

COLOSSIANS 3:15-4:1
CHRIST-CENTRED RELATIONSHIPS

What four words sum up the world we live in? There could be all sorts of answers to that, but the four words I'm thinking about have changed the way we relate to one another completely; they have brought conflict and suspicion into all kinds of relationships; some people have asserted themselves, others have been cowed into submission. They are a symptom of the 'me-centred' culture that is so much part of our Western European world. People who once were active in community organisations have been cheesed off and have given up. It is too much to say that all of that is down to these four words, but it is not far short of it. They began as a fine attempt to bring freedom to those who were down-trodden, but it has become a bit of a mantra that controls and directs so many relationships in our communities. What are these four words? "I know my rights!" These words have made some people assertive and have produced in some an attitude of conflict.

We are all part of lots of different communities. The basic kind of community is the family unit, though the way in which the family unit is made up is constantly changing. We are also part of communities at work, with the people that we meet there, either face-to-face or now increasingly in remote conversations by e-mail, skype etc. We meet communities of people in our leisure time, at the Bowling Club, the Golf Club, the WRI; or we meet others as leaders of youth organisations or in the community council, or running the village hall. The most obvious community might be the people who live in the same street, but there are times we never see the people who live next door, so perhaps that sense of community is diminished. There are also on-line communities now, people we meet on Facebook, or talk to on Twitter, people we call friends and we may only have seen their photo! The Church is a community of faith, people who believe something the same.

All of these communities need people to behave well. Every one of these communities will fall apart if everyone behaves by the mantra "I know my rights" and is centred only on 'me'. The on-line community is one of the most unpleasant places to be at times; when I started my blog, and left it open to comments, I got some very aggressive, virulent, almost abusive comments under the cloak of anonymity. Young people on Facebook have had their pages attacked by so-called 'friends', as people are much more willing to be aggressive at a distance than face-to-face. Every community of people depends on good behaviour; the community sense is broken when that behaviour breaks down and it is harder and harder to build and maintain any sense of community when everyone is out only to get their own way.

Colossians 3, the second part, is all about Christ-centred community and Christ-centred relationships. The whole of Colossians is about Christ being at the centre. It is the main theme of the whole letter that Paul wrote to this small town Church in Turkey. There are some big themes at the start: Jesus is the centre of creation and the universe – everything was made by Him and for Him and He stands at the centre. He is the Head and King of the Church and stands at the centre of Church life. He came to save the world, completing God's plan – He stands at the centre of the salvation and the faith we have as Christians. Jesus is at the centre of everything. Then comes the challenge: Christians are to live with Jesus at the centre; last week we saw that life with Jesus at the centre looks like people who are compassionate, kind, humble, gentle, patient, and loving; we need to think about and work out what actions we need to take to have these qualities more and more!

Then Paul writes about communities and what communities centred on Jesus look like. It is hugely important that we allow the Bible to shape these communities. There is something here about the Church, about marriage and family life, about our work relationships; every community of which we are a member can be included in all of this and there are so many forces at work in shaping these communities and how we behave in them; for Christians the primary force in shaping our attitudes and behaviour should be what Jesus wants and what the Bible says. It was said of the early Christians “See how these Christians love one another” and that was such a draw for people to come to Jesus through the gospel; their shared life, their shared possessions, they cared for one another. There was some statistic that I saw recently that told us how many single-person households there are in UK and what more there will be in near future, with frightening implications for the breakdown of any sense of community; can the church be the place where people find that sense of love and belonging?

Church: “*Let the...*” (*Colossians 3:15*) Referees haven’t had a good press of late, especially rugby or football; they seem to make mistakes. Peace is the referee, the umpire in Church relationships. The Bible often uses the sense of the Church as the body of Christ and of Christians as members of one body, bringing with that picture an idea of unity and belonging together. That unity and belonging is to be characterised by peace and harmony in the Church of which Jesus is head. This is not automatic nor to be assumed; we know only too well the experiences of Church where peace has been notable by its absence because relationships have been acrimonious and church has been divided. Church with Jesus at the centre will see us accept one another with grace, with love and care for one another, will see us treat one another with respect as a brother or sister in Christ, a fellow-member of His body, children together of our Father. “*Let the...*” (3:15)

Marriage: “*Wives...*” (*Colossians 3:18f*) In the passing, here is the God-given pattern for marriage – husband and wife. There are perhaps no verses of the Bible so easily misunderstood than these. The key to marriage with Jesus at the centre is mutual responsibility. The expanded version in Ephesians 5 makes it more clear: husbands and wives have a responsibility towards each other, to love each other and to submit to one another. The person who takes these words “*Wives...*” (3:18) as an excuse to exercise any kind of rights over their wife is seriously misunderstanding the text; there is no excuse here for husbands to force their wives into anything; “*husbands...*” (3:19) – the attitude described is modelled on Jesus and the attitudes we see in Him and on His love for the Church that led Him to sacrifice Himself for the sake of others. Wives and husbands have a mutual responsibility towards each other. These are revolutionary words; we miss it, but in the culture of its time these are revolutionary words. Wives were nothing more than goods and chattels to be disposed of as the husband saw fit; he had all the rights, she had all the responsibilities. Here the Bible is driving a coach and horses through all of that; husbands have responsibilities too! This is totally new; it had never been heard before; these words brought a culture into the world, with the Church as the model of these new values, values with Jesus at the centre.

Family: “*Children...*” (*Colossians 3:20f*) We can say the same about this notion of family life. In first century Roman society, fathers had rights over their children and children had none. Fathers literally had the power of life and death over their children – the new-born child was laid at the father’s feet for him to accept or reject and girls were more likely to be rejected than boys. The Bible says that fathers have responsibilities too! Again, this is revolutionary! Everyone knew that children had a responsibility to obey and there is still something unsettling about children who blatantly disregard and disobey their parents. But now fathers have a responsibility for the welfare of their children and this was totally

new; again the culture is changed by the Bible. Parents and children have mutual responsibilities in family life; there are lots of issues in our society raised by this simple picture: who teaches parenting skills to new parents? How do children learn a sense of responsibility? Can Christian family life be a model for our culture?

Work: “*Slaves...*” (*Colossians 3:22; 4:1*) this is the nearest we come to the work-relationship. Slaves did much of the work in Paul’s culture, but they were bought and sold often at the owner’s whim. They had no rights and had simply to do what they were told. Here is a higher ideal than that: the attitude to work with Jesus at the centre is service to Jesus, an approach to work that is whole-hearted and genuine. There is a famous slave who was now Christian, a man called Onesimus, who belonged to Philemon who lived in Colossae and there is a whole letter given to their relationship; Onesimus is coming back to Colossae with this letter and Philemon is encouraged to treat him as a brother in Christ. Masters have a responsibility to treat their slaves well, even with respect, to be just and fair! How do we take Jesus into the workplace? Is our work service to Jesus? Do we have sense of responsibility for the others with whom we work, or who work for us?

Responsibility is the Bible’s word about relationships. It doesn’t mention our rights! The focus is clearly on our responsibilities towards one another and other people. There is a powerful little story from the experience of David; the national community is at stake here and Saul threatening David’s life; he sees David as a danger to the throne; Saul breathes out murderous words and goes off in search of David who has run away and is in hiding. David and his friends are hiding in a cave and Saul comes to the very same cave to ‘relieve himself’ (NIV) David’s friends see this as the God-given opportunity for their young leader to be free of this hatred once and for all; he should kill the king! “*David...*” (*1 Sam 24:4*) Even by cutting the corner of Saul’s robe, David was troubled by what he had done; he let the king know that he could have killed him but didn’t want to. He respected the king, the Lord’s anointed. He did not react like for like, hatred for hatred; he would not give in to the urging of his friends; but he showed love, respect, peace, kindness, compassion to Saul; even cutting off his robe left him troubled.

Where do we spend most of our time this week? In these communities! With family: as a husband, wife, parent, grandparent, or some other family member; at work with others, the with whom we work or who work for us; in some kind of leisure where other people are involved; in a church-based activity, again usually with other people. How do we take Jesus into these relationships? What does it mean for us to approach these communities with Jesus at the centre? “I know my rights” – “I know how I want people to treat me; I know what I’m entitled to; I know what I deserve to have from you”. Is that our approach? Or do we approach these communities with a sense of responsibility? “I will treat you with love and respect in Church because we are members together of the body of Christ. In any community I will treat you with love and care. I will listen to your opinion and respect it. I will give you what you need. I will help you and treat your needs with compassion”. Is that our favoured approach?

Alive and Active is the excellent little magazine of the Scottish Bible Society; the latest issue is just out, and it is all about community. Elaine Duncan, the Chief Exec writes: “Community is very important to all of us, giving us a sense of our place in world and addressing our deep need for significant relationships. God Himself expresses community within the mystery of the Trinity. The Bible presents us with values that help us to build strong relationships and therefore strong communities”. These are the issues we have been exploring this morning; take them to heart!