

SERMON – 19 APRIL 2015

Reading: Colossians 3: 1-17

Background

The authorship of the letter is greatly contested by two different scholarly approaches. One group is convinced that Paul is the author because of various places in the letter confirming that. Other scholars, including me, are not convinced - due to the different theology and style of the letter.

But regardless of who wrote it, it is still a letter that is relevant for our time.

One researcher said that the letter consists roughly of two parts, the first part is all about theory, while the latter part is all about practice. I tend to agree, although is quite a simplistic view.

The writer meets the challenge confronting the Colossian church by positive teaching, rather than point-by-point refutation. Colosse was a city located on both sides of the Lycus River in Phrygia, about 12 miles from Laodicea in south-west Asia Minor. The histories of Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis were closely associated. The great trade route from Ephesus to Tarsus and Syria went through Colosse and made it a prosperous city in the early years. The city had owed its wealth chiefly to its red or violet woollens, called *colossinus*. But it was already declining in importance in the first century because of competition, especially from Laodicea.

The Christian church in Colosse may have been founded by Epaphras (Col 1:2; 4:12). There is no evidence of Paul visiting Colosse, although he did visit the region of Phrygia.

It seems as if the congregation in Colosse gave an important place to the powers of the spirit world, to the disadvantage of the place given to Christ. Great importance was also attached to outward observances, such as feasts and fasts, new moons and sabbaths (2:16), and probably also circumcision (2:11). These were presented proudly as the true way of self-discipline and the subjection of the flesh (2:20).

It seems as if there was also a problem with some members of the congregation who boasted that they possessed a higher philosophy or even a secret knowledge of knowing God. This is clear from 2:4, 8, 18; and we may assume also that the writer, in his frequent use of the terms 'knowledge' (*gnōsis* and *epignōsis*), 'wisdom' (*sophia*), 'understanding' (*synesis*) and 'mystery' (*mystērion*), was countering such a view.

In Colossians, the writer is, in part, countering a view (probably promoted by outsiders) that the believers there needed to do and have certain things to draw close to God – such as visionary experiences and self-denial. The writer persistently argues that having Christ is not the beginning of intimacy with God, but its climax and nothing further is necessary. In Colossians 3.1-4, the ethical implications of this truth are clear. Believers can seek out 'the above-things'; not through mediation, but each one has been raised with Christ (3.1,3). The writer emphasizes that, though there is the beginning of the fulfilment of the new age, there still needs to be a completion. This is the already/not yet, where wisdom and hope are secured, but a final revealing of glory lies in the future. The present time, then, should be taken seriously, where believers are not just basking in salvation, but vigilantly seeking righteousness and holiness by conforming to the likeness of Christ.

The previous readings from Colossians have urged Christians to hold on to their faith in Christ. It is Christ's victory, not human effort, that will keep them firm before God. This does not mean that they can live precisely as they want. If Christ has died and risen to share God's life, so believers must share that risen life. Colossians does not base its call to ethical behaviour on Jesus' teaching or life but on his victory over evil and his place in God's triumphant reign. So behaviour that is destructive of human relationships and which centres on our own wants is incompatible with it.

In living the life demanded of them, believers already experience something of God's kingdom in hope of the time when Christ's true glory is revealed for all to see, and life is no longer marked by the failures and incompleteness we know now.

But as people who have been raised with Christ are different and have a different dress code...compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Amen

Sermon

My text verse for the sermon is verse 1: Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

In our reading this morning the author gives us a very powerful but short definition of what Jesus' resurrection means to you and me.

By the mercy and grace of God, every believer has the living hope of inheriting the kingdom of God – hence the reason why we must not worry about earthly things but focus on the things above.

I read a drama sketch on “Roots on the Web” which I must say I enjoyed immensely and will share with you.

It is about people checking in for the flight to heaven and Peter checking the tickets and the baggage. One act is especially funny.

It is about a woman who checks in with her daughter:

Mum: At last! Stop moaning, Emily, you only have four things to carry. Now, where did I put the tickets? Isn't this exciting!

Peter at Check-in: You look happy, I'm glad to say.

Mum: Who wouldn't be - we're going to Paradise, and we're both together!

Check-in: If I may have your baggage.

Mum: Of course. *(They unload.)*

Check-in: Thank you. *(Puts it away.)*

Emily: Mum! Mum!

Mum: Not now

Emily: But Mum, he's thrown our stuff away

Mum: What are you doing?

Check-in: You must have heard: you can't take it with you.

Mum: But...

Check-in: Now, your handbag, ma'am.

Mum: So long as you don't take that as well!

Check-in: Travellers cheques, money, credit cards ... you are certainly well prepared.

Mum: Good planning, that's the key.

Peter: No, faith is the key. Anyway, you can't take these, and they won't be of any use anyway. You can only use the Kingdom's currency where you're going.

Mum: But I haven't got any!

Check-in: Yes you have, more than you realise. Anyway, the King gives you what you need.

Mum: Blimey, no wonder it's called paradise! Come on, Emily. Oh, I nearly forgot! What about duty free?

Check-in: Well, the Kingdom runs by grace, not law, so I suppose you could say it's duty free.

Mum: I meant, what about some drink?

Check-in: There's plenty. Enough that you'll never thirst.

They leave.

But our reading is not only about “checking in” it is also about living on this earth as people who have been transformed by Christ. The author uses the metaphor of clothing to make a very valid point. He says that we need to think carefully how we “dress” or, in other words, act in public as Christian people of faith. He says that we must wear clothing that is appropriate to our faith just as we dress appropriately for certain occasions like a wedding or a funeral or a choir. And the “dress code” for people of faith is sacrificial love, heartfelt compassion, forgiveness, kindness, meekness and humility. And then above all these is love. It is as if the author is saying that on top of everything you put on, you still need to complete your dress with a special necklace or piece of jewellery, if you are a woman, of course - in the case of men, a leather belt or a special watch. The author adds love for a second time as if he was trying to say although you should have love as part of your outfit, you need to make sure on top of everything you do, say and think in your relationship, you need to love unconditionally and freely. And for a second time he

emphasizes that the love he is talking of is agape love, sacrificial love for the benefit and greater good of the other.

We have the opportunity to show our new “dress” to the world in the way we speak, act and think as people of faith. People should look at us and say: You are different...you look different, you act different! Then we can reply, it is because we act according to our faith. We act towards each other with the sacrificial love, heartfelt compassion, forgiveness, kindness, meekness and humility. And above all because we act in this way, we have peace - with God and with one another.

So let us all go now and choose our new dress of faith and let us wear it proudly like Joseph once wore his amazing coloured dream coat!

Amen