

Colossians 3:12-17 Growing in Christ.

Good morning! and well done for being in church on Sunday morning so soon after Christmas!

The first Sunday after Christmas is an important Sunday for us to meet together as a church. As we anticipate a new year, many of us look to ways that we can improve on the year that has gone before. We look for a fresh start, the opportunity to have another go at things we may not have done so well in the year just gone.

Taking stock of one's life is always a positive thing to do. Looking for ways to improve our lives and the lives of those we touch is also a godly thing to do.

Our readings this morning are therefore very pertinent for us at this time of year.

Two of the readings share a very similar phrase. One refers to Samuel the prophet as a young boy, and the other refers to Jesus as a young boy. "Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and with the people." and "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man."

The phrases are slightly different, but essentially saying the same thing. As both these young servants of the Lord grew in years, they also grew in wisdom, and in favour with God and with people.

They were growing up physically, and growing up spiritually.

Now here's the thing. The growth they experienced was not just personal growth. It was growth that involved other people. It involved how they related to and were received by their respective communities. "They grew in favour with God and people".

In our own spiritual growth, we need to be careful not to adopt the individualistic bent of our culture, which frames everything in terms of "me". When we commit our lives to Jesus, we become part of the family of God; the Body of Christ; the Communion of Saints. We're grafted into that community and we become part of it, just as a grafted branch becomes part of a plant. We do not exist apart from it.

If we have responded to Jesus and follow him, everything about our growth not only concerns the personal relationship we have with God, but also the relationships we have with fellow believers.

It isn't easy though, is it? We are so used to seeing everything from our own perspective first; seeing everything in relation to ourselves personally, before it concerns anyone else. Our self-centred frame of reference is something we Christians continually wrestle with, and it's something we constantly need to work on.

My brother is staying with us at present. It's always good to see him, though we only seem to manage it once a year. He likes to cook. Which is great, because I don't. Over the chopping boards and veggie peels, we manage to chat about all sorts of things. One of the things he's told me is that he is in the process of creating a bonzai frangipani tree. Though I ultimately feel sorry for the Frangipani tree, any bonzai plant is a work of art.

Do you know how it's done? Apparently you keep the wild growth of the root ball clipped frequently, re-potting it in the same sized pot, so that growth is slow and constant. Then you are able to train the plant to grow in the way you want it to, winding wire around its branches to create a beautiful and artistic form. My brother says it's called the "slowest sculpture in the world."

So creating a beautifully shaped plant that is a work of art involves discipline and training as the plant grows. There's a metaphor for our spiritual growth in there somewhere...

As we stand on the cusp of a new year, let's take a look at the Colossians reading, and see if it speaks to any disciplining or pruning that needs to happen in our own lives.

Knowing something of the background to the letter is helpful. One of Paul's missionary team - a guy called Epaphras - had taken the Christian message to the town of Colossae, and a new church had begun.

The church grew in maturity and was doing well, until it began to be infiltrated by people who taught things that were a little off kilter. Some of the Colossian believers were being led astray, and their focus was being drawn away from Jesus. The false teaching centred around worshipping angels and having mystical experiences, diverting people from their core beliefs. It was the New Age movement of the first century!

Paul wrote to them to encourage them to get their eyes back on what was central, and to focus on living a life that was pleasing to God.

Do you know how a piano tuner works? On a piano, each note has three strings. They are all tuned to the same wavelength. When a piano begins to sound out of tune, or 'honky tonk', it's because one or more of the strings has lost pitch and the wavelengths are out of sync. The sound then grates rather than being pleasing. So the piano tuner tackles each note in turn and brings each set of three strings back to the true wavelength for that note.

The Colossian Christians, in listening to these false teachers, had become like a piano that was out of tune. Some of them had begun to believe things that were not quite true to the Gospel message. Some of them had begun to act in ways that were no longer true to their faith. We use that same term in music – a note can be described as being 'true' or not 'true'.

In this short passage, Paul raises a number of points which the Colossian Christians needed to address to bring their faith back into tune. They are also good things for us to consider if we would like our own faith, and life together as a Christian community to be in tune.

Interestingly, the imperatives that come from Paul's letter centre around our life TOGETHER as Christians, rather than our own individual walk with God. They all refer to how we relate to ONE ANOTHER.

Listen:

1. Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Those words all refer to how we relate to other people. And note that Paul says "clothe yourselves". That's interesting! Clothing is something we intentionally put on our bodies to adorn them. We choose which clothes to wear and how we wear them. In the same way, we can CHOOSE to behave as Paul instructs – or not. Choosing to be compassionate, kind, humble, gentle and patient is saying 'no' to the temptation of being self centred.

Where can we choose to act with more kindness, gentleness & patience as we move into the coming year?

Then Paul says:

2. Bear with & forgive one another

This verse suggests is that people need bearing with and people need forgiving! No one is perfect. Even other members of our church (or family) can get under our skin. But we're to forgive. Forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling. It is a pro-active thing we do. Often people in close communities – or families – can become passive when they're hurt. That means, if someone has hurt us, we simply avoid them. Then we don't have to forgive them. But Paul says forgive one another. We're not to sweep pain or conflict under the carpet. We're to address it. We're to actively forgive.

Who do we need to forgive as we move into the new year?

Then Paul says this:

3. Over all these virtues, put on love, which binds all things together in perfect unity

Love encompasses everything he has just said. If we act in love towards others – displaying the same love God showed us – then all he has said will happen naturally.

How can we actively show love for members of our church family as we move into the new year?

So far, Paul has been talking about things we should do. Now he focuses on what we should be. This is the more passive side of our growth

Paul uses the word let.

4. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts
5. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly

Paul reminds the Colossian Christians – and us – that Christ already lives within us. All we need to live the life he has called us to is already there, within us. We simply have to be conscious of that, and let, or allow these things to come forth.

If we are to let something happen, we need to be aware of it. If I'm to let someone into my house, I need to be aware that they are there at the door, waiting.

In the same way, to let Christ's peace rule in our hearts; to let Christ's word dwell in us, we simply need to be aware they are there, perhaps remind ourselves they are there - and give way.

How can we be more aware of the presence of Christ within us as we move into the new year?

Finally, in this passage, Paul says

6. do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him

There have been times in my life when I've listened to a sermon, or read a book, and point after point has struck home – and I've found myself thinking "How am I supposed to do all that, or be like that?"

Paul's closing comments in this passage are helpful:

"Do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the Father" Paul is saying simply keep your focus on Jesus – do everything in his name. That means doing things on Jesus' behalf. Do things, aware that Jesus is in our skin, in our minds, on our lips - Jesus is touching the world through us. As long as remain aware of that, and respond to his prompting – we will be fulfilling all Paul has said. In fact, we'll be fulfilling the commandments of Jesus that are the Christian's plumbline - loving God, and loving others.

How can we touch someone for Jesus as we move into the new year?

And finally, whatever we do – we should be thankful. If someone hands you a gift, and you're delighted with it, in order to thank the person who gave it to you, you need to pay attention to them. As we give thanks to God, it draws our focus to him. It helps us sense his presence; it helps us look into his eyes, as it were; it draws us closer to him.

As we contemplate the year ahead, may our resolutions for the coming year put God first in all things.

Let's pray.