

SERMON: 14 July 2019 – Rev Brenda Robson

“Heaven’s Hope” (Colossians 1:1-14 and Luke 10:25-27)

Colossians 1 : 1 – 15

Paul wrote this letter to the church in Colossae. He wrote the letter from prison in Rome. He had never been to Colossae and he did not establish the church there but it is likely that he ordered the evangelism that took Epaphras and others to Colossae to plant a church and to minister there.

The letter is relatively short, four chapters in our bible. It was to a small and insignificant town, a place that had once been a large and thriving city. Yet to this insignificant town Paul wrote what is considered to be his deepest understanding of faith, his highest and most developed thoughts about Jesus being one with God and at the same time being fully human. He stresses the power and supremacy of Jesus over all things.

He did this because there were some heresies threatening the Colossian church. Epaphras had brought news of this to Paul in prison. Some of the new Christians still clung on to **astronomy**, seeking direction from the planets and stars because the astronomers said Jesus was not enough. Others were being influenced by the large Jewish population to adopt the laws and **legalism of Judaism** because the message of Christ was too simple. Still others continued to believe in the presence of **evil spirits in all things** in the air and the earth and the spiritual realm and they did not think that Jesus was powerful enough to counteract all this. The church in Colosse was in danger of being corrupted by all this heresy and Christian faith in all Asia would be threatened.

And Paul responded with this letter to reinforce the supremacy of Christ over all things.

The people should no longer look to the stars for guidance.

Jesus took people beyond legalism and hypocrisy.

Jesus had supreme power over all of nature and the spiritual realm, God had placed all things under his feet.

And Paul begins his letter by thanking God for all the faithful Christians in the Colossian church “whose faith and love spring from the hope that is stored up for them in heaven and that they had heard about from the word of truth.”

The words of Paul are so relevant to our situation today. As a church we are under siege from many opposing ideologies and lifestyles and heresies. We are no longer a Christian nation. Church leaders have declining influence in society. For many the church in the widest sense is no longer relevant.

This was underlined by a survey published on Thursday this week. The headline read “Little more than one third of Britons now identify as Christian in religious ‘wake-up’”.

Slightly more than one third of the people polled described themselves as Christian, down from a half in 2008 and nearly two thirds in 1983.

Half of those polled said that they never pray but interestingly those who pray “several times a day” is up from 5 per cent twenty years ago to 8 per cent today. So those who have a faith are perhaps more serious about it than they were in the past.

The response of the Humanists is predictable – their spokesperson said “With these trends set to continue, policy-makers in every field, from education to constitutional law, to health and social care need to wake up to such dramatic social change, particularly the rise of the non-religious and the decline of Christianity.”

And so a call to move education and law and health and social care out of the influence of the Christian church. Take God out of schools and colleges and hospitals and justice and care homes.

How are we to act or react as individuals and as a church in this society today?

We can begin by reading the message in this short letter to the Colossians and the whole word of truth that is contained in scripture.

Understand the supremacy of Christ, the all-fulfilling nature of Christ, the promises of Christ for each one of us. Nurture that hope that is stored up for us in heaven.

Paul has not stopped praying for the people, asking God to fill them with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding (verse 9). He doesn't know these people, he has never met them, and yet he has a passion for them in his heart and he anguishes over their lives and he never forgets them in prayer. We can learn much from his faithfulness.

Earlier at verses 4 and 5 Paul tells the people that he has heard of their faith in Christ Jesus and of the love they have for all the saints. He has heard of their Christian faith and their love in action, serving others, that comes from that hope.

O that this commendation would apply to our church today!

Christian faith and Christian love are fruits of our hope.

Verses 4 and 5 in The Passion Translation – **“We have heard of your devoted lives of faith in Christ Jesus and your tender love toward all his holy believers. Your faith and love rise within you as you access all the treasures of your inheritance stored up in the heavenly realm.”**

What can we take from these two verses?

Firstly, the loving actions of the people are a public fruit. Others can look and see that these people are living out their faith by what they do.

There is that niggling tension, isn't there, about our private and public actions.

Jesus said (Matthew 6 : 1-4)

“Examine your motives to make sure you're not showing off when you do your good deeds, only to be admired by others; otherwise, you will lose the reward of your heavenly Father. So when you give to the poor, don't announce it and make a show of it just to be seen by people like the hypocrites in the streets and in the marketplace. They've already received their reward! But when you demonstrate

generosity, do it with pure motives and without drawing attention to yourself. Give secretly and your Father, who sees all you do, will reward you openly.”

Jesus also said (Matthew 5 : 14 -16)

“Your lives light up the world. Let others see your light from a distance, for how can you hide a city that stands on a hilltop? And who would light a lamp and then hide it in an obscure place? Instead, it’s placed where everyone in the house can benefit from its light. So don’t hide your light! Let it shine brightly before others, so that the commendable things you do will shine as light upon them, and then they will give their praise to your Father in heaven.”

When Jesus talks about doing things in secret in Matthew 6, he is really talking about false motives, hypocrisy, insincerity and drawing attention to yourself. And of course, there are times when it is good to act quietly and in secret with sincere hearts.

In Matthew 5 Jesus talks about doing commendable things for all to see, letting our lights shine. And this won’t attract attention to us because Jesus said people will give their praise to your Father in heaven. In other words, God is glorified by our good and loving actions.

And so love is a public fruit.

Secondly, love is the fruit of hope. **“Faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven”**

This is not the everyday hope that we speak about casually, that this or that might happen – I hope it stops raining today or I hope you enjoy the party or I hope Hibs win the league!

No, this is the deep, deep hope that is laid up for us in heaven, the promises of God for our future lives after this life. An eternal life in the presence of God, meeting with Jesus face to face. I have had a foretaste of glory divine in the blessed assurance that Jesus is mine – as the hymn goes.

(1 Corinthians 13 : 12) **“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”**

But how does some future benefit, some benefit that might be many years away, cause us to love others deeply in the present? Well, the hope laid up for us in heaven should inspire confidence and freedom for us now in the present. The hope of heaven should be so real and overwhelming that it causes hope and love to well up in our hearts now.

We yearn for others to know this hope, to experience this love.

How often do we look at the sufferings of others who have no faith – pain, grief, loneliness, isolation – and ask ourselves how we would endure these things without the hope of Jesus?

The person who stands at the graveside, empty inside, for them this is the end, they have no hope of heaven, the words of the humanist have brought no comfort.

The person with serious illness who has no-one to pray to, one of that half of the population who never pray.

The anxious person who does not know how to seek the Prince of Peace.

The person laden with worries and responsibilities who does not know where to find the Jesus who will help her carry the burden.

We sang earlier **“We have a hope that is steadfast and certain, gone through the curtain and touching the throne; we have a priest who is there interceding, pouring his grace on our lives day by day”**

And so we find ways to take God’s love to others, to pour the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ into the lives of those around us.

As individuals we carry the Holy Spirit into every interaction with others in our families, our friendships, our neighbourhoods, our work and leisure and of course in our church fellowship.

As a church, we continually look for ways to encounter others so that they can encounter the living Jesus – opening our church doors, visiting, prayer walking, Bairnsrock, lunch club, holiday club and many other ways.

And do not be discouraged by surveys that anticipate the end of Christianity. God is still in charge, still in control. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it. This is the Church of Jesus Christ and he will be with us always to the ends of the earth.

And the gospel is still been preached to the ends of the earth and people are turning to Christ every day and in many places the church is growing.

Last week Alistair preached a sermon from Luke 10 on the sending out of the 72. And I listened to a sermon from the same scripture in the English Church in Funchal, Madeira as did millions of Christians around the globe.

And so verse 6 of our reading is still true today – **“This is the wonderful message that is being spread everywhere, powerfully changing hearts throughout the earth, just like it has changed you! Every believer of this good news bears the fruit of eternal life as they experience the reality of God's grace.”**

I will finish by quoting the Church of Scotland spokesman (anonymous) who responded in the newspaper article about the survey of faith in the UK –

It's a time of challenge but it's also a time of opportunity. Whether we are many or few, our calling remains the same, to love God and to love our neighbour and this is why the Church of Scotland will always seek to be a force for good in society. Irrespective of the Church's popularity, you will find Christians active at all levels of society seeking to live out the generous love of God.

The last few verses in our reading are actually Paul's prayer for the people of the Colossian church so let us pray these words now.

Let us pray

Heavenly Father

May you take pleasure when you see the way we lead our lives.

May we continually receive from you wisdom and spiritual understanding

May we always walk in the ways of righteousness, pleasing you with everything we do

May we bear much fruit for you and mature in our experience of knowing you in all your fullness

May we be energised by the explosive power of the Holy Spirit revealing your glory and filling us with hope

In Jesus name

Amen