

SERMON 3

BEING FORMED - Part 2

Reading: Colossians 3:1-17 (to be read after introduction)

When we moved here, our Matthew had just started his last year of primary school. We'd explained that his new school would be 'different', and he seemed to have understood. But his first day was enough to show that he hadn't. 'They're all mad! They're all mad!', he said. Wondering what on earth had happened, I pressed him to explain... 'Lots of things', he said, 'like they don't wear their tracksuit bottoms when they go outside for PE, and at lunch time in the canteen they queue up with their trays.' Matthew had obviously expected his new school to be pretty much like his old one... just in a different place.

Eventually, we were able to help him understand that *that* was the sort of thing we'd meant when we'd said 'it will be different'. Happily, Matthew doesn't seem to have been scarred by the experience. And it makes a great illustration of how we can *think* we understand when really we haven't the faintest idea.

The Bible tells us that, when we become followers of Jesus, everything changes: our old ways have to go. As the speaker put it at the Parish Weekend, it's not a matter of 'business as usual with a little bit of Jesus on top!' As Jesus' apprentices, we've new lives to live, following him, learning how to do the sorts of things he did, and to do them in the way he did them. The apostle Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 (v 17) that 'if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!' Jesus himself said, 'You must be born again'... Now that sounds *very* 'different' to me – so different, I think it might be possible to underestimate the degree of change... When the Bible tells us that everything is going to be different... I suspect that we think that we know what this means. But do we?

In a sermon last month, the preacher made an impassioned plea for us to live differently. So what does that mean? It isn't merely a matter of stopping doing some things, and starting doing others – although we must expect the things we do, or don't do, to change over time; if they don't, we need to ask some serious questions. Primarily, it's a matter of *being changed on the inside* – of spiritual formation, or more, accurately, spiritual *re*-formation, because we've already been formed spiritually. We looked at this in the previous sermon – do you remember? We thought about growing up and learning to obey; learning to value what God values – or not, as the case may be; families, school teachers, the media, pressing children into a particular mould.

Now, we're thinking about the present. We don't have to take responsibility for the way we were shaped as children, but we most definitely *do* have to take responsibility for the choices we're making that are causing us to be shaped today. However, so

many of our choices are barely conscious: we do things because we've always done them, or because everyone else is doing them. Or maybe because they present themselves at a time when we're looking for something relaxing to do, and we're too tired to be selective. Television often comes under that heading; it's there, so we watch it. But the JB Phillips version of Romans 12:2 says this: 'Don't let the world squeeze you into its mould'.

I hope you've been using the reflection sheet you were given a week or two ago – 'Who or what is shaping the way I think and live?' I've been using this question for a year or so now, and finding it helpful. I'd encourage you to go on using it as the basis for a dialogue with God... But now I'd like to pose another question: ***How much more do we need to know?***

The philosopher and theologian Dallas Willard has been known to say that many Christians would be better off for doing *less* Bible study. Before you leap up and down with concern – or with relief! – let me explain. His point is this: going on doing more and more study, without ever pausing long enough to apply what we've been learning, is extremely counter-productive. Worse than useless, in fact, because it leaves us thinking that the Bible is an interesting book but one which has no relevance to real life as we live it. Now that's dangerous!

The Bible is God's gift to us – a wonderful resource – but reading it is not enough. Character is formed by action, not just *reading about* action! So, I pose the question again: How much more do we need to know? Or should I say, 'When are we going to start applying what we *already* know?' If you've been a Christian for ten years, what proportion of what you've learned do you think you are applying...? If you've been following Jesus for twenty-five or fifty years, are you noticeably more like him than you were when you'd only been a Christian for ten years...?

I don't know if you've seen a Life Application Bible – it has notes which encourage the reader to think, 'How am I going to apply this?' And that's great. But, do you know what happens? Along with our Life Application Bible, we somehow acquire a little bottle of Life Application Tippex! No sooner have we resolved to make changes in our lives by applying what we're reading, than something comes along to paint God's word out of our minds – to distract us, to crowd out the good seed God has sown in our hearts. Jesus mentioned this in the parable of the Sower.

If we're going to live life the way today's reading describes, *we're going to need more than good intentions*: we're going to have to be changed on the inside – to be spiritually re-formed. So I'd like to pray, before we listen to it. I'm going to ask the Holy Spirit to empower us to apply what we're hearing. Let's pray:

Heavenly Father, we're about to listen to a very challenging reading. I believe you want it to have an effect; to move us on in the process of transformation so that we're more like Jesus. We welcome your presence, Holy Spirit. Please open our ears to hear; write these words deep in our hearts and minds so that they can't be snatched away.

Jesus, please come and stand with us as we look at what it means to be changed on the inside and formed into your likeness. Pour out your grace, Lord, so that we can apply what we're hearing. We ask in your name, Jesus. Amen.

[**Reading:** Colossians 3:1-17 to be read here.]

[Sermon continues...]

`Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your *hearts* on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your *minds* on things above, not on earthly things.' Sounds different from the average way of living, doesn't it! Hearts *and* minds focused on God and his Kingdom, valuing what God values, living according to his Kingdom principles even when no-one's looking... Maybe you're starting to sink back into your seat, thinking it's all impossible so you might as well switch off now. *Don't!* Because what follows is encouraging, believe it or not!

Look at verses 5 to 10. Why do you think Paul was writing such things to the Colossians? Because they needed to hear them! And why did they need to hear them? Because they were still walking in their old ways; they were still getting angry, using filthy language and lying to one another. Now don't allow a sudden rush of self-congratulation – it's no good saying, 'Oh well, I'm doing OK, then; I only get angry!' Paul is saying, 'all this was normal in your old way of life, but it's no way for a follower of Jesus to live'. He's not expecting the Colossians to have become instantly perfect when they became Christians, but he *is* expecting them to be committed to a process of change – to be wanting to show the likeness of God's family; the likeness of Jesus.

So, Paul says. 'Put to death... whatever belongs to your earthly nature' (v 5)... Pretty drastic, putting to death! Paul isn't pussy-footing around here. Then, verse 10, 'you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator'. Men and women were made in the image of God, but that image has been dulled and distorted by sin. As we're spiritually re-formed, his image in us shines brighter; that's what this subject of spiritual formation is all about.

So, we're to put on the new self, the new self which shows God's likeness; the new self which becomes ours when we come to Christ... As an aside, I feel I need to explain the use of the words 'put on'. We tend to say 'Oh, she's putting it on', meaning that someone is pretending, or being insincere. But the Greek word translated *put on*, and *clothe yourself with* in verse 12 doesn't mean that. THE MESSAGE version talks about dressing ourselves in the new wardrobe *chosen for us by God*.

An illustration may help: if I put on a police uniform, does that make me a member of the police force...? No! And when police men and women put on their uniforms, that doesn't make *them* members of the force either; it's what has already happened to the people *inside* the uniforms – they were signed up and trained in a particular way which entitles them to call themselves police officers.

In the same way, if we've received Jesus as our Saviour and made the commitment to follow him, we're in! 'To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God' – that's John 1:12. We're in! And now the uniform is ours to wear: verse 12 onwards: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiving and loving one another, letting the peace of Christ rule our hearts.

Now it's here that the illustration of police uniform falters, because police officers take off their uniforms, don't they. They wear ordinary clothes, either because they're off duty, or in order to blend into the background – maybe going undercover, getting involved in criminal activities. Now, neither of those could possibly apply to us as Christians... could they?!

As followers of Jesus, we're supposed to be showing the Christ-family likeness all the time – there's no off duty; no plain clothes 'blending in', going round looking just like everyone else. Remember: living differently means living differently *all the time*. Not because we're good at 'putting it on' and wearing a mask, but because we're being changed to be more like Jesus. And as we become more like him on the inside, we wouldn't want to be any other way on the outside.

So, yes, Paul was writing to the Colossians about this because, like us, they needed to hear it. But Paul's aim in writing was to stir them to press on; to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus and to grow more like him day by day. The next set of study notes is based around Paul's letter to the Philippians. And in that letter he's urging them to press on. 'I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me' (3:12). Trying to press on before we've let Jesus take hold of us doesn't work – the saving relationship with Jesus has to come first – but once we belong to him, it's intended that we should be making progress. And I hope that you'll find the notes on Philippians an encouragement to do just that.

Next week's preacher will be majoring on practical ways in which we can cooperate with God as he does his renovation work. Today, I'm going to make just two suggestions of things we can do to cooperate with God, and the first relates to the place of groups in this renovation process.

The Lord uses many ways of re-forming us spiritually. Bible reading and prayer are vital, but also important is the influence of others apprentices of Jesus who are seeking to be more like him. So being in a group is an obvious way of receiving encouragement. And if you struggle with Bible reading and prayer, a group can help you get going on those too.

One of the things I've found particularly helpful is the element of accountability which some types of group provide. For several years, I have met with a friend in what's called a Renovare group – that's a group which is focused specifically on encouraging one another to become more like Jesus. As I've talked in this context about the areas of my life in which I know God is at work – the areas in which I know he wants me

to move on and grow – I've known that, soon, my friend is going to be asking me if I've seen changes... Have I obeyed what I'd thought God was saying to me?

Obviously all this can only work in a relationship where there is a significant degree of trust. But if you're serious about becoming more like Jesus, I'd urge you to find someone you trust to whom you can be accountable; someone who will ask you how it's going. It's a great spur to getting on and obeying God rather than shilly-shallying! The new study notes invite you to consider new ways of encouraging each other to grow to be more like Jesus. And I do hope that you'll take up that challenge. Maybe you could think about developing some accountability relationships within your home groups – maybe in twos or threes.

So, groups are good, but the final question I want to pose today asks whether they could be even better. It may be an uncomfortable question, but I'm working on the basis that we're all wanting to become more like Jesus, and that sometimes probing questions can help... My question is this: is there any way in which your home group or other group – such as the worshipping team, or the lunch club team, or the flower arranging team – is there any way in which your group actually *discourages* you from becoming more like Jesus?

Does your group, for example, encourage you to gossip? When your group meets, do you frequently find yourself getting drawn into undermining talk about the leadership of the church? Or criticism of the preaching – 'too long'; 'not enough Bible exposition'. I refer you to my earlier question about applying what we *already* know – which is that God wants us to honour our leaders, to refrain from gossip and so on. If there's disobedience, house groups and other groups aren't meant to be encouraging us to feel more comfortable with it!

Does your group encourage you to be a disciplined follower of Jesus, or is it all so laid back it's horizontal: turn up or not, it's up to you... wander in when you feel like it; leave your Bible at home... Does any group you meet with have a tendency to encourage you to solve every problem with a bar of chocolate... or a glass or two of wine? Chocolate and wine are among God's good gifts to us, but they're not the answer to anything!

Perhaps when your group meets this week you could thank God for each other, and then ask him to show you if there's anything you need to repent of as a group – any besetting sin which has been undermining his work in the members. You could use our reading from Colossians 3 as a check-list... 'How much of this are we applying as a group? Are there things we need to take action on?'

Maybe your group's doing fine – it's all very helpful and constructive – in which case, thank God some more! But if you find there's an issue that needs dealing with, don't come under condemnation: just say sorry to God, ask his forgiveness, and commit to moving on together in a new way. The same applies to us as individuals when we realise that he's been trying to make us more like Jesus, but choices we've been

making have had the opposite effect. No condemnation! Just say sorry to God, ask for forgiveness, and move on. That's the way God wants it to be.

My final recommendation is that you pray for yourself. Some people were taught to pray for others but not for themselves, but it's definitely OK to pray for yourself – Jesus did! I pray regularly that God will make me more like Jesus. I also tell the Holy Spirit that he's welcome in my life, and I invite him to come and shape the way I think and live. So give it a try – you might find this a life-changing way to pray.

As I finish, I'll just do a one-minute re-cap of the ground we've covered:

Have we underestimated what 'living differently' means?

Thinking about the question, 'Who or what is shaping the way I think and live?', I've emphasised our responsibility for cooperating with God as he seeks to make us more like Jesus. In terms of Bible knowledge, 'cooperating' means 'applying'. 'How much of what we already know *are* we applying?'

Are we comfortable showing the God-family likeness, wearing 'the new wardrobe' described in our reading? Or are we prone to going 'off duty' or 'under cover' as a Christian?

Our groups are good, but could they be even better? I've suggested that you look at the issue of groups *discouraging* members from becoming more like Jesus when you next meet.

And finally, I've encouraged you to pray for yourself, inviting the Holy Spirit to come and make you more like Jesus. If you know you'd like others to pray for you too, please do ask after the service.

I'll close with Paul's words from Romans 12, which are great advice for any apprentice of Jesus. This is THE MESSAGE version:

'So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out.'

If you're ready to say 'Yes!' to that, please stand!

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we're ready to be changed from the inside out. Please write your words on our hearts, then help us to choose obedience and translate them into action. Holy Spirit, we invite you to come and shape the way we think and live. We want to follow Jesus, learning from him and becoming more like him, because we long to see

your Kingdom coming in this place. Lord, your Kingdom come, your will be done.
Amen