

Thursday 9 September 2001 - Zoom

Today's reading from Colossians is the second of a pair of alternatives that Paul sets before his readers. The first alternative is in the earlier part of the chapter. Paul charges them, and us, to set their minds on things above and not things that are on earth. On the one hand are 'fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed...anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language', on the other 'compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience...forgiveness, gratitude, love.' Hard choice!

You'll find plenty of people in today's moral climate who'll go for the first! I must assert my individuality, I must do my thing, so I can be the person I want to be. Sexual morality is what I want to do. It's not greed, it's my entitlement to have what I want. If you choose to disagree with me, I am entitled to insult you, to try and silence you, to cancel you. We seem to be living in an increasingly dysfunctional and damaging world. Even when people are rightly fighting the evils of the past, the case can be spoiled by lies, slander and verbal bullying. There's little attempt to 'admonish one another in all wisdom', 'to speak the truth in love' as Paul says in Ephesians. That too often is today's secular world. The second alternative, as Paul points out, is the recipe for a just, compassionate society, one of mercy and kindness, as we say in the *Benefice*, one in which 'we are bound together in perfect harmony' for the good of each other and with a committed care for creation.

And this is echoed and underlined in the extraordinary Gospel, where we are called to heroic behaviour. I wonder how many of us, how many people at all, manage to live up to it. Offering the other cheek, giving your shirt as well as your coat, giving to everyone who begs from you. It may be the hyperbole, the exaggeration, which the Rabbis often used, but Jesus is making a critically important point about the nature of the Kingdom, one which flies in the face of so much of today's social attitude. God has shown us, continues to show us, overwhelming generosity not least that he came himself, in the person of the Son, to share our human life as the human being, Jesus. Overwhelming generosity: "A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, has been put into our lap." How should we, how do we respond?

There is little doubt what much of society today would respond: that's just wishy-washy liberal, do good, unrealistic and so irresponsible nonsense. Do unto others before they do unto you.

But it is, of course, not one of the many equally valid world views, but the only truth. "The Christian ideal," said G K Chesterton, "has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried." Moses said in Deuteronomy "I have set before you life and death." Jesus offers the same choice. Never before, possibly has the human race needed more urgently to make the right choice, individually and collectively, for we face the real possibility that we could destroy ourselves and the worldwide society in which we live.

Few of us are called individually to change the world; we don't have the power or the wisdom. But we can make the right choice in our own lives, in the life of our church and the wider community, and if we do the rewards from an unimaginably generous God, will be unimaginably great, as Jesus promises, not just for us, but for the wider world we encounter and inhabit. Will we, will other people, rise to that challenge?