

Daily Devotions Monday 13th April

Colossians 2 v 1-7 (esp 1-3)

Three words stand out from these verses. Encouragement, love and understanding.

Paul is writing to the Colossians but also mentions here the church in Laodicea. From Revelation 3 vs 16 we know that God calls this church luke warm! They had faith (v5) but because it wasn't backed up with love in action, was displeasing to God! We often get comments from visitors to our church how welcome they feel and about the warmth that exists. However, there is love in action shown in our church outside of Sundays and Thursdays! Being apart has driven us to a more personal connection between ourselves and God but it is encouraging to hear of phone calls, facetimes, text messages and physical acts of kindness going on between our church family. We are not just a Sunday social club but a body of people driven by unity of love for Christ, for each other and for the community. I'm thankful also that this unity means we try to agree on fundamentals rather than divide over minor issues.

Measham Baptist Church is no longer a luke warm church thanks to everyone's efforts. Praise God for that but pray also that we don't become complacent.

A mystery is defined as being something that is difficult or impossible to understand (e.g. the mystery of the universe). Paul says here that Christ is a mystery but through encouragement and unity of love it is possible to have complete understanding of that mystery. The Old Testament is a mystery that points to Christ but now God has made that mystery known to Jews and Gentiles alike! (Col 1 v 27).

Paul has already mentioned 'glorious riches of the mystery' in that verse. Now he refers to 'the treasures of wisdom and knowledge'. These are hidden in Christ. The phrase 'in whom' initially sounds confusing as it appears to be plural but the KJV has God the Father and Christ.

Paul writes of wisdom AND knowledge. They are not the same. Wisdom is the application of knowledge. As Brian O'Driscoll (ex Irish rugby international) put it, "Knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit, wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad!"

Study is good and it gives us knowledge but Paul says here that wisdom also is hidden in Christ. Lynda hides the wine but guess what I do to solve that little problem! I look harder!!

God gives wisdom generously to those who ask him for it (James 1 v 5)

Pray for a heart to excel in these three areas. Encouragement, love and understanding.

Colossians 2 vs 4-7

Paul is a great encourager and at the same time a great teacher. In verse 5 he commends the Colossians for their firm faith in Christ, which balances his opposing previous point of teaching in verse 4. As we've already seen, this was a problem for the Colossians. There was the idea that faith in Christ needed add on's on the form of other spiritual fads and philosophies. More on this tomorrow but we do need to be on our guard as we know that wolves will come in sheep's clothing with fine sounding arguments (even within the church). (Mat 7.15, Col 2.4)

I used to teach how to take cuttings using geraniums in my science lessons. It involves cutting leaf stems from a 'mother' plant, dipping them in rooting powder then planting them in compost. In a week or so they develop roots and as they draw nourishment from the soil begin to grow. A Christian is 'rooted' in Christ and our nourishment comes from him. This is in order that we grow. Psalm 1 compares us to a tree planted by a stream!

In the same way Paul now uses a building to illustrate his point. The foundations are laid but we are to continue to be built up! Paul uses the word 'grow' in much of his writing. It's not enough just to become a Christian, we also need to grow. From milk to solid food then on to maturity. (Heb 5 12-14). God's word is our milk and our food and incorporating that knowledge into our thoughts, actions and speech is how we develop maturity. The mark of a mature Christian is not how much knowledge they have but how much they are like Christ.

Great and famous Christians are marked mainly by their accomplishments and it's easy to get despondent thinking we can never be like them. However we don't see the little steps they take through their lives. Battles over personal sin, denials of self and acts of faith should be an ongoing part of our Christian growth towards Christ like maturity.

Pray for the help of our counsellor and teacher, the Holy Spirit, in this task.

Finally be thankful (v7). Another of Paul's favourite principles (and because it's in God's word, one of God's principles). Many in these present circumstances may feel they are being denied much but I'm sure you, like me, have found so much more to be thankful for.

Daily devotions Weds 15th April 2020

Colossians 2 vs 8-10

Lynda gave me a huge Easter egg on Sunday. I am grateful but isn't it a bit disappointing when you crack them open to find you're left with a thin shell of chocolate and nothing inside? Paul is warning the Colossians, and us, of empty philosophies. Hollow is the word used. It appears to be good but there is no substance to it!

Paul doesn't condemn all philosophy. He's already said it's good to search after wisdom and knowledge (1 v 9 and 2 v 3). Christianity itself is a philosophy according to the definition of the word, although, of course, it is so much more! But Paul warns against such philosophies that do not have Christ at their core. The Colossian church had teachers within who were misleading Christians to investigate other mystical and pagan philosophies and ideas. We are bombarded with all sorts of new ideas to do with wellness, physical and mental health, how to find our inner selves etc etc. There are also those who try to seduce us within the church to focus on one aspect of Christianity to the detriment of the fulness of the whole gospel.

The human traditions referred to in v 8 could have been Jewish traditions handed down through the years or adopted Greek traditions. Or both. Either way they are condemned because they are not based on Christ!

Taken captive, kidnapped and robbed are words used in different translations but the essence is someone being taken from a place of security to a place they don't really want to be. We might think we are clever enough to avoid such a move but the philosophies are described as deceptive (v8). Appealing, promising but delivering nothing. Remember the devil is that most crafty of all God's creatures. (Gen 3v1). Maybe an example of a philosophy we may have succumbed to in one degree or another is the one of political correctness!!

In v9 Paul gives us the reason for avoiding hollow philosophies. He reminds them again that Christ is God in bodily form. There can be no wisdom and no philosophy greater than that which is found in Christ. Why bother with any worldly philosophy when we have the wisdom of the one who created that world. He is the head over all powers. Why bother with the minions?? Go to the boss!!

Did you notice Paul says "lives" not "lived" in v9? As of the first Easter Sunday Jesus lives in a resurrected body. A man now sits at the right hand of God. A man who has experienced the deepest depression. A man who has suffered more pain than any of us. A man who knows what it's like to be human!

Christ is the Cadbury's Creme Egg of the world. Appealing to those who are just looking but full of wonderful substance for those who have tasted!!

Daily devotions Thursday 16th April 2020

Colossians 2 vs 11-13

In these 3 verses is condensed the essence of salvation. We have just celebrated Easter and remembered the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Paul is using this as a parallel for the Colossian Christians who were dead, buried with Christ through baptism then made alive in him. Baptism by immersion itself, is meant as a symbolic parallel to show what Christ has done for believers.

Our starting point is being dead in our sins (v13). Our sin (we've all done it!) makes us spiritually dead. God can't have anything to do with us in this state. He even forsook his own Son on Good Friday because of the sins of the world that he was bearing. A dead person cannot do anything about the fact that they are dead. It takes an act of intervention from an outside source. It is God who makes us alive. Not just alive but alive **with Christ!**(v13)

Paul uses circumcision to explain what Christ has done. The Colossians would be used to this as a ritual that Jewish males underwent at the age of 8 days old as mark of their special covenant with God. Now though, a new covenant has come through Christ's death. Jewish circumcision involved human hands cutting off human flesh. The new circumcision is a circumcision of the heart where by a spiritual act of the Holy Spirit, the sinful nature (often referred to as 'the flesh') is cut off from a persons heart! (Ro 2 v 9).

Our sins are buried with him. They are forgiven. They are dealt with. Christ didn't rise from the grave still carrying some sin! He left it all buried. Interestingly, according to Jewish law chopped off foreskins had to be buried as part of the ceremony!

Our end point in this process is that we have been made alive with Christ! Once we had an inability not to sin. Now we have a desire not to! Once we were unaware of our sin. Now we see ourselves in the light of Christ's holiness and though we still may sin, we have the joy and peace of knowing all our sin is forgiven and we are right with God.

Our faith in Christ (v12) means that God gives us a new spiritual eternal life. We are born again changed people and are being transformed into the likeness of Jesus.

"Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus". (Ro 6 v 11)

Colossians 2 vs 13-15

Paul, before he was converted, was a fearsome opponent of Christianity and a relentless persecutor of Jesus's followers. It's no wonder he keeps returning to the cross in this letter. You can read about his conversion in Acts 9 but after his encounter with Jesus, he had 3 days and nights blind and without food or water! God had chosen him to take the gospel to the Gentiles (non Jews) but also gave him plenty of time to pray and to work out the real meaning of the cross.

Imagine one morning you opened an official looking letter addressed to you personally. In it are listed all the ways in which you have broken God's commands. Murder (command 6) might not be on the list but coveting (10), lying (9), petty thefts (8), working on Sundays (4) and most of all neglecting the first three commandments. Not giving God his rightful place in your life. You wonder how all your secret sins have been spotted. You are summoned to appear before a judge who will pass sentence on you if found guilty. You know you are guilty! The letter is signed by the judge himself. God!! You can ignore the letter and put it in the bin but it'll still eat away at you. You don't know the date of the court appearance. It could happen at any time and there is no way of avoiding it.

This is what Paul is writing about in v14. The King James version says "the handwriting of ordinances that was against us". It's as if the hand of God did the writing a similar way to the hand that wrote the message on the wall for Belshazzar in Daniel chapter 5. "You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting" Dan 5 v 27.

Then Paul gives us the good news! "He took it away nailing it to the cross". (v14)

Your letter and mine is nailed to the cross on which Jesus paid the penalty that was rightfully ours.

Because of the cross we will no longer be sentenced to eternal damnation but from the moment of real acceptance of this truth we will be made alive in Christ forever.

Previously I have mentioned Lazarus, who was literally dead. He had been buried for 4 days (John 11 v 39). He most probably was also "dead in his sins" (Col 2 v13). But Christ made him alive. He called Lazarus and he came out from being physically dead to demonstrate he has the power to revive both the physical and spiritually dead. His hands, feet and face were still wrapped in the grave clothes and Jesus told his friends to take them off Lazarus.

Imagine how Lazarus felt towards Jesus after this miracle of new birth!

As with Lazarus, so it is with us. Jesus wrought a miracle in bringing us out of spiritual death. We are so grateful for that but let's spare a thought in our prayers today for all those friends and teachers who have "unwrapped our grave clothes" so that our eyes can see him, our feet can take us where he sends us and our hands are free to do his work.

Daily Devotions Saturday 18th April 2020 (Phil is 70 today!!)

Colossians 2 vs 16-23

Paul returns to his central theme for the Colossians. Christ is all they need. Their reliance on ritual, following rules, harsh bodily treatment, false worship and trust in an ulterior spiritual world have all been replaced by a simple and single trust in Jesus Christ. The Colossian Christians were used to such lives but now they had been made alive in Christ.

Christian growth is a lifelong process. We don't immediately get pure thoughts and attitudes when we become Christians but if we keep our focus on God we will grow. Our worship, traditions and ceremonies can help bring us close to God but we should not criticise fellow Christians whose traditions and ceremonies differ from ours. How we worship is not as important as that we worship in truth! As long as Christ is the centre, Paul is telling us not to let others judge us for how we worship him.

Paul has a specific warning here again not to be misled by false teachers (v18). They were people who claimed to have worshipped with angels and had been privy to special visions as a result. They were prepared to go into great detail about such spiritual experiences and were asserting their spiritual superiority as a result ('puffed up' v18) Paul not only labels such people unspiritual but says that because of their own private religious experiences they have lost connection with the Head (i.e. Christ). Paul warns us not to let anyone disqualify us from the prize. This is still happening today and I'm sure many of us have experienced it.

Verses 20-23 can be summed up with the fact that man-made religions focus on human effort whereas Christianity is about what Christ has done! Keeping to God's rules are not condemned but they can't provide salvation. That is only God's to give! The Colossians were used to keeping the rules of Jewish traditions but here Paul re-states that they have died to that way of life so why re-submit to it's rules. These rules had been handed down from generation to generation.

Hefting is a process by which lambs learn from their mothers the area of the fells that they can graze on! They don't venture away from that area despite the freedom to do so!! It's not easy to break free from worldly thinking despite the freedom that Christ brings. Not all Christians are yet free from superstition which can exert more influence than faith. It is still possible to think along the lines of, "If I don't go to church today I'm going to have a bad week!" That is totally different from, "I can't wait to go to church to worship my Lord, be with his people and encourage them!"

Praise God for this grace that he gives. Philip Yancey in summing up grace said, 'There is nothing I can do to make God love me more and nothing I can do to make him love me less!'

I believe my Dad's upbringing prevented him from thinking he could ever have anything he hadn't earned or deserved!

Are we trusting wholly in Christ and his Word or are we still clinging to our resources, rituals and spiritual experiences.