

“Be good, be kind” doesn’t quite cover it

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Read: Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2

Holy God, as we listen to your Word to us through the Scripture and by your Spirit, help us to hear and be ready for the work you have to do in us. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

At a first glance the reading from Ephesians is straightforward and easy. It seems to be nothing much more than Paul admonishing us to be good, be kind, and be forgiving. It sounds like something that a radio announcer may say to sign off at the end of their shift: be good, be kind, be nice. That’s not a bad thing, but it probably isn’t too unsettling – a bit like: go about your business and don’t make a mess. Even at a first glance, though it does end in a remarkably strong way such as you would not expect from an average radio presenter. Paul writes, “Be imitators of God”.

That seems strong. Most of us have an aversion to the idea of “playing God”, which is probably healthy. But actually, it all depends on your image of God. If you think of God as a powerful overlord, or as an angry judge, or as a cosmic game player who plays us like dice, then you definitely should NOT be imitators of that!

How do we image God then? In the rest of that last sentence, Paul talks about how we are beloved children of God, how God loves us; he talks about living in love *as Christ loved us*. *Jesus* gives us the true image of God. Jesus lived out truth and grace and faithfulness and courage and love. He broke down boundaries and was inclusive and generous and giving. If *this* is more like your image of God, then imitating God becomes a much better idea.

Jesus trusts his life on this knowledge of God. Not even the worst that humanity can do is enough to stop Jesus from giving and loving and trusting God through it all, so that Jesus’ self-giving is like a fragrant offering, the fragrance of flowers – a positive thing, a gift of love, not like a sacrifice to an angry God - and Jesus’ committed love for all is a model for our own loving.

With that in mind, the first part of the reading is worth a second glance. There are some things to notice.

We might notice that it has words about speaking truth to our neighbours, *because we are members of one another*. Paul adds, though, that our speech is only to be what is useful for building up. It’s relatively easy to tear others down, or to speak behind people’s backs rather than actually *to* our neighbours, but Paul urges a directness and a care which is no small ask. In a few weeks’ time we’ll begin working through the book of James, which is all about faith in action, faith shown in deeds, and one of the primary deeds that it teaches is taking care with our words.

Another thing we might notice in the reading is the rather sweet line, “Thieves must give up stealing”. For those familiar with Dora the Explorer it sounds awfully like “swiper, no swiping”! And as most of us probably don’t consider ourselves to be thieves, and hopefully aren’t, it also seems relatively safe. But read the rest of the sentence. Thieves aren’t to give up stealing *out of respect for the private ownership of property*. Protecting private property is *not* in mind here, at all. Actually, former thieves are asked to work honestly *in order to have something to share with the needy*. Former thieves are asked to work honestly in order to have something to share. I’m going to come back to that with respect to reconciliation in Australia, shortly.

One more thing to notice – well, at least one. It actually includes the words, “Be angry”. So much for this passage being all about being nice. There were times when Jesus was angry. He overturned the tables of the money changers. He had a few things to say about self-protective Pharisees criticising his healing ministry. There’s a place for anger. “But do not sin”, the passage says. There is NO excuse here for violence, domestic or otherwise. Do not make room for the devil, Paul says, because if your anger causes you to do violence, that is not imitating Christ, it’s imitating someone else.

So among the things that we’re noticing here, we’ve got:

- * Imitating God by living in love, as Christ loved us.
- * Speak the truth, with care
- * Don’t steal, but share
- * Be angry, but without sin

And we could add, of course,

- * be kind, and forgive one another.

As you are probably aware we have some study series running on the Statement from the Heart at the moment. The Statement was composed in 2017 through a meticulous process of national consultation and an unprecedented gathering of Indigenous people from across the nation. That Statement, and this passage from Ephesians, make a remarkable coupling. One of the things about reading the Bible is that we always have to think about the perspective from which we read it. I’m a white, middle-class, privileged male, and so when I read the Bible I can so easily make certain assumptions about what it means not to steal, and what it means to tell the truth; but sometimes we have to sit in a different position, or take another persons’ perspective to really break open the text and see what God has to say.

How do First Peoples in Australia read this text from Ephesians – this text, which starts with Paul saying “putting away all falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another”?

It seems to me that the Statement from the Heart could have been written following a study of this passage, because the Statement contains all of the threads of truth telling, sharing, anger transformed, and grace; and it invites the rest of us to listen.

Among other things, the Statement says:

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from 'time immemorial', and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

...

It goes on to candidly say,

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

This is a document that dares to speak truth, with grace. It goes on to call for a First Nations Voice to the Parliament, and a Makarrata Commission to supervise agreement making and truth-telling, for the sake of the flourishing of the First Nations children who "will walk in two worlds and [whose] culture will be a gift to their country."

The Statement from the Heart was not, in fact, written as a response to Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2. But so many of those themes from Paul's passage are relevant.

Bringing to mind the context of the First Nations people as we hear Paul's words may give us pause to think about how we are imitators of God in this context. What does truth-telling mean, for us and for the most vulnerable? What does moving from stealing to sharing mean in this context? What makes us angry, and do we direct our anger without sin? Do we live in love as Christ loved us?

These questions are not to make us feel guilty or unworthy, but they do invite us to recognise the depths of what Christ's love is like, and they invite us to stretch what it means for us to be good, be kind, be forgiving, with all of our neighbours.

I suggest, then, that we pray.

Let us pray.

Holy God, Help us to recognise what you seek from us; what you seek in us; what you seek among us. Above all, help us to recognise the way you walk with us and grant us grace. As we walk with you as beloved children, help us to know the breadth and height and depths of your love and to reflect it in all of our life together.

In the name of Christ we pray.

Amen.