

**Province of Southern Africa  
Diocese of Mthatha**

**PAPER FOR CLERGY CONFERENCE**

**July 2015**

**The Rt Revd Dr Robert Gillies, Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney**

**Isaiah 6**

**Colossians 3:12-17**

**Mark 8: 31-38**

My Lord Bishop, Archdeacons, Canons, fellow clergy and friends: Grace, mercy and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It is my joy and delight to bring you the greetings of my home church, the Scottish Episcopal Church, and in particular the Diocese of Aberdeen and Orkney. The association between Scotland and South Africa's Eastern Cape goes back almost 150 years and we are blessed because of it.

One of the most significant tributes to me as a bishop was given by My Lord Bishop here. On a previous visit to your Diocese in 2009 I think it was when we were at the Church of St Cuthbert, Tsolo, he spoke of our relationship. He said of me, that 'I am a Whitey.' And of himself he said, 'He was a blacky.' And then I quote, "That makes us twins!" For so we are and I consider myself blessed because of it.

My own is the most northern of all the Dioceses in Great Britain and extends from the city of Aberdeen to the tip of the most remote of Britain's islands.

In my diocese we have forty two churches and about six private chapels. We have a rich Christian heritage which, so very sadly, is under huge pressure as secular humanism and militant atheism place us under attack. The majority of weddings and funerals are now conducted by non-Christian celebrants, as they are called. Most if not all of them secular humanists.

In addition paganism and various forms of non-Christian spiritualism attract people away from what you and I recognise to be the one true faith given to us by Jesus Christ himself and spread by his followers from the moment of his first resurrection appearance down through the ages and right to us today.

I have great pleasure in being with you today for it is your faith, the faith of Africa, that gives us in western Europe great comfort and great inspiration. When we see what you can achieve in Africa we get a glimpse of what we could do ourselves. We owe a great debt to you and thank you for your witness and perseverance in the faith and well as your commitment to its spread.

Direct changes have come about in our liturgy as a result of what I have experienced in my previous visits to you. The 'sharing of the peace' in our services is now much more vibrant and energetic that it was previously. I tell our people in Scotland to become African in sharing the peace. What is wonderful is that they are doing so.

Likewise, In many of churches there is now open prayer out loud said by people when invited to do so. That is something I learned from you and first heard here in this diocese. We could do more and we could do better, but we have begun. And it is because of your influence that you are helping us build up the body of Christ in your companion Diocese, my own Diocese of Aberdeen and Orkney.

And that takes me to the address I now wish to offer you.

My theme with you today is: 'Building up the body of Christ.' My working scripture, and the one with which I will begin is Paul's Letter to the Colossians and in particular Chapter 3, and from verses 12 – 17.

The central feature of these six verses are the graces, the virtues, which must be *put on* by the Christian. These virtues must become like clothes that we wear. They must become part of who we are. To list them these are: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.

I will say a bit more about them in a moment. But I must note that these haven't suddenly appeared in this text, as though out of nowhere. In the previous verses of Chapter Three of Colossians Paul has introduced two lists of vices; two lists of bad things that we must, as Christians, get rid of.

So he says that we must “put to death” whatever is earthly amongst us. And he lists five things that must be ‘put to death’. These are: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire and greed (verse 5). And to emphasise his point in verse 8 he goes on to list a further five things that we should get rid of. These are: anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language.

So then, these two lists, each of five bad things of which we are guilty and of which we must rid ourselves, are now overtaken by a list of five good things, what I might call ‘graces’ or ‘virtues’ that we should put on.

To remind you: compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. In other words Paul was saying to the early Christians at Colossus, what is now part of Greece, that it isn’t sufficient simply to get rid of the negative things that get in the way of discipleship. One has to clothe oneself of the things that are of God.

Paul was speaking to the Church at Colossae then, but today he is speaking to each one of us now.

Each of the three actions: ‘put to death’, ‘put off’ the negative things and ‘put on’ the positive virtues indicates a single action which then leads into a total change of life and lifestyle.

Why should we do this? Well it is because the Colossians then, and you and me today, are ‘chosen by God’, we are ‘holy and beloved’. Previously these were titles given to the people of Israel previously, but are now being transferred to these new Christians.

To be worthy of this, all that they were before needs to be transformed into something new. Issues and vices that were there in the old life, need to be transformed into their new life. And insofar as the Scriptures are the living word of God what Paul said then needs to be accepted by us now.

In Romans Paul encourages the Roman Christians to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 13:14) So putting on these virtues means making oneself part of the life of Christ. Making them part of who you are shows how Christians should behave in their dealings with others, particularly with fellow-believers.

In one sense this is obvious. But it is in this area that we all too easily fall down and fail. If I were to ask each of you are you:

Compassionate with one another. You would know you ought to be, and yet I bet that many times you are intolerant and not at all understanding.

Kind to each other. Again you will know you should be. But how often have you sent somebody in this room a cruel email, or have said unkind things to one another.

And then humility. All the way through the Old Testament are references to the virtue of humility. About two hundred and seventy times versions of this grace appear. It stands in marked contrast to pagan Greek literature where humility does not figure as a grace or virtue at all. By making it part of the life of a faithful Hebrew and then a virtue of the Christian life such a lifestyle is being given a totally new standing and significance in the ancient world, and by extension to us now.

In the Magnificat, from Luke's Gospel, we read how the might are to be brought down and the humble raised up. Humility before God and before one another is truly a virtue. It is a grace of God and you should look up to those in whom you can see it and you should seek it yourself and, as Colossians says, put it on.

I have cited the Magnificat as a place where this is found. But you'll also get it in the Epistles, not least Philippians 2:5-11.

Meekness is closely linked with humility. Similarly it is found throughout the Epistles of Paul as well as in James and 1 Peter to say nothing of three appearances in Matthew's gospel.

In the Old Testament the term for 'meekness' also designates those who are poor, the defenceless, those without rights who are cheated and exploited. They are those who are cheated and exploited; targeted and bullied by those who want what they have, and don't want to work for it themselves.

But the principal meaning of meekness is the willingness of a Christian believer to take on one's own shoulders the burden another is carrying. Think for a moment of those around you. Picture in your mind's eye those whom you like least. Those

whom you dislike. Picture them. Now see yourself carrying their bags for them. Now see you supporting them in their life's difficulties. This is meekness. This is you carrying Christ's burden for them.

Our human tendency is to put another person down when we don't like them, or when we think they are a threat. No, if you are follower of Christ you must build them up and you must carry their burden. You may not like the thought of that. But there is no alternative. Putting on the grace of Christ means you doing the thing you like least.

And, fifth comes patience. Are you impatient with another? With your wife or husband? You may well be. But you will now know from what I have said already that you should not be. To show a lack of patience with another is to fail in one's Christian duty towards them.

Put on the grace of patience. Be kind, courteous and gentle with one another. And if someone doesn't show a willingness to be patient back to you let your understanding and generous attitude towards them be an example of how they should behave. And be ready to forgive one another insults and offences when caused.

Now it may well have been the case that when he wrote this Letter, Paul was addressing a very specific problem or issue in the Church there. Even if he was then it still follows that his words of both warning and encouragement have a more general application.

This is in verse 13. If one of you has a complaint against another then before you even begin to work out what has gone wrong you should approach the situation ready to forgive the other person for whatever went wrong, or to forgive harsh words that might happen to have been said. At the heart of Paul's message is God's unconditional forgiveness of us. For that reason, if for no other, we should unconditionally forgive one another.

We must not just teach reconciliation and forgiveness with our lips and in our teaching. We must live it. Forgiveness and reconciliation must be found deep in here, in your heart and soul somewhere. They are not just words and concepts to be

voiced in a sermon. They should be there in heart and soul every moment and every day of our life.

What God has done for us in Christ Jesus, namely forgiven and redeemed us, we must do for one another. And in verse 14 we find echoes of that glorious hymn in 1 Corinthians 13 where 'above all' we must "clothe ourselves with love". It is this which "binds everything together in perfect harmony."

When I was a rector of a parish there was a man who for about twelve years or so tried every way that he could to bring down my ministry. He wrote to every canon lawyer he could think of. He contacted the local Member of Parliament about me. He wrote to every bishop in Scotland and no doubt to the Archbishop of Canterbury as well. He complained to the Standing Committee of the Diocese about me. And he brought canonical actions against me.

Outside church he would shout and argue to my face. He would do the same to me inside the church. At times I had to get the police to be there to ensure the congregation could worship in peace. And I won't deny that there were times when I was completely at a loss to know how to deal with him.

And then, one Saturday, I went to a conference on the Ministry of Healing. It was a conference all about praying for healing. Anyway without thinking about it I went forward during this conference to two people who had the task of praying for people who asked for prayer. And I asked for prayer. I described the situation with this man. The two people asked a few simple questions for clarification. And then they began praying. Initially in English. Then in tongues. I didn't have a clue what they were saying. But when they finished and I went to sit down I felt a huge grin across my face and I felt wonderfully lightened.

And in my mind I could hear and see the words of scripture, "Perfect love casts out fear." That was my clue as to how to deal with this man. However firm I was to be with him. Whatever way I had to seek to control him, first of all I had to love him. If I loved him I would no longer fear him whatever steps I had to contain or control him.

It made all the difference. Even though his attitude remained unchanged my sense of peace with the situation lifted. Every time he spoke or addressed or shouted at me or

was in any way unpleasant I ran the words through my mind, 'Perfect love casts out fear.' And I kept repeating those words as a prayer in every moment of my dealings with him. In summary, finding a way to love the one who most hated me has become one of the pivotal moments of my ministry as a priest. I continue to do it whenever I am in a difficult or stressful situation with someone.

Now so far I have spoken as though putting on all these graces, these virtues, is an individual act. In one sense of course it is. Simply because each of us has to do it personally. But in Paul's mind, and therefore in our minds there ought to be, the recognition that what we do individually has an effect on everyone around us.

Love binds together the members of the congregation, the members of the church, into unity. And not just the sort of unity that you might find in any group of like-minded people but a unity that is both at one with itself, and one with Christ.

From John 17 Jesus said, 'As I and the Father are one, may you be one, so that the love which we have may be between you as well ... You in me, and I in them, may they all be one.'

Individual actions concerned with putting on the graces of Christ have their wider effect and impact on the unity of the church. The graces and virtues which we each must adopt individually are nothing at all if they are not then put into effect in our relationships with one another. It is by the love that we have, and which is lived out in the graces we adopt, that the body of Christ, his church, his built up here and now.

In verse 15, Paul moves on from love to peace. This has many echoes with what he has written elsewhere, notably in Ephesians. In many ways five graces, lived out in the love of Christ between us in our relationships gives rise to a 'peace', indeed a 'peace that passes all understanding.' Even when we are disputing with one another, if it is peace that rules us then discord and disharmony will not get their foothold as we work out how to put things right. Christ has given us his peace and he asks us to live it with one another and, as he puts it, to be thankful.

The word used in verse fifteen for thankful is *eucharistoi* the word from which we derive eucharist. Give thanks therefore with a full and open heart. As thanksgivings for all of this increase amongst so God is glorified.

And as we move from love to peace to thanksgiving so the Word of God dwells among us. In this context any disagreement or dispute has its resolution in the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs and we can advise, caution or correct one another with all of this in place. By all of these means, and principally in our conduct with one another, we demonstrate the reality of Christ in our midst by the way we show the love and peace of Christ to one another and with the other person live a life of thanksgiving towards him.

In all this there is a deeply profound wisdom that takes us way beyond all human understanding. The moment a Christian says to one another 'I'm going to take you to court' you will know that they have not understood, even if they have read, these few verses from Colossians. Colossians gives us a new way to be church. It gives us that teaching which, with numerous other parts of the New Testament shows us that if we live in the body of Christ our calling is build up the other person, not to knock them down.

The summary of these few verses arises in verse 17. It speaks for itself and I close with it: "...Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."

Everything must be done in obedience to the Lord Jesus if the Church is to be built up in unity. A consequence of this is giving thanks to God through Jesus, in whom we live and move and have our being. And this provides the framework of love that enables us to work through our differences and truly to live in a peace with one another that passes all understanding.

Amen.

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Begin exegesis here.