

“WHAT KIND OF CHRISTIAN?”

7. Christians with attitude

Romans 12:1-2

Well, we've got to the end of this little series about being a Christian, about what it means to take the name of Christ as a way of identifying ourselves. You'll recall that the name "Christian" was coined in first-century Antioch as a term of abuse used to ridicule those who claimed to follow Jesus, but it soon became a name that was proudly borne by the followers themselves. The story is told of a couple of martyrs called Carpus and Papyrus who were executed for their faith in the second or third century. When Carpus was questioned by the Roman proconsul as to his name he replied, "*My first and chosen name is Christian. But if you are asking for my name in the world, then I call myself Carpus.*" It is a noun, not an adjective: it signifies our identity, which is bound up with Jesus.

In a world currently obsessed with identity, we are able to find our identity in Jesus. Our foundation is in him and that brings us a sense of security. We put down our roots into him and that is what nourishes and resources us. We have been transformed by Jesus, so that we are no longer identified with or shaped by the world around us. We have a different mind-set and worldview, which means we go against the grain, not measuring things by the constantly shifting standards and values of the culture around us, but by the eternal truths of God's word and the teaching of the Jesus we claim to follow. So this is not just about our words and our behaviour, but about a completely different set of attitudes. We can try and modify our behaviour in all kinds of ways – as people like Pavlov and B F Skinner showed with their systems of rewards and punishments for animals; as scientists like Mark Solms and Jaak Panksepp are discovering in their work with advanced artificial intelligence – but that is only a temporary fix. Something deeper is needed so that the old ways of acting and thinking don't keep poking through.

In the passage we've just read (which you'll have worked out is a favourite of mine), St Paul writes to the first community of Christians in Rome, "*Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world*" Do not allow the values and ideas of the culture around you to shape your thinking and your outlook on life. Because of the presence of evil in our world – a consequence of the broken relationship between God and humanity which is described by the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the opening chapters of *Genesis* – the world generally does not acknowledge God and his ways. Everyone does as he or she likes without taking any notice of God, and the defining quality of so many lives is selfishness and individualism. You can see that, as I've said, in the story of what we call The Fall and it is a theme that runs through the Bible – look, for example, at *Judges 21:25*, this little refrain that comes up more than once in that book: "*At that time there was no king in Israel. People did whatever they felt like doing*". And that has continued to be the case down through history, as it was given legitimacy in the idea of individual autonomy by the

thinkers of the Enlightenment, and has more recently been enshrined in law in the pursuit of a particular economic policy.

But what is the current “*pattern of this world*”? What are the attitudes that we need to avoid adopting? What does our culture use to try and mould us to its value system? I would suggest that there are three things which define the way our culture works at the moment and which we easily find ourselves caught up in – three things to which we, as those who call ourselves Christians, need to offer an alternative. Now, let me just preface this by saying that, although these are features of our wider society, there will always be those who do not go along with it, those who do have a different outlook on life. I am talking in general terms, but I do believe that these three things which characterise our culture in the liberal democratic world of the West affect us all to a greater or lesser extent and need to be challenged. They are **Deceit, Distrust and Fear**. Let’s look at them and then see what we need to do about it.

DECEIT

This is part of our sin-scarred humanity, something ingrained into all of us to a greater or lesser extent. Look at what the prophet Jeremiah writes in *Jeremiah 17:9* – “*The heart is hopelessly dark and deceitful, a puzzle that no one can figure out.*” As we said last week, this is what so many political and cultural systems overlook. Most political, sociological and cultural theories have an element of progress about them: everything is moving along towards a kind of utopian future as things will just keep getting better and better all the time. But they don’t reckon with the human propensity to mess things up, the innate selfishness in humanity which scuppers any true progress. In one of Mrs Gaskell’s novels – *Mary Barton*, I think – one of the characters points out that if all the wealth in the nation were somehow collected together and then shared out equally, there would still be people who’d get up at 4 o’clock the very next morning to try and steal a march on their fellow citizens and get their money off them.

And currently, I would suggest, much of this is expressed in lying and disinformation. We have leading figures in our governments who are serial liars – which is well documented in all kinds of ways – but we have become so inured to it that no-one really challenges it any more. If something goes wrong, just deny you ever did it. And that trickles down into the rest of society, so that we have a situation where nothing can really be relied on any more – which is why the conspiracy theorists have such a field day: who is to say what’s right and what’s wrong. As the Manic Street Preachers entitled their 1998 album, “*This is my truth, tell me yours*”. (The album contains a track entitled “*If you tolerate this your children will be next*”, which is also pretty relevant.) There is no over-arching narrative any more. We make up our own truths – and from there it’s just a short step to choosing our own identity and thinking we can choose our destiny.

Deceit is all around us. Look at the world of advertising, at the scary landscape that is social media. People are always trying to manipulate opinion, to push their own version of reality. Vocabulary is changed to make what was once taboo now seem everyday – lust is love, abortion is reproductive rights, euthanasia is dying with dignity. That heart-hidden darkness which Jeremiah described is now mainstream and cleverly explained away.

DISTRUST

Now, you may say that most people can see through all that, but I believe that it has led to a situation which we maybe don't recognise quite so easily and that is the pervading atmosphere of distrust which is so much a part of our lives now. In fact, I would say that this is the pre-eminent characteristic of our society at the moment. No-one trusts anything or anyone any more. Anything new or different is viewed with suspicion. And anything old or established is viewed with suspicion, too.

The symptoms of this are all around us. Look at all we try and do to protect ourselves – the huge gates that are a feature of so many new houses; the ubiquity of CCTV cameras that record our every move; the massive industry that is safeguarding – and health and safety along with that. The overwhelming message that is rammed home again and again with all of that – along with a plethora of television programmes about scams and confidence tricksters and dodgy businessmen – is “Don't trust anyone”. We're always looking out to check that what we do is risk-free – and if there is any risk, we need to ensure that none of it our responsibility – hence the astonishing proliferation of policies and protocols in pretty well every walk of life. If you look at them closely you'll see that they all boil down to this one idea: “We don't trust you”.

You see, as the conventions of society which have for so long held in check some of the baser characteristics of human behaviour are swept aside in the lemming-like rush towards the apparent freedoms of human autonomy, we then need more laws to protect each other. Any political philosopher will tell you that the huge increase in legislation, the massive rise in the number of laws in recent years is precisely for that reason. If we sweep away the things that hold us together and give us a shared worldview as a society, then we need more and more laws to police that society for the apparent good of everyone.

FEAR

And, again, flowing out of all that is the sense of fear that people have. When I'm cycling round the lanes round here, I am struck, as I mentioned earlier, by the security and protection that surround so many of the large houses – massive electric gates, electronic entry devices, posts bristling with CCTV cameras. How afraid must the people be who live there? But for us ordinary mortals, there's a similar sense of fear that we feel when we go out and about – and, indeed, when we stay at home, behind our own bolted and alarmed front doors. And let's not forget the fear that has been instilled in us about this current pandemic.

Fear is used by governments and authorities, advertisers and the media, to shape our behaviour. Whether they're selling insurance; or influencing our financial habits (because we're constantly fearful that we won't have enough of this or that); or driving a policy of xenophobia or even racism (because they're all a bit different from us); or bolstering a policy that is dependent on militarism (as was the case particularly during the 1980s and more recently in the era of terrorism); or wanting to tell us where we can and cannot go, they are capitalising on our sense of fear. We become increasingly risk-averse and end up almost paralysed into doing nothing – or worse, doing just as we're told by people in whose interest it is to make us do it. I'm certainly not one of your conspiracy theorists who believe this is all being co-ordinated with a particular end in view, but that doesn't stop plenty of people taking advantage of the situation.

And I think we need to acknowledge that the Church has succumbed to this over the years in all kinds of ways, but particularly during the past year or so. It affects our opportunities for worship and witness. It affects how we welcome people (or not, as is increasingly the case). It affects how we're viewed by others. And it comes down to a lack of faith in God – even he is distrusted by many now. When Jesus is in the boat with his disciples during a storm on the lake, he says to them, "*You of little faith, why are you so afraid?*" And again and again we read of Jesus telling people not to be afraid – indeed, that is a refrain which echoes down through all the pages of The Bible.

Don't conform to all this, says Paul. Don't adopt those attitudes which characterise the world around you. Don't allow the world, as J B Phillips memorably translates these words, "*to squeeze you into its mould*". You are Christians, followers of Jesus in whom you claim to have put your faith, so don't conform, but "*be transformed by the renewing of your mind*". Adopt attitudes that are consistent with having faith in Jesus. Those changed attitudes should then lead to changed behaviour. That's why political parties at general elections and military forces as they invade foreign countries talk about "*winning hearts and minds*". It's the worldview you have to attend to first, the big picture, the overarching narrative. How's that going to work for us, then?

INTEGRITY

Well, let's start by replacing deceit with integrity. We are, as Jesus teaches, to be known as people of truth. In *The Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus says "*Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes', and your 'No' be 'No'; anything else comes from the evil one.*". In other words, live out your faith. Live with consistency and speak the truth. There is no need to lie, no need to give a false impression – whether it's trying to explain away something you've done or using every available filter on your social media photos.

I said earlier that the three characteristics of the world's attitudes are all interlinked and that is so here. So many people lie to get out of a situation because they are afraid of the consequences. It's to avoid blame and avoid taking responsibility. If you mess up, accept that. Hold up your hands and apologise. Whether that's in your family, at your workplace, in your school or wherever. It works with God – you can acknowledge where you've gone wrong, ask for forgiveness and resolve not to do it again. The same should apply with the people you have affected by whatever it is you've done.

In the end, this is part of our witness as Christians. In a world where so many people see that integrity is lacking, let's demonstrate that our attitude is one which prizes integrity and honesty. It is not a sign of weakness to admit a mistake. It might make life a bit more difficult to go against the grain, as we saw last week, but stick with it. Peter writes in his *First Letter*, "*Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*" That should come as second nature to us, but we may have to work on acquiring the habit for a bit to start with.

TRUST

In a culture saturated with distrust, this is where we can show an example. It may seem naïve (and I'm sure someone will tell me so afterwards), but we need to approach others with a positive attitude, not the kind of negativity which is so endemic in our world at the moment. Yes, call out those who are demonstrating deceit – that's part of our prophetic calling – but don't necessarily assume everyone is out to cause trouble. Our fellow men and women are first and foremost made in the image of God, so let's respect them as such, despite the ways in which we have all been tarnished by sin. Encourage other people rather than putting them off. Welcome them and be generous and hospitable, however different from you they may seem. I think I've told you before about the representative of one of the city's larger community groups who always referred to Wade Street Church as "The church that says 'Yes'." Let's not become the church that says "Maybe" or "Probably, if you fill out the right forms."

At the root of all that is what Jesus taught and modelled in his own life. Yes, he was hard on those who did not lead lives of integrity and he spoke out against deceit and hypocrisy, but he also showed amazing grace and offered forgiveness to all who wanted to change. He was open in his dealings with people and longed to welcome others into his Kingdom. Let's pray that we might have that same openness and generosity of spirit that provides a positive alternative to the distrust of the world, an attitude that does not conform to the pattern of the world.

HOPE

And here is where it should all be centred. In a world of increasing fear, our calling is to be people of hope. Our attitude should be one that recognises that God is in charge and, if that's the case, we have nothing to fear and everything to hope for. The writer of the *Letter to the Hebrews* expresses it well as they quote from *Psalms 118*: “So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?’.” God has got it all sorted out – he has shown that in Jesus. What was the greatest fear that a human being could have? Facing their Creator and Judge when this life is over, because of the broken relationship between him and us. In Jesus, God has healed that brokenness and offered the opportunity to spend eternity in his presence. The cross stands as a witness to that healing and the empty tomb proclaims the hope that we have.

That means we can take some risks – or step out in faith, as we used to say before corporate language and business models took over our lives. Do not allow fear to limit your enjoyment of life or stunt your growth as a disciple, a Christian. I've told this story before, but it's worth repeating in this context. The late Donald Coggan, after he'd retired as Archbishop of Canterbury, was travelling down to his home in Winchester on the train and got into conversation with a student who was sitting opposite him. When they arrived at their destination, the student helped Dr Coggan off the train with his luggage and then walked off down the platform with a cheery, “*Take care, then*”. There was a bit of a queue at the exit barrier and the elderly clergyman caught up with the young man. They had another brief conversation and exchanged a few more niceties, before the student picked up his bag and said once again, “*Well, take care, then.*” “*No,*” replied Dr Coggan. “*Don't take care – take risks!*”

When I last used that story (back in 2003) I went on to quote from David Coffey, who said, “*Beware of a religion which is concerned only with not doing anything wrong.*” And that kind of religion – comfortable, predictable, nice, risk-free – is certainly not what Jesus Christ calls us to. The kind of spirituality or faith or religion or whatever word you want to use which Jesus calls us to is messy and untidy. It involves talking to the wrong people, keeping the wrong company, pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable back further and further. It involves picking up your cross every single day in the knowledge that the only people who ever carried a cross were those who were going to be nailed to it. That is very scary. And it's particularly scary when you've managed to survive into middle age or beyond and you don't have the same energy and enthusiasm that you once did, when you feel that this is a time to take your ease after all the risky and iconoclastic things you did in your earlier years. But it is a religion of hope – it's a faith that says that we know there are dangers, but we have a hope that eclipses all of that.

Of course we have to take seriously things that are dangerous and not be reckless in our behaviour. We do have to act responsibly in all that we do, but we need to show that our faith does make a difference, that we

are not going to be stifled or silenced by the attempts of others – be they government agencies or people with an agenda which is inimical to Christianity. We follow Jesus, for goodness sake: he’s the Saviour of the world, the exorciser of demons, the healer of the sick, the one who lifts up the downcast, who gives dignity to the outsiders, who has overcome all that the powers of evil could throw at him on the cross, who burst out of his grave to demonstrate that even death couldn’t quench hope. He is the one in whom we find our identity and our purpose. He is the one who told his first followers – even before they were called Christians – *“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”*

Fellow Christians, we need to kick back against deceit, distrust and fear. They are the attitudes of the world around us and we must resist being forced into thinking that way. Pray that, through his Holy Spirit, God will transform you by the renewing of your minds, and you can live life to the full with integrity, trust and hope, the hope that overcomes the world and all that it can throw at you. Because, if we don’t, effectively that means our faith makes no difference to us. Your trust is in Christ. Your hope is in Christ. Your identity is in Christ. Get on and live like it!

For reflection and discussion

- 1) Do you agree that deceit, distrust and fear are defining attitudes of our culture at present? What would you add or change? Why?
- 2) Jeremiah gives the impression that everyone is in some way tinged with deceit. Do you think that is true? Is anyone free from sin?
- 3) Give some examples of distrust in our society that you have noticed. Is it justified? Why/why not?
- 4) How does distrust affect the way we function as a church? What can we do about it?
- 5) Are we right to say we shouldn’t be afraid of anything? Isn’t that simply naïve?
- 6) How can we demonstrate that we are people of hope in today’s culture – as a church and as individuals?
- 7) What have you learned from this series? What are you going to do about it?