

SERMON AT HOLY COMMUNION AT 8.00 AM AT ST JAMES' CHURCH, YARMOUTH AND AT 11.00 AM AT CHRIST CHURCH, TOTLAND BAY (CW) ON SUNDAY 19TH AUGUST 2018 (12TH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY) BY JAMES COOK

Readings: Ephesians 5.15-20 and John 6.51-58

Title: 'More to Learn'

Aim: To encourage us to continue to learn from the Bible how we may be better disciples of Jesus.

Central to the Christian faith are the twin features of love for God and love for others. We are reminded of those two special features of our faith each time we hear our Lord's summary of the Law:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”¹

With regard to both loving God and loving our neighbour, we have Jesus, God's Son, to help us translate those guiding principles into intimate relationships.

¹ Matthew 22.37-40a.

In our Common Worship Lectionary readings over recent weeks, we have been directed to think more deeply about our loving relationship with God and our neighbours from two perspectives:

1. the perspective of receiving Jesus as the Bread of Life, described in the Gospel of John, and
2. the perspective of how we treat our fellow church members, described in the Epistle to the Ephesians.

Although we are due, next Sunday, to have readings that follow immediately from this week's Gospel and Epistle readings, today is the last Sunday, for the time being, when the Epistle focuses on relationships with our fellow church members.

Let's see what the writer to the Ephesians has to say to us today about how we behave within the church. This is a vital issue, which seriously affects our relationship with God and with those outside the Church when we get it wrong. The world at large, the world that God created, judges us not so much by our Christian theology as by how we treat each other. The world notices when we treat each other well, but it notices especially when we treat each other badly. Having observed how we treat each other, the outsider decides either to join us or to give us a wide berth.

Today, Paul begins by telling us to be careful how we live. Are you careful? Am I careful? Do we sometimes say, “I couldn’t care less what other people think,” when for the sake of God’s kingdom we ought to care? Far worse, do we sometimes cover up or ignore bad behaviour around us that should be dealt with and, in serious cases reported to a higher or independent authority? This is a question that especially challenges the Church at present, as numerous cases of serious abuse come to light.

Paul goes on to tell us not to be foolish. How often do we kid ourselves about an issue? Sometimes we need a friend or even an outsider to say, “Come on, don’t be naïve,” or “don’t be stupid.” I suggest that on occasions Christians would do well to say to each other: “Get real!”

Paul has a piece of specific advice to give us where alcohol or strong drink is concerned. “Do not get drunk,” he says. Over the years, many fine Christians have chosen to abstain totally from alcohol in order to avoid the risk to which Paul alludes. Anglicans generally are not as strict as are, or used to be, some of our free-church brothers and sisters; but let’s not be complacent. We all know that too much alcohol impairs our judgement, to the extent that we are not fit to be in charge of a motor vehicle or indeed of an organisation or family. For some, alcohol proves seriously addictive and for their own sakes has to be avoided at all costs.

Last week's reading from Ephesians, when Paul castigated church members for their sometimes poor working relationships, ended on a positive note when he wrote,

“...and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”²

Today, Paul rounds up his stern words about behaving properly with more uplifting words to encourage us:

“...but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts...”³

We are privileged in this area [/church] to have fine church organs [a fine organ], [a] gifted and motivated choir[s] and a good range of hymns and spiritual songs to sing. Psalms are not often sung in some churches, but they could be; and there are many styles of Christian music yet to explore. Let's be open always to new musical possibilities that will raise our spirits and gladden the heart of God our maker and redeemer.

Although all our local churches sing, and sing often, our practices vary in the degree to which our liturgy – set

² Ephesians 4.32.

³ Ephesians 5.18b-19.

prayers – is sung. We want our music to be both honouring to God and accessible to our congregations. The music needs to enhance the words, and not obscure them. Someone else’s musical and liturgical tastes may be very different from our own and so we need to exercise patience when, for example, a service of Evening Prayer or Holy Communion is sung when we prefer it to be said, or vice versa.

The Gospel reading for today, as in recent weeks, underlies much of our understanding of the significance of Holy Communion. This sacrament has been ordained by God through Jesus Christ and so we call it ‘Holy’. It contains rich symbolism as well as fine words. It is a fellowship meal – Communion – and a thanksgiving meal – Eucharist. It provides a memorial of what is past and a vision of what is yet to come. Through his death on the cross, which this meal signifies, Jesus becomes ‘the living bread that came down from heaven’. He promises that ‘whoever eats of this bread will live for ever’.⁴

The pride of some who listen to Jesus will not allow them to accept the gift of eternal life and the promise of resurrection on the last day. Will we swallow our pride and receive the spiritual food of the flesh and blood of Jesus? I pray we shall. Amen.

⁴ John 6.51.