

Put On The 'New Self'

The sermon given at the BCP Communion Service on Harvest Sunday Evening, 7 October 2018 by the Associate Vicar, Revd. Wendy Wale, in Beverley Minster.

Ephesians 4: 17-end; Matthew 9: 1-8

God of the harvest we thank you for your word and pray that you will speak to our hearts and minds this evening.

I'm afraid this is not quite the jolly harvest talk with chocolate that I did at the All Age service at ten thirty. This evening we are considering more the harvest of our words and our lives and, slightly less cheerful than chocolate, funerals. I took my first Beverley funeral this week. It is I think one of the greatest privileges, if not challenges, of my job.

And one of the things that funerals really make me think every time I attend one is, I wonder what the person whose life is being described would feel like if they could hear the tribute? I wonder if they knew how much they were loved and valued? I wonder if they would have been surprised by how many people turned up to pay their respects? And it's always a challenge to me to think what do I wish that I had said to the people I love while they're still alive. Because it's so easy to assume that we're all going to go on forever.

We live in a society that masks and hides death to the point where we don't even use that word very often. People 'disappear to another room' or 'cross a rainbow bridge' - but the reality of grief is that people do die. And sometimes we can be left with big regrets.

I took a funeral last year for one of the members of staff where I worked. Her son had just come out of prison. He was a young man, a young father; he had gone onto the streets and been homeless; he made the brave decision to go home, where he had a blazing row with his younger sister. He was found later that day in the river. Taking the funeral was one of the hardest things I've done, but nothing like as hard as that poor

young teenage girl who was struggling to know how to cope at all with her last words spoken to her big brother.

It said in our epistle reading earlier, "Do not let the sun go down on your anger", and I've often heard this spoken and given it as advice to newly married couples - it's a really good thing to not go to bed until you've dealt with your arguments. This doesn't work well in my marriage because Tom will fall asleep midway through absolutely anything, but I have heard of some couples where they will sit up all night flushing something through until they reach a place of peace. Thankfully Tom very rarely gets angry unless he's really hungry, so this is not too much of a problem.

But I love the epistle reading because it doesn't say, "Don't get angry." It says, "Be ye angry and sin not." I don't know if is anybody sitting here tonight who could honestly say to me (and you're very welcome to afterwards), "I've never got angry in my whole life about anything." Hm - here's some laughter here. Perhaps some of you young people if you'd seen yourselves when you were two, there probably would have been some quite strong tantrums - there are some laughs from the mums here.

You see it recognises that we humans will get mad and cross and frustrated and probably say things that we regret, and our passage asks the question, "What do we do with our 'old man' or 'our old woman'." I shall use the term 'old self', not commenting on anybody's hair colour or age status, but that part of ourself that is messy and perhaps broken and human and we would wish it would just disappear. The Bible passage here speaks of deceitful lusts; lying; stealing; negative speech; bitterness; wrath and malice. And actually through my work as a priest, a chaplain and perhaps even more so, as a therapist, I've heard many people's stories and confessions.

Now I am very aware as I am sure you are, watching the news day by day, that that list hasn't changed very much a few thousand years later. People share with me their unwanted addictions: they talk of the damage done by untrue words and gossip, both against them and when they know they have been the starter of it; of bitterness - one of the things I found most in church communities sadly, people holding resentment for decades; of the impact of broken promises particularly in marriages and relationships; of

the pain when relationships go wrong; the resentment; and of course, of the many forms of abuse.

Which brings us I think to the question that Jesus asked in our Gospel reading, "Which is easier, physical or spiritual healing?" And I must admit I've spent many an hour pondering - as I do - on which answer to the question Jesus was looking for. But I think my conclusion is that probably there isn't an answer: they are both inextricably linked. Jesus tells the man with palsy, "Your sins are forgiven. Arise, take up thy bed. Go home." You see as we deal with our inner struggles we become freer; we're more able to get up and walk through life; we're better at being at home in our own skin.

So how do we do that? Well I could probably preach a series of sermons lasting till Christmas to give a full answer, but in the two minutes that I probably have left, some thoughts: we spend time sitting simply in the presence of Jesus whether it's in our worship service like this or in quiet prayer alone, allowing his spirit to gently nudge and prompt the areas in our lives that we know we would love to be free of; to seek to think differently and perhaps even to act differently. And very often, when those habits of 'old self' have been around for a very long time, we might need support: that of a church community; a small group within the church; our friends and family; and sometimes professional help.

I've often thought that all of us should be in some kind of Alcoholics Anonymous group, where we sit and start off by saying, "I can't do this on my own." And that's okay. I had the privilege of knowing a student for the four years I was there [at Wadham College] who when I first met her as an older teenager, was coping with the pain in her life through alcohol; through quite intense self-harm; through a whole series of inappropriate relationships. She quite quickly had to stop her studies before she completely pressed the self-destruction button. She went back to Wales and spent a year in incredibly intense therapy but also sat in Welsh chapels, making peace with God. Then she came back; she is back now; everything isn't easy and rosy but she can now sit with her pain; she can make different choices. She often posts on Twitter but she's chosen to listen to Gregorian chants, rather than to go out and use alcohol to

solve the problems; she is flying through her degree; her new self is moving forward, free.

It says that the world will know us by the way we, God's people, love one another, and I think we'd do well if we all started with the description we heard in our passage earlier of what it looks like to live with our new self: be kind to one another; tender hearted; forgiving; free from bitterness; without angry words.

Let us pray that we can be those 'new-self' people this week.