

Ephesians 4.1-16

Equipped

Amington Parish Church

Sunday 8 March 2020

The Truth

¶ One evening after work John drove his boss home after she was unable to start her car. Not wanting to upset his wife Maureen, he decided not to mention it to her.

Later that night John and Maureen were driving out to eat when John spotted a high-heeled shoe hidden under the passenger seat. Pointing to something out of the passenger window to distract his wife, he picked up the shoe and tossed it out of his window.

They arrived at the restaurant a short time later and were about to get out of the car when Maureen enquired, 'John, have you seen my other shoe?'

§ Ephesians 4.1 marks a shift in Paul's letter. In chapters 1-3 he gives a glorious summary of the truth of what God promises, has done, and will do for his people. We read of every spiritual blessing being lavished upon us in Jesus; we read of how God chose his people in Jesus before the foundation of the world; we read of the gift of the Holy Spirit, the guarantee and seal of God's promises; we read of how even when we were dead, God made us alive in Jesus; we read of the new family God is creating in Jesus; we read of how we may approach God himself because of what Jesus has done for us –

Paul writes of all these truths, then ends with a glorious 'Amen' (or 'so be it') – and then I imagine him pausing and saying to himself – 'so what?' All this is the truth... but *so what?* You see, we humans have a curious relationship to the truth.

Sometimes, when something is true, we act upon it. For example, it is true that driving at 150mph down the M42 at 5pm on a Friday is both illegal and highly dangerous, so we don't do it.

But a lot of the time, I'm not so sure we do act on the truth. We all know the truth that eating healthily, and getting regular exercise – raising our heartbeat for at least two and a half hours a week – is really good for us. But how many of us actually do it?

Paul knew that Christians often fall in that second camp: we know the truth, but does it actually impact our lives?

That is why he shifts in chapter 4, from the truth of what God has done for us, to how we *must* – yes **must** – respond. He **urges** his readers (1), he pleads with them, he *begs* them to respond.

For the truth is... if what Paul says in chapters 1-3 *is* true, things simply cannot stay the same.

One (v2-6)

First then ¶ Paul launches into a U2 song. Look with me at what he says there is **one** of (4):

- ¶ one **body** (4)
- ¶ one **Spirit** (4)
- ¶ one **hope** (4)
- ¶ one **Lord** (5)
- ¶ one **faith** (5)
- ¶ one **baptism** (5)
- ¶ one **God and Father** (6)

This is where Paul starts – what brings us together. This is the foundation, the bedrock; this is an Upper Story truth.

But it doesn't always look like that in the Lower Story – which is why Paul says in v3:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4.3 (NIV)

§ **Make every effort** – in other words, this is difficult. Otherwise Paul would be able to say, 'try a little and see how it goes'.

No! He says **make every effort**.

Why? Because it is hard, and because, united though we are, we are all still different. There are still things that are trying to pull us apart. There are people in our church family we don't get on with, people we don't like, people we can barely be in the same room as – bad luck if, for you, that's me.

Being united is not easy, so Paul says **make every effort**.

I suppose the obvious question is, do you?

Do you? I know some do, but most of us are content to 'try a little and see how it goes'. One small example: after services, at church socials – do you sit with and talk to the people you know, or do you **make every effort** to get to know the *whole* family?

Being a Christian is like being an athlete – which is why Paul uses that example elsewhere. We may or may not have the Olympics this year, depending on the spread of COVID-19, but all those athletes hoping to compete in the games – do you think their attitude is, ‘try a little and see how it goes’?

No! They **make every effort**. They change their diet. They change their daily routine. They change the way they think. They make sacrifices and work as hard as they possibly can – why? Because the truth is unless they do that, they won’t win the prize of being an Olympic Athlete.

Gifts (7-13)

The year Jess and I got married, I bought my (then future) mother-in-law a special book for her birthday: *How to be a Good Mother-in-Law*, first published in the 1930s.

It contains such sage advice as, ‘If your opinion is not sought, don't volunteer it.’ ‘How not to pass comment at the dinner table.’ ‘Do not march into the drawing-room and, having inspected it, say, “What a nice room, but...” ’

My mother-in-law sometimes listens to my sermons online... so I think I won’t pass any further comment!

I love buying people gifts – but only really if I have a good idea, or I know it’s something they’ll love. At Christmas I bought Jess tickets to see *The Prince of Egypt* in the West End – it’s one of her favourite films, and she’s been desperate for it to be turned into a live-action musical. I saw the tickets and knew instantly it was the right present for her. We are going to London a week tomorrow to see it.

God loves to give different gifts to *all* his people.

In that list of things there are ‘one’ of – did you notice something missing? There is one Lord, one faith, one Spirit, one God, one hope – but there is *not* ‘one type of Christian’.

The great news is, we are all different! God does not want or expect us all to be the same. The same Spirit brings different gifts to different people.

Some of us, for some reason, are given the gifts we need to be vicars. But thankfully God doesn’t stop there. He gives gifts to *all* his people. Here Paul lists only a few, mostly focused on the leaders of the church, but elsewhere he talks about gifts of faith, prayer, healing, administration, friendship, love, serving others, encouragement, hospitality, wisdom – and so on.

It's like building – well, *anything* really. Building a house requires bricks, flooring, plaster, wires, concrete, tiles, wood, windows. Building a computer requires silicon, precious metals, magnets, metals, plastic, and so on.

Lots of different things, brought together to build one, *united* thing – that's what God is calling us, his family to. We may be many, we may be different, but in Jesus he is calling us to be united.

And did you spot an important little word there – **that the body of Christ may be built up... and become *mature*** (12-13). This is in fact one of the verses that inspired that line in our church family prayer: 'maturing in holiness'.

God gives gifts because he loves his people – but he also gives gifts because he wants us to grow, to *mature*.

Maturity (14-16)

When I was growing up we went on holiday a few times with my grandparents. One time they took us to a place near La Rochelle called **¶** *Les Graves*.

Now, something you need to know about my Grandad is that he *loved* French cheese, and he *especially* loved *mature* French cheese.

It's too long ago for me to remember exactly what kind of cheese it was, but as soon as we arrived Grandad J bought himself some of the foulest smelling stuff an eight-year-old boy could imagine, and that's saying something.

He stored it – to start with – in the fridge. But the thing about *really* smelly cheese, is that it starts to make everything *else* smell, and even *taste* like itself.

After my Granny opened the fridge and practically passed out from the stench, she made him take it out and keep it on the window-sill of his bedroom, at the back of the house.

A slightly nicer (for me) form of maturity are these *show wine bottles*. These were both gifts for my 30th birthday. Hopefully they have been maturing nicely in the bottle, so when we open them they taste delicious.

That's the thing about the word 'maturity' – sometimes the image it brings up is a positive one, sometimes less so.

For Paul it was an entirely positive thing – something to be desired, sought after, worked for.

Look with me at verse 14.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful schemes. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

Ephesians 4.14-15 (NIV)

In one respect we need to be ‘like children’ – as Jesus taught, we need to be entirely dependent upon God, as a child is entirely dependent upon her parents.

But in another respect, we need to grow up in our understanding, in our confidence in the truth, so we can recognise and resist the lies and subtleties and tricks and temptations of the world.

It’s an old favourite of preachers, but when officers are trained in detecting counterfeit currency, they don’t start with the fakes, they start with the real thing. They touch it, tilt it, smell it. Once they are used to the real thing, it becomes much easier to spot the fakes. Knowing the truth makes it easier to spot a lie.

<https://www.challies.com/articles/counterfeit-detection-part-1/>

retrieved on 08/03/2020

There's a little phrase which I'd like us to spend a few moments thinking about: **speaking the truth in love** (15). Christians are not always good at doing both of those things at the same time.

Sometimes we are all about truth in the sense of 'telling a few home truths' to people, enjoying scoring a few points.

Sometimes we are all about love, meaning what the world wants us to mean: anything goes, we can do whatever we like, because God loves us and it's ok.

That is the pressure the church has always been under. Today, the Church of England is under extreme pressure to disregard what the Bible says about sexuality, gender, and marriage.

This isn't the time to go into any of that in detail.

But what I will say is this: maturity means not acting on instinct like children do. There *is* truth, there *is* right and wrong, and for most of us that makes us uncomfortable, it makes us squirm, because deep down each of us knows we don't live up to it, in all sorts of ways, and for all sorts of reasons, only some of which are about the bedroom. We need to be honest, honest with ourselves and with others about the all ways we ignore the truth, and worship ourselves and our desires rather than God.

But we also need to be full of love. Not the woolly ‘anything goes’ sort of love, but the strong, powerful, self-sacrificing love of God, which is stronger than death, which goes further than our sin can ever take us away from God, which is higher, deeper, wider and greater than we can even imagine – which accepts and welcomes and cherishes *anyone* – love powerful enough change even me.

Anyone who comes through that door – including everyone here today – should be welcomed and accepted in love, and challenged, convicted, and encouraged by the truth.

Anyone who comes through that door – including everyone here today – should be offered the precious truth that our identity, who we *are*, does not depend on who we fancy or what bits we have or don’t have – who we *are* depends on Jesus.

Look with me at verse 16:

From *him* [that is, Jesus] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Ephesians 4.16 (NIV)

Jesus is the **head** (15), and he is the source and the centre: **from him the whole body grows and builds itself up in love** (16).

Maturity means finding ourselves, not where the world is looking, but in Jesus. Instead of fiddling with counterfeit truth, Paul calls us to know the *real* truth: Jesus Christ, who died and was raised and ascended on high so we might have life, and life in all its fullness – which is found where? Verse 13... in **Christ**. Don't be fooled: the world has *no idea* what fullness of life is or looks like. *Real* fullness of life is actually **the fullness of Christ**, and it is found *only* in him, and it is found *only* with him at the centre.

Equipped

Finally... Paul ends with **as each part does its work**. It cropped up earlier as well – **to equip [God's] people for works of service** (12).

God generously equips each of his people with gifts and talents – and everything he gives, he gives to be *shared*, not kept to ourselves.

And he equips *all* of his people – not only the vicars and leaders. One of the huge encouragements of my time here has been seeing different people use and grow in their God-given gifts.

So here is my question for all of us: are we using and sharing those gifts? If not, why not? God has given this church family *every* gift we need to be faithful to what he is calling us to be and to do... it's up to us to discover, encourage, and use those gifts. What's yours?