

Today we continue our sermon series on St Paul's letter to the Colossians as we look together at the passage set for our NT reading from Colossians 2.

The church in Colossae was a young church when St Paul wrote this letter. It had been in existence only a few years so it's understandable that many of its members were somewhat immature in their faith. St Paul is concerned that these immature Christians might be drawn away, perhaps unthinkingly, from a true faith in Christ, to a diluted version of faith that was Christian in name only, and which would rob them of the direction and the hope and the assurance and the joy, that only a true and living faith can deliver. In our reading from Col 2 Paul:

- (1) Warns these new Christians of dangers to their faith from the pagan culture in which they lived, and then,
- (2) To counter these dangers, he reminds them of the all-surpassing greatness of who Jesus really is and of what God has done for them through him.

In verse 8 Paul writes:

⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe and not according to Christ. (Col 2.8 NRSV)

We have to read between the lines a bit here, but Paul, perhaps has two threats in mind. The first is a threat which arose from a temptation to adopt a more philosophical understanding of the Christian faith so as to make the faith (and perhaps the Christians themselves) more acceptable to the broader society of the city. There was a ready-made precedent for this because, in Greco-Roman society around that time, a form of Jewish faith known as Hellenistic Judaism was espoused by some as a more reasonable form of that faith. Hellenistic Judaism was a philosophical interpretation of the Jewish faith which sought to rationalise those aspects of Judaism which Greco-Roman society found difficult to accept. It's possible that in order to be respected, and perhaps to gain a broader acceptance in society, the Colossian Christians were under pressure to make a similar adaptation, and perhaps to drop what some saw as the more objectionable aspects of Christian faith – for example, the insistence on salvation only through faith in a crucified

saviour - a proposition which, according to the historian Tom Holland, Roman society would have found 'beyond weird'

The second threat that Paul warns about is that which stems from the pervasive influence of the pagan culture of Colossae. When, in our passage, he refers to '*the elemental spirits of the universe*' he is almost certainly referring to the power, over people's behaviour, of so-called local gods. There would have been significant pressure on the Colossian Christians to accommodate themselves to this pervasive influence. Imagine if you had become a Christian and therefore stopped worshipping at the shrine of the god that was thought to protect your family or your trade group. There would be a lot of pressure on you to adapt your Christian behaviour to the prevailing pagan culture.

Paul knew that accommodation to either a philosophically adapted form of faith or to the demands of the pagan culture, would involve compromises that would inevitably weaken the faith of these new Christians and lead to them losing the hope and the assurance they had in Christ. To guard them against this Paul firstly reminds them (in vs 9) of who Christ really is: '*... in him,*' Paul reminds them, '*the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.*'

This is the mind-blowing conclusion the apostles had been driven to by their experience of the life and ministry of Jesus and especially by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead – they had been forced to confess that Jesus, whom they had known as truly human, was also truly God – as we continue to confess in the Nicene Creed, Jesus is, 'God from God, light from light, true God from true God.' Jesus is not just one more Jewish philosopher whose teachings might be debated and adopted or discarded, nor is he just another capricious demigod to be added to the pantheon represented around most Greek cities. No, in him the fullness of God dwells, in him resides the fullness of God's love and faithfulness, and thus Christ's word, his command, and his promise have authority like no other and can be relied upon.

Paul then continues, in the next few verses, to emphasise what they have gained through faith in Christ.

(1) In Christ the fullness of God is made available to them

In verse 10 he writes:

‘ . . . ,¹⁰ and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.’

What Paul is talking about here is the availability of the fullness of the life of God to everyone who trusts in Jesus. In Christ the fullness of God dwells, and those who are joined to Christ in faith have, as St Paul puts it, ‘come to that fulness in him.’ The fullness of God’s love and power and richness is made available to the Colossian Christians, and to us, as we trust in Christ – and that’s the key: ‘As we trust in Christ’. The danger for the Colossian Christians is that they might be drawn away from trusting in Christ, that they might turn their eyes elsewhere, to other supposed means of fulfilment and, in doing so, fail to experience the fullness of life that God offers. And anyway, to look elsewhere, Paul continues, is pointless, because the powers and authorities that might tempt believers with offers of greater fulfilment or security, are themselves subject to Christ – he is head over them all.

(2) In Christ they have been made members of God’s family

In verses 11 and 12 Paul reminds them that they have been brought into and are assured of membership of the people of God - not by the circumcision that some Jewish converts were suggesting is necessary - but by baptism into the death and risen life of Jesus. Just as wedding rings, accepted in trust, are a tangible sign of the love of two people and their status as husband and wife, so baptism, accepted in faith, is a tangible sign of their membership of God’s people.

(3) In Christ they have been forgiven and made alive to God

In verse 13 Paul reminds the Colossian Christians that previous to their faith in Christ they had been dead in their trespasses – that is to say they were completely inert to God – but in Christ God has forgiven their trespasses and made them alive to him.

(4) All this is through the cross of Christ

Finally, Paul points out that all this is through the cross. And the language is graphic! In vss 14 and 15 he writes:

That God has erased ‘ . . . *the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.* ¹⁵ *He disarmed^[6] the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.*

The record, with its legal demands, is the list of charges against us - list of our failures before God and of our rebellions against God. This charge sheet Paul says, has been nailed to the cross. So, at the head of the cross, on which Jesus is hanging and dying, is nailed a parchment that reads ‘For the sins of (insert your own name). This death for us disarms the powers of sin and death – they no longer have dominion over us – they are defeated and disarmed by the cross.

I want to put it to you today that these exhortations that Paul put to the Colossian Christians so long ago are very relevant for us today. We live in the midst of a culture in which, at least in the eyes of those who see themselves as more sophisticated, Christianity is regarded as either naïve or quite objectionable. When did you last see Christianity portrayed in a positive light in a movie or TV production? The pressure this continuous commentary exerts can lead Christians to doubt their faith and become discouraged. Some might be tempted to accommodate faith to the make it fit with the prevailing climate. But as Christian journalist Greg Sheridan warned not long ago in his regular column in the Australian newspaper:

In the end, Christian denominations choose between surrender to the ideology of the culture, or faithfulness to their beliefs. It's not possible to do both. The Christian movements that accommodate the culture inevitably disappear, for if they are only offering what the culture already has, why would anybody bother. This is a sober and pertinent warning.

The increasingly secular nature of our society also can draw Christians away from living faith in Christ. Bishop Tom Wright, New Testament theologian and former Bishop of Durham has observed that modern secularism, with its materialist gods, might be

regarded as a form of paganism if, he says, a rather boring one. There is a real danger for church members today of so worshipping the gods of materialism that they are drawn away from a true and living faith in Christ to a lifestyle that is Christian in name only – and with that comes a loss of the direction and hope and joy – which is to say the fullness - that only a living faith can deliver. And the irony is that the materialist gods deliver neither fulfilment nor hope. After all, he who dies with the most toys still dies!

Brothers and sisters, we, like the Colossian Christians, need to dwell again on the magnificence of what God has done for us in Christ, and to reflect especially on the costly love of God shown for us at the cross, and to know again the length and breadth and depth of that love and this to be strengthened to live out our faith in the midst of an increasingly hostile culture. P earlier:

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. (Col 2.6-7 NRSV)