

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 8 August 2021

Guide us, O God, by Your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

John 6:35, 41-51; Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Imitating God

How on earth can we imitate God? It may be the first thing that comes to our minds as soon as we read Ephesians 5:1 – “therefore, be imitators of God.” In the gospel according to John, people asked the same question but in a different way – “How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’ In both readings, the work of God in human life is mattered. In John, it will be through Jesus’ saying - ‘the bread of Heaven.’ In Ephesians, it will be through the rules for the new life. These two will be woven into one - the life of the church as imitators of God.

The bread of Heaven in human form

It is not difficult to see people doubt on Jesus’ identity as the bread of Heaven. In the end, they knew his parents and family. They concluded that he hasn’t come from Heaven. The crowd’s self-assured “knowledge” stands in their way of seeing the truth. It is not uncommon to see such a thing. We often suffer from the same difficulty of seeing beyond what we “know” to be true while not seeing the divine truth among us. But what is truth? This is what Pilate asked Jesus.¹ Pilate was the judge as procurator while Jesus was a criminal charged by the religious authority. On the surface, he had the power to let Jesus live or die. Yet, he didn’t know what the truth was. In fact, the truth has already been said by Jesus - “you say that I am a king. For this, I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”² The truth is, Jesus was the king and judge whom had the transformative power. Anyone or anything that had in contact with him cannot remain the same but changed. But transformation is not such a mechanical chain of events, but only by grace. As such people’s grumble about ‘the bread of Heaven’ helps us see that faith can come only from God. Unless God opens our eyes and hearts, no one is able to see new possibilities.

In John 6, we see the aspects of Holy Communion. The bread from Heaven will give life to the world, astonishingly, by dying for it. But it is not “free meal,” as it will cost Jesus his life.

¹ John 18:38

² John 18:37

Those who feed on this bread will also be drawn to the cross.³ The bread that we have leads us to the truth and faith in Him. In this way, we become imitators of God.

What do imitators of God do?

Imitating God involves a few things. First, a person is called by God to be God's family through Christ. Next, in Christ, their former way of life is put away, and the person is renewed in the new life. Last, what this person would do is to speak truthfully to their neighbours.⁴ In Ephesians, speaking in the truth firstly helps believers' character building. Even though we may be angry at something/someone, we will not sin because of it. As human beings, emotion and feelings are natural, but they will not hinder us from being imitators of God. For those who are living in the truth, love is the ground of their being. Even situations that seem intractable or unpardonable are sometimes transformed by this approach. In the end, God is the sole king and judge. Paul says, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."⁵ In truth and love, we will be led to be imitators of both God, and Christ⁶ whose love has been central to the message of Ephesians. ⁷ Even so, sin does not disappear. The persistence of sin is a reflection of human frailty. Many of the New Testament writings deal at length with the persistence of sin within the body of Christ. In v4:28, Paul says that even thieves are to be found within the body. But by living a godly life, we promote the body's growth in building itself up in love.⁸

The life of imitators of God

In our story time, we heard a story titled the frog and the Ox. The frog wanted to look bigger than the ox before his child. The story's moral is 'self-conceit may lead to self-destruction.' The word 'bigger' in this story has connotations of 'king,' or 'power.' The frog is living in such a world where the bigger, the powerful, or the king are revered. In such a world, the weak or the common may serve the bigger or the king. In fact, this kind of thing happens everywhere. What is the truth in this story in that God is the only king and judge then? Imagine that the small pool/pond where the old frog and his son are living. The ox is living nearby paddock that belongs to a farmer and his family. Yet all these things belong to God's kingdom. Strangely,

³ John 12:32

⁴ Ephesians 4:25

⁵ Romans 12:19; cf. Deuteronomy 32:35

⁶ Ephesians 5:1-2

⁷ Ephesians 2:4; 3:19

⁸ Ephesians 4:16

this all powerful king is serving the little, the weak, the ugly and the silly. Had the frog understood the truth of Jesus Christ, the story unfolds differently and the ending of the story might have been different. To the question – ‘what made the frog fail?’, the short answer may be that the frog didn’t know the truth in that he himself is uniquely created by God, in that the bigger or the smaller cannot be measured by simple comparison. If we re-write it from the perspective of the truth, how the story will unfold? We’ll exchange it during our morning tea time.

Paul sums up a life of imitators of God in 5:1-2. “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” The Torah required Israelites to make various kinds of sacrifices, including burnt offerings. These were sometimes accompanied by incense. These offerings produced a sweet-smelling fragrance that was pleasing to God. Here Paul depicts that Christ’s sacrificial offering of himself on the cross was the culmination of the sacrificial system. It demonstrated his love for us and gave us a model for loving one another.

Initially, we thought that such a call to imitate God seemed absurd. By thinking that we could ‘imitate God’ might be the height of arrogance. Now we know that this call to imitation is founded on the love of Christ for us. Jesus himself is the footsteps of God through this world. He didn’t simply give us an example to follow by our own determination. But he cut the path for us and then pull us along. We imitate by grace, not as those who are goaded and threatened into stepping in only the right places, but as those who are loved into walking this path. May God help us live as imitators of God today and always. Amen.