

Synod Bible Study, 8 October 2017

Colossians 2:8-15

Revd Emma Street

By way of context: within the body of the Church my own calling is to help lost travelers - perhaps needing to meet Jesus, or perhaps looking for a casual understanding to grow into a solid relationship – by connecting them into the community of the body of Christ and conversely helping that community to go outward towards the traveler on the road. Thus I am looking at Paul's letter to the Colossians, particularly vv 2:8-15, in the context of community.

As we have gathered together for this Synod we will have shared a number of encouraging examples of people whose lives have been transformed by the knowledge and love of Jesus.

Many of these people were assisted in their journey towards God through the offerings and outreach of a community of Christians. Some of these people ventured alone into our places of worship and gathering. Others began with a personal, individual connection with a believer who later brought them into the community - to worship, or an outreach group, a retreat, or an Alpha course.

In saying 'community' I am avoiding the word 'church' to avoid conjuring an image of a building or institution. Paul did not think institutionally, except to caution against it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides some words that clearly articulate Paul's idea of church, which I believe applies at both a personal and corporate level:

'Since the ascension, Christ's place on earth has been taken by His Body, the Church. The Church is the real presence of Christ. – We should not think of the Church as an institution, but as a person, though of course a person in a unique sense' (The Cost of Discipleship).

I start here because my point is that communities can evangelise and it is not only the task of intrepid souls prepared to head out alone, or in pairs, into perilous places. Also because, however someone comes to a relationship with Christ, they will most likely, we hope, join a Christian community. As this letter to the Colossians (and Ephesians, Galatians ...) attests, that is where things get complicated.

Thinking of the 'almost' and the 'new' Christians among us. Thinking back to when each of us received that great profound sense of Jesus' presence in our lives. Paul is saying, remember this and don't let that wonderful moment be undermined by a kind of bondage to religious practice.

I offer a few questions to reflect on as we look to Paul's guidance:

- a. *What happens in their life the day after someone is drawn to Jesus?*
- b. *How does an established community respond and assist new members to become 'mature in Christ'? (Col 1:24)*
- c. *How does a group of people with different backgrounds, different secular roles, different notions of religion and faith, hold together as a united 'body'?*
- d. *How does the 'body' exist apart from, and yet simultaneously part of, a different world?*

How do we read this letter from Paul and answer these questions as a community?

The pressing point of this Epistle for us TODAY, and particularly v2:8, is that we are not reflecting on historical issues. Like that early church, we hold Paul's charge in our hands and take responsibility for the strength of the church TOMORROW. We must not underestimate the weight of this short letter Paul writes from prison to a community he has never met.

Living 'in the World' (Col 2:6, 2:8)

In v 2:6 Paul exhorts the community to 'continue to live your lives'. We have joined this Christian community but we are still 'in the world'. As the 'real presence of Christ' we must be actively engaged in the world.

Negatively - our presence 'in the world' leaves us open to influences that might pull us away from God.

The universal perils are outlined in v2:8:

'See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elements of the universe, and not according to Christ'.

It is generally accepted that Paul is here addressing ascetic practices, certain kinds of Jewish mysticism and pious behaviours, leading a church of new believers away from God before they were mature enough in faith to discern the right path. These practices have been brought into the church from the world and other religious influences.

A good deal of us who gather for a Synod are well established in Christ. However, we should not be complacent that the same perils are not near us. Many of the issues facing the Diocese and the world attest to that. However, for those feeling confident, perhaps the lesson of discipleship we should take from this text is to question whether we are examples of a Christ-centred life, or whether we are the false teachers. Are new believers safe in our hands? Do we offer the fullness of the body or a human tradition?

Positively – our calling to be ‘in the world’ brings us to know the influences which pull others away from God. Our brokenness and ongoing struggle to keep Christ in the centre equips us for the task of helping others with their struggle.

Thus, the perils must be faced:

Philosophy and empty deceit: The arguments of contemporary intellectuals. Those who seek wisdom and knowledge in the absence of God. Mysticism gone wrong. Humanist as opposed to God-centred philosophy. ‘Spirituality without religion’?

Human tradition: matters of food and drink, festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths (Col 2:16) Services, prayer books, vestments? Organs? *Ascetic practices as disguised indulgences of those very cravings they were supposed to kill* (John Wesley).

Our human traditions must be understood as in contrast with the truth we have received, not of man, but of God (cf. Gal 1:12)

Elements of the universe: (rudiments of the world): Self abasement, worship of angels (spiritual forces of the world, not God) (Col 2:18)

(Living) not according to Christ: Marcus Loane summarises Paul’s sentiments, in a statement (chillingly) pertinent to the current condition of our society, and perhaps some parts of the Church:

‘All pagan culture tends to degenerate at length because culture which fails to place the Son of God at its center leads to spiritual vacuity’ (Three Letters from Prison).

Living ‘In Him’ (Col 2:9-11) United in Love (Col 2:1)

‘in Him the fullness of the deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness (complete self-realisation) in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority’ (Col 1:19, cf Eph 1:19).

Paul affirms that the foundation of discipleship is not strict observance with pious endeavour, but instead identification with the accomplishments of Christ.

The life of the disciple centers primarily around fellowship, expressed in word and deed, with God and with one another. The focal point of reference for Paul is not a book or a rite, neither a code (Judaism) nor a cult (Hellenistic), but a set of relationships (Banks, Paul’s Idea of Community).

In referencing circumcision Paul addresses an area of conflict between the ‘old Law’ and new Christianity that is not so relevant to us except in its contrast with the Baptism we now enjoy. A new mark of being God’s people that now applies to all: Jew and Gentile, man and woman. The mark of an intimate relationship with God.

Circumcision establishes the context for the ultimate statement of v15.

In the act of dying Jesus was stripped of the flesh through which the evil powers of the world had been able to attack him, and rising in new life, triumphed over them. In their 'spiritual circumcision', believers can say 'in Him' they have put off the old self and put on the new. The old skin has been shed and a new life in God has begun.

For those who struggle to describe salvation to the non-believer Col 2:13-14 provides all the words you need. My sins were nailed to a cross and I walked away with Jesus (leaving them behind).

Our principal relationship is with Christ, and from this all relationships flow.

The knowledge of God's mystery that is Christ - Col 2.2 (Col 2:9-15)

I'll boldly label Paul's response to empty philosophy as mystic wisdom. 'Mystic' talk makes many of us uncomfortable. Is Paul not primarily addressing the error of 'mystic' practices?

Paul's aim is to guide us away from that mysticism which looks like a 'dream world' where words are confused with things, and symbols with reality, towards the true goal of 'attainment of universal truths' (Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*). The treasures of wisdom and understanding found only in Christ (Col 2:3)

Paul's intensely spiritual language articulates our joining in Christ's death and resurrection [vv2:8-15] - '*spiritual circumcision*', in the '*circumcision of Christ*', '*buried with him*', '*alive together with him*'. This letter urges readers to forsake pale imitations of spirituality for the wonder of the 'real thing' in Christ.

Correct ascetic practice is simply, being still *and* knowing He is God (Ps 46:10). In this overloaded world, people will be attracted by our stillness, we need to introduce them to God.

The profound Christological centre to this Epistle in vv 2:9-15 clarifies the true wisdom. Salvation, as it is worked out in the Christian experience, is centred on the idea of a mystical union between Christ and believer. 'It is a union which is established by faith, spiritual in nature and ethical in its results'. (Scott, *Footnotes to St Paul*) I might suggest that the ethical results are addressed in part in Colossians 3.

It is through union with Christ that we are a complete person and in his union with us he remains present in the Body. Thus we are simultaneously 'in him' and filled with all *His* fullness (Col 2:9, Jn 1:16).

Paul's message: We are not complete in Church we are complete in Christ. When we are complete in Christ, we are a Church.