

Domestic Politics Ephesians 5:21-33

Sermon by Margaret Wesley, preached at Holy Trinity, Dulwich Hill, 9 June 2013

Home

Home is the place your heart resides^[1]

Home is the place that you decide^[2]

Home is the womb that holds the soul^[3]

Home is the place where one is whole^[4]

Home is protective against the others^[5]

Home is full of sisters and brothers^[6]

Home is where you find your rest^[7]

Home is where you feel your best^[8]

Just Google “home” and “poem” and you too can discover any amount of schmaltzy stuff like that. Ever since the industrial revolution people in the West have idealised and romanticised the home. “Home is a haven in a heartless world.” Home is a peaceful place of rest after the labours and conflicts of our day.

But we all know that isn't true. Home is where much of the real, inescapable, gruelling work of life happens²: the work of maintaining relationships that really matter. Home is where our annoying habits are LEAST likely to be calmly tolerated. And it is where the annoying habits of others are MOST likely to drive us crazy. And I think that is true even for people who live alone.³ Home is where there is no escaping from that annoying person in the mirror.⁴

The homes that Paul wrote to and about were happily free of this sentimental nonsense. In the Roman world of the first century, homes were understood to be the smallest and most important unit of economic production, of politics and of religion. Homes were the small-scale factories of the time, producing most of the goods that were exported or sold at markets. Relationships happened there, of course, but they were not the point.⁵ And a man who fell in love with his wife was likely to get teased about it by his friends. Wealthy men had any number of outlets for romantic and

¹ *Home* by Aisha Patterson, <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/home-174/> My apologies to Aisha for making fun of her poem.

² In our culture, every home is so different from every other that no generalisation can be applied.

³ Though I cannot speak from experience because I have never lived alone.

⁴ For many of us, home is where the incredibly demanding task of raising children takes place, along with the even harder work of maintaining a marriage. Home is not a place where you find your rest; and it is rarely a place where you feel your best. And all that sentimentality about home life only makes those of us who live in real homes - and that's all of us - feel as though there is something deeply wrong with us and with the people we live with.

⁵ It would be wrong to say that genuine affection was never present in the Roman family, but it was expected more in parent-child relationships than marriage relationships.

sexual expression – slaves, mistresses, prostitutes. Wives were for producing legitimate heirs and managing the household under the husband's authority. And wives were chosen for the economic and political value that the connection would give to both families.

Men would generally marry women who were much younger than them and would educate them in the work they would be expected to do in the home.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul specifically addresses households that have a husband, a wife, children and slaves. The passages is printed with your service sheets or you might look up Ephesians 5:21-33 in your Bible. This is only one sort of Roman household, since the majority of families would not have been able to afford slaves.⁶ This sort of household was often addressed by philosophers and ethicists of the time, mainly because this is the only sort of household in which anyone had time to read or write philosophy.

Aristotle⁷ introduced the study of the household by seeing it as consisting of three sorts of relationship: master/slave⁸, husband/wife, father/child.⁹ The master, husband and father were all same person and, though he had different responsibilities in each of the three relationships, the nature of his role in each relationship was to rule the other.¹⁰ That is because he believed that “the male is by nature better fitted¹¹ to command than the female”¹², the master better fitted by nature to command than the slave, and the father better fitted to command than the child.

In Ephesians, Paul followed the usual format of household codes by addressing those three key household relationships identified by Aristotle. But his take on them is unique: firstly because he addresses those ruled and not just the ruler. Wives, children and slaves are treated as rational and moral agents who can make choices for themselves. He is also unique because of what he says to the all-powerful husband, father and master.

⁶ Aristotle, Politics I, 1252b: Hesiod was right when he wrote “First and foremost a house and a wife and an ox for the ploughing”, for the ox serves instead of a servant for the poor

⁷ Aristotle was, of course, long dead by the first century AD, but his influence was still substantial. Later Greco-Roman household codes differed little from his.

⁸ Aristotle, Politics I, 1253b “an article of property is a tool for the purpose of life, and property generally is a collection of tools, and a slave is a live article of property.”

⁹ Aristotle, Politics I, 1253b

¹⁰ Aristotle, Politics I, 1259a “for it is a part of the household science to rule over wife and children (over both as over freemen, yet not with the same mode of government, but over the wife to exercise republican government and over the children monarchical)”

¹¹ For Aristotle, what was right was determined by what was fitting according to nature, and therefore he often ran the risk of saying that something was right just because it was generally done.

¹² Aristotle, Politics I, 1259b

His overall message in Ephesians is that all relationships, especially power relationships, are transformed by the lordship of Christ, who has abolished all barriers between people.¹³

This section of Ephesians is found at the end of a chapter that calls the Christians in Ephesus to be distinctively Christian within their culture. They are told to submit to a different master, imitate a different father, live by a different code:

vv1-2 be imitators of God, as beloved children,² and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

vv8-11 For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—⁹ for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.¹⁰ Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.¹⁴ ¹¹Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.

V15 Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise,¹⁶ making the most of the time, because the days are evil.

I'm sure Paul knew that he was calling for revolution here – for the overthrow of the values held by the people of Ephesus; for a re-evaluation of everything they had previously thought and done in light of the fact that there is one Lord, to whom we all owe allegiance. Above the husband, father or master, and above his patron, above his patron's governor, even above the emperor¹⁵... there is one real master. And that master is the very Jesus who died to bring the church into being.

The Christian claim that Jesus is Lord denied the absolute authority of the emperor and called into question the entire hierarchical structure that he put in place.¹⁶ I think Paul fully understood how treasonous this Christian confession might sound to a paranoid emperor – or to a sycophantic governor. He knew that this confession could get his fledgling congregations into very serious trouble.

In the third century, Roman emperors did catch onto this, and wave after wave of vicious oppression was unleashed on the church. Thousands of our sisters and

¹³ Ephesians 2:11-22

¹⁴ Compare this with "As wives, our life's work should be to perfect how we may please our husbands." Debi Pearl, *Created to be His Help Meet*, 151

¹⁵ They all served the emperor, but they served him at a distance via a hierarchical structure. Hardly any of them expected ever to meet him, but they obeyed him by obeying his representatives. And in the Roman Empire, the better emperors were very good at ensuring their governors and other representatives at every level understood what they expected.

¹⁶ People of the Roman Empire honoured their emperor by honouring the men above them in the hierarchy that the emperor had imposed on them. The real master is nothing like that. Each Christian person reports directly to Jesus. And for the Christian person, this revolutionises every other authority structure we find ourselves in.

Claiming that Jesus is Lord was an outrageous political statement for these early Christians. This claim rendered the authority of the emperor relative at a time when emperors were claiming absolute power over their subjects and were moving towards an insistence on being worshiped as gods.

brothers were tortured and executed.¹⁷ In the third century the church was large and strong enough to survive that. In the first century it was probably not.

Paul had been tortured and imprisoned enough times himself to have felt the danger personally. What could he say to these young Christians? How could he prepare these people to bravely face martyrdom, if necessary, but to refrain from doing anything that might unnecessarily bring martyrdom upon themselves?¹⁸

You might be thinking that surely there is nothing potentially treasonous about challenging the structure of the household. I could respond by suggesting that you try publicly challenging Australian family values and see what happens. Romans loved their family values at least as much as any culture. And at this point many of them could remember their greatest emperor, Augustus, pushing a whole raft of family values laws through the Senate: laws that made life difficult for anyone who chose not to marry and raise children.¹⁹ Families mattered in Rome because families produced the soldiers who would defend the empire in the future. But families also mattered because they were seen as a microcosm of the empire. The power of the father echoed the power of the emperor, and any challenge to the father's power could be heard as a challenge to the rights of the emperor, himself.

If Paul was going to call for his fledgling churches to rethink family life in light of the Gospel he was going to need to do it very carefully.

What he came up with was, in my humble opinion, the most brilliant political strategy ever conceived. But it was not just a political strategy, it was a succinct summary of the life and teachings of Jesus.²⁰

Jesus had taught a politic of rendering what is demanded by authority while critiquing the system in which that demand is made; a politic of wise innocence and innocent wisdom. Paul's brilliant political strategy, based on Jesus, was this:

¹⁷ And thousands of Christians renounced their faith under torture and the bishops had to think and argue hard about what to do with these people when they later repented.

¹⁸ How could he hold the zealous ones back from acting in ways that might bring the full force of the empire down on the church? And at the same time, how could he call these Christian people to find ways of living in their culture that reflected absolute allegiance to Jesus?

¹⁹ Those laws remained in effect until the fourth century when Constantine made some changes to allow for celibate clergy.

²⁰ In thinking through the way forward, Paul must have reflected on

Matt 10:16 See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Matt 17:24-27 ²⁴ When they reached Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax came to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?" ²⁵ He said, "Yes, he does." And when he came home, Jesus spoke of it first, asking, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?" ²⁶ When Peter said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the children are free. ²⁷ However, so that we do not give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook; take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a coin; take that and give it to them for you and me."

Matt 22:21 Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.

²¹ Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Familiarity can cause us to miss the wisdom and depth of this simple statement. But think about what it means to

²¹ Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Submit to people, but not because you are afraid of them...

Not because you have been ordered to...

Not because they are "fitted by nature" to rule you...

Not because you want them to do stuff for you...

But because you reverence Christ.

Because you honour Christ when you respect the people he created.

Because even though the human in front of you might be a worthless scumbag, Jesus, who created and loves that scumbag, is always worthy of your reverence.

Submit to everyone, and that way those who think they deserve your subservience will be satisfied, *and* those who think they deserve nothing will be reminded of the dignity they have as human beings created in the image of God.

I am reminded here of a scene from Johannesburg of a black child walking along the street with his mother. A white bishop who passes them and doffs his hat to the child's mother. This simple act of respect changed the nature of the universe for this boy, and set him on a path to becoming the man we know as Bishop Desmond Tutu.

Paul's political strategy sows seeds of revolution: in the world and in the home. It means you can be humble without being humiliated. It means you can treat another person as though they are more important than you without buying into the hierarchy that keeps you apart.

The psychiatrist, Victor Frankl, who survived the dehumanisation of Nazi concentration camps, wrote that "everything can be taken away from a person except one thing, the last of the human freedoms, to choose one's attitude in a given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way..."²¹

To women, slaves and children, who generally had no power and little freedom in this culture, Paul writes of the dignity they did have of choosing their attitude to their subjection. And he gives them honour in their servitude by showing them that while they serve the man who happened to be their husband, master or father, they can be serving Christ. Their humility is not meaningless. It matters for the kingdom of God.

²¹ Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

²¹ *Man's Search for Meaning*

Wives had no choice but to be subject to their husbands. Legally, they were the their husband's property; physically, they were smaller and many would have had the added vulnerability of being often pregnant in a time when the only reliable form of contraception was infanticide. They had no choice about whether submitting to their husband, but they could choose HOW they would submit, and so Paul advises them:

²² be subject to your husbands as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head²² of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. ²⁴ Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.

On first glance this sounds a bit blasphemous. Is Paul really telling wives to worship their husbands as though they are the creator and sustainer of the universe? To act as though their husband is God? I doubt Paul even imagined that readers might take that interpretation.

He is pointing to an example of submission in which the one who submits is not diminished or degraded by the act of submission. In fact, in submitting to Christ²³ the church finds life and growth and salvation. So, he says to wives, you are being forced to submit, so model your submission on the church. Choose active submission over grudging servitude.

Treat your husband as though he is the kind of head that Christ is to his body, the church. The kind of head that will sacrifice himself to save and nourish the body. Treat him like this and, who knows, maybe he will become that sort of husband. But in any case, your servitude will be transformed into Christian service that honours your true Lord. And if your subjection is "as to the Lord" then you will not agree to anything that dishonours the Lord, though you might be punished or even lose your life. Christ gave his life for you and you must be prepared to do the same.²⁴

So Paul makes the wife's submission to her husband secondary to her submission to her real Lord.

He gives similar advice to children and slaves:

*Children, obey your parents **in the Lord** (6:1)*

*Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, **as you obey Christ.** (6:5)*

²² How kefalh is translated is, of course very important. However, because of time constraints and the fact that it has been dealt with well by many commentators, I choose not to focus on it here.

²³ We know that one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord. The church consists of those people who bow their knees willingly, in advance of that day.

²⁴ I want to be clear here that this was a real possibility in the first three centuries AD, but we are blessed to live now in a time when abused women have many more options for leaving dangerous situations.

Servitude and obedience need not be dehumanising, and it need not be incompatible with serving Jesus.

Does that really imply that Paul believed it was good and right for the master of a household to have complete power of ownership over wife, children and slaves?

It took way too long for Christians to come to a clear position on the evil of slavery. But we did get there eventually; and relatively soon afterwards²⁵ we also created laws to enshrine the full personhood of women and children. Only in the last century or so have women gained the vote and the right of married women to own property. More recently we have gained the right to equal pay, to divorce, and to continue to work after marriage and childbirth.

Christian convictions fired many of the people who fought for these rights.²⁶ But women of my generation can easily forget just how recently these rights were won for us, and we forget to be grateful.

The fact that Paul could call wives, slaves and children to courageous Christian living within their servitude does not imply that servitude *should* be imposed. All life situations are transformed by the Gospel, but that does not mean that all life situations are good, or that we should hold back when we have an opportunity to relieve suffering and enhance human dignity.

Paul did not explicitly call for the overthrow of slavery or patriarchy, but if Christian men had paid more attention to his words to husbands, fathers and masters those evils would have been abandoned much sooner. The call to overthrow slavery and patriarchy is not explicit in Paul's words, but it is subversively implicit. Look at what he says to husbands²⁷:

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the word, ²⁷ so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind - yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way, husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body. ³¹ "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and

²⁵ This is because many Christian people who had campaigned for the abolition of slavery turned to the emancipation of women once their first goal had been accomplished.

²⁶ It seems to me that those who call for a return to patriarchy demonstrate great naivety in light of how we know women have fared under patriarchy in the past and in other cultures in our time. They also demonstrate a lack of gratitude for the blessings God has given us: blessings that have been hard won by our sisters and brothers in the past.

²⁷ remembering that Aristotle's words to husbands consisted of arguments for why it is right and natural for men to rule over women, and then a few thoughts on how to exercise that rule. Nothing of the sort is found in Paul

be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.”³² This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.

Husband, he says, you legally have complete power over your wife. OK then, exercise your power the way Jesus exercised his: in love. And just in case you have some sentimental or patronising ideas about love I’m telling you that your love is to be modelled on Christ’s love for the church. That means self-sacrifice. It means giving everything of yourself in order to see your wife become the complete, whole, mature person she was created to be. It means that the fulfilment of your humanity is to be found in the full expression of her humanity. She is not there to serve you. Quite the opposite. Just as Jesus came not to be served but to serve, so you are to serve your wife. Roman law does not require this of you, but the law of Christ does.

Just as the wife’s servitude is transformed by the Gospel, so the Husband’s mastery is transformed. It is transformed into servitude.

I have to say that when one of the authors of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* writes that “A man, by virtue of his manhood, is called to lead for God.” and “A woman, just by virtue of her womanhood is called to help for God”²⁸ he sounds a lot more like Aristotle than Paul.

That is not the biblical message about gender. Genesis 1²⁹ tells us that men and women were made to jointly image God in the world, leading and nourishing and benefiting from the rest of creation. Genesis 3³⁰ shows us that the rule of men over women is a consequence of the fall of humanity, not a part of God’s original intention for creation. And throughout the Old Testament, the story of women under the rule of men is told as one of oppression and violence, of rape and powerlessness. And within that story we find just a few women who shine as victors over their humiliating position. We need to remember their stories: Rachel, who outwits her deceitful father; Deborah the victorious prophet and Judge, Tamar who tricks her father-in-law, Judah, and establishes herself as a righteous person *and* as an ancestor of the Messiah. I could go on, but you can read about them for yourselves. The female heroes of the Bible are not doormats who put up with anything the men around them choose to do with and to them. They are women who use their intelligence, and whatever other resources they can get their hands on, to gain victory for themselves, for their children and for their people.

They are people who transcended the restrictions placed on them as women under patriarchy, just as the women of Ephesus are called to do, not by outright rebellion, but by having an attitude to their subjugation that preserved their personhood and their capacity to act.

We are blessed to live in a very different world. The humanity of men and women has been enhanced as we have left patriarchy behind... or at least as we have begun

²⁸ Raymond Ortlund, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 72

²⁹ vv26-28

³⁰ v16

to do that. Men have been released to be persons, not masters, and women have been released to be active agents for good in the world. And the world is a better place for it.

We can be grateful now that the words of Paul eventually bore fruit. But families are still hard work and men, women and children need to keep working at doing whatever in means in our situation to:

²¹ Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.

I would like to finish by paraphrasing Paul's words from chapter 2 of Ephesians, where he wrote about how Jesus abolished the barrier between Jews and gentiles. Imagine that he was writing instead about that more fundamental barrier between men and women:

¹¹ So then, remember that at one time you who are women by birth, called "helpmeets" by those who call themselves your "head" – based on a merely physical difference - ¹² remember that you were at one time without Christ, alienated from the world of men, prevented from learning the law of God, and told that God is male and concerned only for men. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who were subordinate have been raised up by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the patriarchy that divided us. ¹⁵ He has abolished the curse of male dominance, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death all hierarchy through it. ¹⁷ So he came and demonstrated humility to you who were at the bottom of the ladder and humility to those who were at the top; ¹⁸ for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer dehumanised and humiliated, but you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (including Junia and Hulda), with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²² in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Amen

For further reading I cannot do better than recommend the web site of the wonderful Margaret Mowczko (<https://margmowczko.com>). You will find insightful blogs there, and also reviews of the best current books on gender and the Bible.