

Sermon for Sunday 10th January 2021 by Canon Simon Everett Greetings, Thanksgivings and Prayer (Colossians 1:1-14)

Over the days of Christmas and New Year I had great pleasure in reading the latest Ian Rankin novel, the rather aptly titled 'A Song for the Dark Times'. For those of you not familiar with the author he is probably best known for writing detective novels featuring a crusty detective called John Rebus. Although now retired, old habits die hard and Rebus gets drawn into a double murder, with one of the murder victims being his daughter's partner. It doesn't disappoint, and little by little he and his former colleague Siobhan Clarke (now friend), gradually piece together the evidence to determine who carried out these crimes.

Today we start our sermon series on St Paul's epistle to the Colossians and although you may not realise it, reading an epistle is not dissimilar to reading a detective novel, because nearly all of the epistles were written for specific reasons, usually to counter heretical teaching, or division within a church, or to settle a dispute of some sort. And it is the task of the reader, and certainly of the theologian to determine which of these it is. Sometimes it is obvious but at other times it is a little trickier, which can lead to various hypotheses being put forward. There used to be some graffiti that said, 'JESUS IS THE ANSWER', to which some wag would usually write 'Yes, but what is the question?' At this point we might say, "Colossians is the answer" which then makes us ask, "So, what is the question? or "the answer to what?"

Of course, the epistle can be read simply at face value and that in itself will bring blessing and spiritual nourishment, which will help you grow in faith. You will also discover new things about God. But if you spend a little more time, in this case with Colossians, and start to read between the lines, then a whole new world opens up, that helps us get into the mind of the writer and the life of the early church. You will find that not only does this give a greater understanding of the Bible but also, it helps us see that there really is '*nothing new under the sun*' and the issues that we grapple with, both individually and as a Church, are not dissimilar to those of the first century.

So now let's get to grips with the epistle to the Colossians. The first thing to notice is that it is written by St Paul, with his young assistant Timothy by his side. This may seem obvious, but sometimes the authorship is disputed by theologians. However, with Colossians nearly all agree that it was Paul writing. And he is writing to the young church at Colosse, which was a rather an insignificant little market town about 100 miles East of Ephesus, (In fact it is not even mentioned in the Book of Acts). Having said this during the years of the Persian and Greek empires (about 500 years before) it had been very different, then it was described as '*A populous city, wealthy and large.*' And so it was a city or town that had seen better days and had been eclipsed by its neighbours Laodicea and Hierapolis.

So why was Paul writing to the Christians there, to a place he never actually visited (as far as we know)?

Well, it would seem that a friend of his by the name of Epaphras had come to see him and told him of some troubles that were besetting the church in Colosse. Now again, reading between the lines, we can learn that Epaphras was a Christian who had come to a faith through Paul's teaching during his time in Ephesus. And having come to Christ he had been empowered by the Holy Spirit, to share his new-found faith with his home community, and the communities of neighbouring Hierapolis and Laodicea. This was very much part of Paul's strategy, to teach and bring people to a faith and then encourage them to go and share with others, that they too may enjoy the riches of the kingdom of God and set up new churches.

At the time of writing Paul was in prison (or most likely house arrest, probably in Rome, although some say Ephesus). So Epaphras would have been able to visit and spend time with Paul, sharing his excitements and concerns. It would seem that after a good start some of the church members at Colosse started to question whether Epaphras had sold them a bit short on the Gospel, and they wondered if they shouldn't be doing more to earn their salvation, or if there was some deeper mystery that needed exploring. Also, it would seem some thought that they should be *feeling* more Godly and experiencing more than they were. In a nutshell some were questioning whether they shouldn't be getting more out of their new-found faith, or expressing their faith in other ways. We will find out more about the issues that the church in Colosse faced in the coming weeks, issues that have become known as the Colossian Heresy (but that's for another day).

So getting back to today's text, after giving his identity and stating his apostolic credentials Paul then gives thanks for all that is good within the fellowship he addresses. In doing so he affirms Epaphras and the ministry and Gospel he's been preaching (vs 6-8). So, although there were problems there is still much to praise God for. *We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,* says Paul, *'because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people— the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven...'* (Col 1:3-5). Paul reassures the Colossians that they are true Christians – there is definitely evidence of the Holy Spirit being at work amongst them most noticeably in the qualities of faith, hope and love they exhibit. Throughout Paul's epistles these three graces are hallmarks of God's work in a true child of God. *'Faith hope and love, these three remain'*, says Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians. These are eternal qualities that will abide if we are truly in Christ.

We can all love the lovable and we can all be good, kind and loving when things are going well for us. But true faith shines through in the difficult times, and when encountering the difficult people and ugly situations. It is faith in a God of love that enabled Paul to do his missionary work, often encountering hostilities and hardship, but he knew God loved him (despite his earlier animosity to the faith) and he knew that whatever he encountered God would be with him.

When at theological college Linda and I once heard a Missionary doctor from Uganda address the students. He had retired three times, but God and the people kept calling him and his wife back. He encouraged us to think seriously about ministering in Africa or other foreign parts. Towards the end of his talk, one of the students who was married with a young family asked if it wasn't rather irresponsible to go to Uganda where AIDs was so prevalent and healthcare rather basic. The Doctor looked the student straight in the eye and said, "Your child could get run over tomorrow here in London. Remember, there is no place safer on this earth, than where God wants you to be." God's love calls, and we respond in faith knowing that in the eternal hope all will be well. In these times of Covid lockdown, let us be reassured by this; there is no place safer than where God wants you to be.

That's is not to say that life is going to be easy. And maybe this is another part of the Colossians complaint, that despite coming to a faith, life was still a grind. Maybe there were some who were saying that, of course, a *real faith* would mean that all would go well and everything in the garden would be rosey! I sometimes hear this today from Christians (even church leaders). But let us be clear, the Christian faith is the offer of salvation through Christ crucified and the promise of God's Holy Spirit being at work in us, to help us lead godly lives – But there is no guarantee of an easy life.

Apart from a tiny minority of people, life in the Roman empire was incredibly tough, yet the Christian faith gave the poor and the slaves hope in something greater – if not in this world then certainly in the next. It also strengthened them for their daily grind.

To reassure them that their hope was well founded and to encourage them, Paul writes, '*...since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives,¹⁰ so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience...*' (vs 9-11)

Note the two main thrusts of Paul's prayer in verses 9-14; he asks that the Colossians would have knowledge and wisdom, and that they would be strengthened with God's power. Coming to a faith in Christ means a radical change (new life), not just in behaviour but also in the way we think and view the world. By his Holy Spirit God helps us with this, but it also means we need to be willing to change and work and pray hard to bring this about. Prayer, Bible Study, fellowship, worship, these are essential if we are to grow in faith. Do you daily ask God in prayer to show you new things and forgive your failings, to sustain you in your trials so that you do not grow bitter and complain? It is so easy for this to happen, to let the world get on top of you, this is why Paul prays that the Colossians would be strengthened by God's power, as well as being enlightened with his wisdom and knowledge. The power he prays for is not to do spectacular things and give spiritual party tricks to show off to friends and neighbours! it is to have the patience to endure all things and live faithfully – joyfully even – in Christ, in an often hostile world.

Paul concludes his prayer, by again thanking God that the Colossians have been rescued from darkness and brought in to his Kingdom, where there is forgiveness and redemption. In other words they have been set free to be children of God and to live lives worthy of God's calling.

At the start of this sermon series we stand on the threshold of discovering new and exciting things about God, and what it means to faithfully follow him. We shall learn from the early church of Colosse and see how St Paul's teaching to them continues to be relevant to the church today. It is my prayer that we too will grow in knowledge and understanding and that this will produce fruit in us that is attractive to those around.

Let us pray:

Almighty God,

We give thanks for the faith that has been handed down to us.

We ask that you fill us with the knowledge of your will,
and give us the wisdom to do what is right in your eyes.

Give us your strength and love to bear all things, believe all things,
hope all things and endure all things,

that you may be known by the fruit that we bear.

(Based on today's reading, I Cor 13:7 & Matt 7:20)

Questions

1. If we were not told that Paul was 'in chains' (Col 4:3 & 18) would you guess it from Paul's writing? What example does this give, and how can we learn from this?
2. Are there times when, like the Colossians, you feel like there should be more to your faith than you are experiencing? If so how do you overcome this?
3. Is there a temptation today to sugar-coat the Christian faith in order to make it more appealing to non-Christians? What are the dangers of this?
4. What lessons about prayer can we learn from the opening 14 verses of this epistle?
5. How are faith, hope and love demonstrated within your life?
6. For what do we need Knowledge, wisdom and understanding today? How can we acquire this?
7. For what do we need God's power today? How can we acquire this?

If you want to take time to read the whole epistle, do so with the following in mind: 'If Colossians is the answer – What questions are being asked by St Paul? See how your answers tie in with the preachers' in the coming weeks.