

## Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> October – Colossians 3:12-14 ‘Homemade RELATIONSHIPS’

Some years ago I arranged to meet a friend for coffee before work. We both passed through the same train station each morning, so we planned to meet at the station cafe. I got there just after 8am and stood and waited by the entrance. My friend was a no-show. After about 5 minutes I started to look round the concourse, and eventually found my friend. He was kneeling next to a homeless man, talking with him and arranging to buy him some food.

We did go and have our coffee, but I was profoundly struck by this encounter. We were both Christians and often met to discuss faith and how to grow in Christlikeness. But where I'd slipped into the habit of mostly *talking* about it, my friend was *doing* it. I was thinking about my own hunger and thirst, my friend was thinking about someone else's. I stood around and waited, my friend abandoned his position, as it were, and knelt beside someone on the floor.

**What does compassion look like to you?** That was the image that came powerfully to my mind, but will be other experiences for you. And in today's passage, St Paul uses the lovely image of clothing as a way of describing the virtues that we all aspire to have. Perhaps this year, when we use a phrase like 'compassionate clothing', we might think of a key worker in apron, mask and visor risking their own health to treat or nurse a victim of COVID. That is literally compassionate clothing. But before we get into the detail of the passage, let's take a step back to understand the image a little further.

To do that, you have to go back to a similar passage in the book of Ephesians. In that letter, Paul reminds his readers that when we become Christians we become new people. The inner person changes – Paul also refers to it earlier in Colossians chapter 3 when he talks of the old self having died and our new life being united with Jesus.

So we are new people, new creations, with new life – but we're still wearing the old clothes of our old way of life. Some of those clothes are not fit for purpose anymore. So the task of our spiritual lives is to replace these dirty old clothes with new ones – and these are the clothes Paul talks about in this lovely passage.

So what are our new clothes? Well he starts with **compassion** – which literally means 'to suffer with'. Compassion is that empathy for another person and for their situation. But the heart of what I want to get across today is that these kinds of virtues are not just for extreme situations, or crises, but for our everyday lives, especially our lives at home. We need daily compassion at home and with our families just as much, probably more, than the occasional crises we might encounter.

As I often say to a wedding couple, when you've had a bad day at work, compassion sits and listens and lets you down. Compassion cares when one of your partner's family is ill. Compassion gives you a break from the chores when you really need it. This is daily compassion.

And then there's **kindness**. All those little acts of service for each other. Washing up, changing the lightbulb, making a packed lunch, dropping off shopping to someone who is shielding – the boring stuff of family life, but the stuff that makes someone else's day just that little bit better.

And **humility**. Giving up the right always to be right! That's harder than it sounds, isn't it?

That in turn needs **gentleness** and **patience**. All those little things that wind you up. Alise will tell you that if I'm absorbed in something I'm a terrible listener – she'll ask me to do something before she nips out and 3 seconds later it's gone out of my head completely while I'm hard at work tapping some great thought into the computer. You need a lot of patience in a family!

No surprise then that the next two are **forbearance** and **forgiveness**. Those 2 go together I think. Putting up with the stuff that winds you up, and then being able to forgive when you fall out. The two most important words in family life are 'sorry' and 'thank you'. But almost as important is being able to accept a sorry from someone and let it go. Forgiveness – not holding onto grudges.

As the weather turns colder, we're all getting used to putting on extra layers at the moment. So maybe it's easier to imagine us wearing all of these items than it was a few weeks ago and it was hot and sunny. But there is one more item of clothing which I like to see as the big overcoat that covers the rest of them – Paul says it like this: 'Over all these virtues put on **love**, which binds them all together in perfect unity.'

**Love is what makes sense of all the rest of these virtues.** And it's always worth remembering that early Christians invented a new word for love, which is the one used here – *agape*. It means selfless service. It was inspired by what Jesus did for us, and no word existed at the time which made that clear. So the early followers of Jesus created this word to reflect a new understanding of love. Jesus showed how much he loved us by giving himself for us – so now, like Jesus, we give ourselves for others.

Love is not ultimately a feeling word, but a doing word. As the text says, 'forgive as the Lord forgave you.' We have a perfect example to copy. We're usually less than perfect in copying it, but that is what we aspire to, and what we ask for God's help to do by the Spirit.

So as we try and practise this homemade faith, let's resolve again to wear these clothes, day in, day out. Compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and forgiveness – which are all reflections of the greatest virtue of all: love.

And may God keep inspiring us day-by-day with gifts of His love, that we might pass that love onto others, wherever we are, for His glory. Amen.

*Response: Breathe on me breath of God – that we might love as God loves....*