

## Sermon on Ephesians 5.1-20

2 July 2016, St. Nicholas Cuddington (Eph 5.1-20; John 7.37-44)

### Prayer.

We are once again living through interesting times – I think you’ll agree the last couple of weeks have been quite a bonanza for the apocalyptically minded, and for the prophets of doom...!

Just eight years after a big economic meltdown, yet again it’s astonishing quite how many seemingly assured realities in our lives can be torn to shreds in a matter of days. Against all serious predictions Britain is suddenly set to leave the European Union, a scenario that even last Christmas nobody took very seriously. One of the two main characters who delivered that result was until Friday very widely touted as a Prime Minister in waiting – the charismatic golden boy of politics who could do no wrong and who had always been served pretty well by his widely quoted policy on cake: “pro having it and pro eating it”.

After the Shakespearean political massacres of this past week he is neither having it nor eating it. It seems he has been stabbed in the back by his closest fellow Brexiteer. His party is divided from top to bottom. His Prime Minister and lifetime friend has resigned just a year after delivering the first majority Conservative government in 25 years. Meanwhile Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition is facing its greatest internal crisis and division for at least 35 years, a state of chaos that is making the Tories seem roundly united and in rude health by comparison....! And all that without beginning to think about the businesses and banks, the universities and other organizations many of us are involved in, who are suddenly facing huge threats to their continued success in the coming years.

It seemed this week as if the one solid rock of reliable predictability in this storm of uncertainty was England’s expulsion from the European Cup by a nation without a professional football league and a population the size of Croydon... One pundit I came across suggested that since we seem to be running out of other plausible candidates for prime minister, the England coach Roy Hodgson has a fantastic record of knowing how to leave Europe in a hurry....

With political and economic certainties crumbling all around us, it’s unsurprising that many are feeling rather glum about what to do next. Some are desperately signing petitions for another referendum, and there is huge interest in moving abroad or in securing an EU passport through your Irish granny. I spoke this week with graduate students and colleagues from EU countries, some of whom were really distressed about what is happening. This country is famous around the world for the advice to “keep calm and carry on”, but at the moment there seem to be quite a few who are finding it difficult to do just that.

And I imagine that while all of that has been playing out in the background, many of us are dealing with other uncertainties in our lives that feel closer to home – whether in relation to our health or our family, or maybe a new job (like curate of Cuddington! ☺).

What does it mean to have faith in a situation like this? Does the Christian gospel offer any greater clarity about how we should live and where wisdom and security are to be found?

Actually, I'd like to suggest that our reading from Ephesians 5 this morning provides a wonderfully down to earth, practical, sober and hopeful account of how a Christian life helps to sustain believers through challenging times and allows them to shine a light in a place of darkness.

The reading is quite long, so I'll just single out a few points from it. Do keep it open in your service leaflet. But I also strongly recommend you to take it home and spread it out on your kitchen table next to your cup of coffee this week.

The most important principle is this, verses 1-2: know that you are dearly loved children of God. Christ loved us and gave himself up for us; so we are invited to follow his example and walk in the way of love.

Nothing and no one in the world can *ever* take that away from us. And it is by the light of his love that we can see clearly. This leads on to three further things, quite practical insights into Christian living in a confused and confusing world:

1. First, Verses 3-6. Don't walk near the edge of the cliff: we are not at Hogwarts flying around on magic brooms. So steer well clear of anything that corrupts the health of God's good gifts for his people - sexual immorality, materialistic greed, or the acid corruption of careless language. Don't think you can worship God and false gods without destroying what you love most deeply. It's a long way down that particular cliff. Don't walk near the edge of the cliff.
2. Secondly, Verses 8-14: embrace the Light. Christians are people who are able to shine a light in a place of darkness because they know it well as they have been rescued from it. So we are both invited and empowered to live as children of the light of Christ: "Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." This is a powerfully uplifting and encouraging gift: having been rescued from the darkness by Christ and bathed in his light, we don't just ignore and dismiss the darkness but are called to shine his warmth and light into places that are caught in despair and destruction. Embrace the Light.
3. Finally, Christ teaches us wisdom, worship and thankfulness as the engine of the Christian life, verses 15-20. To live wisely is not to fritter away the gift of time or relationships by pretending that all that matters is to be liked, or that nice people will always effortlessly float to the top. Christian wisdom acknowledges the evil and injustice of our society, and makes the very best of our time and opportunities because – as the text says on a rather sobering note, the days are evil. To do otherwise is to be foolish; instead we should always understand what the Lord's will is. Instead of seeking our inspiration in alcoholic or other distraction, we will find the power of this wisdom not in ourselves at all – but in the gift of the Holy Spirit and in prayer, worship and Thanksgiving together with other Christians.

I think it's worth taking this to heart at a time of uncertainty. The world around us seeks affirmation through success in our career or relationships, in Facebook likes or other imaginary measurements of social popularity, in the fortunes of our football team or our politics. For a short time, we may kid ourselves that these things matter. But before long comes along a shocking reality check like the last 10 days, whether in public or private life, painfully raising the question of where we can turn for wisdom and security, for light in the darkness and a fulfilled life.

The source of that light is not in ourselves but in Christ. It is that which gives us courage and confidence to shine the light of Christ in a dark and confused world.

In a way the same point is made in our Gospel reading from John 7 where Jesus preaches in the temple on the last day of the great and Jewish Festival of Tabernacles. On that day a ceremony of great joy was celebrated with water being drawn from the Pool of Siloam, carried up to the Temple and poured on the altar accompanied by blowing the trumpet symbolic of redemption. Jesus offers us himself as the crowning fulfilment of that joyful water celebration: instead of the water being drawn from the Pool of Siloam, it is he himself who causes it to well up abundantly from within each one of us who places our faith in him. That is the same source of strength and wisdom which Paul has in mind in Ephesians:

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. ... Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

AMEN.