, even if we struggle to do it. But people who are not religious are always accusing religion – and Christianity in particular – of being just a load of “thou-shalt-nots”. They think it’s all negative. So Paul moves on to the positive: this is how you *should* live, he says. And when you look at the things he has to say, which we’ve just heard in our reading this morning, you’ll see it’s as much about **attitudes** as it is about **actions**. If you’re going to behave in the right way, you’ve got to start thinking in the right way.

Now this is one of those passages that you don’t really hear preached about too often, mainly because it is so obvious. These things here don’t really need too much explanation, do they? Or so we think. The trouble is, what Paul writes here is so obvious we tend to ignore it. We tend to assume we’re doing all these things, because we’re Christians and that’s how Christians behave. Well, the trouble with the Colossian church was that they were assuming that, too, and their lives were simply not matching up to those assumptions. And we’re the same.

It's interesting that as you look through this list of things that we are to do, you'll find that these are the things that cause divisions amongst Christians, these are the things that we really need to pay attention to if we are to function properly as a church. It's not usually heresy that divides people within churches – you don't find people falling out because one of them is a Calvinist and another is an Arminian: you don't find long arguments at Church Meetings about semi-Pelagianism rearing its ugly head or baptismal theology being found wanting: we don't have little groups getting together to ask searching questions about transubstantiation. (And if you don't know what any of those things are, it just bears out what I'm saying!) But you do find that churches fall apart when there is a lack of compassion or humility or patience amongst the members. People fall out much more easily when they see their own little pet issues being threatened by others. I've heard part of this item a couple of times this week, but haven't been able to listen to the whole report, but a survey has found that the place where most people have been most rudely treated is in church – and I can quite believe it: indeed, I've experienced it!

So Paul sets out some things that we are to aspire to, attitudes that we are to cultivate. He begins with what I would say are **individual attitudes**, things that we should each be trying hard to show in our lives. As we've noted, they don't need a great deal of explanation. "*Compassion and kindness*" are the kind of things everyone would want to demonstrate, but "*humility and gentleness*" are perhaps a bit more difficult to get to grips with. One writer points out that "*humility and gentleness were not considered virtues by the pagan world*", and nor are they today. We live in a society that believes in everyone getting their own way whatever the cost, so the ones who succeed are the ones who are least gentle and least humble. Unfortunately that spills over into church life. Charles Moule identifies gentleness as a characteristic of Jesus, as part of the fruit of the Spirit, as a distinctive trait of those who belong to Christ and defines it as "*a willingness to make concessions*", seeing things from someone else's point of view and trying to accommodate them.

"*Patience*" is also part of that – not rushing to conclusions or jumping in with both feet to try and get your own point made. In the Greek the next couple of things are actually an expansion of that – "*bearing with one another and forgiving whatever grievances you may have against one another*". Tom Wright sums it up by saying that you should "*restrain your natural reaction towards odd or difficult people*" – and I know that's something I need to take to heart. Another writer puts it like this: "*Paul uses [these words] to show that Christians who are truly patient will manifest this attitude by (1) a willingness to bear with those whose faults or unpleasant traits are an irritant to them and (2) a willingness to forgive those they have grievances against. 'Bear with' suggests the thought of putting up with things we dislike in others.*"

I wouldn't mind a small wager that several of you are thinking right now of other people who need to be taking these words to heart. Why not try and apply them to yourself? That might then help with the forgiveness part of it all. Resentment and grudges are highly destructive in any relationship and absolutely deadly between Christians. Tom Wright again: "*First, it is utterly inappropriate for one who knows the joy and release of being forgiven to refuse to share that blessing with another. Second, it is highly presumptuous to refuse to forgive one whom Christ has already forgiven.*"

And what should hold all this together, says Paul is **love**, *agape*, sacrificial love, love that suppresses one's own desires and aspirations in favour of the needs and desires of another. If you don't have love, as he writes to the Corinthians, then you might as well give up now. And as love is something that cannot exist in a vacuum, you need someone else to share it with, Paul goes on to list some things we need to do together. Again, not much explanation needed here. These are, if you like, **collective attitudes**.

There's "*unity*" and "*peace*". We're all in this together, says Paul, so let's get on and make the best of it we possibly can. "*Be thankful*" together – share what Jesus has done in your lives and then you can worship and learn together. Thankful worship is something that should draw Christians closer to each other – but in many churches it seems to be what drives them apart. Within that spirit of thankful worship, share with one another and encourage one another – don't snipe and discourage. Because basically the point of all this is to give thanks and glory to God.

If we are to do that, we need to keep Jesus at the centre of our life together – “A *church at the heart of the city with Christ at the heart of the church*”. With Jesus as the hub, we should all be connected to him and thence connected to each other. There should be a sense of togetherness, a palpable sense of unity – no factions nor cliques – all pulling together towards the same goal, that of glorifying God and sharing Jesus. But each person needs to play his or her part in the mission of this church, each one of us needs to sort out our attitudes at the beginning of this new year so that we can move forward together in the way God wants us to go.

New Year is a time for making resolutions. But this isn't about resolutions. Paul isn't writing this letter to tell the Christians in Colosse to make their resolutions. They know what they've got to do. They know what being a Christian entails. They know what is needed as they spread the good news about Jesus. And so do we. So Paul doesn't tell them to make resolutions. He's telling them to get on with it, to do it, to live lives that demonstrate Christ-like attitudes. This morning we are not being asked for a decision, we are being asked for action. May 2006 see us moving closer to being a church that acts as if it's serious about following Jesus.

(Housegroup notes follow on next page)

"LIVING LIFE WITH ATTITUDE"
Colossians 3:1-17

In these verses, Paul is talking to the Colossian Christians about their group identity as the people of God. The chapter begins with an encouragement to focus on Jesus alone – to look towards "*things above*". If our lives are centred on "*Christ, who is our life*" (which is the main thrust of this whole letter), then when he appears we will be taken to remain with him for ever, sharing in his glory.

If that's to be the case, though, it's necessary to get rid of all the things in our lives which are concerned only with short term gain and gratification, because they can have harmful consequences in this life and a profound effect on what happens in the life to come (*vv3-9*). In renouncing these things, and focussing on Christ, we become part of the renewed community of God's people, the community of those whose lives have been radically changed. It is a community which is not defined by race, accident of birth, culture or class (*v11*). In *v12* Paul points out that it is this renewed lifestyle which distinguishes the Christian community. As "*God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved*" we should be "*clothed*" with the attributes of Christ himself. And in the life of the Church this should be apparent to outsiders by our **relationship, fellowship and worship**.

Relationship (*vv13-15*) – Paul paints an ideal picture of the Church community, but must surely recognise that there will be real difficulties in our keeping to this. These are tough targets, but we still need to keep striving for them. Being the Church is all about showing to a brutal and unforgiving world that there is a better way.

Fellowship (*v16a*) – Relationships within the Church are characterised not only by an *absence* of things, and not only by fine words. We are also to take responsibility for one another's spiritual well-being. All that we do should be based on what we read in God's word and we are to share that with one another.

Worship (*v16b*) – Our lives should be distinctive as individual Christians, but there is a further dimension to our faith and witness when we come together. We should be building one another up in our worship. Some of our hymns and songs are directed towards God, and some are encouragements to other Christians.

In all of this, the glory must go to Jesus (*v17*). The one who is supreme over all must be the object of and motivation for our worship, our fellowship and our relationships. If we are to be distinctive, it must be for the right reasons!

Questions for discussion

1. Does *v2* encourage an attitude that refuses to take everyday life seriously? Doesn't it lay Christians open to the accusation of being "too heavenly minded to be any earthly good"?
2. Why does Paul refer to greed as "*idolatry*"? Does that make any difference to the way you view it?
3. How can we best "*bear with one another*"? Does it mean always giving in to someone else?
4. Is there anyone you need to forgive? What are you going to do about it?
5. How should we be "*teaching and admonishing one another*"? How can we do that in our worship?
6. In the light of this passage, what might we do at Wade Street Church to show that we are part of this renewed community of Christ?