

Colossians 3: 1-3

1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

John 15:1-12

1 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.

2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

4 Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

5 'I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

6 If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

8 This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

9 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.

10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.

11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

12 My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.

Christian Identity: Summary Colossians 3:1-3 John 15:1-12
What it means to be a follower of Christ

I'm going to try and summarise in a few minutes what we've been saying over the last couple of months. This is a 9 part sermon. They're short parts...

What is it to be a follower of Jesus? What does it involve?

I actually quite deliberately try to avoid using the word 'christian' in my sermons. The problem is that I and many people I talk to have found that the description christian today has too many negative connotations.

The response to any mention of church is usually, oh so you're religious? And as I've said previously, this apparently first and foremost seems to mean that I don't swear. I don't know about you but if that's what it means to people we need to change that perception. I would hope my **faith in Jesus** defines me, rather than things I think people shouldn't do.

The greek *Christianos* was originally used as a term of derision aimed by non-believers at believers who didn't acknowledge the emperor of Rome. The believers themselves did not, certainly initially, refer to themselves as Christians. I think we've come full circle on that, christian means too many different things to different people.

So anyway here are some of the things we've drawn out of the new testament over the last two months which describe who we are in Christ.

Not who we wish to be, but who we are because if we follow him he is spiritually part of who we are.

1. We're a chosen people, a Royal Priesthood 1 Peter 2:9.

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. We're royal in the sense that Jesus is the King and as his followers we represent him to everyone we meet.

We're all like priests, because we all reveal something of Him to others. Paul tells us *you died* (to your old self), *and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.* We've surrendered our lives to Jesus. If that's true how can we not reveal something of God?

2. Keep your love on. What we once might have said were the rules for life, and still do of course, were the ten commandments, but Jesus himself reduced them to two overarching commandments, Love God and love others. More than anything that's what must define us. God does not just love, God is love. And we're *commanded* to love our enemies. Because if we only love people we like, our love is not the love of God.

God loves without conditions attached.

3. Submit to one another. To quote what Annette said about this, "it means to put the needs of the other before your own, to serve one another willingly. In Philippians 2 it says we must count others more significant than ourselves. And Jesus modelled this perfectly when He, the very King of heaven, washed his disciples' feet".

Leadership structures are necessary up to a point in any organisation, but where we should be different is that we all regard serving, supporting, helping, loving, accepting others, as more important than campaigning for our own interests. And at the same time we must be accountable to each other for everything we do. Humility, in the present political and moral climate, is *absolutely central* to our calling as peacemakers. Jesus prayed for his disciples (US!) ...*that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.* We're never going to be one if we don't submit to one another.

4. Culture of Honour. Unless we honour the people we meet and work with, we are not going to be able to truly love them. Respect is the word that crops up again and again here but as Annette pointed out, worldly wisdom is that we expect people to earn our respect. The problem Jesus gives us here is that he *doesn't* expect that. God's unconditional love for the people he has created is one thing that comes as a mystery to many of us who are more cynical about human nature. We can't earn God's respect. So we can't expect it of others

5. Give of yourself and your time. In a world which is deeply invested in a consumer culture which revolves around taking, the key word here is GIVE.

The kingdom of god principle, as so often, is the opposite of what we're conditioned to think. Give, and it will be given to you. Luke 6:38

The more we give away the better life will work for us.

If you want to save your life, you must be prepared to lose it. It's what I've sometimes referred to as a Looking glass philosophy, God's Kingdom again and again requires us to do the exact opposite of what the world admires.

6. Lay down your life. So here's the most challenging aspect of Jesus teaching which is really that although we've been given the free gift of eternal life, in return we have to be prepared to lose our lives. The communion prayer says **Through [Jesus] we offer you our souls and bodies to be a living sacrifice.** That's a mirror image of what he did for us. To receive everything we give everything. There are no half measures, and if we plan to be half-hearted about it we will be disappointed. There's a famous passage in John's gospel which goes like this

The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life. 64 Yet there are some of you who do not believe." For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. 65 He went on to say, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them."

And the next verse says: *After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.*

7. Give your money. I suppose things very often come down to money in terms of how committed we are to a cause.

If it's going to hurt our pocket, we certainly think twice about buying something. Finances are a major concern for all of us.

So I think a test of laying down your life is: what are you going to sacrifice financially for your faith?

The widow's mite was the passage we used, and the widow, who had very little, gave everything. The rich man, when challenged by Jesus that his money was his idol, walked away.

8 & 9. Word for the world: righteousness and mercy.

The last two sections are very much concerned with what we have to say to the world. The problem really is that the world doesn't really want to listen, if it ever did. I once had a poster of a single fish swimming against the whole shoal This is what we have to contend with.

But we have good news that there's a God who is not the remote, wrathful, judgemental, cartoon figure who has been rejected in so many people's minds and who has become irrelevant. Science is the new God because it has come up with something which supposedly proves there is no God. The truth is no one can prove there is no God any more than they can prove there is. We all have a faith position, atheists as much as anyone else. The problem for the church is the mixed messages it's presented in the past about who God is, who Jesus is, who the Holy Spirit is. Holy... Ghost, that's a mixed message!

We have so much more to offer than hoping people might want to join an institution they consider past it.

We have so much more to offer than empty rituals, we offer love and acceptance and friendship.

We have so much more to offer than safety and certainty, we offer healing and wholeness in mind and body and spirit.

We offer peace where there is division.

We offer forgiveness.

We offer a life worth living and not just existence.

To receive all of this we don't need to come to church

we need to come to Jesus himself,

he doesn't just show us the way,

he is the way

he is the truth

and he is life.

Amen.