

“HOLY AND FAITHFUL”

1. Introduction

Colossians 1:1-8; 4:16-18

As the New Year gets under way, we’re going to start a new series of sermons this morning, and we’re going to look at another book from the New Testament – another of Paul’s letters, in fact. Last year we spent some time reflecting on the book of *Hosea* from the Old Testament and, before that, on Paul’s *Letter to the Philippians*. Now, some people may wonder why we do this – why do we spend time reading through and talking about stuff from this old book, The Bible? Yes, it’s got some bearing on our faith, but surely there are more contemporary things we could be considering, aren’t there?

Well, the first response to that is the standard one that you’ll find in another of Paul’s New Testament letters, the second one that he wrote to his young friend Timothy, where he says, “*All Scripture is God-breathed [inspired by God] and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the person of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work*” (2 Timothy 3:16,17). As Christians, we believe that God speaks through the words of the Bible and that what he says is still useful – indeed, necessary – for us today.

But what do we gain from reading stuff that was originally written in a very different culture and in a very different time from today? What could God be saying to us in twenty-first century Britain from words written to a bunch of believers in a small town in Turkey two thousand years ago? What on earth do we have in common with them? Well, the setting may be different, but the truths and principles are still basically the same for us today. What it tells us about the unchanging God and his relationship with his people should still have some effect on our lives now. So we are reading it for the same reasons that Paul wrote it to the Colossian Christians in the first place.

Paul wrote this letter – as he wrote all the letters that we have as part of our Bibles today – with two main purposes in mind, I believe. Firstly, he wrote it to **encourage Christians** in their own daily lives. That was a particularly important concern in the *Letter to the Philippians*, which we looked at last year, but it’s a thread that runs through them all. Paul clearly wanted his readers to share the enthusiasm for and joy in the relationship with Jesus that he enjoyed. But he also wanted to **inspire them** to discover more about the story of God’s love for them and to share it with everyone they met. At root, this is about being witnesses of the Gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ and his transforming love.

You see, Paul didn’t go round holding big gospel events. His letters are not about plans for forthcoming crusades or campaigns or evangelistic rallies in their towns and cities. If the opportunity presents itself – a crowd of curious people gathers (as in Ephesus) or he is questioned about his faith (as in Athens) or there’s a prearranged meeting he can be part of (as in the various synagogues he visits) – then, of course, he’ll tell

them about Jesus. But his main strategy – as we still try to do here today – is to help all believers grow in their faith and then share that faith. After all, in a group of believers in any one place, each one will have many more contacts and be more familiar with them than any visiting preacher. So firstly, we share that by living it out. You can see just how important that is by the many ways in which Paul encourages attitudes and behaviour that mark believers out as distinctive and full of integrity. In first century Colossae – and Philippi and Rome and Ephesus and wherever – just as in twenty-first century Lichfield, those who follow Jesus do not unthinkingly drift along with the prevailing ideas and fashions of the time when it comes to living out their faith. What we believe about Jesus and what we take from his teaching means that our lives should be characterised by love, concern and selflessness in each and every situation.

But also Paul expected his readers to be telling other people about Jesus and his offer of a new, transformed life. And they were to tell the people whom they knew, the people with whom they already had a relationship of some sort – neighbours, family members, workmates and so on. You see, the Church is made up of individual members – you can see that in the way Paul addresses so many of them by name in his letters (look at *4:10ff* in this letter, for example) – and it is the task of each one of us to communicate the good news about Jesus. It's all very well saying that the church should be doing more outreach or evangelism or whatever word we want to use to describe our work in the community, but the fact is that it is up to each one of us – people who make up the church – to get on and do that, as you may recall Colin Davies reminding us last year. Looking at these letters of Paul can help us get ready for that.

In each of his letters, Paul tries to help his readers in the situation in which they find themselves, the particular contexts in which they have to work and witness; he answers some of their questions; and he gives them advice in dealing with particular issues, issues which still resonate with us today. The Corinthians are having difficulties within the life of their church, the Galatians are struggling with people who are trying to over-emphasise the Jewish roots of their faith, the Philippians are finding it all very hard going, the Thessalonians are getting a bit mixed up over what will happen when Jesus returns – each letter clearly confronts a different issue, but uses it all as a way of saying something timeless and important about Jesus.

And the Colossians' main issue, as Paul sees it, is religious syncretism. That means that people were trying to mix Christianity up with all kinds of other beliefs – some, because they'd never fully left those things behind; others because they were wanting to reach out and make Christianity more palatable to others who had other ideas; and others because they hadn't quite grasped who Jesus was and what he was all about. For whatever reason they were thinking like this, the result was that Christianity was losing its distinctiveness and the supremacy of Jesus was being downgraded. Paul refers to the believers in Colossae as "*holy and faithful*" in his opening greeting (*1:2*) and he wants them to remain that way. They can only

really do that if they have a proper appreciation of who Jesus is and then allow that to influence all that they are and all that they do.

This morning, though, let's fill in a bit of the background to this letter so we can see the context in which Paul was writing. Colossae was a town in Asia Minor – modern day Turkey – some 100 miles east of Ephesus, in the valley of the River Lycus. At one time it had been an important stop on a major trade route, but by the time Paul wrote this letter it was a relatively insignificant place, overshadowed by Hierapolis, a spa town about six miles away over the valley, and by nearby Laodicea, a very rich and important town, as you can see from *Revelation 3:17*. The three towns are mentioned together at the end of this letter and the churches are obviously in close contact as Paul tells them to read each other's letters from him.

Their connection would seem to be that they were set up following a bit of pioneering evangelism by Epaphras (1:7) who is still dear to them and to Paul. The population of Colossae was, as you'd expect in a town that had been on a trade route, fairly mixed, but the three main groups were the native Phrygians, the Jews and the Greeks. The mixture of Jews and Greeks is particularly interesting in the light of what many scholars consider to be the reason for this letter – it was written to warn against what has become known as “The Colossian Heresy”.

Sadly, no-one can be completely sure what this heresy was, but it was certainly a form of religious syncretism, a mish-mash of other ideas which adulterated and watered down the faith of the believers to the extent that many of them no longer really knew exactly what they believed. And that's why this letter is still so important for us today – these Colossians never really got to think about what they believed until it came under attack and then they weren't too sure what it was they'd believed in the first place. Today, in an age when we are bombarded with so many ideas, ideals and ideologies, we need to work out what we believe or we may end up being sucked into some other set of beliefs which are totally at odds with the Gospel.

In Colossae, we can work out from the various things Pauls says and the emphasis he places on certain subjects that a rather insecure Christianity found itself alongside elements of pagan Spiritism, an early form of Gnosticism and some very legalistic Judaism. “What on earth does that all mean?” you may ask.

Well, the old gods and goddesses of Phrygia were mixed up with angels and other beings, into which mix some had tried to put Jesus Christ, so that he became just one of many beings in a hierarchy between God and humanity. And that hierarchical idea was also found in the teachings of the Gnostics, who were a sect that didn't fully develop until quite a bit later, but their precursors in Colossae were trying to make Christianity more appealing to the philosophical Greeks. The main plank of their teaching was that spirit

was good and matter was evil, therefore Christ could not have been fully God and fully man. That is still a danger for those who like to divide up their life into spiritual and secular bits. They also had some strange ideas about creation and about how to get to know God. And the Jews, of course, were still insisting on certain outward observances, such as circumcision and keeping feast days, as being necessary for salvation.

Now we'll see how Paul responds to those issues as we work our way through this letter over the next few weeks, but all in all the Colossians were getting themselves into a bit of a pickle. Some of what they believed was good and orthodox, but some of it was really off the wall. And we still need to ensure we guard against that temptation to mix our belief in Jesus up with all kinds of other stuff as we find ourselves surrounded by all sorts of messages and many voices trying to convince us that by putting Jesus at the centre of our belief and our behaviour we are being exclusivist or imperialist or naïve or old-fashioned. And we need, too, to ensure that, in our desire to make our faith "relevant" to a largely amoral and unbelieving world, we are not stripping it of its distinctive qualities. This letter of Paul's to the Colossians should help us in that, with its central emphasis on Jesus and its encouragement to look carefully at him and at what he stands for. And I hope it might rekindle in us a desire to share what we know and what we have experienced of Jesus with the community around us as we try to remain "*holy and faithful*" day by day.

As always, each week there will be some material on the church website to help you think about this and some of the housegroups will be following this in their weekly meetings. As it's the beginning of the year, it might be a good time to see about joining a housegroup – again, there are details on the website, if you are interested.

"HOLY AND FAITHFUL"

1. Introduction

Colossians 1:1-8; 4:16-18

One of the many dangers facing Christianity today is religious syncretism – the mixing up of one faith with ideas and philosophies from other sources, thus watering down the distinctiveness of the original. Paul's letter to the Christians at Colossae is written to address this problem and in it Paul stresses the uniqueness and sufficiency of Jesus.

Colossae was a town in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), about 100 miles east of Ephesus, in the valley of the River Lycus. Although it had once been an important trading town, by Paul's time it was relatively insignificant, overshadowed by Hierapolis and Laodicea. The churches in these three towns had been planted by Epaphras (1:7) and they still had close links (4:16). The population was fairly cosmopolitan, but the three main groups were Phrygians (the natives), Jews and Greeks. The latter two groups particularly are thought to have provided the seed-bed for "The Colossian Heresy". No-one is sure exactly what this "heresy" involved, but there are some elements we can be fairly clear about.

The old Phrygian deities were mixed up with angels and other beings, diminishing the supremacy of Christ and making him just one small part of a hierarchy between man and God. Some people (who later developed into what we now call "Gnostics") held that spirit was good and matter evil, so Christ could not have been fully God *and* fully man. And there were Jewish believers who still insisted on outward observance of the Law. Some of the Christians in Colossae had allowed themselves to be drawn into all this and, as a consequence, were now unsure exactly what they believed. Paul writes this letter, with its clear emphasis on the centrality of Jesus, to provide some kind of remedy for that situation.

For reflection and discussion

- 1) What factors can lead to our watering down our faith today?
- 2) The Gnostics saw a clear divide between the spiritual and the material realms, with spiritual being good and material evil. In what ways do we give the impression that this divide still exists? What are the dangers of living life according to this idea? How can we overcome it?
- 3) Is the Church more than the "sum of its parts"? How can we live out the tension between an individual response and the collective life of the Christian community? If we are to live out our faith as individuals, what's the point of the Church anyway?
- 4) What do you understand by the phrase "*holy and faithful*"? What can we do to ensure that we remain holy and faithful?