**Sermon for 9th February 2020 (Third Sunday before Lent)**

**Amos 2. 4-16; Ps. 4; Eph. 4. 17-32**

*May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

***“In a word, as God’s dear children, you must be like him.”*** I have taken as my text the first verse of Chapter 5, as it neatly sums up all that Paul has written throughout chapter 4. As background, this “letter to the Ephesians” was probably written by Paul when he was in prison in Rome about AD61 and is thought to have been intended as a circular to all the churches and congregations that Paul had set up during his third missionary journey when he spent about three years in and around Ephesus. It helps to remember that the time was within about thirty years of the first Pentecost and there was still tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians. However, as far as Paul was concerned, there was no difference to be made between people - the Christian Church was open to absolutely everyone of whatever race, colour or gender; as is said at the administration of Communion here at St Peter’s, this is the Lord’s table and the invitation comes from him alone. This letter of Paul’s was therefore intended to be read to all who attended the church gatherings in and around Ephesus where it was circulated. The first three chapters set out Paul’s theological thoughts about God’s purpose in sending his Son Jesus into the world to draw all people into one great family of mutual love. Faith in the good news of Christ’s life, death, resurrection and ascension delivers his followers from all that kept us apart from God and allows us to enter into this new relationship. This is true whether we are Jew or non-Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised. Now we know what it means to pass from the living dead of self-centredness to the new life which is centred with Christ in God.

Chapters 4 to 6 set out Paul’s thinking about the practical implications of this great vision of the role of the Church and its members in the world. As Paul wrote earlier in chapter 4, ***“There is one body and one Spirit, just as there is one hope held out in God’s call to you; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”*** Although the circumstances are so very different between life in the latter half of the first century AD and life now at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, yet the principles of Christian living as propounded by Paul are just as applicable to us now. Thus we ***“must be renewed in mind and spirit, and put on the new nature created in God’s likeness, which shows itself in the upright and devout life called for by the truth.”*** Each of us has a special gift, which we should use for the building up of the body of Christ. We should always keep going in the attempt to do away with all spite and bad temper, with rage, insults, and slander, with evil of any kind, as we were reminded this morning in the Prayers of Penitence. We should be generous, tender-hearted and forgiving, kind and compassionate - and this is not just to our fellow Christians, but, as Nathan was telling us this morning, to each and everyone we meet, particularly the poor and destitute, the homeless and sick. And everything we do should be done in God’s name and to His glory, never seeking reward or praise for ourselves.

Our Old Testament reading from the prophet Amos reinforces the idea of being renewed in mind and spirit. Amos lived in the eighth century BC, at a time when the kingdom of Israel had been split into two - Judah and Israel. The people of both kingdoms had fallen away from their devotion to their God who had brought them out of slavery in the land of Egypt. They had spurned God’s laws and abused the poor and needy. God will grant them no reprieve for their crimes. But towards the end of his prophecy, Amos indicates that, if Israel will turn back to God and forsake their evil ways He will yet restore them. That will involve a tremendous effort on the part of the Israelites to have done away with all evil, to renew their minds and spirits, and to understand and concentrate on the character of their God and how to replicate this in their own lives. They too had to be generous, forgiving and compassionate, and to do all to the glory of God. Then God would forgive them and restore their prosperity. ***“Once more I shall plant them on their own soil, and never again will they be uprooted.”*** That was about the nearest that the prophets of that time got to the concept of eternal life in the presence of God. Through the good news that we have heard, we now believe in the resurrection of our bodies into life eternal along with our Saviour Jesus Christ. We don’t know the time when our Lord will come again, but we do know that that day **will** come. We should try always therefore to be in a state of facing God so that we can greet our Lord with His love in our hearts. This is why we should attend regularly with our brothers and sisters at the Lord’s table to share in Holy Communion with them, as we make a memorial of Jesus’s death until he comes again. At the same time we need to be living our lives as children of God, which means as Paul so succinctly put it ***“In a word, as God’s dear children, you must be like him”.***

***Even so, come Lord Jesus. Amen.***