

“HOLY AND FAITHFUL”

9. Real Lives

Colossians 4:7-18

When you go to the cinema (if you can remember what that was like), at the end of the film most people get up and hurry off out of the auditorium, but there's often one person still sitting there watching the credits roll down (often with his wife standing impatiently over him and putting her coat on). He will usually do the same at the end of television programmes – and read every name in the album cover of any CD he listens to. That person, I have to confess, is me. I find the credits fascinating, as I try to discover who played that little mellotron part at the end of track 3, or wonder what the “Best Boy” and “Chief Grip” do, or ponder whether I need to know what the “Intimacy Coach” gets involved in.

The endings of most of Paul's Letters are a bit like the credits of the film or TV show or CD in that they list all the people who have some part to play in Paul's ministry, either with him where he is or at the receiving end of the letter. And this *Letter to the Colossians* is no exception. Paul has written this letter to the new Christians in the town of Colossae, in what is now Turkey, to help them develop in their faith following their response to the preaching of his friend Epaphras. He is particularly concerned that they should keep Jesus and his grace at the heart of all they do and not be sidetracked by the teachings of those who want to add extra rules and regulations to the simple truth of the Gospel, or who want to push the idea of secret knowledge that is accessible only to a few, or who want to see Jesus as just another of the spiritual beings that they know from their old pagan ways. And he has made it very clear that following Jesus means living out his teaching in a way that is often completely counter to the values of the culture of the world around them. That needs to be done in every situation – in the home and the workplace as much as anywhere else – and it all needs to be undergirded by persistent and passionate prayer so that they can make the most of every opportunity they get to share the good news about Jesus.

And now he mentions a few names – he brings up the credits, if you like. We'll have a look at these people in a few moments, but before we do, let's just note a couple of things. This is where we see that the Gospel involves real people – these are named individuals who have each been affected by the teaching of Jesus and whose lives are now – on the whole – devoted to living out the message themselves. They're a very diverse bunch – Jews and Gentiles, men and women, professionals and others, a slave and freemen, reliable colleagues and those who mess things up. It's a group of people such as you would find in any church – and all have their part to play. It fits in with what Ruth prayed about last Sunday in our service: she prayed that God would help us, *“not just make allowances for our differences, but ... cherish our differences, knowing that each member of the church is an essential part of the body, loved and cherished by God for who they are.”* William Barclay, in his *Daily Study Bible* notes on this passage refers to them a *“heroes of the faith”*, but I would take issue with that – these are not particularly heroes: they are just ordinary people,

with their faults and failings as well as their gifts and commitment. You can see something of that as we just comment on the names Paul includes here.

Tychicus was a great friend of Paul who accompanied him on his last visit to Jerusalem and took the offering that had been collected for the needy people in the church there. He is a “*dear brother, a faithful minister and a fellow-servant in the Lord*” and, on this occasion, is Paul’s messenger, bringing the Colossians not only the letter but all the news of Paul and his ministry. With him is **Onesimus**, who is mentioned – indeed, is the subject of – Paul’s *Letter to Philemon*. He is a runaway slave whose master is Philemon, one of the congregation in Colossae. He has become a Christian and is returning to Philemon as a “*dear and faithful brother*” who will join his master in the church.

Then Paul mentions three men who are Jewish believers. **Aristarchus** is another of Paul’s usual travelling companions who has been through a good deal with the Apostle and has ended up in prison with him on more than one occasion. Possibly he is with Paul at the moment, but he was also arrested after the riot in Ephesus. **Mark** is the author of the second Gospel, the cousin of Barnabas and he caused a bit of trouble when he left Paul unexpectedly during one of his preaching tours to go back home. In fact, Paul and Barnabas argued about it so much that they split up and went their separate ways. Clearly, Mark is back with Paul and the broken relationship has been healed, but Mark has clearly had his struggles. **Jesus Justus** is the only name here that is not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, so we know nothing else about him.

The other people who are named by Paul are all Gentiles, an indication of the spread of the Gospel message out into Europe. **Epaphras** has already been mentioned in the letter as he is the one whose preaching helped to start the church in Colossae and who continues to pray fervently for them and work hard for them and the other churches in the area at Hierapolis and Laodicea. Then there is **Luke**, who is a doctor and a trusted friend of Paul, someone who accompanied the Apostle and, no doubt, put his professional skills to the service of the travelling band of evangelists. **Demas** is also mentioned, but there is no comment. He’s mentioned in Paul’s *Letter to Philemon* and also in *2 Timothy 4:10* where Paul notes that he “*loved the world*” and deserted him, going back to Thessalonica and, it seems, giving up on the faith.

Paul also send his greetings to the Christians in nearby **Laodicea** who were to read this letter once the Colossians had finished with it. We know about the Laodiceans from a letter to them which is part of *Revelation* and in which we discover that they, too, went a bit cold on the faith and the church there lost its deep commitment to Christ. And he sends his greetings to **Nympha**, who hosted and possibly helped lead the church which met in her house – remember, the churches didn’t have any formal buildings at this time.

The name Nympha can be either a man's name or a woman's, depending on where you put the accent, but the pronoun "*her*", referring to the house, suggests this was a woman.

And finally, Paul mentions **Archippus**, who is another person mentioned in his *Letter to Philemon* and from the context there, many people think he was part of Philemon's household, very likely his son, so he may well have been one of the younger members of the church in Colossae. Some scholars have suggested that he may even have been helping Epaphras lead the church.

So there you have it. We went through that list so that we could see what a diverse group they were, but some of them made up the growing and lively church in the town of Colossae and some of them were involved in the wider task of spreading the Gospel around the Eastern Mediterranean. Each had a part to play and each one was able to use his or her God-given gifts in that enterprise. Some were great friends of Paul as well as valued colleagues – and some let him down badly but, in the case of Mark, were able to make a new start and continue to be used by God in his mission.

Right at the end of the letter, Paul adds his own personal greeting himself. The bulk of the letter would have been dictated by Paul and written down by one of his friends – possibly Tychicus or Aristarchus – but Paul says here that he is signing it himself, no doubt as a recognition of his love for the Colossian Christians. But the words I want to leave with you this morning as we come to the end of our reflections on this letter are the words Paul addresses to Archippus in 4:17 – "*See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord*".

Now, at this stage, Demas hasn't left Paul, and the Laodiceans are still going all out for Jesus, so he won't have them in mind. This isn't a warning to Archippus. Nor is it, I believe, a rebuke, as some scholars suggest. This is a word of encouragement and we should all hear it as that as we hear the Spirit's voice coming to us through these ancient words. Paul often tries to encourage his friends, colleagues, readers and fellow-Christians to keep going in the task that God has given them. It's a real privilege to be involved in the mission of God, in the proclamation of his Kingdom – it is indeed, "*work you have received in the Lord*". God wants you involved in this and he trusts you to get on and do what you can. Whoever you are, wherever you are – whatever your background, ethnicity, gender, age – there is something for you to do and God will help you to do it if you are committed to him and his ways. In *Philippians 1:6* Paul actually writes that God will complete his work in you – "*I am confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus*". You're not alone. God's Holy Spirit is at work in you. You stand in the tradition of men and women of God who have been used by him down through the centuries, from Nympha, Epaphras, Aristarchus and Onesimus down to today. And you are surrounded by, supported by, upheld in prayer by a whole host of fellow Christians who make up the local

church, just as these good folk in Colossae did. Keep Jesus at the heart of all you believe, all you say and all you do – and do all you can to support and pray for those around you. And “*Grace be with you*”.

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Paul closes this letter by mentioning a few names – he brings up the credits, if you like. This is where we see that the Gospel involves real people – these are named individuals who have each been affected by the teaching of Jesus and whose lives are now – on the whole – devoted to living out the message themselves. They're a very diverse bunch – Jews and Gentiles, men and women, professionals and others, a slave and freemen, reliable colleagues and those who mess things up. It's a group of people such as you would find in any church – and all have their part to play. These are not particularly heroes: they are just ordinary people, with their faults and failings as well as their gifts and commitments.

If you have a concordance or a Bible Dictionary, look up these names and see where else they are mentioned in the New Testament (many of them in *Acts*)

Tychicus (Paul's messenger)

Onesimus (a slave)

Aristarchus (possibly in prison with Paul now – a Jewish believer)

Mark (author of the Gospel – a Jewish believer)

Jesus Justus (a Jewish believer – mentioned only here)

Epaphras (founder of the church in Colossae)

Luke (a doctor)

Demas (eventually deserted Paul)

The Christians in nearby **Laodicea**

Nympha (hosted and possibly helped lead the church)

Archippus (part of Philemon's household, very likely his son)

Each had a part to play in God's mission and each one was able to use his or her God-given gifts in that enterprise. We need to reflect on the words Paul addresses to Archippus in *4:17* – "*See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord*". This is a word of encouragement and we should all hear it as that as we hear the Spirit's voice coming to us through these ancient words. Paul often tries to encourage his friends, colleagues, readers and fellow-Christians to keep going in the task that God has given them. It's a real privilege to be involved in the mission of God, in the proclamation of his Kingdom – it is indeed, "*work you have received in the Lord*". God wants you involved in this and he trusts you to get on and do what you can. Whoever you are, wherever you are – whatever your background, ethnicity, gender, age – there is something for you to do and God will help you to do it if you are committed to him and his ways. Keep Jesus at the heart of all you believe, all you say and all you do – and do all you can to support and pray for those around you. And "*Grace be with you*".

For reflection and discussion

- 1) Does anything strike you about the list of names at the end of this letter?
- 2) What does this list say about the relationship between Paul and the Colossians, and about the relationships between them all? What can we learn from that?
- 3) Looking back over the whole letter, what has stood out for you in what Paul has to say? Has God said anything particular to you through these chapters?
- 4) If you had to sum up the letter in one sentence, what would it be?
- 5) Will you do anything differently as a result of reading *Colossians*?