

St Lukes 2025 July 13th

Colossians 1:1-14

Paul of the New Testament was a strategic type of person. He knew that small groups of Christians, meeting in people's homes, was a good way of growing the faith. But, being in the days before jet travel, Paul couldn't personally visit each town or city and stay there long enough to plant a church.

So Paul set up his base in key places, mostly trade hubs where people gathered. It's not a bad idea. Back in the 1980's, it was said that if you wanted to evangelise NZ you should start on Bondi Beach by converting the surfers, because most of them would be going back to Auckland.

Perhaps following that principle, Paul spent three years with his young church at Ephesus, set among a cosmopolitan, mobile population. It was a major centre in the Lycus Valley district. The book of Acts tells us that Paul also held daily talks and discussions in a lecture hall in Ephesus, possibly the first-ever lunchtime lecture series in history. Ephesus was within striking distance of several smaller places. One of his regular audience members was a man called Epaphras. He came from Colossae which was two or three days' walk away. Colossae wasn't considered a very go-ahead sort of place – not the kind of transfer people would seek out as their next career move. But inspired by what he heard from Paul, Epaphras went on to found a church there, as well as possibly seeding others in the district.¹

Paul was delighted to hear about the new church in Colossae. His strategy is working. Right now, Paul's in prison. Yet from the beginning of his letter to the Colossians you get the impression that he's never been happier! He's got pens and parchment, and a like-minded companion in his protégée Timothy. There's a steady flow of Christian visitors to keep up his supply of essentials and bring him news of the new churches and the outside world – what more could a man want? Paul loses no time in writing to the Colossians, to encourage them. What does he tell them first? Hang on to faith in Jesus, and the love it gives you for each other.

I'm too embarrassed to ask myself what sort of letters I'd be writing to church from prison if I were an incarcerated missionary, especially if it was at a time and place with minimal official support. If you go to prison in Australia, the government have to feed you and clothe you and even pay the power bill for your accommodation. You're a guest of His Majesty, so to speak. But back then, the duty of supplying your needs mostly fell to your friends and family. Sometimes charity groups helped, but that was patchy. How would I be handling it? Well, I'd ask the church to pray for my release, and I'd want someone with connections to do something about getting me out of there. Apart from that, I might ask for some warm socks and maybe one of those memory foam mattresses. But such details don't seem to concern Paul at all. There are occasions in his prison letters when personal requests are mentioned,

¹ Epaphras was a familiar figure in ministry in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

perhaps saying thanks for the extra blanket or something. But his own comfort is never a main focus. The main thing he does is tell the Colossians how happy he is to hear of their growth and activity.

We know from other places that Christian love was a very practical thing. The book of Acts tells us that love within Christian communities meant that they habitually took care of their own needy. They took on what would normally have been tasks for the natural family.² It was also the beginning of a long and continuing tradition of organised Christian charity. Many churches like ours, as well as supporting larger charity groups, run their own relief and outreach activities. Our basis for helping others shows in today's story about the good Samaritan where the lawyer wants to know who is his neighbour, whom he's obliged to help. He really wants to know who is not his neighbour, whom he may ignore.

In not so long ago memorable history, during the wartime occupation of Holland, another Christian family faced the same question. Corrie ten Boom tells how her family sheltered Jews in their home as part of the Dutch resistance. They were eventually betrayed and arrested. While her family were still in the hands of the relatively humane Dutch local police, the cop who had charge of them looked with sympathy at Corrie's elderly father. 'Old man', he said, 'I'd like to just let you go home. If we do that, you won't give us any more trouble, will you?' And Casper ten Boom stood, as to a judge, and said, 'If you send me home today, then tomorrow I will open my door to anyone who is in need'. With those words, a brave man signed his death warrant. -They didn't directly kill him, but he didn't survive the camps for very long. For us, expressing God's love for those in need is unlikely to be so costly. Our love is for Jesus, a person, rather than for any particular point of doctrine. And our love for Jesus will result in love for each other.

What happens when faith and love move into a human life that previously didn't have them? I think we start to see what Christianity is saying, compared with other religions and philosophies. Since we live in a world where Christianity is not exactly the flavour of the month, we can expect to meet opposition. And we can use that to build our strength. There's a story about a micro-climate experiment done to see whether crops could potentially be grown on the moon. In the desert where nothing much grew, they built a biosphere, a sealed dome. to keep out the scorching desert wind. They brought in some suitable soil, and modified the temperature extremes to a tolerable level. Wattle trees were chosen for the experiment, because they grow fast. The seeds arrived and duly germinated, and sprouted in the sealed dome. Soon the first branches appeared. The scientists were happy. Then something unexpected happened. The wattles grew to bush size, but then they began to drop their branches. They tested soil nutrients and moisture, and checked no vermin had got in – all the obvious things- But there seemed to be no reason. Eventually, they concluded the problem was wind, or rather the lack of it. To build strength, the young wattle branches

² Acts 4:34

need something to toughen themselves against. It can be argued that we get stamina for our journey partly by standing against the prevailing climate of our time. Our society rather assumes selfish motivation is the norm. Any time a taxation reduction is announced, for example, the newspaper runs an article on ‘What’s in it for me?’ They typically break down the various income bands so you can see your benefit. Next time the conversation turns that way, try saying, ‘But I think I need to pay more tax!’ People will look. I have little doubt that the prevailing social climate in Colossae wasn’t known for its altruism either. But it was pleasant enough, and most people there were reasonably comfortably off. A bit like Adelaide, maybe. And the young Christian community in Colossae was around the same age as our own merged parish of Modbury and Golden Grove. Whether you’re a Christian in first century Colossae or 21st century Adelaide, it would be hard to argue against the importance of sticking to our faith in Jesus, and to expect that to lead to growth in love for each other. And as Paul desired to see growth in the new Christians at Colossae, so we too can expect God will continue to shape and change our lives, giving us increased stamina with confidence in him.

Today we looked at the opening part of the letter Paul wrote from prison to the Colossian church. In the coming couple of weeks we’ll hear a little of the situational threats they’ll be facing - stay tuned!

I’ll close in prayer.

Lord, we’re thankful to know that through good times and bad you have set people in place to watch over your church. Help us work out how best to live in a way that reflects your light in the world, and glorifies your Name. Amen