

Living as God's people.

Psalm 19 is a well-known psalm: Most famously, it gives us that wonderful verse “May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.” (Psalm 19:14) – but it’s also interesting because it’s a psalm that’s in two parts, the first part begins “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands”. It explains that the wonders of creation show us the glory of God. In the New Testament, Paul writes to the Romans (1:20) “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made...”

Then the second part of Psalm 19 begins at verse 7 with “The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy...” and it goes on to tell us about how the commands of God are more desirable than gold and sweeter than honey. Which are odd things to say about most of the laws we experience in our lives, if you think about it.

But both of these parts make up the one psalm, the one hymn of praise to God. On the one hand, it talks about how wonderful and great God’s creation is, and on the other, how wonderful and great the order that God wants for his creation is.

One of the things that we often miss about God’s law is the order in which things happen. Do you remember when God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments? Exodus 20:2 “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, where you were slaves”.

God heard the cry of his people in Egypt (he declared he was their God and they were his people) and he rescued them from slavery; he delivered them. He saved them. And then – only then – he gave them the commandments.

The Israelites weren’t rescued because they kept God’s laws, or as a result of them ‘being good’ or whatever. But he delivered them out of Egypt anyway. He demonstrated that he was their God – and that he loved his people.

And then he gave them the commandments, effectively saying “I am your God, you are my people” and my people will live like this. My people will keep these commandments.

The commandments shouldn't be a burden, because if we are living the way God wants us to live we will keep those commandments automatically – if we are living in community with God and with each other, they will be second nature. If we are living the way God wants us to live, then we will have no other gods but God, we won't make or worship idols, we will respect our parents, we won't steal or murder and so on.

With that as a background then, we come to this morning's reading from Hebrews... Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters (13:1). In John's gospel, Jesus give his disciples the new commandment "...that you love one another, even as I have loved you" and when challenged as to what is the most important commandment, Jesus, rather than turning to ten commandments, turned to Deuteronomy 6:5 "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" and Leviticus 19:18 "...love your neighbour as you love yourself."

It is for their love for one another that Christians should be known.

But it's not just words of love, love to be lived out.

Verse 2: "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers," Hospitality is important. Welcoming people into our homes and into our lives is important, and sharing hospitality with people is not an onerous task; there may even be benefits in it for us, after all, Hebrews tells us that "... by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it." You might remember the story from Genesis 18, where Abraham did just that – welcomed angels without knowing it, and they prophesied the birth of Isaac.

But it's not all simply sitting around having nice dinner parties... Look at verse 3: "Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." Not just think about them, but remember them. As though we are in prison with them. As though we are suffering with them.

Be mindful of the pain others are feeling. Be mindful of their suffering. Be mindful of their isolation. The old saying "There but for the grace of God go I" can be troubling. But think about it: We're very fortunate to be living where we are. We're fortunate to be living when we are. We're fortunate that circumstances or poor judgement haven't led us into a life of crime. We're fortunate that we're not living in a country ravaged by famine or war.

We're fortunate, but others aren't. So let's remember that.

Marriage, Hebrews tells us, should be honoured by all, and husbands and wives must be faithful to each other. (13:4). Marriage is the closest human relationship there is, although circumstances can change, we do marry for better and for worse, and until we are parted by death. While we recognise that sometimes relationships fail, we need to be faithful to our partners, and they should be faithful to us. Interestingly, the writer to the Hebrews says that marriage is to be honoured by all, not simply those who are married.

So even if someone is not married, they need to respect the marriage of others.

The next part of verse 4 is a bit uncomfortable "God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral." Judgement is always an uncomfortable topic, but the way I think about judgement is this: If there is something wrong, things can't be made right without doing something about what is wrong.

Importantly, the judgement is not ours, it is God's. Despite what we are told, we Christians do tend to be pretty good at judging others. It's tricky though, because we do need to reject what is wrong – "Deliver us from evil" we pray.

We tend to think of sexual promiscuity as a modern thing, but the territories of the Roman Empire were as promiscuous as western world is today. Christians stood out then, as they do today.

And similarly, as it is today, making money was big business in the Roman Empire. But Hebrews implores us to "Keep [our] lives free from the love of money".

You've probably noticed that money is immensely useful stuff. You can buy all sorts of things with it. And having a bit more is always useful. I've never met anyone who's struggled to find things to spend money on.

Money can't buy happiness, they say. Perhaps not, but it's very doubtful that poverty brings joy to anyone.

It isn't money though, that the writer to the Hebrews warns us of, but rather the love of money (which we all should know from 1 Timothy is the root of all

evil (1Tim6:10)). So, you might wonder what's the difference between loving money, and just liking it a lot?

Well, when you love someone, you make sacrifices for them. You put them before others. You put them even before yourself. So if you start sacrificing things for money or for opportunities to make money, then you may well have crossed the line.

If you are giving up family time to work and work and work – not for the pleasure of work, but for the reward, if you are cutting back on spending to buy lottery tickets, if you are sacrificing friendships for sales of the latest network marketing opportunity. Well, the love of money has probably taken over from loving one another.

Instead of pursuing money, the writer says we should be satisfied with what we have. So often, our wealth is our safeguard for the future. We save for a rainy day. We save for our children's education. We save for an unexpected emergency. We fear for the future, and what it will mean for us and our loved ones.

But the writer to the Hebrews assures us of the future: For God has said: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" And he encourages us to be bold and say "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"

Wealth, of course, will often help. It will often get you out of a tight spot. Money is, as I said, immensely useful stuff. But there are times that there is nothing money can do.

But what God has done for us, can't be undone. It can't be lost. The hope that we have in Christ through his death and resurrection is sure and it is certain.

Even when people had forgotten God's promises to them, even when they'd turned away from living the way God wanted them to live, even when they were loving money rather than God, God reached out to them – and to us: to each one of us, and to all of us, to reconcile us to him.

Jesus died for us. And in his resurrection he shows us the sure and certain hope of new life, if we simply put our trust in him.

The writer tells the Hebrews that they should “Remember [their] former leaders, who spoke God's message to [them]. Think back on how they lived and died, and imitate their faith.

I’m sure we can all think of Christian people who have lead and taught and supported and prayed for each one of us - generations of faithful people, a cloud of witnesses (Heb12:1), who have gone before us.

And we can all think back on how they lived and we can seek to imitate their faith.

Then we have this wonderful assurance from the letter to the Hebrews that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. (12:8) The writer is very definite on those three times: yesterday, today and forever.

Firstly yesterday, the time of the old covenant. The time before the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus. Christ, as the Word, was present in the beginning, at the time of creation. As John’s gospel tells us “In the beginning the Word already existed; the Word was with God, and the Word was God. From the very beginning the Word was with God. Through him God made all things;” (John1:1-3a)

Secondly, today. The writer emphasises that the message of Jesus isn’t simply a message for later, something for the future. Rather, it is something that can’t be put off until tomorrow. Or the day after. Or early next week when things aren’t so busy. The promise of Jesus, new life in Jesus, is the offer today. We are called to love each other now not later. We welcome strangers into our homes today, not next week. We need to turn away from the love of money, and put our trust in Christ, now.

Thirdly, forever. In his death and resurrection, Jesus has opened the way to everlasting life. The Jesus who we come to know now, is the same Jesus that became human, who suffered and died, and who rose again, and the same Jesus who we will know in the world to come.

The lectionary then skips ahead to verse 15 and 16 for the rest of our reading “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.”

Remember that the Hebrew people would have been used to quite different sacrifices. They would have been used to animal sacrifices, brought to the temple and slaughtered and burned to please God. And that would have been the concept of sacrifice that people who weren't Jews would have been familiar with too. But here, the writer tells us that praise is our sacrifice to God, because as the writer explains in Chapter 9 of Hebrews, the blood of sacrifice, the blood of Christ, has already been shed (Hebrews 9:15), so we offer praise to God as our sacrifice through Jesus, through what Jesus has already done for us.

And not only that, we get to make our sacrifices of praise and service directly to God. No longer is there a priestly order to make sacrifices on behalf of the people. As Peter writes, to all Christians, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." (1 Peter 2:9).

Doing the right thing and praising God go together. We can't really do one and not do the other. If we are truly praising God, then we must be loving one another, we must be doing the right thing. We must be living as God's people.

God wants people to follow Jesus, to put their faith in him, to pray, to worship and witness in his name. The life of the church, our collective life as a Christian community, as we love our brothers and sisters, welcome strangers, care for others, and respect each other, is a sacrifice of worship.

We should be seeking to please God, not because we can do anything to earn his favour, but because that is the right response to having received God's favour. We love, because God first loved us (1 John 4:19).

So when we go out from here, let's do the right thing. Let us praise God in our songs and words, and also in our actions and in our lives. Let's live as Christ would have us live. Live as the writer to the Hebrews implores us to live. Let's love our brothers and sisters, let's cheerfully greet people who come to Church, and cheerfully talk to our neighbours too, and welcome them into our homes.

Let's remember people in prison with sympathy and not disdain. Let's remember people who are suffering, not simply be grateful that it's them and not us. Let's be honest in our dealings and not seek unfair advantages, not be

driven by the love of money. Let us honour our own marriages and those of others. Let us be content in what God has done for us, and be confident in what God has done for us as well. Let us be thankful for the generations of faithful Christians who have gone before us, and faithful to all those who will come after us.

And throughout all of this, let us remember that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

So let us today, and always, do the right thing: Offer praise to God through Jesus, and never forget to please God by loving one another.

Amen.