

SERMON AT GELORUP 13/12/2020: GEOFF CHADWICK

ADVENT 3: 1 Thess 5:26 "Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss."

THE KISSING REVOLUTION

Most of you know that I grew up in Fremantle amongst various ethnic groups. In my childhood I had many Italian friends, and apart from unsuccessfully trying to teach me Italian (which I now regret), I had to learn the appropriate greeting rituals of their families. Most importantly, I learnt the Italian practice of kissing your friend's old aunties, twice- once on each cheek- despite the unusual aroma of Parmesan cheese and fermenting salami. Then, more often, that not I would have to endure the pinching fingers on my cheek, accompanied with the words that "*I was a cheeky boy*". Such rituals welcomed me into their families and even to this day, I greet my Italian friends with the double sided kiss. Sadly though, it seems I am not longer afforded the "cheeky-boy" status!

Curiously, in today's reading from 1 Thessalonians, Paul reminds the church members to: *Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss.* (1 Thes 5.26) This appears as a tiny little command in the midst of what seem to be more important matters. But in fact, this command to "kiss" is of the greatest importance!

Just like my Italian friends, in New Testament times, it was customary for family and friends to greet each other with kisses. The NT Greek word for *kiss* makes this clear. The word is *philema*; a derivative of *philia* or "*family*". A NT dictionary puts it like this:

The noun φιλῆμα (philema), literally a "love-thing", often thought to mean kiss but probably a more general show of affection or care — perhaps also including a hug, a tousle of one's hair or holding of one's head with both hands, and all that. In the Bible we find this word as part of Paul's often repeated instruction to "greet each other with

a holy kiss", which may very well be an over-interpreted instruction to "say hi with a hug"

([ROMANS 16:16](#), [1 CORINTHIANS 16:20](#), [2 CORINTHIANS 13:12](#), [1 THESSALONIANS 5:26](#), and also [1 PETER 5:14](#)).

[Remember too:]

Judas famously betrayed Jesus with one of these (kiss, hug or any such show of love; [LUKE 22:48](#)),

and Jesus' host [Simon](#) refrained from greeting his guest with one, while the unnamed woman didn't stop doing it to his feet ([LUKE 7:45](#)).

(See https://www.abarim-publications.com/DictionaryG/ph/ph-i-l-o-sfin.html#.X9Qb_nczaUk)

So, not to greet one-another with such a sign of affection is considered rude and a slight on the family. Paul's readers would have understood the meaning more clearly than we might today because the greeting was an essential part of their culture.

Basically, he is commanding the church members to behave like family. To greet one another as friends, parents, brothers and sisters. Failing to greet is to behave badly!

Those of us who come from less-exuberant, "stiff upper lip" backgrounds might find all this kissing a bit hard to take. Some of us too might find public *displays of affection* (or PDA as

my Father in Law called them) a little embarrassing, or even uncomfortable. Nevertheless, I read somewhere, that even when an English person has a “stiff-upper-lip”, if you are observant enough, you might just see a small sign of exuberance in a spontaneous, tiny curl of the lip.

In the early church kissing was a significant part in the liturgies. Just as the Europeans greeted family with kisses, it was natural for the early European church members to incorporate kissing and hugging into acts of worship. This “holy kiss” occurred either at the beginning of the service (after the *Lord be with you*), or just before communion when the faithful gathered for the communal eucharist. Interesting, in the 4th Century the deacon was required to shout a warning to the congregation as the kiss was being made “*Let no-one keep rancour against any! Let none [give the kiss] in hypocrisy!*” (See Dix, DG, 1954, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Dacre Press: Westminster, p107)

Sadly, the *Greeting of Peace* was lost from the Anglican rites for many centuries until it was reinstated in the 1970s. Some of you may remember the consternation this had for some.

All sorts of worries were expressed: such as:

- *How dare they introduce this “new-fangled” thing in church!*
- *It’s not right to show your affection in public!*
- *It interrupts the service!*
- *Shaking hands is OK but what if they don’t like it. (Meaning I don’t like it.)*
- *It’s not hygienic!*
- *Now I get to show my church friends I love them.*
- *Here’s an opportunity to say sorry to some one (as long as no one is watching).*
- *It’s a welcome relief from all the formality that’s gone before!*

- *etc*

Nevertheless, this *kissing revolution* has become so much a part of what we do, that in many parishes they add it to the *Prayer Praise and Proclamation* service because people wonder what happened. We must remember though, that Paul and the early church began the *kissing revolution*, not just because it was a *nice* thing to do, but because it was a *radical* thing to do. The command to *greet one another with a holy kiss* (1 Thess 5:26) was a *confronting* ideal. That's because, in the church, people from all walks of life were gathered together against the social norms of the day. Slaves, gathered with their masters, women gathered with men, children gathered with adults, Jews were with Gentiles, different races mixed together, and the social hierarchy little mattered. The early church was a *melting pot* of all people. Imagine being commanded to *kiss one another!* Imagine! Kissing your master, your slave, a Gentile, a Jew, a widow, a foreigner a superior, an underling, a stranger! The *kissing revolution* made it clear: In Christ you are all one family. You are *φιλημα (philema)*, *one another as a sign of philia (family)*.

This of course, is our challenge today.

Having said all this, I couldn't let an opportunity to mention *Star-Trek* go by!

(Are there any *Trekkers* here?).

In 1968, just one year after the US Supreme Court struck-down the State of Virginia's Law out-lawing inter-racial marriages, Gene Roddenberry and the Producers of *Star Trek* joined the *kissing revolution*. They broadcast the first ever interracial kiss on public Television. In a bizarre plot Captain Kirk (William Shatner) and Afro-American, Communications Officer, Lieutenant Uhura (Nichelle Nichols), under the influence of Aliens, are made to kiss one another.

It's hardly, earth shattering now, but at the time it threatened the Series' ratings in the Southern States.

Following this, it's worth noting that Nichols went on to become an advocate for equal opportunities for minorities at NASA.

(See: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/fifty-years-ago-star-trek-aired-tvs-first-interracial-kiss-180970204/>)

You never know, how much can be done on the basis of one simple kiss!

Now in this COVID-19 world, we have been in a *kissing free zone*. Our normal and natural ways of showing affection have been shut down so we've looked for alternatives. sing the "Shalom" song to one another. Some use sign language, and others are using the now ubiquitous elbow bump.

I've even noticed military salutes happening – which curiously originates from practice of showing others that you are holding no weapons. Perhaps we could introduce this into our liturgy?!

We could salute one another and say:

"We are the body of Christ"

"We have no weapons!"

The peace of the Lord be with you

And also with you.

I digress...

Yes COVID-19, has disrupted our *kissing revolution*. But not completely. Advent is upon us and it seems to me that we will know our new Advent when *we can kiss one another again*.

Or putting it another way: *COVID-19 will be over when we can kiss one-another*.

Meanwhile, let us continue to people of the *holy-kiss* as best we can.

The peace of the Lord be with you.

And also with you!