

19th August 2018

Ephesians 5.15-20

Paul calls us to be filled with the Holy Spirit and live as children of the light and to be different to those in the world around us who he describes as being in darkness.

This is a dilemma today. For Christians living in society – do we see ourselves as living in the light whilst others live in darkness. How do we fit in?

Is it true that living ‘the Good Life – the Christian life’ is only partly about being true to your principles – because ‘fitting in’ also enters into it?

At the start of this month the Danish government banned the wearing of the burqa – the head to toe dress of some Muslim women. It has been controversial and there have been protests in Copenhagen the Danish capital at a new ban on the wearing of face veils in public, accusing the government of infringing women’s right to dress as they choose.ⁱ The BBC did a short video on their website about the [Scandinavian ‘Jante Law’](#) which gives an insight as to how this has come about.

The Law of Jante (Danish: *Janteloven*) is a code of conduct that is common in Nordic countries, ⁱⁱthat portrays doing things out of the ordinary, being overtly personally ambitious, or not conforming, as unworthy and inappropriate. It might be summarized as *"You shouldn't think you're better than everyone else."*^[1].

It is a social code to encourage group behaviour, and has been credited with making Nordic countries much more harmonious and equal by pointing out the intrinsic conflicts between individuality and social conformity. The law has been credited as one of the reasons Nordic countries have high happiness scores. The rules are treated as a way of behaving in order to fit in and results in dressing similarly and the types of cars that people buy and buying similar products for their homes.^[1]

Whereas in countries such as America, being rich allows people to behave differently, Jante Laws tend to level out society, as the people as a whole get to set the rules, not the rich alone.

This code of public-opinion-enforced homogeneity may make for a stronger group identity, but it comes at the cost of individual freedom. In the Burqa controversy – the cost is to a Muslim’s right to her own spirituality and the way she chooses to dress.

Sticking to your principles or fitting in?

Not thinking you are better than others? We have the light you are in darkness?

Sticking to Christian principles without becoming excluded as a 'party pooper' is often a problem, especially for young people, who mostly want to be accepted and fit in. The phenomena of FOMO is widespread – Fear Of Missing Out : a hyper-sensitivity to being excluded by friends and a need for peer acceptance and approval. Aspects which are most problematic for them may include sexual mores and being perceived as prudish; attitudes to alcohol and/or drugs; activities precluded by Sunday church attendance, use of language and swearing. They are the most obvious markers. For others it may be certain disciplines that mark them out: e.g. total abstinence from alcohol, vegetarianism or 'meatless Mondays', a Lenten fast, plastic-free endeavours? Or daily prayer or bible-reading? Or an exercise or meditation regime? Some such practices are done maybe to draw you closer to God?

I gave a talk about Jehovah's witnesses on Tuesday and whatever you think of them - and I was quite forthright on

Tuesday in stating that I believe they distort and deceive people with their version of the Christian faith – you have to admire them for their principles and commitment to their cause and what they believe a Christian lifestyle should be like. They dress modestly, speak with kindness, are thoroughly honest and have great integrity and politeness and don't wish to do anything that would bring dishonor to their faith. They have a strong sense of identity and call to discipleship. But they regard the world as a dark and evil place and need to be separate and exclusive.

When I first arrived at university I was submerged into the drinking culture of young people. It hasn't changed much. My whole block in the student hall of residence decided that once a week they would go on a pub crawl. The itinerary was predictable. Tour round the student pubs in Nottingham. At least a pint in each. First person to keel over was ridiculed as being lightweight. Off for an Indian curry to round the night off and then somehow stagger home without vomiting into someone's front garden.

As a relatively new and keen Christian this itinerary didn't really appeal. But neither did I want to be a party pooper and come across as holier than thou. Fortunately, there was another student in our block who wasn't into

drinking, because he was Muslim. So, he and I teamed up as the God squad. We said to the rest of the lads, because I was in an all-male hall of residence, we'll come on the pub crawl and we'll look after you. We'll have fun with you, we don't intend to get drunk, but we'll make sure you get home safe. Men who are the worse for wear after a few drinks can do stupid and irresponsible things, as I'm sure you are all aware. Myself and Asif, my Muslim colleague, did our best to ensure displays of nudity, aggression, obscenities, sexist and racist remarks were kept to a minimum and the twelve men who went out all got back safely – well one did throw up over me -there is always a cost to following the way of Christ.

Our church weekend this October will be looking at the topic of discipleship: walking the way of Jesus: what is distinctive about being a Christian - in our homes, our work, our schools, our church and local communities. What do we struggle with – how should we react or respond. I hope will be an honest sharing and encouragement for all present. It is always a great time of fellowship and fun – Please consider coming - if you've never been on one talk to me or someone who has. (see film on Tab's website front page: <http://www.dursleytab.org.uk/wplive/index.php>)

As we continue to look at Paul's letter to the Ephesians, this short section sums up some practical advice from Paul that he has been giving contrasting the ways of the world and what he believes should be Christian distinctiveness in light of the gospel of Christ.

The first three chapters of the letter have given this grand vision of God's redeeming purposes through Christ and the church as the community that will now, by its life and unity, declare to the world that the one God is God and Jesus is Lord and that all other powers are in subjection to him. That may seem and indeed has seemed by many in our own day, an impossibly grandiose naïve fantasy.

By the end of chapter 6 comes the reminder of the continuing reality. Believers are locked in a power struggle and it is dangerous and unpleasant, calling for vigilance and for all the defensive equipment the gospel can provide.

Paul is writing from prison more than aware that the powers and principalities of the world strike back against God's rule and God's way everything that Paul says in chapters 4-6 constitutes a rolling back of the frontiers in the world's moral power struggles. To make widely differing gifts and personalities work for unity not division, as in chapter 4, is hard enough. To retrain the

imagination and the natural impulses and desires and resist the murky short-term gratifications and delights of the pagan world is harder still. To make and sustain marriages of genuine mutual submission is perhaps hardest of all. (if you want to see whether wives should submit to their husbands in all things and whether its Ok for Christians to have slaves – then come along to my Bible Class on Monday 10th Sept.) Compromises and second-best solutions are easy. To go for the full version of discipleship is to sign on for spiritual warfare.

In this brief section, Paul draws a number of threads together using three contrasts to move his argument along.ⁱⁱⁱ

He first contrasts being wise with being unwise, and he suggests that this has to do with making the best use of the time we have. The word translated ‘live’ is Paul’s favourite word for describing lifestyle; literally it is ‘walk’. His admonition about wisdom is very general: make the best use of the time you have. But the hearer is probably expected to fill this out using the teaching that Paul has already offered up to this point. So, it is good use of our time to work hard, be honest, speak the truth, etc. Indeed, Paul is standing squarely in the Old Testament wisdom tradition in suggesting that the wise person lives well. What ‘living well’ means of course is open for

multiple interpretations – but sadly in British culture it invariably means living selfishly, thinking only of your own personal happiness and enjoyment not the servant type love of living for others that Jesus exemplifies as having life in all its fulness.

Tom Wright comments that verse 16, making the most of every opportunity can of course lead some people to an obsessive lifestyle, calculating and counting every minute and giving oneself and everyone else no peace. If that’s a danger for you, then take note he says, learn how to relax, how to rest, how to let go of your over organized life and allow God to bathe you in his peace. He once met a man who said, aware of the irony, that he made a careful list of the things he should do to help him conquer his bad habit of over-organized thinking!

The second contrast he makes is similar. It is between being foolish and having an understanding of what God wants. This is the classic contrast in Old Testament wisdom thinking. It is a reminder that wise living has an intellectual component. It does not just happen, it requires careful thought, a discerning of God’s will in the midst of the hurly-burly of everyday life. Our mind and the constant renewing of our mind is a regular theme of Paul’s writing. We must get our mind right – our attitude right in all circumstances. Most people rely on their feelings too

much for Paul's liking. They go with the flow, are swept along with emotions unthinkingly. Paul always cautions us to be in control, to think through our responses, to have our attitude right and our mind right. Our attitude will then influence our feelings – not the other way around.

The third contrast is a puzzling one. Paul doesn't have anything against wine and drink explicitly, but the contrast is between being drunk on wine and being filled with the Holy Spirit. The puzzle is compounded by the fact that the context for this warning is very clearly when the hearers were gathered for worship, because the apostle goes on to say, 'as you sing...'. The contrast could focus on the effects of the two entities. Both make one merry, but the merriness of wine can lead to debauchery, whereas the merriness of the Spirit results in praise and worship. Alternatively, it could focus more deeply on the nature of Christian spirituality. When the first hearers worshipped other deities, alcohol fueled the experience; now that they are followers of Jesus, his Spirit should energize their worship.

In the context of this short section, though, Paul might be contrasting being in a place where we are able to think well with being in a place where we can't think at all. He

has talked about wisdom and understanding, so here he addresses the state of our minds. If we are drunk – or more broadly living lives driven by our appetites and whims – we will not be able to walk wisely. If we are filled with the Spirit, on the other hand, we will be able to live with renewed minds, centered on worshipping God 24/7.

He concludes by reminding us to walk as thankful people, grateful to God for all he has done for us in Christ. Worship is an excellent way forward. It allows you to relax in God's loving presence, re centre your life on godly values, to give you a perspective, to give thanks where thanks are properly due, to share concerns, anxieties and worries and leave them with God. Then the peace of Christ that passes all understanding will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4.7)

Worship helps you be God's people, distinct from the world around you. It helps you find your community identity.

But is there any difference between the conformism achieved through meditation on God's word and worship and that enforced, like Jante Law, by the dead-weight of community opinion? Paul's community are to judge their actions in relation to God's will before conforming. Fulfilling God's will, not just obeying a rule, is their goal.

Going back to the burqa. Is the burqa worn because Muslim women are oppressed by patriarchy, or because [women, having explored God's word, embrace this](#), like Paul's sobriety, for their spiritual good?

Jante Law conveys the oppressiveness of uninterrupted sameness and moderation. Early Puritans embraced a discipline which saw linguistic flourishes as self-indulgence and refused all but biblical paraphrase (v.19) in worship. If you attend some of the tradition Wee Free churches in remote parts of Scotland they still will only sing the psalms – biblical verses – and not any 'man made constructions. George Herbert, at the height of puritanism, disagreed and claimed the freedom to use every resource of language to praise his God (for example, see the entries titled: [The Collar](#); [Virtue](#); [Love](#)).

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,

Guiltie of dust and sinne.

But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack

From my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,

If I lack'd any thing.

A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:

Love said, you shall be he.

I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,

I cannot look on thee.

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,

Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame

Go where it doth deserve.

And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?

My deare, then I will serve.

You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:

So I did sit and eat.

Conformism doesn't have to be joyless and colourless!

Thank God we have a diversity of ways of worship and praising God today in word and song and image and action.

Brenda Vance is a retired University Teacher of English and a URC Elder and she writes this postscript for our worship resources:.^{iv}

As a student and teacher of language I am grieved by any move to put limits on the power of language to convey

individuality, evoke vivid images or mark fine shades of meaning. The gift of fluent yet precise language can be used as a hostile weapon just as the gift of plentiful provision can be an opportunity for drunken excess (v.18). But as the Ephesians could also use their convivial assembly for praise and thanksgiving, so the linguistic skill which makes witty phrases at the expense of burqa-wearers could equally identify the perceived incongruity of the burqa in a free society in a way which is conducive to better understanding of the problem. You might, rather than saying those covered women looked like letter-boxes, say they were like shaded lights or shuttered lanterns. That would put the emphasis where it should be, on what such devout women sadly withhold from wider society, in beauty, smiles, warmth. We could, through 'care-full' linguistic precision, then be debating the gains and losses, in a multi-cultural society, of particular spiritual disciplines, whether [refusing alcohol](#), adopting self-denying regimes like Jante Law, or veiling oneself against distraction.

Paul sets up a challenging contrast. If you are a Christian, you are in a different kingdom: God's kingdom. This is in contrast with the kingdom of the World. In the prior verse to this passage he contrasts light and darkness. We must wake up to the deeds of darkness and let Christ's light

shine on us. Being careful how we live, let us be filled with the Spirit of Christ to change us, guide us and strengthen us but also bring us joy and thankfulness. And over flow with love not superiority and self-righteousness. May our lives be guided by the calling to offer Christ's light and love to those in darkness.

Prayer

A meditative prayer on language, which could be used as part of prayers of intercession.

Dear Lord, many of us know that we have used language to hurt those around us.

Do we also know how to use it to heal?

We know all the insulting phrases, the ways of belittling those we disagree with.

Do we also know how to build people up with our words, how to encourage, how to inspire?

Living Word, fill us with your Spirit.

May our words be fluent without shallowness,
vivid without spite or cruelty,
and insightful without malice.

And may our conversations always be guided
by our calling to be salt for the earth,

light for those in darkness,
and love for those who remain among the world's
unloved.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/01/danish-burqa-ban-comes-into-effect-amid-protests>

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_Jante

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2018/96-july-august-2018-b/proper-15/bible-notes>

^{iv} <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2018/96-july-august-2018-b/proper-15/postscript>