

Colossians 2 v. 6-15

Sermon for St Augustine's Church - 25 July 04

When looking through the readings appointed for today, I was spoilt for choice as to which one to focus upon....they all leant themselves to some interesting study, and each could have provided good, tasty, spiritual meat for our souls.

But then my question shouldn't have been '*what might interest St. Augustines about God this Sunday*', but *what does God want to say to us at St A's this day ?* What does our heavenly Father want to specifically say to us - this congregation - gathered here in this place today?

Rightly or wrongly I felt more drawn to the passage from Colossians, and felt that in here would be truths God wanted us to hear today. So, if any of this speaks to you personally then maybe you'd be good enough to let me know after the service!

Having had around 10 months of Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians, I'm **not** sorry to say -you have yet another morning of Paul imposed on you!

Paul wrote this letter in c. AD 60 while he was imprisoned in Rome. And he wrote it to the embattled church in Colossae who, it is believed **he never even visited**. Unlike Corinthians this letter has only 4 chapters, and we are looking at just 10 verses .

It may have been written some 1,940 years ago, but it is jam-packed with timeless truths and brilliant and succinct advice which is as relevant to us today as it was then. And if you've never had the opportunity to sit down and read Colossians , then I would invite you to do just that - but you'll need to read it slowly to

take in and absorb the many gems and precious jewels that are embedded there.

The key verses for the whole letter are found in our reading -

'For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you Have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority'

2 v. 9-10

The main problem in the church at Colossae was that of 'syncretism', of allowing other philosophies and ideas and even religions to infiltrate the Christian church. Combining paganism, other strains of Judaism, and Greek thought with Christianity lead to what was later called '*Gnosticism*', which denied Christ as God and Saviour. As we will see from our few verses, Paul was keen to stress the **deity** of Christ - his absolute connection with the Father, and his sacrificial death on the cross for sin.

Not so long ago, Pete and I had a few minutes to spare before going in to watch a movie at the theatre. So we wandered into 'Chapters' which was close-by. In the 'religious' section, as in most bookshops and libraries, there were Holy Bibles and classical Christian writings, sitting side-by-side with books on transcendental meditation, witch-craft, new age philosophy, yoga, Buddhism, palmistry and a whole load of other material which could loosely be called 'religious'.

Perhaps this helps illustrate the sort of syncretism that was happening within the Christian church in Colossae. Like a supermarket shelf which, with no discernment, provides a bit of

this and a bit of that mixed together to find the level of 'Religion' that is to one's taste and fits one's lifestyle.....

The Colossians were in danger of being seduced by '*hollow and empty teaching*' - bad philosophy which had no basis in reality. And Paul points out the 3 things which always characterise wrong/deceptive philosophy: It

- Depends on human tradition
- depends on the basic principles of the world and the ways of darkness
- 'Not according to Christ' - ie. evil teaching always focuses on demoting Christ, who is often portrayed as one of a number of 'divine masters'.

IN The Eugene Peterson paraphrase of the New Testament, called The Message, he translates Paul's words this way :

Watch out for people who try to dazzle you with big words and intellectual double talk. They want to drag you off into endless arguments that never amount to anything. They spread their ideas through the empty traditions of human beings and the empty superstitions of spirit beings. But that's not the way of Christ.

The word used here in verse 8 for '*taking you captive*' really means being 'kidnapped' or taken hostage. [If you've been following international news recently and esp. the situation relating to Iraq, you will be aware of the many different nationals who have been kidnapped, who have been taken hostage by one of the Islamic extremist groups - often to get a country to withdraw their](#)

troops/support for USA , and the penalty for not doing this is the gruesome execution of the hostage. At least two Americans that we know of have been beheaded in the last few months, and the breaking news on Friday was that An Egyptian delegate had been captured.

Paul talks, in the same language, of Christians being taken hostage by false teaching. Thereby losing their **Christian** liberty. Some may be held hostage for years. And in extreme cases, where there have been active sects and cults who have brainwashed their adherents, it has even lead to their deaths.....as in the sad case in Waco, Texas in 1993, when more than 70 Davidians died in a fire and shoot-out with police. And in Quebec in March 1997 the charred bodies of 3 women and 2 men were found in a house belonging to something called the Solar Temple; the same sect who have been responsible for causing other mass suicides in the name of their strange beliefs.....it seems to have become a recurrent.world phenomenon.....

There are many impersonators around, 'con-men', in the guise of charismatic and 'attractive' leadership, but who are NOT on the side of Christ. Their understated but nevertheless real allegiance is **with the enemy**, and these figures and their ways of life often attract vulnerable people who are seeking to satisfy the spiritual urges within.

For us within the Christian church in the 21st C., the dangers are no less real. Natural curiosity and a desire for something more may lead to an unhealthy interest in pseudo-spiritual books and philosophies in order to find 'answers'. Don't get me wrong - expanding your mind by reading classical philosophy (if you can cope with it!) is no bad thing.

The lessons I'm drawing from Paul's words here relate more to everyday temptations which may subtly seduce us away from the deity and all-sufficiency of Christ. I'm thinking of things like reading your **horoscope**.....I won't ask for a show of hands of those who do, but I have known a number of Christians who can see no harm in it. I once did a talk just on astrology and in preparing for it found a paperback book called '*What your horoscope doesn't tell you*'written by a Christian who used to be an astrologer. And it is scary to read what is behind horoscopes. *Even if your interest is superficial, perhaps you would think twice if you realized that when you turn to astrology you are actually turning to advice from the ancient gods of a peculiar polytheistic religion.* I really don't have time to go into it now, **but** if anybody wants to read the book they are most welcome to borrow it.

What about Yoga? Again, there are many Christians who say '*I only do the exercise bit - not the TM stuff; there's no harm in that, is there?*'

Let me quote to you from a publication by the Reachout Trust in Britain :

" Yoga is an ancient practice combining meditation and training the body. It originated in India at least 5,000 years ago. The main paths of yoga, its philosophy and its application to everyday life, are described in the Bhagavad gita - the Hindu scriptures - written in the 6th century BC.

It is about harnessing a person to a discipline, while at the same time unifying body, mind and spirit with something Greater and transcendent.....

The term yoga which means 'yoke' or union, has a broad Definition, being a way of living and a way Of understanding life. So, to 'do' yoga in this broad sense is to Practice the Hindu religion.....

Which in itself accepts a broad range of beliefs and practices including those from other religions ".

Paul is keen to emphasis to the Colossians (and it is a truth for us too) that Jesus is God's presence - his very self; he is the embodiment and full expression of the one God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Gk. Word is theotes, lit. DEITY.....

And Christ will stand no rivals-His people need no-one but Him.

We don't need Christ **AND** anything else

Don't need Christ **AND** good health in order to find fulfilment and new life

Christ **AND** horoscopes

Christ **AND** Yoga

Christ **AND** a new car

Christ **AND** drugs

Christ **AND** a new outfit of clothes

Christ **AND** the garden centre

Or whatever is your thing.....

There were plenty of 'idols', of 'gods' around in those days....and the Colossians would have had their local 'deities', superstitions and mythologies. Paul is saying that, in being set free from their

national solidarities through belonging to Christ, the Colossians have also been set free from their local deities too.

" You have been given fullness in Christ, who is the Head over every power and authority " v. 10

The alternative to the superficiality offered by all other philosophies and religions is the system of **life and truth** that depends on **Christ**.

As a result of their **Baptism** into Christ, implies Paul in vv. 11-12, the Colossians now belong first and foremost to the family of God and not therefore to their human family and their local 'rulers'. The convert, in stripping off his clothes for baptism leaves *behind* the solidarities of the old life - the network of family and society to which, until then, they have given primary allegiance.

The old is exchanged for the new - they now become part of the People of God, they belong in the family. That is the best place to grow and mature in the faith and the new life that comes through faith in Christ.

Just as the doorway to a building often indicates what sort of a building it is, so baptism, the gateway to the Christian life, demonstrates that being a Christian means dying with Christ to the old solidarities and habits and coming alive to the new family of God and its new lifestyle.

I once spent a few months working for a Baptist church where I witnessed Baptism by full immersion - not something we see very much in the Anglican church - and the symbolism as the new believer was pushed backwards under the water and then came up again was very powerful and very emotional too. The minister, down there in the baptism tank, then welcomed them with a

Christian hug, into the family of God, and the rest of us clapped and cheered. They went down right under the water, symbolically dying to their sins and came up out of the water - raised to new life with Christ.

In V12. Paul is saying that to believe *that God raised Jesus from the dead* is to believe in the God who raises the dead - its not just assenting to a fact about Jesus - IT RECOGNISES A TRUTH ABOUT GOD.....and now the new Colossian Christians belong to the new world, where the 'rulers' of the old world have no authority.

NB: The heavenly life - God's real new age - which Christians now enjoy does not escape the rigours and temptations of earthly existence - but becomes more than ever committed to working out the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection in practical human life.

The last 3 verses of our reading refer to the work of the Cross; it is a succinct summary of the gospel, though Paul here does not attempt a full theological statement of the achievement of Calvary.

Whenever Abby sees anything that resembles a cross-shape she says 'Look mummy - Jesus died on a cross!' and often she'll ask " mummy, why did Jesus die on a cross? "

How do you explain to a 4-yr old the significance and meaning of the work of the Cross? How do we explain it to ourselves?

How *did* the cross solve the problem of sin?

Because of the close Biblical link between sin and death, the *LOGICAL PRE-CONDITION* for the resurrection life is that sins must be dealt with. We, along with Paul join the Colossians in the category of 'forgiven sinners'.

But how was this forgiveness accomplished?

Paul chooses here to talk about the 2 things which might have excluded the Colossians from God's people, and how they were dealt with on the cross;

2 barriers = firstly, the 'written code, with its regulations, that was against us' and that stood opposed to us, Paul; says was CANCELLED
and secondly
'the powers and authorities' were disarmed.

But what does all this mean?

The Gk. word cheirographon could refer to the old law, the *Mosaic law*, and that's certainly how I've always understood this verse. But it could also refer to a 'bond of debt' ,like an *IOU*, signed by the debtor, referring here, metaphorically, to the debt of sin, and paid for by Christ,

Or

Possibly it could refer to *angels* who kept recorded your evil deeds; angels being highly regarded by the heretical teachers of the day, or the angels who were the mediators of the law. In Gal 3.19 Paul refers to these angels.....

Perhaps there's a grain of truth in all three...

Jesus came to fulfil the law.....yet he cancelled the written code

Jesus, remember, was sent to a Roman tribunal after being deemed worthy of death by a Jewish court, which had declared him 'guilty acc. to the law'. Pilate put a sign over Jesus' head "THE KING OF THE JEWS'. But Paul saw that as the 'written code' that stood over against them who crucified him - disqualifying them from the life of the new age. The same truth is expressed in Gal 3v13:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written 'cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'..

As the representative of his people, Jesus dies their death, our death on the cross, do that dying with him, they need never die again. This is how God has dealt with sin, so that his people may have new life.

LUTHER called this 'the wondrous exchange - Christ takes our sins, we his righteousness'

God himself is the source of the redeeming action, not at all an unwilling angry tyrant, pacified by the sight of his Son's blood.

And Christ dies under the 'written code', that stood against us, not in virtue of some arbitrary exchange of roles, but because he, as Messiah, truly represents his people and can, therefore, appropriately stand in their place.

So this verse explains how God has made forgiveness of sins and new life available to all, and how the law can no longer keep the Gentiles out of God's family, or the Jews under a curse.

There's a final interesting irony in v. 15, which I really want to include here -

As I just said, the rulers and authorities of the day - of Rome and Israel (arguably the best Gov. and highest religion the world had ever known) conspired to put Jesus on the cross. These powers, angry at his challenge to their sovereignty, stripped him naked, held him up to public contempt, and celebrated a triumph over him.

In one of his most dramatic statements of the paradox of the cross, Paul declares that, on the contrary, on the cross God was STRIPPING THEM NAKED, holding THEM up to public contempt and leading them in his own triumphal procession - in Christ the crucified Messiah.

Jesus, neither blasphemer nor rebel, was infact their rightful sovereign. They thereby exposed *themselves* for what they were - usurpers of the authority which was properly his. The cross therefore becomes the source of hope for all who had been held captive under their rule, enslaved in fear and mutual suspicion. **Christ breaks the last hold that the 'powers' had over his people, by dying on their behalf. And ours.....**

He now welcomes them and us into a new family in which the ways of the old world - its behaviour, distinctions of class, race, gender etc., its blind obedience to the faces of politics, economics, prejudice and superstition,- have become quite simply out of date.

Which brings us back to the first 2 verses of our reading , with which we will finish -

“ so then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him, rooted and built up in Him, confirmed and settled in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness ”

It's interesting imagery - being 'rooted' like a tree, 'built up' like a solid house, 'confirmed and settled' like a legal document and 'overflowing' like a jug of good wine !! But I think we get the picture - as Christians our roots have - past tense - gone into Christ and should remain there or we die spiritually: being **built up** is, in the Gk, in the **present** tense, so it's *continuing* to grow and mature and develop in the faith, becoming ever stronger - and the more we draw our strength from Him, the less we will be fooled by those who falsely claim to have life's answers.

And gratitude to God is to be our main characteristic - a church that learns *truly* to worship God is one growing to full maturity.

May we at ST Augustines be a church who learns to truly worship God with overflowing and thankful hearts.....