

## “HOLY AND FAITHFUL”

### **4. Encouraged and United**

*Colossians 1:24 – 2:5*

The advent of digital media – e-mails, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and all the rest – has, to a very great extent, sounded the death knell for proper letter writing. Now that we can communicate instantly in response to pretty well anything, there is not much point sitting down with a piece of paper and a pen – or even a typewriter – and dashing off a few paragraphs of properly constructed English. Sally is part of a family WhatsApp group, which I am certainly not, but I did take the opportunity recently of responding to a series of comments by using Sally’s ‘phone and there was soon a reply saying something along the lines of “That was Dad answering, wasn’t it? It has proper sentences and punctuation and stuff.”

People of my generation who learned to read and write before everything was reduced to digital grunts, emojis and abbreviations with no vowels in – a bit like Welsh, really – used to write letters when the need arose, mainly (when we were kids) to thank people for birthday and Christmas presents. And there was usually a formula that we stuck to. “Dear Auntie Olive” – then an enquiry after her health: “I hope you are well” – then the actual thank you bit: “Thank you for the postal order for five shillings that you sent me for my birthday” – then something about how you used it: “I spent it on a new set of lights for my bicycle” – then bit of news of some sort: “We’ve been enjoying the snow this week” – and then the final greeting: “Well, that’s all for now. Love to you and the cat. From Ian”. Most letters – whether they were from a friend, a relative, the Council or the Gas Board – followed some sort of pattern.

And these letters from Paul the Apostle to the Christians in the newly planted churches scattered around the Eastern Mediterranean region also follow a bit of a formula, based very much, as we already seen, on the literary conventions of the time. In the letter to the Christian community in Colossae (which was going to be shared with the Christians in Laodicea and Hierapolis as well) Paul has introduced himself and his friend Timothy, greeted the Colossians, expressed his thanks for their faith and witness, set out the main reason for his writing and, as we saw last time, established the letter’s focus on the centrality of Jesus Christ. He now includes a couple of paragraphs, as he does somewhere in most of his letters, which are autobiographical, setting out something about his call and his mission. Remember, Paul has not yet met the Colossians – his friend Epaphras has been working with them on his behalf – so, in a sense, he is setting out his credentials, so that they know he is trustworthy and that they should take what he has to say seriously. In this instance he writes about his **Call**, his **Proclamation**, his **Pastoral Concern** for them, and his **Purpose** in all this. Let’s look at them one by one.

## CALL

In 1:25 Paul writes, “*I have become [the Church’s] servant by the commission God gave me.*” Paul has been called by God to the ministry he is in. Wherever you come across Paul talking about his ministry – whether in his letters or the records of his preaching in the book of *Acts* – he is eager to point out that God has called him. If you know the story of Paul’s conversion and call – which you can find in *Acts 9* – you will be well aware that he certainly did not volunteer for this. Whatever our ministry – and if we are a follower of Jesus we will have one, be it prayer or preaching or helping others or encouragement or whatever – it is at root a call from God. As Jesus said to his original group of disciples in *John 15:16*, “*You did not choose me but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit*”.

And with that call comes all kinds of other stuff, especially in church leadership and, it seems, especially in Paul’s case. Following Christ is not always an easy path to take and truly following where God leads us can often be more difficult than we had envisaged. Answering the call of God is not a route to a comfy life or to fame and fortune. Paul writes here of his suffering in 1:24 and of his struggle in 1:29 and 2:1. It can be very tough. Eddie Askew expresses it well in a reflection from which I’ve quoted before, but let me read a bit more of it for you (*Many Voices One Voice* p39).

It is that sense of God’s call that keeps Paul going and can keep us going too. Being called by God – and, as I say, we are called to some ministry or other, some expression of our Christian faith that touches the lives of others – is an immense privilege. But even when it is not easy, the idea that God has called us – and will therefore sustain us and resource us – is a huge factor. It’s not our idea: it’s his. So we are not having to make up things to do or examine our motives or doing stuff under our own strength: God is at work in us and that cannot be denied. If you ever saw the sit-com with Tom Hollander called *Rev* (one of the best portrayals of Christian ministry you’ll find), you’ll recall an amazing scene where the vicar, Adam Smallbone, is struggling with what to do and whether he should do it and he just keeps coming back to this idea that God has called him and he cannot deny it or refuse it. In Robert Duvall’s 1997 film, *The Apostle*, you see the same thing. The pastor played by Duvall, Sonny Dewey, kills the youth minister with whom his wife has been having an affair and ends up on the run. But even while he’s hiding from the law he cannot help founding another church and when he’s eventually caught, the final scenes show him preaching to his fellow inmates. He cannot negate God’s call on his life. And if you protest that that’s not a good example, look at Moses, at Jacob, at Samson, at David, at Paul himself – all called by God and used by him despite the murky aspects of their lives. If God calls you – and you respond – he will use you and sustain and help you as he does Paul.

## **PROCLAMATION**

And that call is to a specific ministry in Paul's case. He writes here in 1:25 that he has been commissioned to *"to present to you the word of God in its fullness"*. He is called to preach, to proclaim the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ. And this is *"the word of God in its fullness"*. As we read on here we see that Paul sees that as including both *"admonishing and teaching"* (1:28). He has to warn people when they are going against God's purposes, as well as pointing them towards the great blessings that are in store for them. But at the heart of it all is this *"mystery"* that we have looked at many times before.

Paul is presenting to them *"the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people"*. He is telling them **all** about this amazing story of God's love that is now fully out in the open – and that includes the Gentiles now, it's no longer just the preserve of the Jewish people. It's a secret that has been revealed. And at the heart of this are two phrases Paul uses here – *"God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."* It's those last two phrases that are key to this.

*"Christ in you"* expresses that idea of reconciliation that we looked at last week. In Jesus Christ – through his life and death and resurrection and glorification – we are now reconciled with God, we are back where God intended us to be from the very beginning. The guarantee of that is the sense the Jesus is living within us through his Holy Spirit. As we respond to God's wonderful offer of being out right with him through Jesus, so we have that inner assurance that we somehow have his Spirit within us.

And with that comes *"the hope of glory"*. It's great having that assurance for now, but it is an assurance that not only is God with us and helping us now, but we have a great and glorious eternal future to look forward to, a future in God's renewed and restored Kingdom, a future that will see us sharing in the glory of the risen and ascended Jesus Christ.

This is what Paul is proclaiming. All that he says and all that he does is directed towards this astonishing truth. When Jesus calls us and we respond, we can know his help and his presence now – a renewed attitude to our lives here and now, a renewed attitude to God's world, a renewed attitude to each other, a renewed relationship with God, all sustained and nourished by the presence of the Holy Spirit. And we can know a wonderful hope for the eternal future which means we don't have to worry about what will happen to us when this life is over. Is that amazing, or what?

**PASTORAL CONCERN**

Which all leads us into Paul's next point. He expresses here his pastoral concern for the Colossians. Having this concern for other Christians isn't about visiting them in hospital or holding their hands when life's crises arrive. That's part of it, of course, but Paul can't do that kind of thing from the prison where he is writing this letter. What he can do, though, is keep proclaiming Jesus and his love so that he "*may present everyone fully mature [or perfect] in Christ*". His aim is to help his readers become what they were meant to be – or, indeed, become what they are once Jesus has touched their lives. He wants them to realise (in every sense) what Jesus has done for them, how it can have an impact on their lives and who they are to ensure that they hang on to that.

We all have a part to lay in that. It's not just down to the one who actually has the title "Pastor", but to each and every one of us as we pray for each other, support each other, speak with each other, share with each other. Together we are called to help each other keep growing as disciples of Jesus. Paul doesn't say that specifically here (just so no-one accuses me of adding things to the text), but he says it in plenty of places elsewhere, so let's ensure that together we do all we can to make that happen in our own situation.

## **PURPOSE**

But Paul says there is a reason for all this, for his ministry, for the exercise of his call, for the preaching and teaching he is doing, for the pastoral concern he has for them. "*My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love*", he writes in 2:2. He wants particularly to stand alongside them to strengthen them, to build them up through his teaching and preaching, and through the struggle that he is experiencing on their behalf. This word translated "*encourage*" here is the Greek word *paraklethosin*, which come from the same root as *Paraclete*, a word sometimes used to describe the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the one who stand alongside to support and offer help. Paul wants his readers to be encouraged, comforted, strengthened in their faith. The word he uses embraces all those ideas.

And for that to happen throughout the company of God's people, they need to be "*united in love*". It always comes back to this in Paul's letters. It always comes back to this in the teaching of Jesus. We quoted from *John 15* earlier on, about being chosen by God. That little section goes on – "*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit – fruit that will last – and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. **This is my command: love each other.***" A followers of Jesus who have heard the secret, the mystery that has been revealed about God's plans for us, and who have been called to live out that mystery in our lives day by day, need to demonstrate that first and foremost in our love for each other. Paul is desperate for that to happen in all the churches to which he writes, because, as the old Scottish scholar William Barclay writes, "*Without love there is no real Church. Methods of church government and ritual are not what matter. These things change from time to time and from place to place.*

*The one mark which distinguishes a true church is love for God and for the brethren. When love dies, the Church dies.”*

And all of that, as we have said, is so that may *“know the mystery of God”* – experience that union with Christ and hold on to that hope of glory. They need to know the *“treasures of wisdom and knowledge”*, Paul writes, using the buzzwords of the false teachers – the philosophers and the Gnostic thinkers. And they need to hang on to that so that they are not *“deceived by fine-sounding arguments”* – which brings Paul back to the reason for writing this letter, to help them counter the ideas that would remove Jesus from the pre-eminent place at the heart of their faith. And that is where we will go next time.

But in the meantime, let us be encouraged by the knowledge that we are called by God and he will never let us go. Then let’s express that in our love for one another and in the way we help one another to grow and bear further fruit, with Jesus at the very centre of all that we do..