

Chosen people

I think most people here will know that I am a fan of Lego – I have a lot of Lego, and my collection increased by 2,377 pieces this week. I still think of Lego as a child's toy, for which I have adult enthusiasm and an adult budget – but in recent years, Lego has become a reasonably mainstream adult hobby. Lego markets sets to adults – adults of all ages – I've met a lady in her eighties who builds large Lego sets while her husband is out playing golf – and Lego sells sets such as ships in bottles, flower arrangements and Christmas wreaths which don't seem to have much child appeal at all.

This is really the golden age for Lego fandom. There have been many ups and downs in the past... and I can talk about most of them at length, but I'll leave most of them to another day. But there are two changes that Lego made that I want to share:

Firstly, Lego introduced the minifigure – the small Lego person - in 1977, which really revolutionised the Lego world – finally there were people in Legoland. Police officers, firefighters, paramedics, construction workers, chefs and all the rest. They all had the same face. Two black dots for eyes, and an upward curve for a mouth... the face Lego fans know today as the 'classic smiley'.

In 1989 things changed when Lego introduced the Pirates line, and along with it, character faces – there was Captain Redbeard who not had only a red beard but an eye-patch as well, the figure known to fans as 'the pirate babe', who had eyelashes and red lipstick, and so on,

But until Captain Redbeard and his motley crew arrived on the scene in 1989, the only way to tell Lego people apart was by their clothes.

So often it's the same with us. I can tell you that you get a different reception if you walk into an office wearing a high vis shirt, work pants and steel capped boots than you do wearing a suit.

I once went to visit a nursing home after church on a Sunday, and one of the residents said to me 'you must be in real estate'. I explained that I wasn't, and he apologised and told me he couldn't think of anyone else who'd be wearing a suit on a Sunday.

People do judge us by what you wear.

What we wear can be important. People see what we're wearing and have expectations based on that. As we heard in our reading from Colossians this morning, Paul told us "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." (3:12)

This clothing of ourselves – or dressing up – that Paul describes is the essence of following Jesus. We're called to turn away from our old way of living for ourselves. To put off our old selves (3:9), and rid ourselves of our old practices – anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language and lying.

Paul urges us to clothe ourselves instead with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Who do those things remind you of? Jesus?

As we put on this new clothing, it might not fit us very well at first – it's a big change – but if we don't get rid of our old clothes – anger and rage and so on, the new clothes will never fit on properly over the top.

For our new Christ-like clothes to fit us well, we must take off everything that connects us to our old nature. As the Christ-like clothes become more and more a part of our thinking and speaking and doing, we find that something else happens. You might think that these clothes are just external changes – our clothes are seen by others, after all. But by adopting the behaviour that Paul calls us to, it does something to our internal spirit.

“Let Christ’s peace rule in your hearts,” Paul writes. What began as an outward change of our ‘behavioural clothes’ now becomes an inward change for us. The peace of Christ begins to take over the way we think and behave, ruling not only our hearts, but also our actions.

It is important to remember that all of the Christ-like characteristics we are to put on are social ones – they cover how we relate to each other – and to others as well. We together are part of the body of Christ, and we are sent into the world to connect with others, as well.

Paul explains this in verses 13 and 14 of our reading, “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

He’s not urging us to read the scriptures more, or to pray more – instead, Paul wants us to work on our relationship. Not just those nearest and dearest to each other, but all our relationships.

Because sometimes we do need to work on our relationships: We’re people. We’re bound to disagree from time to time and come into conflict with each other. We need to think about how we respond when that happens.

Remember the new commandment that Jesus gave his followers? John 13:34, “A new command[ment] I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another”. And that new commandment is reflected in what Paul writes here to the Colossians “And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” (3:14)

Paul goes on to say, “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly.” This change of heart, this movement from clothing ourselves in Christ to finding an inner, spiritual peace in our lives, happens when we immerse ourselves in the word of God.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews tells us of the importance of the message of Christ: “The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). And in his second letter to Timothy, Paul writes, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

Friends, we grow in the knowledge and love of God when we allow God’s word, the message of Christ, to dwell in us richly – and for that to happen, we must take it in. We must read the scriptures – or listen to them read – and meditate on them, so that we understand – so God’s word is in our hearts and well as our minds.

And we do that together – as Paul says: as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. (3:16) I think we have been reminded in the last week in our Carols and Christmas services of how powerful hymns and songs and carols are in remembering and understanding what God has done for us in Jesus. Songs are a great way to remember.

Paul tells us too that we should sing to God with gratitude in your hearts. In fact, Paul reminds us to be thankful three times in three verses, to be thankful in verse 15, have gratitude in our hearts in verse 16, to give thanks to God in verse 17.

Paul tells us that, as God's chosen people, we have put off our old ways, clothed ourselves in Jesus, and had our hearts transformed by his peace as we take God's Word into ourselves. The only response we can offer to such a great gift is our thanks and praise. Our lives become lives of worship, showing each other and the whole world compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, and offering one another forgiveness.

How we look is important. How we look to others is important. And I'm not talking about how we dress when we come to church, but I'm talking about how others see us – at church, at home, at work, at the shops, on the train – or wherever it might be.

Society has certain expectations of Christians. Certain stereotypes that come up time and time again. We're expected to disapprove of some things. We're expected to be hypocritical about a lot of things. What's expected of us is often more like what we would expect of the Pharisees of Jesus' time rather than Jesus' followers.

People are fond of quoting that saying attributed to Gandhi, "I like your Christ; I do not like your Christians".

That's an easy thing to say, but there's certainly an element of truth to it.

Because when we truly put on Christ, we look different, we act differently, we speak differently, because we not only wear Christ on the outside, we are filled with Christ in our hearts as well. And it shows. People will notice. Rather than the anger, rage, pride, malice and slander of other people, they will see compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience of our lives. They will become curious; they'll want to know why our lives are different from theirs, why we have peace and joy in abundance, whatever our circumstances are.

This is something I often contemplate: After Jesus had given the new commandment (Love one another), he went on to say "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:35).

Everyone will know that we are disciples of Jesus because they will see our love for each other. Do people notice our love for each other? Can we expect others to know that we are Jesus' disciples because they can see how much we love each other?

If someone outside our faith isn't noticing how our life is different from theirs, why do you think that might be? If no one is asking us how we have such peace in our lives, even in the face of disaster, why is that? If no one is remarking about the joy we always show, why aren't they? If no one can see Christ in you, ask yourself why.

If people can't see our love for one another, then we can't be doing it right, can we?

Could it be that we haven't really been changed, that we have not ever experienced the transformation Jesus offers?

If we talk one way at church, but our language at home and elsewhere is laced with criticism and slander and abusive talk, maybe it's time for us to cast off the old you and clothe ourselves "compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." Maybe it's time for us to start – or

perhaps restart bearing with our sisters and brothers in Christ, and when we have a complaints against each other, let's work to forgive each other, just as God has forgiven us.

We are God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved. Let's act like that. Not smugly, holding that we're chosen because we're special, but humbly, because we're chosen because we aren't special. But are being transformed by God.

We are God's chosen people. We are loved by God beyond measure. Jesus gave up his life for us. In response, so let's give our lives to him, and reflect his love to the world around us.

Let's make sure that our neighbours can now we are followers of Jesus, not because we come to church on a Sunday morning, not because we uphold particular standards or dress in a particular way, but let's make sure that they can now we are Jesus' followers by our love.

I'm not generally one for New Year's resolutions, but maybe it's a good time to contemplate how we are going as followers of Jesus, and how we are showing our love for one another in our lives.

Maybe it's a good time to make some changes. To make sure that what we clothe ourselves in is not the things of the world, but rather, the compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, that Jesus offers us. To work on exercising the fruit of the spirit in our lives, and in our world.

But whatever we do, as individuals or as a church, whether in word or deed, let us do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Amen.