

COLOSSIANS 3:1-14  
BE WHAT YOU ARE!

A group of people is standing beside the water, waiting for something to happen. They take off their outer garments and leave them in a heap at their feet. They are given a white tunic to wear and one by one they go down into the water and the leader of their church immerses them in the water; they go under the water to come back up again. Out of the water they come and are given a new set of clothes to wear, a new outer garment that will replace the old one; the old one is thrown away. This is a group of new Christians, maybe even around the town of Colossae and they are being baptised; they are publicly professing their new Christian faith and that public profession is allied with the symbolic act of baptism that admits them into the community of faith that is the Church. The new clothes are also symbolic – here are people with new faith who will live a new kind of life, with new values and new standards; and this new life is symbolised by a new wardrobe!

You don't need to read very much in the papers this week to discover just how important Christian behaviour is. It is important on so many levels: we see the public reaction to all of these headlines and some are chased away from the Christian faith and the gospel by what they see as hypocrisy; it is important because the challenge we face is to be consistent, that our life should match our profession of faith; it is important, most of all, because Jesus should be the centre of life. For the Christian, we live with this tension: we know what we should be, and how we should live, but we are not perfect and we make mistakes, we still get things wrongs and part of us pulls in the opposite direction. The marvel is that God is at work in us and even more amazingly is at work through us, that by our imperfect lives, people are still drawn to Jesus; by our imperfect Church people are still drawn to Jesus. This is not an excuse for loose living, but the grace of God is indeed amazing.

“Be what you are”. The New International Version heading for this passage is not the best – “Rules for Holy Living” is not the best heading for these verses. The Message version has: “He is your life” which is better. There are really no rules here, but there is one big theme: “Be what you are” i.e. be people with Jesus at the centre! We have already seen in Colossians that Jesus is the centre of everything: He is the centre of the universe and all creation, since everything was made by Him and for Him; He is the centre of the Church, its king and Head, the One who gives the Church life and direction; He is the centre of salvation, because God's plan to save the world is fulfilled in Jesus and we are complete in Him. We are people with Jesus at the centre. Now, here in chapter 3 is what that means in practice, in day-to-day, practical living; here is what it looks like to be people with Jesus at the centre. There is this daily tension – we are pulled in two directions: the Spirit pulls us to be more like Jesus; our natural instincts pull us in the opposite direction.

First of all there is a little reminder of who we are. *“For you...” (Colossians 3:3f)* Christians are new people with Jesus as Lord of our lives. This Jesus is the One who is raised from the dead and glorified. This is Jesus seated at the right hand of God in heaven. Jesus is the complete embodiment of God in human flesh; Jesus is the crucified Saviour who died for us; and now Jesus is raised, glorified, and returned to God in glory. As people who believe in Jesus we have also died and been raised: we have died to our old life, to our sins and faults; now we are raised to a new kind of life, a life of faith, a life with the Spirit, a life looking to obey Jesus and become like Him. We are raised, filled with the Spirit and with the power of Jesus. We have the hope that when Jesus appears again on earth, we shall be changed and share in His glory. This is who we are: people

who belong to Jesus and who share in His glory and we are this new people because of Jesus; He is our life. This is who we are, a people who belong to Jesus.

“Be what you are”: Jesus is our life in theory, the centre of our faith and the centre of the Church; now live that way! Day-to-day life is to be lived with Jesus at the centre; the kind of people that we are should match our profession of faith. The Bible doesn’t expect us to be perfect people; Jesus’ words in Matthew 5 are the ideal to which we should aspire, but it is realistic enough to know what we are like. So the challenge is always to be consistent people, people who are genuinely trying to become more and more like Jesus. Paul has a wardrobe in his mind. one wardrobe that is to be put off and left behind, thrown away, like the old clothes of our people being baptised; the second wardrobe is of clothes to be put on in their place. Except here we’re not talking suits, dresses and shoes; here we’re talking behaviour and qualities. It is easy to change shoes: the Pope’s changing his red shoes for new brown loafers. It is much harder to change the ways in which we behave; it is much harder but much more valuable!

“Put to...” (*Colossians 3:5*) The language is mixed: at some points this is an instruction, “to put off”; at other points Paul seems to suggest that we’ve already put these things off. In fact both are true: in theory we have already put off these worldly attitudes when we come to faith in Jesus, life is already changed. In practice, we still need to put these things off every day because they are still there. There are two main groups of attitudes to deal with, attitudes to sex and speech. We are a society obsessed with sex: look at the newspaper headlines; sales of erotic books have risen markedly with the advent of Kindle and other e-readers because people don’t know what you’re reading, you won’t be embarrassed! That has to get inside your head! This is nothing new: Roman society, by the time the empire was coming to an end was either the most sexually liberated society or the most debauched and immoral society of its time, depending on your point of view; some will say that was its downfall; we are condemned to repeat the mistakes of past if we’ve forgotten them!

Words are hugely powerful things. There was a fascinating piece by Tom English in *The Scotsman* this week about Rory McIlroy: he walked off the course during a round and golfers just don’t do that; next day he said he had toothache, which everyone knows was a lie. Tom English suggested that golf is far more comfortable with the lie than with the truth, that McIlroy was just fed up because he was splaying badly! Truth and lies? You know the playground rhyme: “Sticks and stones will break my bones but names/words will never hurt me!” Don’t believe it! I come across more people who are hurt by words than almost anything else. Children are bullied at school, often by words; adults are scarred for life by parents who’ve told them repeatedly they’re useless; people have walked away from church for ever because of something that has been said and they’ve taken offence and once they’re out, we can almost never get them back! So, says Paul, slander, bad language, lies and the rest should have no place in the mouth of the Christian; these are to be put off in same way as sexual immorality, lust and greed. Put them off; leave them in a heap at the side of the road and walk away! Here is a wardrobe to put off.

In case you think the Bible is only telling us what we can’t do, there is another wardrobe, a set of qualities and characteristics that we are to put on in place of these old clothes that we are putting off. “Dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you.” (*The Message*) Here is a set of clothes that make us look like Jesus, qualities that are to be put on day after day. We take a look at them and they seem beyond us, almost an impossible standard to set for us, but this is what it means to live with Jesus as the centre of our life. There are seven qualities here and perhaps the seventh sums them all up: love. Love is

the belt, the undergarment that holds all of the other qualities together. But love can be a bit hard to define and describe, so Paul leaves us in no doubt by the other six: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness. Anyone who has lived on this planet for five minutes will know how hard this menu is; how hard it is to be compassionate and kind, how hard it is to be humble and gentle, patient and forgiving and how easy it is for us to slip back into the malice, slander and lies of the old ways. Jesus told a parable about a wedding: there are two empty seats when you go in; which one do you take? Do you take the one at the top table and run the risk of being relegated? Or do you take the one at the bottom and enjoy being promoted? *“Take the...” (Luke 14:10f)* That’s the spirit that has to drive the Christian.

*“Set your minds.” (Colossians 3:2)* This is the key to the whole passage. When I was first in Cambodia, I met a Christian project worker who described what he was trying to do in the village we visited: he was “helping people to think better.” Some people will suggest that to believe as a Christian you need to shelve your mind, but actually the most important thing we learn to do is to think properly. When we get the thinking right the behaviour will follow; have the right attitudes in our minds and hearts and then we will say and do right things. Learning to think in the right way is key; setting our minds on Jesus and what He wants is the place to start; understanding the truth about who we are and what God has done, then we will understand how to live and behave. The key to getting this right is the way we think and our mind and heart are shaped by Jesus through what we read in the Bible and what we hear in Church; pay attention to these and the Spirit will shape our minds in a Jesus-centred way.

Here’s a thinking exercise that we can all do and will do us good. Tom Wright, former bishop of Durham in his little book on Colossians say: “it’s worth taking a moment to think about each word here, asking yourself what sort of actions and words will make each one come true in your life, in the life of your church, in the life of your village or (community). Think about them: compassionate, kind, humble, gentle, patient, forgiving, loving.” These seven words are big words, ideal words, words that when we meet them we say “yes” to them because we know that’s what we should be. But here’s the exercise – What sort of action or words will make compassion part of our lives, or kindness, or humility? Take all seven of them and ask what you can do or say that will make these ideals become reality in the way you live, or in church life, or in community life. Think about it, pray about it, ask God to help us with it.

Jesus is our life. Jesus - raised, gloried, seated at God’s right hand – He is our life. We are already raised with Him to a new kind of life; we hope to share His glory. “Be what you are!” we are new people in theory; be new people day-to-day. The new Christians put off their old clothes as they went down to baptism and put on their new clothes on the other side, symbolic of their new life. Change your wardrobe: put off all the old ways, kill them off and leave them for dead at the side of the road, walk away and leave them. This is something we all have to do; there are no exceptions, no excuses, and this is not just for preachers and cardinals, but for every Christian! Put on ways that speak of Jesus: be compassionate people, people who feel one another’s pain; be kind, humble, gentle, patient, forgiving, loving. We know what these words mean; we know what these qualities look like; we already have them in some measure; put them on again today; think about what you need to do or say to have more compassion, more kindness, more humility, more love!.