

SERMON – 17/1/21**'Taking Jesus' Message Seriously'**

Ephesians 4:1-16

“By speaking the truth in a spirit of love we must grow up in every way to Christ who is the head.” (Ephesians 4:15)

Last Sunday we began to look at the six themes of the Growing Young programme that our congregation is involved in alongside another couple of dozen Church of Scotland congregations at the moment. The first theme we considered was called 'Fuelling a Warm Community' and we thought about how we, as Kinross Parish Church, might be the kind of nurturing community of faith where people of all ages and stages help each other to grow as followers of Jesus, a family of faith who know and understand the different challenges we each face in life, where those who have questions may ask them and find answers from fellow travellers along the way.

I want to highlight again today the fact that *Growing Young* is not only about youth work or about young families, it's about the whole church, because if we are not consciously allowing rejuvenation as a congregation then the church will simply grow *old* and die.

This morning our theme is 'Taking Jesus' Message Seriously' and although it has often been said in recent years that the church needs to make its message more appealing if it is to attract new members, research shows that in fact the churches which are growing (and particularly those that are seeing greater numbers of younger people) are actually those who *don't* try to water down the challenges of the Gospel or sweep difficult teachings under the carpet but who *wrestle* with what those teachings mean in our current circumstances

Our Bible reading this morning focusses on the idea of the church as the Body of Christ, made up of members who each have different gifts and abilities, given by Christ to be used for the common good and to enable the church to be all it can be in the service of the wider world. Actually, it is one of my favourite passages in the whole New Testament, speaking about unity in diversity, about humility and patience, about tolerance and love which are the gifts of God, and about the different ministries given to each of us for the common purpose of preparing the Lord's people for works of service in order to build up the body of Christ. It paints a picture of a

church I would really like to belong to – and actually I see lots of signs in most churches, not least this one, of the potential to be that kind of church. If we take Jesus' message seriously and don't just be the kind of tame imitation of church that we too often end up being because people's expectations are too low, then I believe we can be that kind of church.

I'd like to suggest to you this morning that we are given a description in this passage of three different kinds of people in the Body of Christ and I'd like you to consider which of them you might be yourself and which of them you might aspire to be if you were to take the message of Jesus more seriously than you currently do.

Firstly, Paul writes about spiritual “children” or “infants” - those whom he describes as being “carried by the waves and blown about by every shifting wind of the teaching of deceitful people who lead others into error by the tricks they invent.” (v.14) Perhaps, actually, most of us fall into that category – we don't feel very confident about our faith and if we heard a preacher or teacher say something that we had never heard before we might not know how to check out what he or she had been saying against the Bible's teaching; we might be easily swayed by a persuasive speaker because we don't feel well-enough grounded on Scriptural principles; we might have Jehovah's Witnesses at the door running rings round us with the verses they quote.

Yes, as Christians, we are called to have a child-like faith but we are not supposed to have a childish faith. What infant would you go on feeding nothing but milk? What child would you forbid from going to school or discourage from learning? And yet too many of us are too lazy to pick up our Bible and study it with any degree of commitment and even those who do, stop short of wrestling with the things we find difficult to understand. Am I content to remain an infant in Christ? Are you?

The second category is what the apostle exhorts those of us who are spiritual infants to aspire to. “Instead, by speaking the truth in a spirit of love,” he writes in the words of this morning's text, “we must grow up in every way to Christ, who is the head.” (v.15) It is the task of Christians to be people of the truth. We are called to seek the truth, understand the truth, communicate the truth, and by truth I don't mean dusty text-book truth but the living truth as it is in the Person of Jesus, the truth that is the very essence of love. So often that phrase 'speak the truth in love' is used to

describe those occasions when for the good of another believer we point out their faults. We are doing it in love, we tell ourselves, not maliciously, but unfortunately too often it ends up being received as insensitive and destructive criticism. No, speaking the truth in love is far more than that – it needs to be a way of life, it means taking Jesus' message to heart and allowing a growing understanding of the things of God in Christ to permeate our whole being and to manifest itself in our lifestyle so that our words and actions make the truth known and by so doing to help other believers grow in faith and to allow those who are not Christians to experience the love of God in action.

During the Crimean War, the famous Florence Nightingale was passing down a ward one night. She paused to bend over the bed of a wounded soldier and as she looked down the wounded man looked up and said, “You are Christ to me.” We ought to be able to define and recognise a Christian as someone in whom Christ lives, because they take the message of Jesus seriously and live it out. I wonder if one of the messages of *Growing Young* to those of us who are older might be a reminder that no matter what age we may be we need to be humble enough to recognise that we still need to be growing up into Christ who is our head. Am I ready to take Christ's message seriously enough to be growing in Christlikeness and to be growing up into Christ? Are you?

Because, thirdly, when we are growing into Christ, we will be what we are meant to be as members of the Body of Christ. Paul writes: “Under Christ's control, all the different parts of the body fit together, and the whole body is held together by every joint with which it is provided. So when each separate part does its work as it should, the whole body grows and builds itself up through love.” (v.16)

Last week we were talking about the church as a family and I encouraged all of you to make contact with someone in the family that you had perhaps not been in touch with for a while, just to ask how they were or to see if there was any way you could help or encourage them. I know that many of you did just that and I know that there was blessing as a result. That's can't just be a flash in the pan, though – it needs to be part of who we are as a body, and it needs to go beyond being a nurturing community (good though that is) in the physical realm. We each need to be taking up the different gifts God has given each and every one of us and *using* them in the ongoing

process of building up the whole body. For some of you that will be doing a lot more of what you maybe did once in this past week and making pastoral contact with others in the congregation regularly, to offer a listening ear, a helping hand, a bit of advice or practical support, the promise of prayer. For others it will be stepping up to volunteer in some way with the various ministries the congregation is involved in – children's and youth work, sharing in aspects of leading worship, behind the scenes admin or technical work, in finance or the upkeep of property. And perhaps that's one of the challenges I need to give particularly to younger folk in the congregation who have not yet found their place in the work we seek to do as a church. Perhaps some of us older folk need to be putting our energies into enabling new people to take the place we have occupied for a while even and maybe especially when we know they won't do things the way we have done them in the past. Do I take Jesus' message seriously enough to give up what I am doing in favour of someone who will maybe do it better or with more energy, and do I believe that I can play my role in the building up of the body just as well and perhaps better by supporting the ministry of others than by exercising it myself? Do you?

I have a sense that this year is going to be a significant one in the life of our church, locally and across the country. Covid has forced us to stop doing things the way we used to do them and has made us ask ourselves how we can be church in new ways. Alongside that and in tandem with the developing work we have begun through Kythe, *Growing Young* is inviting us to look with fresh eyes at our previously hesitant attempts to reach a new generation with the Good News of Christ. Whatever age we are we may be infants in Christ or we may think we are growing in maturity as disciples of Jesus – wherever each of us is on that journey we need to grow up until we reach what Paul calls here 'the full stature of Christ.' (v.13)

I hope that we are ready to take Jesus' message seriously and that by speaking the truth in a spirit of love we may grow up in every way to Christ who is the head.