

A few Sundays ago, as you may recall, I mistakenly read the previous week's gospel passage. Well, that was a very public mistake: stood there in the central aisle, I had no hiding place! Hopefully, we all learn from our mistakes, but I am sure that some of us today were thinking I had not learnt from mine! You see, today's gospel reading repeats the end of last week's, and continues last week's theme of 'the bread of life'.

Tempting though it may be, I won't repeat last week's sermon – which explored what Jesus meant when he said 'I am the bread of life' and how this links in to our 'living in him and he in us' through the sacrament of Communion. But later in the service, I will repeat last week's Invitation to Communion which resonates with those words of Jesus. Instead, I will consider today's New Testament reading, from St Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Now, since the middle of July, we have been working our way through this powerful letter. Remember that Paul had visited Ephesus, set in modern Turkey, on his missionary journeys, en route for Greece. Remember too that some commentators question whether in fact it was Paul who was the author of this letter: they suggest it might have been one of his followers. But that need not concern us here.

The letter to the Ephesians can be split into two parts. The first part considers the Church, the Christian community, and includes the radical teaching that all people are equal in God's sight; that our 'righteousness in God's sight' comes from our faith in what God has done for us, not from our own 'good works'. The second part of Ephesians examines the ethical values which mark genuine Christian behaviour, values based on truth, love and forgiveness.

It is worth remembering that for Paul the Church is a meeting place where all people, whatever their background, can meet at the same level – as an expression of God's universal welcome and acceptance. It is worth remembering, too, that this was in stark contrast to how first-century Roman society was ordered (as well as modern society!). The deeply radical part of Paul's teaching is that God's universal welcome means that we who gather in God's Church can know ourselves to have been set free – set free from being 'owned' by any kind of human power, set free from any kind of slavery, including slavery to sin. And because we are each 'justified by faith, and not by works' then nobody who belongs to the 'household of faith' is any more 'righteous' than anyone else. No wonder Paul says in our reading today, 'be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you'.

Knowing that our freedom has been freely given, and purely by God's grace, our response as followers of Christ must surely be to try to live up to the righteousness he sees in us. So that is where the second part of Ephesians, which examines the ethical values which mark genuine Christian behaviour, comes in.

Our reading today, from that second part, includes such familiar and wise teaching as ‘do not let the sun go down on your anger’, and ‘do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption’, and ‘put away from you all bitterness and wrath’.

That latter saying reminds me of the great quote from the Rule of St Benedict, ‘rid your heart of all deceit’. Benedict’s Rule is shot through with biblical teaching, and in fact has been described as ‘a practical guide to living out the teachings of the Gospel, which are the teachings of Christ himself’.

As we are all aware, certain Benedictine communities have rightly received some bad press recently, and the Holy Spirit will indeed be grieved by the things being reported. Clearly, the monks who perpetrated these crimes must be called to account by the law of the land, and their victims given every support. Clearly, those monks failed to live up the call to ‘rid their hearts of all deceit’.

Now the writer Esther de Waal in her commentary on the Rule of St Benedict says, ‘Benedict knows a great deal about the innermost self, that world of my deepest thoughts and intentions. If I am to grow into a whole and free person then there must be a harmonious relationship between the inner [disposition] and outward behaviour.’

The teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and of Saint Paul cannot be clearer on what our inner disposition is to be; our task in ridding our heart of all deceit is to ask ourselves whether our outward behaviour fully reflects the values of truth, love and forgiveness.

Whoever we are, we need help to do this. And perhaps Benedict’s Rule can guide us. In Chapter 4 of the Rule, which is entitled ‘Tools for good works’, Benedict says much which overlaps with what we read in Ephesians. He also says, ‘Let nothing come before the love of Christ’. He says this again in Chapter 72 of the Rule, and in many ways that simple phrase sums up the whole of the Rule. Remembering that phrase and using it often can surely guide us as we seek to rid our hearts of all deceit. ‘Let nothing come before the love of Christ’.

One more thing from the Rule of St Benedict. Commenting on chapter 19, Esther de Waal writes, ‘The inner and outer must correspond, my heart must be in tune with the words that I speak. Benedict challenges any behaviour which depends on outward appearance and lacks inner attention. His concern is always with attitude, with the disposition of the heart, awareness of the presence of God, response to that presence, habitual attention.’ Surely, Benedict has something to say even to us, separated as we are by fourteen hundred years of striving to live the Christian life.

The name Benedict means ‘blessed’ in Latin. One of the great canticles of the Church is the Song of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, and is called the Benedictus. Its opening words are ‘Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel’. Zechariah goes on to acknowledge his son John as the ‘prophet of the Most High’, who will ‘go before the Lord to prepare his way’. Zechariah also says that in Jesus God has ‘come to his

people and set them free' – 'free to worship him without fear, holy and righteous in his sight, all the days of our life'.

As we make our Communion with our Lord later in this service, let us resolve to live up to the righteousness he sees in us, and to rid our hearts of all deceit.

Thanks be to God. Amen.