**HOW TO BE PERFECT pt. 1 MM O/L**

**Now, those of us who are parents or grandparents, what is it you want most for your children? Or those without your own children, what do you want for the children in your family or the Church or your neighbourhood? Don’t you want the very best? Of course you do! You’d be a very strange adult to wish anything less than the very best on the children closest to you!**

**Now, to Paul, the Corinthian Christians *were* his children. Well, he’d founded their church (Ac. 18) and we don’t know of any natural children of his, although we did reflect in an earlier “thought” how he’d adopted Timothy as a sort of godson (1 Tim. 1:2). He wrote to the Corinthians in his First Epistle, *Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel (1 Cor. 4:15).* We might paraphrase that as the words of a concerned father, “Look, there are plenty of people wanting to give you good advice, but they ain’t all going to agree! Why don’t you listen to your own Dad?” And he wrote to them – passionately – in his Second Epistle, *God knows I [love you] (2 Cor. 11:11)!* We can be in no doubt of the apostle’s love for his Corinthian “children”.**

**How do you *show* your love to your children? In many different ways, some of which are impossible in lockdown, but always, surely, in prayer! Most of us will begin and end each day by praying for our families, especially, I suspect, for the children. And Paul was no different. Do you remember in our last study how he said he prayed for the Corinthians? And do you remember *what* he prayed? *We pray to God that you will not do anything wrong….but that you will do what is right (2 Cor. 13:7)* and he even went on to say, *our prayer is for your perfection (v. 9) –* the word means *completion* or *full restoration.* Do you dare pray *that* for your children? But why not if we sincerely want the *best* for them?**

**And, so, Paul concludes his epistle with a description of perfection and the means to attain it. In doing so, he writes what are possibly the most famous words he ever wrote. Certainly they are the most quoted:**

**2 Cor. 13:11-14**

**Hang on! He’s not calling them *children* here,he’s calling them *brothers* (and, by implication*, sisters*)*.* Well, of course he does! When we want the *best* for our children, that means wanting them to *grow up*, doesn’t it? Those parents who smother their children to try to keep them dependent are certainly not wishing them the best! Paul wants them to become perfect, complete, fully restored. He wants to embrace them as his *brothers and sisters –* as adults in the faith. What is Christian perfection? Growth into maturity. And that, of course, takes time. So be patient with one another as we pray that we all might *grow up* in Christ.**

**Then he tells them to *aim for perfection.* As you wake up each morning and thank God for a new day, don’t pray that you might just get through it, but *aim for perfection.* As Zig Ziglar, the Christian motivational speaker, said, *If you aim for nothing, you’ll hit it every time! Aiming* for perfection doesn’t necessarily mean you’ll become perfect *today,* but it does mean you’ll be that much closer to the target when you wake up *tomorrow*. I suppose it’s another way of praying St. Richard’s famous prayer, *To see You more clearly, love You more dearly and follow You more nearly day* by *day.***

**What he says next depends on the translation you’re using. Does it say something about *encouragement*? Paul wants to *encourage* them and you. Or does it say *comfort*? Paul wants to *comfort* you. But it may also say *Listen to my appeal* or *pay attention,* because we will be *encouraged* and *comforted* if we do listen to him. He’s *appealing* to us. Dads and mums, can you *force* your children’s obedience? Well, yes, for a time….begrudgingly….but – be warned – out of sight, reluctant obedience reverts. So Paul is *appealing* to them and to us to heed his words, not for *his* sake, but for our own.**

***Be of one mind,* he says, or *agree with one another.* And then he reminds us of the outcome of that: *live in peace.* Now, it has to be said that Christians haven’t been very good at that since Paul wrote those words. In fact, Corinth was the site of one of the first ever church splits when some said they followed Paul and some said they followed Apollos and some said they followed Peter and only *some* said that they followed Christ (1 Cor. 1:12)! And we know that some of our own local churches have suffered from disunity, haven’t they? So how do we do it, Paul? How do we agree with one another when we are people of passionate convictions? He tells us: *the God of love and peace will be with you.* Remember the perfection for which we strive is found only in Christ. If He is with us and we are truly aiming for Him who is Perfection, then we will love even those we disagree with and strive for unity and peace. If, having striven, we still cannot attain it, then it really is better that we part company, at least for a while.**

**Meanwhile, *Greet one another with a holy kiss.* What’s the difference between a *holy* and an *unholy* kiss? Someone once said, “about 30 seconds!” But really it’s the Holy Spirit. Was Judas’s kiss holy (Mt. 26:48-9)? Of course not! A *holy kiss* is *sincere -* we are embracing because we love the one we embrace, or, at least, are *willing* to love him. And, if you’re a bit inhibited and struggling with all this talk of kissing, don’t worry: JB Phillips (who was an Englishman, of course) translated the phrase as *A handshake all round, please!* The holiness is in the *motivation,* not the *action*, as shown when Paul goes on to send the sincere greetings of *all the saints* with him in Macedonia (- and, of course, both kissing and handshaking are at a premium in lockdown!).**

**And so we come to what I would think are Paul’s most quoted words: *may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all (v. 14),* the benediction which we often call the Grace and which is prayed, I suspect, even more often than the Lord’s Prayer in the collective worship of our Christian tradition*.* With this prayer, Paul loops right back to the benediction at the beginning of his epistle (1:2); with this prayer he sets out three vital Christian qualities; and with this prayer he begins to teach the doctrine of the Trinity. Do you know what? I’ve run out of time and I think this is all too important to squeeze in. So I’ll tell you what we’ll do – we’ll have one more look at this epistle next time when we’ll think about these, his final words to his Corinthian children….**

**So for now, Paul wrote in v. 11, *Finally brothers,* *goodbye,* but that word for *goodbye* can also be translated, *rejoice.* And that’s a strange thing, because we’re so aware at the moment that separation is a *sorrowful* experience – especially separation from our children and families, including our Church family. But next time when we come to look at grace, love and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, we’ll see not only how Paul can be joyful in separation, but also how God can answer his prayer that we might become perfect!**