

Imitating God

Psalm 34:1-8; Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2

Views on imitation are extensive. Herman Melville, author of *Moby Dick* wrote, “It is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation.” The C18 writer Dr Johnson commented, “No man was ever great by imitation.” The fable writer Aesop said, “Men often applaud imitation and hiss at the real thing.” And most of us will remember the television advert campaign, “I can’t believe it’s not butter.”

Yes, you could, you really could.

Here is one another quotation from a different faith and ethical tradition. Confucius was a Chinese teacher, editor, writer and philosopher who lived between 551 and 479 BC. His moral teaching stressed the importance of skilled judgement rather than knowledge of rules. He said this: “By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and Third, by experience, which is the bitterest.”

The apostle Paul, writing in the C1st AD, wrote to the Christians at Ephesus, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us...” What are the children of God to be like? Paul spells it out:

Speak the truth.

Don’t let the sun go down on your anger.

Don’t steal.

Don’t speak unkindly.

Don’t upset God’s Holy Spirit.

Be kind and gentle.

Forgive.

Well, that’s all right then. Do that, and you will imitate God.

Paul doesn’t give us these things as a simple tick box exercise. Nor is this a pick-and-mix approach to Christian living, “choose any three from the list.” It goes deeper than that. It is a

constant challenge to us to measure our lives and see how near, or far, we are to the example of Jesus.

Christianity is not simply about believing, about getting your faith theory right, about thinking why it is that you are a follower of Jesus; it is also about putting that belief into sustainable practice. Not many of us will be called to do great things on the stage of life, but as Mother Teresa once said, “we can do small things with great love.” If we do that, we imitate God. If we do that, we reflect the image of God that is to be found in all of us.

To do small things with great love is to reach your hand out to many of the hurting people and hurting places of the world. Some of the problems people face are enormous and will require massive investment and changes in culture and the way society works. Others are no more, and no less, than doing small things with great love.

CrossReach is the Church of Scotland’s social care arm and it does tremendous work across the country. I think of a day care centre in Govanhill, where pre-school children from many different ethnic backgrounds play together happily, unconcerned that one is Syrian, another Afghani, another from the Roma community, another from Bangladesh and another from Iraq. Govanhill, where in the space of a square mile sixty different languages are spoken, and poverty is almost of a Dickensian proportion. Yet in the Daisy Chain Early Learning Project play facilities for children and support for their confused, baffled, frightened parents is provided, by the Church of Scotland.

In January I visited a psycho-social therapeutic session at the Shija’ai Clinic in Gaza City that helps young girls to cope with the trauma they have experienced under the Occupation. The Shija’ai Clinic is run by the Middle East Council of Churches Committee for Refugee Work, Gaza Area and is a World Mission Partner of the Church of Scotland. I thought of it last week when 36 rockets were fired from Gaza into Israel, and the Israel Defence force unleashed a fire-storm of ammunition into that benighted city. I thought of that clinic especially, and how it tried to help young lives that have been affected by years of military assaults and their consequences. I thought of the group of eight-year-old girls that I met, most of them had lost a parent, or brother,

or sister, or friend in the conflict. The members of the medical staff were playing trust games with the girls. It is hard to trust when you fear terror dropping on you from the sky. At the end of the session they showed the girls a video. It was of people laughing. Turning to the girls, one of the medical team said to the girls, "Now, can you copy what you saw the people doing on the screen? Can you imitate what they were doing?" They were teaching eight year olds to laugh. They had forgotten how to laugh. Who has to teach an eight year old to imitate how to laugh? It was one of the most heart-rending sounds I have ever heard. But they did it. Doing small things with great love. Imitating God.

In Muir of Ord there is a forty bed residential home, fairly newly built, filled with care and compassion. It has developed a wonderful relationship with the local primary school. A wonderful choir from the school comes each week to sing to the older people, and to play games with them. The children and old people talk together happily, with the older people telling the youngsters about the "olden days", and the young people helping the older people get the best out their computers and smart phones, and all aided and abetted by a local Church of Scotland chaplaincy. A great example of gentle, professional care for some of the older members of society. Doing small things with great love. Imitating God.

What was that list Paul gave to the Ephesians?

Speak the truth.

Don't let the sun go down on your anger.

Don't steal.

Don't speak unkindly.

Don't upset God's Holy Spirit.

Be kind and gentle.

Forgive.

Does it seem so impossible now? Does it seem so unlikely that anyone could imitate God?

The glorious truth is that there are individuals and communities imitating God all over the place.

Imitation, wrongly done, can be insincere and phony. That's not the kind of imitation meant

here. "Imitating God" means putting our focus on the *actions* that flow from God's character. There will be grand gestures that will make world-transforming differences. But more often than not it will be the small things done with great love that will make all the difference in the world. Those of us who call ourselves Christian, however uncertainly and with whatever sense of embarrassment at the poor fist we sometimes make of it are called to be imitators of God and the actions of God. Not just in the churches in which we find ourselves, but on the stage of a global village and on the front lines of human relationships. In this Church, and in this community, this is what we are about.

To imitate God, only these things are needed: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, body, strength and soul, and to love your neighbour as yourself. To reach out with thoughts turned into words, and words turned into actions, doing small things with great love, and bringing the light and healing of God's love to work in our world, today, and into the future.

"The future is God's, it is ours, it is good; and that is good news."¹

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

¹ Peter J Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, p245