

Sermon for Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

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2 Samuel 18.5-9, 18.14, 18.31-33, Psalm 130, Ephesians 4.25-5.2, John 6.35; 6.41-51

In the name of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen!

Good morning, St Lukes!

Truly I can't describe to you what an immense pleasure, and honour it is to be standing here before you all and opening up our beautiful scriptures.

For me St Paul has been quite the challenge over my life. He often reminds me of being told off by a cranky old father figure.

Anyway, here we are delving into the transformative message of Chapter 4 of The Epistle to the Ephesians. In this St Paul outlines not just moral advice but a radical blueprint for a new kind of community. This vision is made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, creating what he calls "one new humanity."

Whilst preparing for this sermon I was drawn to Bishop Tom Wright. I am assuming some of you know who he is?

If not, he is a Church of England Bishop and Theologian whose writings on Christian Hope have helped me understand how to embody this new reality in our lives. So, I thought I would share with you!

Bishop Wright emphasizes that Christian hope is entrenched in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This hope is not merely about personal salvation or a future in heaven but involves the renewal of all creation.

As we heard Samuel preach a few weeks back on Chapter 1 of Ephesians, in that St Paul says;

"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe."

Our hope as Christians is grounded in the transformative power of Christ's resurrection and the unity it brings.

St Paul begins this week's chapter of Ephesians by urging us to live a life worthy of this calling, grounded in hope.

He calls us to embody virtues such as humility, gentleness, patience, and love (some of these are easier than others as my lovely wife often reminds me).

These are not mere moral attributes, but reflections of the new humanity created in Christ.

Bishop Wright explains that the resurrection inaugurated a new reality, breaking the power of sin and death, and ushering in God's kingdom.

This new reality shapes how we live today, fostering unity as emphasized in verses 4-6;

"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

This vision that St Paul has for the church is one of unity in diversity, something that I believe we all miss from time to time. We can be diverse in many ways and still have unity.

In verses 7-13, he describes how Christ has given different gifts to the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. These gifts are meant to equip the saints for the work of ministry, building up the body of Christ. This diversity of gifts reflects the multifaceted nature of God's grace.

Bishop Wright notes that the purpose of these gifts is to foster maturity and unity in the church. This goal being that.

"... we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (v. 13).

This maturity involves stability in faith and doctrine, discerning truth from falsehood, and growing into the likeness of Christ.

Here I am also reminded of something that has been said in formation classes. Let me paraphrase as I can exactly remember who said what, and when, but it went along the lines of;

“if you’re not confident in your own faith then how can you convince others to be confident in their faith”

Wise words by someone on the journey with me!

In verses 17-24 we see a contrast of the old way of life with the new life in Christ.

St Paul urges the believers to put off their old self, which is corrupted by deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of their minds. They are to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

For some context on this Bishop Wright emphasizes that this transformation is not just a change in behaviour, but a deep, inner renewal made possible by the Holy Spirit.

This new life is characterized by truth, holiness, and a reflection of God's image. St Paul's call to live out this new identity is a call to embody the hope of the new creation in our daily lives.

As often is the case in his letters Paul provides some practical instructions for living out this new life, which we can view as expressions of the Hope we have in Christ.

First, he urges us to put away falsehood and speak truthfully to our neighbours.

Some learned context from Bishop Wright explains that truth-telling is foundational to Christian community because it reflects the reality of the new creation.

When we speak truth in love, we build trust and unity, fostering a community where people are genuinely known and loved. As always this needs to be done in a Christ like manner with grace and compassion front of mind.

St Paul acknowledges that anger is a natural human emotion, but he warns against letting it move us towards sin. Wright points out that righteous anger should motivate us to address injustice and seek reconciliation.

However, we must not let anger fester. Instead, we are called to pursue peace and unity, ensuring that our anger leads to constructive outcomes rather than division.

Next, St Paul instructs those who have been stealing to stop and to work honestly with their hands. Work is not just for personal gain but for the benefit of the community. By working honestly and sharing with those in need, we reflect the generosity and provision of God's kingdom. This shift from taking to giving exemplifies the transformative power of hope in Christ.

This is my favourite bit! We then hear a warning against "unwholesome talk" where we are encouraged to speak in ways that build up others. Our words have the power to shape reality and influence others.

By choosing to speak words that encourage and uplift, we contribute to the growth and health of the community.

Our speech should be a source of grace, reflecting the love and hope we have in Christ.

This further reminds me of Pope Francis and his quote over the pandemic that “Gossiping is a worse plague than COVID”.

Finally, St Paul calls us to put away bitterness, rage, and malice, and to be kind and compassionate, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven us.

Basically, Bishop Wright emphasizes that forgiveness is at the heart of Christian hope.

It reflects the reconciliation we have received through Christ and extends that grace to others. By embodying kindness and forgiveness, we live out the hope that transforms relationships and builds a community grounded in love and mercy.

By living out these instructions, we not only reflect the hope we have in Christ but also actively participate in the renewal of our communities.

Each of these practices’: truth-telling, reconciliation, honest work, edifying speech, and forgiveness serves as a testament to the new humanity created in Christ.

They demonstrate how the hope of the resurrection transforms our daily lives and relationships, making the kingdom of God visible here and now.

In our current cultural and political climate, the message of Ephesians 4 is particularly relevant. I have heard Bishop Wright on his YouTube channel often speak about the church's role as a signpost of the coming kingdom of God.

As followers of Christ, we are called to embody the hope of this kingdom in a world that is often divided and fragmented.

Imagine if all our communities were known for their unity, diversity, truth-telling, reconciliation, generosity, edifying speech, kindness, and forgiveness.

Such communities would be a powerful testimony to the hope we have in Christ. They would stand in stark contrast to the divisions and conflicts that characterize much of our world today.

Consider how different our church and secular communities would be if we were intentional about using our words to build up rather than tear down.

This doesn't mean avoiding hard truths, but it does mean framing our conversations in a way that seeks to edify and uplift. By doing so, we foster an environment of support and love, reflecting the hope we have in Christ.

Our hope is not a passive waiting but an active participation in the new creation. This hope calls us to live in a way that reflects the transformative power of Christ's resurrection. It calls us to build communities that embody the values of God's kingdom and to live as children of light in a dark world.

I will conclude in prayer.

God of Hope

you call on us to be your witnesses in this uncertain world;

by your Spirit awaken in us a true vision of your kingdom, a greater certainty of our salvation, and a deeper dedication to your service;

that through our words and actions the same Spirit may bring many who are lost to be found, and for them to celebrate the hope that we can only have in Jesus Christ,

in whose name we pray. Amen!