

A Sermon in King's College Chapel

A young man approached a Cherokee elder and said: “within me are two wolves. One is wild and full of violence and hatred; the other is full of gentleness, compassion and love. Tell me which one of these wolves will win?”

The answer came slowly. “The one you feed.”

The New Testament doesn't have stories like this about wolves but it does talk about the contrast between the old person and the new person, and that between the behaviour of the wider community of Gentiles and what is expected of the Christians. The passage we heard from the letter to the Ephesians is based on just this contrast. The Gentiles behave abominably. But you, the recipients of the letter, are Christians. You must behave differently. They, the Gentiles, have but a poor understanding. They are unenlightened. They are alienated from God. They are ignorant and their greed has got the better of them. The hostile wolf is in control.

But that same greed and ignorance is a deep-set aspect of you as well. You may have converted, but the hostile wolf within never quite dies.

So Paul challenges the Christians. They have been converted, but they must still convert. Faith isn't just a matter of believing a few things. It involves the transformation of the whole person. And this emerges from an inner struggle: the struggle between desires that provoke harmful actions, and those that build up community; struggle between the wild wolf and the kind wolf.

We are a long way away from the Ten Commandments here. In the New Testament we don't find a list of 'dos and don'ts'. What we find are lists

of character traits that are fitting for followers of Jesus and which make Christian communities distinctive.

Among these are truthfulness, the capacity to feel anger – but not get locked into it; a willingness to work hard and to be generous with the rewards of your labour; an avoidance of gossip and bad-mouthing, and a complete absence of malice; and all this coupled with kindness, tender-heartedness and an intention to forgive.

The ‘dos and don’ts’ of the Ten Commandments are reasonably easy to understand and create nice straight lines that clarify things so that we can know precisely when we transgress. The values and virtues of the New Testament demand of us significantly more interpretation.

The question of truthfulness, for instance, can perplex us. We are used to people saying 'total disclosure', but we are also aware of being put off by 'too much information'. I once heard a convincing sermon that argued that we should not always tell the truth. 'The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth' may be right in court, but much of the time we can't really live like that. For instance, it's not fair or appropriate for parents to tell children everything they know. We rarely live in the world of complete disclosure or 'the whole truth'. And yet honesty matters hugely, as does the intention not to deceive. But honesty must always be kind.

Those of us who are provoked to anger from time to time can feel affirmed by our passage. Be angry by all means. But don't settle into anger. Anger is understandable and acceptable and sometimes good, for a short while. If it is habitual, or if it settles into rage or bitterness, that's because something's wrong with you, not a sign that there is something wrong with others. And if some serious injustice is what's provoking you then it's a campaign and a political strategy that you need, not violent explosions of rage.

It's interesting to note that there is an expectation of hard work among the early Christians. They are told they must not only respect the property and ownership rights of others, but be generous with what they have. Practical generosity is just as important in the New Testament as not pinching things was in the Old.

I sometimes wonder why the New Testament puts so much emphasis on not being malicious, not gossiping and so on. I can only suppose that this is because there was something of a culture of gossip among the early Christians. People can be really cruel with words if they like, and habits of waspishness, remarks that are cutting, or just plain cruel, are commonly found in institutions. At one level it's a coping strategy for those who are threatened; at another it's a form of entertainment, some salt and vinegar on the potato chips of otherwise dull conversation. But these are descriptions, not excuses. The biblical message is clear. Don't gossip; find something better to talk about!

The passage concludes with the instruction to be kind to one another, tender-hearted and forgiving. These words all point at practical forms of living that express the attitude of love to our neighbours. They are positive examples of what it means to love your neighbour. It is impossible, I suggest, to think of a person living a Christian life, or an institution enshrining Christian values, without kindness and tender-heartedness - that is living with a significant degree of sympathy, warmth, compassion and having a forgiving spirit.

The New testament gives a clear indication of what it means to think, talk and act as a Christian. But the truth is that conversion takes a lifetime. The nasty wolf within us never quite dies; never quite gives up. As the wise Cherokee elder suggested, whether you are end up being consumed by bitterness, envy and greed or develop into someone kind, tender-

hearted and forgiving, depends to a great extent on which of your inner wolves you feed.

My message is simple. Give some honest reflection to the way in which you nourish your soul. You may like to start by asking this: 'To which of those inner wolves do I give the best breakfast?'

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Ephesians 4. 17-end*

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*N.B I came across Cherokee wolf story in the chapter by Richard Carter in the book
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