**Ephesians 4:17-32**

**Steps towards resolving conflict**

This morning, we are thinking about the topic of how to resolve conflict. And I have to say that this is one of those rare weeks when I have not been scratching around for a few sermon illustrations. All I’ve had to do is switch on the News Channels and watch the parliamentary dramas unfold, and there has been more than enough examples of conflict over the last 7 days to illustrate a hundred sermons!

Tories in conflict with Labour. Brexiteers in conflict with Remainers. The DUP in conflict with Theresa May. The Prime Minister facing down a Vote of No Confidence. Jeremy Corbyn in conflict with some of his own MPs. The US President in conflict with Democrat Senators, the list goes on and on…

Conflict, conflict, conflict…

How will it all resolve in the end? No-one has a clue, of course, and I’m not about to offer opinion or advice to anyone on this topic today!

But what we are seeing in the political landscape at the current time is just one more example of how deeply embedded conflict is in the world in which we live.

As we think about this topic, though, it’s important for us to recognize that, actually, conflict is not necessarily bad and that the vast majority of conflict is actually very good indeed. Now, I say that because the created world in which we live only physically survives and thrives as a result of conflict.

At the most basic level, think about cells dividing, for instance: that process is the result of physical conflict with matter fighting against itself, leading to the creation of a new cell.

Think about the process of evolution: the ultimate Theory of Conflict leading to change, growth and adaptability.

It’s the same with new ideas as well: there can be no new thinking, no advancement of ideas without conflict because new ideas arise when we look at a current situation and come into conflict with it through critique and re-evaluation and, as people argue with one another in a constructive way, exploring different opinions, different ways of doing things, so that conflict brings a synthesis of thinking that produces new ideas and development.

And, of course, constructive conflict is at the heart of our democracy too. Democracy is such a beautiful thing and it is to be treasured and respected. And the democratic system is partly so amazing because we actually pay people to oppose the Government of the day. We have this incredible concept called ‘Her Majesty’s Opposition’: it’s amazing when you think about it. Democracy is built on the fact that we actually want a group of people to oppose the Government in order to create argument and conflict so that ideas and thinking and plans get refined. Whether the Government of the day is Tory or Labour, or whatever else may emerge in the coming decade, we want a strong Opposition to create constructive conflict so that our democracy is strengthened.

I could go on giving examples – but you get the point: conflict is actually part of the natural order of things and can be good.

So I don’t believe that we as Christians are called to avoid conflict. If the church avoided conflict, it would never be honed, it would never grow. And if we as individual Christians avoided conflict, we would never become more spiritually disciplined as we seek to live out the holy life to which we are all called.

We are not looking to avoid conflict, when it is a constructive thing. But we do need to know how to resolve conflict when it occurs, and that is entirely different…

So what do we learn about how to resolve conflict from this reading we heard in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians?

I want to think about this in two parts, and the first is this:

**Firstly, we need to understand the basic source of conflict**

Now, I’m not talking about the direct cause of any specific conflict itself; whether a couple are disagreeing about where to go on holiday next year or whether a pupil is arguing with a teacher about not doing her homework or whatever. I’m talking about something far more fundamental than that, which is this:

The stance that we often take in conflict situations, if it is an unhelpful stance, is often driven by self-protection and self-interest. In the Bible, we find different terms to describe this: sometimes, it is called ‘the flesh’, sometimes, it is called ‘the old self’.

But the basic idea is that there is an ego within each one of us that wants to protect its own interests from any perceived harm and the natural response of the ego when it senses conflict is to pull up the drawbridge and prepare for the fight in self-defence.

So we may be opposed to change for the reason that we are more comfortable with the way things have always been, even if we know, in our heart of hearts, that this is not sustainable.

We may be frightened of new ideas because they challenge what we have always believed and we are comfortable with our old beliefs, even if we know, in our heart of hearts, that they are not watertight.

We may force our own way in a situation, either through aggressive behavior or passive-aggressive behavior, because we want to retain control over that situation or the other people involved.

These are all behaviours that come from the ego or what the Bible calls ‘the flesh’ or the ‘old self’.

But Jesus said in Mark’s Gospel that the daily lifestyle of the Christian involves dying to the self, suppressing the flesh, denying the ego. As Jesus put it, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their lifewill lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.”

We have to die to self in order to find our true identity as a child of God.

We won’t ever find our true identity, our destiny as human beings all the time we allow the ego to rule in us at the expense of our spiritual journey with God.

And we won’t ever be able to resolve conflicts all the time we approach those conflicts from the position of ego rather than the position of spirituality.

As Paul says in this passage from Ephesians 4, the old self, the flesh, the ego is hallmarked by futile thinking, darkened understanding, ignorance and a hardening of the heart. If we want to resolve conflicts in our lives, we need to abandon the ego-position and find a new way to approach those problems.

And at the heart of the Biblical story is that, when Christ died on the cross, he took our old selves, he took our flesh, he took our egos and crucified them. When we are united with Christ, the old has gone and the new has come. Our old selves have been crucified with Christ and now we are able to live a new life in union with him.

The power of the old self has been broken, and we no longer need to live under the control of the ego - unless we specifically choose to do so.

We have been renewed, a clean heart has been placed into us. We are new creations, we are children of God - and every time we enter a situation of conflict, we have a choice: we can either go into that conflict from a position of ego or we can go into that conflict from the strength of our new being in Christ.

The choice is always ours…

And in this passage from Ephesians 4, Paul goes on to outline 5 attitudes that can underpin our approach to conflict if we seek to act out of our spiritual being rather than our ego. So let’s briefly look at these…

**First, if we want to resolve conflict, we must speak out of truth not lies.**

In verse 25, Paul says, “Each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour”.

Now, we need to be careful with this notion of ‘truth’ because it’s always been the case – and is increasingly so in an age of powerful social media - that some people use ‘truth’ as a weapon to hurt others. We can say something quite nasty, or expose something that brings shame on someone and we justify it by saying, “Well, I’m just saying it how it is”.

You know, some things don’t need to be said. Some situations don’t need to be shared with other people. There is a great maxim to live by which is, before saying anything at all, ask yourself three questions: “Is it true? Is it helpful? Is it kind?”and if you can’t answer ‘Yes’ to all three questions – then don’t say it!!

Truth is always important when seeking to resolve conflict, but it must be truth spoken in love - not truth spoken to beat the other person down and gain the upper hand.

**Second, if we want to resolve conflict, we must express anger properly.**

The key thing to see here is that anger is not a sin: it is not wrong to be angry. And, of course, the Bible reminds us that we worship a God who gets angry. So we mustn’t feel guilty if things make us angry: it’s an emotion that human beings have because we are made in the image of God.

But in verse 26, Paul writes this: “Do not let your anger lead you into sin”. When we are in a situation of conflict, it is OK to feel angry, and we need to be honest with one another when we do feel angry. The crucial issue is, what will we do with our anger? Will our anger lead us to say unkind things? Will our anger lead us to accuse and point the finger at others? Will our anger lead us to stew in hateful and vengeful thoughts?

Anger is not sinful – but unless we guard our anger and express it appropriately, it will lead us into sin.

There is no point pretending that we are not angry – that will only make us boil up inside. But the challenge is to express our anger in a godly, helpful manner, that seeks resolution rather than to further exacerbate the conflict.

**Third, if we want to resolve conflict, we must develop a generous spirit**

In verse 28, Paul writes this: “You must have something to share with those in need”.

The ego is innately selfish, of course, always looking out for what is best for self. But the way of Christ is the exact opposite: seeking what is best for the other.

If we are looking to resolve conflicts, we must let selfishness go and consider the needs and desires of the other person; not necessarily caving in to every request but certainly treating that person with respect and compassion.

**Fourth, if we want to resolve conflict, we must speak constructively, not destructively**

This is absolutely crucial, of course, and it is a quality that is often sadly lacking in the public discourse of our nation.

Speaking words that build up rather than tear down is crucial for conflict resolution, as Paul reminds us in verse 29: “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

Words can wound so badly. We can never take back what we have said and so we must always use words wisely.

The word ‘sarcasm’ comes from the Greek phrase meaning ‘to eat flesh’ and that is exactly how it feels to be on the end of destructive, unkind words: calling of names, sarcasm, gossip, threatening words, words of revenge, slander and lies: these modes of speech can destroy lives, both emotionally and physically, particularly in this age of social media. And we have seen so many young people take their own lives because of what has been written or said about them on social media sites.

These social media attacks are often reported on in the media, but just as damaging is the gossip and destructive speech that can happen over a cup of tea with a small group of friends and we absolutely have to call out such behaviour and not allow for it in any Christian community.

Instead, as Paul urges us here, “speak only what is helpful for building others up…”

If there is anything that should mark out the Christian community in this period of our national history, it must be our readiness to use encouraging words and thoroughly rejecting destructive discourse…

And finally,

**If we want to resolve conflict, we must show kindness and forgiveness.**

As Paul says in verse 32, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ forgave you”.

Kindness is so, so important.

How we long to live in a kind world…how desperate we are to see a surge in kindness in society.

I was speaking with someone recently and they said the same phrase that we hear so often: “Respect needs to be earned”. And I thought to myself, that is exactly the problem with the world in which we live. The default position for relationship now is one of disrespect: until you have earned my respect . Wouldn’t it be a more beautiful world if mutual respect were the default position and, actually, disrespect needed to be earned? How much better to go into relationships with the attitude of committing to respect the other person unless their behaviour eventually led to a change of opinion.

Respect does not need to be earned. Respect should be a given. Disrespect needs to be earned…

And at the heart of that is kindness and compassion to other people and if we approached conflict in that manner, how much more easily our conflicts would be resolved.

So, in closing, then, conflict is not always a bad thing: it’s part of the natural order of things and leads to growth and development. Conflict, in one way, is to be embraced for its potential.

But conflict that is ego-based and self-centred must be overcome and resolved and we cannot resolve conflict just by pitting our ego against someone else’s ego. We need a more spiritually mature approach than that.

We must speak truth when it is helpful to do so.

We must express our anger appropriately.

We must develop a generous spirit.

We must speak constructive words to one another.

We must show kindness and forgiveness.

In these ways, we will be reflecting the spirit of Christ rather than an egotistical state of being, and that is the life to which we are called as Christians.

Embrace conflict when it is appropriate. Resolve conflict through wise choices when you need to. But in all things, let us mirror the spirit of Christ in all our relationships.