

## **Sermon Ephesians 5, 15 to 20**

**“Make the most of the time because the days are evil”. So says Verse 16 of our reading from Ephesians today.**

I want to start with a poem, “Waiting for the Barbarians” by Constantine Cavafy.

*“– Why are we waiting in the agora?*

*“Because the barbarians arrive today.*

*“– Why is there such uncertainty in the Senate?  
Why do the Senators sit there and not legislate?*

*“Because the barbarians arrive today.  
What laws can our Senators enact now?  
The barbarians will legislate when they arrive.*

*“– Why has our emperor awoken so early,  
and seated himself before the city’s main gate,  
on his throne, solemn, wearing his crown?*

*“Because the barbarians arrive today  
and the emperor wants to greet  
their leader. As is the custom, he will  
present him with a parchment.  
Many titles and names are written on it.*

*“– Why have our two consuls and the praetors chosen  
today to don their red, embroidered togas?  
Why are they wearing bracelets adorned with amethyst  
and rings with shiny, glistening emeralds?  
Why do they carry expensive walking sticks  
gilded and inlaid with silver?*

*“Because the barbarians arrive today,  
and such things impress barbarians.*

*“– And why have our outspoken orators not come as always  
to spout their words, to have their say?*

*“Because the barbarians arrive today,  
and eloquence and speeches bore them.*

*“– Where has this anxiousness and confusion come from  
all of a sudden? Look at the haunted faces.*

*Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly  
and everyone returning to their homes so worried?*

*“Because night fell and the barbarians never arrived.  
Some men travelled to the border region,  
and reported that the barbarians no longer exist.*

*— “Now what will we do without the barbarians?  
They were a sort of solution for us.”*

Constantine P. Cavafy lived from 1863 to 1933. In his poem “Waiting for the Barbarians,” leaders exercise a sinister kind of violence — they’ve taken over people’s imaginations with showy displays of wealth and privilege, time-wasting ceremony, and fear coursing beneath it all.

This sinister kind of violence has always existed. We may feel the days are evil now as we look back at the murder of those three little girls at a dance class and the riots of two weeks ago but, if we look across history, we see it is nothing new. Where is it coming from at the moment? It is there in the rhetoric of the likes of Donald Trump and some of our own leaders, who insinuate false narratives which create fear and hatred. It is there in fake news perpetrated by who know who, and for what purposes? What is new, is that now we have the means to spin and grossly inflate these ideas at speed on social media.

Sometimes it can seem as though we come to church and the readings and the sermon have nothing to do with what is happening in the world today. This could not be further from the truth. A few Sundays back, Graham spoke of how we have three ways to access the truth. Two of them were through our emotions and imagination. These are wonderful gifts from God, but can be dangerous, as we see from our poem - as we see from social media and the riots - if manipulated by the evil intent of others. Both Jesus and, later, Paul, were very hot on this topic. “Renew your mind – make it new,” says St Paul. Jesus speaks of Metanoia, changing our minds, looking at things in a different way, God’s way. Metanoia is the true meaning of the word, “Repent!” Change your mind, change the way you look at the world, and you will change the way you interact with the world.

One of the best and possibly the shortest prayer is, “Change the world, Lord, and start with me.” Why is this such a great prayer? Because it begins by recognising that I may be, probably am, part of the world’s

problems. If I want the world to be peaceful, then I must first work at peace in myself. If I don't want people of different colour, race and faith to be attacked and terrified in riots, then I must face my own racism and ask God to help me change. If I want unity, then I have to work at building community. Church is about community. But this prayer also recognises my inadequacy, my need of God's generous and merciful heart in what I do.

"Change the world, Lord, and start with me", because without You working in me, I can do nothing.

Paul tells the Ephesians they can change their world by changing themselves – working at becoming more Christ-like. Christ has broken down the barriers that separate people from each other. They and we, have to follow through by carrying on Christ's work in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In today's text Paul has been talking about how those who follow Christ now live in the light of Christ and are therefore made visible. They no longer live in darkness. So, he continues his instruction about how to live as a follower of Christ and begins by saying, "Be careful then how you live". Make the most of it. What follows then are three sets of instructions about how to do that.

The first is, be wise, not unwise.

The second, is don't be foolish but be understanding.

And finally, do not be drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit.

Do you see how the first two instructions speak directly to how we should read, mark and inwardly digest all the opinions being thrown at us today? Be wise. Be understanding. And the third may remind us that quite a few of the rioters who have been brought to trial, have admitted they were seriously under the influence of alcohol.

So, first, the readers of this letter are to live wisely making the most of the time in which they live. Our age is one in which we are surrounded by more information than we can possibly consume, but we know there is a difference between wisdom and retaining a lot of information.

Wisdom is one of those characteristics that produces goodness, righteousness and truth. This way of living does not happen overnight but takes a lifetime to cultivate. As we continue to read into the text, we

see that one who lives wisely is one who is filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, the Holy Spirit would lead us into all truth.

Secondly, Paul says the readers are not to be foolish but are to seek to understand what the will of the Lord is. As Paul writes we understand that the greatest evil the Ephesians were facing was not paganism or non-Christians. Rather it was those within their own community who claimed to represent Christianity but who taught in a way that was not consistent with the teachings of Jesus. (Just after I had written this I learnt that, according to the BBC, Donald Trump has made \$300,000 dollars – that is £273,000, from selling Trump branded bibles!)

Today we live in a time when understanding what God's will is, is hard because so many people are shouting that they know what that will is, and often they are shouting different things. So faced with the legion of voices, we turn to Christ - "metanoia" – turning back to God, and ask, "What would Jesus say?" "What would Jesus do?"

Our greatest evil comes from those who are motivated more by hate than love, by exclusivism more than hospitality, and by their own need to show their self-righteousness more than by a desire to live righteously.

Thirdly, the readers of Paul's letter are not to be drunk with wine but to be filled with the spirit. Now this doesn't say you can't drink! Paul is quoting a commonly used metaphor of his own time. In other words, if you're going to have some kind of ecstasy or excitement don't let it be because you are drunk which can lead to all kinds of scandalous behaviour but rather let it be because you are filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit which leads to a fruitful life, one that is characterized by praise and thanksgiving.

Finally in our text the readers are told, be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Christ gives to us the ultimate example of what it means to serve others and to put the needs of others before our own. Paul reminds us that a life that is lived carefully in the light of Christ bears real fruit – wisdom, understanding, the joy of the Holy Spirit leading to thanksgiving, and servanthood. These things become visible through the Holy Spirit, the light of Christ shining in an individual. May all of us learn to live our lives well in the light of God and help bring peace to our communities and country. May we learn to pray, "Change the world, Lord, and start with me".