

Today's second reading gives us one of the loveliest passages of the New Testament's letters. Last week we heard about the importance of breaking down barriers between peoples, now the emphasis is on the unity we must have, bound together by the peace of Christ.

There are four importance words in this exhortation. Let us probe the meaning of each of them.

“Bear with one another in complete selflessness”. The word 'selfless' actually translates a word which the Christian community coined. The word is often translated as 'humility'. This is a concept which was foreign in the ancient world and hence the need to invent a new word for a characteristically Christian, Christ-like, virtue. To be humble in ancient days was to be a Uriah Heap-like figure. It is a wholly negative word implying slavish obeisance of a fawning, cringing kind. It is not a virtue at all but describes an ignoble, cowering servility.

Christ is our model for humility. “He was humbler yet, even to accepting death on a cross” (Phil. 2,8) There is a nobility in his humbling himself, for he took the lowest place of all for the sake of others. Christian humility arises from honest self-understanding, which knows how puny and sinful we are, but also accepts that we have been raised up by Christ. We can do nothing by ourselves but in Him, all things are possible.

The second word is 'gentleness', sometimes rendered as 'meekness'. Aristotle thought that the great virtues were the middle way between excesses. The extremes in this case are hyper-anger on the one hand and complete spineless passivity on the other. In between is the virtue of gentleness which can be angry at the appropriate time when there is a righteous cause for anger, but which at other times is accepting of the way the world is and its imperfections. The same Greek word is also used of an animal which has been well-trained to obey the word or touch of command. Its will is subject to the will of its master or mistress. It has achieved complete disciplined self-control. Doing the will of God would show us to have the virtue of gentleness; thinking of others before ourselves.

We are then also called to 'patience', which has also be rendered as 'long-suffering'. In part this involves never giving up. The patient person endures the end; they have the stamina for the long haul; a dedication which is resolute. In particular this virtue concern relationships with people. The patient person also puts up with everything that people throw at them. There is no retaliation and no bearing of grudges.

It is clear that we are being called to be perfect. But there is more. We are to bear with each other 'charitably'. This is based on another word coined by the Christian

community for a specific meaning which Greek for all its richness and variety of language had no word for. The Christian community took a word for love and gave it a very specific meaning. The word is '*agape*' and its meaning is God's love for us. God's love is faithful, and fruitful and abides for ever. Then the word's meaning is extended to speak of our love for one another which is a reflection of God's love for us. We know God's love and we pass it on by our patient, enduring, selfless love.

The Greeks had many words for aspects of love, but all are concerned with feelings, a warm glow within. The Christian novelty was to see the need for a word which has nothing to do with feelings. God, after all, does not have feelings as we do. God is impassible. *Agape* is not a feeling-word. No one can have lovely feelings for someone who is hammering nails into their hands and feet. It is a word of commitment. It is a word which involves making a decision and sticking to it. Married love involves loving feelings but it must also have the commitment which is *agape*. *Agape* abides when feelings have, for a time at least, disappeared.

This short passage begins, "I, a prisoner in the Lord". Notice the preposition: A prisoner **in** the Lord, not for the Lord, or of the Lord. While Paul did spend some time in prisoner, in Ephesus, and he went to Rome under guard before spending time in Rome under house arrest which is where we leave him when the Acts of the Apostles closes, I do not think this is a letter written from prison; and, as I have said previously, not written by Paul himself but by a disciple of Paul, in Paul's name, with Paul's tacit authority. This phrase. "I, a prisoner in the Lord" may have been a phrase much used by Paul, almost a catch phrase. Even when not in prison he felt captured by Christ. Prison was not a happy experience. It was not a punishment. Prison was where you were kept before trial and would end with release, or a fine or death. Conditions were harsh, and food was provided by friends. But to be a prisoner in Christ was to be supremely free, for nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. And so in Christ we communicate that love in lives characterised by selflessness, gentleness and patience.