

## Highfield Rd Uniting Church

### Ephesians 5: 8 – 20      Sleeper Awake!

‘Sleep walking through life.’ Have you heard that expression? Usually it’s applied to people with a narrowly focused life: go to work, go home, eat, go to bed, go to work, go home, eat, go to bed. Sleep walking! But increasingly, the expression is also being applied to people within a political context – those who are focussed exclusively on their own life, their own interests and comforts, while ignoring the world around them and even the consequences of their own actions. People will say that our culture is sleepwalking into a climate crisis. Or that we are sleepwalking into a resources crisis. Or even that we are sleepwalking into a cultural collapse.

Here in this passage from Ephesians, written in the first century, we hear much the same warning being given to the new, young church: “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you!”

The Lectionary selection for today begins at verse 15. However, I thought it was important to consider the run up to verse 15 as well, which keeps today’s selection within the context of ‘instruction for Christians’ rather than ethics. This helps us to stay focussed on understanding these chapters as the “So what?” of all the grand theology of our faith.

What God has done in reconciling the world through Jesus Christ is not just to give you the warm glow of a new religion. In the light of Christ, you see the world and your life in a whole new way. You are no longer just attending to your own life, but in that bright light of grace and love you can see and focus on the world around you – the needs and the evils – and identify the will of God. In the strength of the Spirit, you are able to make the most of your time.

Actually, ‘making the most of your time’ is a culturally suitable but unpoetic translation of the author’s words. In the old Authorised Bible, the phrase ‘redeeming the days’ captures Paul’s thoughts better, because it matches the whole feel of this passage. Paul is encouraging the Ephesians to live a Christian life in all parts of their life, even including the language they use. So he uses a theological word – ‘redeeming’ – to describe metaphorically what it means to wake up from the sleep of self and look at life in the light of Christ.

Just as God in Christ redeemed us, we are called to redeem our days. Carrying a gift card around in your pocket is rather foolish; the wise thing is to go to a store and redeem it and get the most value from it. Similarly, simply living your life for yourself is rather foolish; the wise thing is to ‘redeem your days’ by seeking out the will of God. Twice in this passage, Paul encourages the reader to seek God’s will or God’s way (or pleasure). The sense conveyed by the passage is one of looking at the world in the light of Christ in order to find your place, your role and your work in the world – the will of God for you.

There is an old aphorism which says “You cannot know the will of God unless you are living the will of God.” Paul outlines three simple, basic steps for living the will of God:

– Don’t get drunk with wine.

This is not simply a temperance message; it’s about living as a Christian. In Paul’s time, drinking wine was the way to use up time or to drown your sorrows. Today there are many

other options to do that. Paul was saying: Don't look outside of yourself for distraction or consolation, seek the Spirit that was given to you at your baptism. Don't abandon control of your life to substances or activities; instead, build up your life in the Spirit.

– Sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.

Occupy your thoughts with the words of scripture and worship. This is more than a call to gather in worship; it's about focusing your mind and leaving little room for all those stray thoughts that are mostly negative, divisive or self-seeking.

– Give thanks to God at all times.

Yes, the world can be a crazy, negative and difficult place, but beginning your prayers with thanks to God is a way to open yourself to the presence of God and to bring the kingdom of God close to hand. It's important not just to feel the presence of God in prayer, but to see the presence of God in all your life.

There is a fourth step in this passage - although we don't easily recognise it because the translators have split up a really long sentence and then the editors have divided the sentences into separate paragraphs with a heading. For Paul, the fourth part of living the will of God is to "be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." Paul goes off on a bit of tangent about the meaning of being 'subject' within a household, but he is also talking about living in a community. It is part of the will of God that we live subject to one another, rather than simply as individuals or in any form of hierarchy. Subject – all of us – to one another. This idea brings us back to all the instructions about mutual love, humility, service and unity – instructions that come not just from Paul but also from Jesus, as found in the Gospels.

Seeking the Spirit; living in and through the words of God; being thankful; and being subject to each other – this is how we can live the will of God for our own lives so that we may find the will of God for the world.

We must not sleepwalk through this life, either through focussing just on ourselves and our own comforts, or through withdrawing from the world into a Christian-only life. God has done so much in Christ to bring reconciliation to the world and this passage guides us towards part our response. We are called to wake up, to see the world through the gracious light of Christ and to discover our role in living out the will of God. By doing so, we will make the best use of the days given to us.

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