

Becoming a new creation

Sermon Matthew 18.15-20, Romans 13.8-14

Earlier in the week I was talking to someone about the Anglican church. English wasn't their first language and they referred more than once to the *Angelic* church. If only we were! It's tempting to imagine that the early church really was a bit angelic with all those new Christians, but our readings this morning remind us that this definitely wasn't the case. I find that quite comforting.

I'm starting with our extract from Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome because he was writing about 30 years before Matthew was putting together his gospel. Paul, ever practical when writing to the young churches is clear about the framework for moral behaviour. For many new believers a radical break from old habits seems to have been necessary, and we can see from the list he gives at the end of this extract that some of them had a long way to go – drunkenness, sleeping around ('The Message' translation), quarrelling, jealousy. He gives them the base line from his Jewish faith and spelled out by Christ himself – 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. When considering a course of action they can ask 'Am I loving my neighbour if I do that?' He is also saying, 'Take action on this while you can. Don't wait till next week or next year. Now is the time, you never know how long you've got.'

Now Matthew, writing for more established churches where disputes would sometimes arise. Sounds familiar doesn't it?! Here the wisdom, probably drawn from Jewish legal practice, is that if you have a grievance with someone you start by talking to them first rather than broadcasting it straightaway on Twitter or going to Reading Chronicle. Again, very practical.

Now, we might think, ah, here we have some clear Christian ethical teaching, some rules for behaviour, even, and indeed they do offer helpful guidelines. But Matthew and Paul in dealing with these matters are really highlighting something much more important which is to do with the transformation and subsequent power that results when we turn to Christ and come together as believers; a transformation and a power that they would expect to see evidenced in our behaviour. How can we carry on in the same way as before, Paul is asking. We are clothed in Christ, for goodness sake! Imagine! Matthew says that if as a group of Christians we say yes or no to something it actually happens because God listens to our prayers, even if there's only 2 or 3 of us!

Something radical is going on here. Recently we had a new neighbour move into our street. She and her family moved into a house that had been lived in for over 50 years by the same couple. She invited us all in to see the house. She had, she said, fallen in love with it as soon as she had gone through the front door. Everyone saw it as the previous owners had left it – a large, rather handsome, but faded home, still with its furniture and fittings. I missed this because I was away at the time so I called in last week to say hello and she showed me round. Every room in the house was now in disarray, plaster was being replaced everywhere, there were holes in the walls, an old toilet was sitting outside, and so on. Everything needed doing. Much more than she had anticipated. The beautiful curtains she wanted to hang in the living room had been put away for the time being.

It reminded me of Jesus' sayings about new wine needing to be stored in new wineskins, rather than old ones, or of the futility of sewing a patch of new material on an old

garment requiring mending. A complete refit is necessary. Paul and the gospel writers know this. No half measures when it comes to following Jesus. It's not first of all about good behaviour and following rules (Paul calls this the Law), but about taking into ourselves what Jesus did in dying and then rising from death. Nothing less than being recreated. We are a new creation; in this season of creation let's note that – *you and I are a new creation*. We are actually clothed in Christ. So of course, Paul says, we will love our neighbour, of course, Matthew says we have great power when we say yes or no, as we pray, because Christ is in us and we share that close relationship he had with God the Father.

But we can see from the behaviour of those early believers being addressed by Matthew and Paul that this doesn't happen all at once. We know that in our own lives too. Like our neighbour's house, we won't be a mess one day and then completely sorted and Christ like the next. My neighbour seems to be tackling everything together. Mercifully God treats us more gently, he goes with the grain of who we are, waiting for that movement in us that indicates we are ready for the work he wants to do in us. Quite often we need healing before we can move forward. There was no point in decorating an upstairs room until a leak from a blocked gutter had been fixed, my neighbour said.

Earlier on in his letter (chap 8) Paul connects our movement from our old state of being to that of being fully clothed in Christ (the metaphor he uses in today's extract) with the same movement in creation as a whole. It's not just we who are being recreated because of what Christ has done, but the whole of creation. Paul is here drawing on the picture of creation set out in Genesis where human beings, though the summit of God's creation, are nevertheless part of a dynamic thread running through it, a thread that includes the birds, the fish, the mammals, the insects, the plants – every living thing. All harmoniously woven together as pictured in the garden of Eden. Then our ancestors broke that thread. They wanted to do their own thing. Creation was fractured. There was a distance between humanity and creation, a distance that has increased exponentially as we have become more and more industrialised and urbanised and less aware of our dependence on the earth.

Well, Paul's good news as he spells out earlier in his letter (chap 8), is that when humanity is recreated, so is the earth, but like humanity, not all at once. We're all in the process of becoming. (Read Romans 8.21-23 '...creation itself will be set free from its bondage to sin and decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God').

In response to Jesus' naming the 2 great commandments as being to love God and to love your neighbour as yourself, a lawyer asks 'Who is my neighbour?' and Jesus tells the story of the good Samaritan. I sometimes think that in our context the man who was robbed and left bleeding and seriously wounded by the roadside whilst people passed by is like our earth at present. It needs neighbours who love it and tend its wounds.

Matthew's good news is that we have the power and authority even, to seek, ask and pray for re-creation, that new creation, in ourselves, in others, and also, for our neighbour the earth during this time of climate crisis.

Love your neighbour as yourself, Paul exhorts his Roman brothers and sisters, and do it now while there is still time!