

COLOSSIANS

A Message for Today

Bible Study Month - Week Two

Sunday 10th September 2017

Colossians 3:1-3

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Colossae was a small city in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Two thousand years ago it was a prosperous part of the Roman Empire as it lay close to major trade routes. On its busy streets merchants from all over the empire would gather. This created a fascinating forum for the sharing of new thoughts and ideas.

Jesus of Nazareth was crucified about 30 years AD and over the next fifteen years many people became followers of the Christ or “anointed one”. We know that three thousand people became followers of Jesus on one day alone at Pentecost. Most of these people were Jews who lived in Palestine.

Then some 16 years later Paul began his missionary journeys to largely non-Jew (or Gentile) cities in the eastern Roman Empire. As a result of a series of public addresses given by Paul in the nearby city of Ephesus in the mid 50’s, the church in Colossae was founded by one of Paul’s co-workers, Epaphras.

The church in Colossae was very young. It met in local homes because anyone who claimed Jesus as Lord was taking a big risk. It was hard going because the Gospels as we have them today did not exist. Neither did the creeds or the doctrinal formulations that we take for granted. People would have simply heard about Jesus, who had lived just a generation ago, through public testimonies or private conversations.

It is in this context that Paul writes his letter, most likely from prison in either Ephesus or Rome. This letter is written because Paul was concerned. Paul was concerned because first century Roman Empire was a cauldron of fads, crazes, convictions and obsessions. Emperor worship was central while such deities as the mother-goddess, Cybele, the many-breasted Artemis and the mighty Zeus all competed for peoples’ allegiance.

Colossae was also inundated with all sorts of philosophies and spiritualities. Angels, spirits, horoscopes, numerology, moon rituals, revelations and prophecies captured the imagination of its people. And here Paul was concerned Christians in Colossae would be influenced by such things. Paul feared faith could be distorted and compromised.

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So, Paul worked hard to address these matters. He faced similar issues with churches in Galatia and Corinth and, in an effort to affirm Christ is to be the focus of everything, Paul, proclaims Christ stands at the centre. Christ is the heart of life.

Here Jesus Christ is supreme, Jesus Christ is all-sufficient, Jesus Christ rules above all principalities and powers. And through baptism in Christ, salvation is offered to all. Indeed, all those who are in Christ inherit God's kingdom where death no longer holds sway over the world.

These are powerful, massive claims and they present Paul as, I believe, the greatest evangelist and the most important theologian ever!

In our reading today we encounter an important phase or stage in Paul's Letter to the Colossians. This is a transitional point where Paul moves from what we call exhortation about the substance of faith to an imperative that calls on Colossae's Christians to put into action what they believe.

What I mean here is that Paul spends Chapter 1 and 2 proclaiming Christ and then in Chapter 3 he moves into giving practical advice on Christian living. We encounter this today most eloquently in Chapter 3, Verses 12 - 17. Sadly, there is not enough time this morning to do this passage justice. So, when you go home today, read these verses and reflect on them. They are simply amazing.

Colossians Chapter 3, Verses:1-3 represent the transition between exhortation and imperative. In other words, these verses are a kind of bridge that moves the reader from words on doctrine or the affirmation of belief to advice on practice or the living out of the faith. Next week Radhika will take us through some of Paul's practical instructions in Chapter 4. They present some interesting challenges!

Chapter 3, Verse 1, begins with the words, "So if you have been raised". This speaks of an action that has been done for us, an action that, Paul affirms, is unquestionably true.

These words mean those who accept Christ actually participate in his resurrection. Moreover, resurrection is a gift that takes place through no goodness of our own. For its attributed to God and to God alone who, through God's unconditional love enacted in the person of Jesus, takes on the forces of evil and death – and defeats them for our sake.

"Seek the things that are above" refers literally to "up above" or to a higher place. Here Paul is addressing the milieu of the day where people played with the idea of higher and lower spiritual planes or orders. Paul cuts through this as he says followers of Jesus are to focus beyond the things of this world - things that inhibit, limit, undermine or destroy us - to embrace that realm which is "above".

And this refers to God's reign of justice and peace. It is a reality to which believers have inherited through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the One who dwells in union with the Father for eternity.

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Moreover, Paul presents this command to focus on the things “above” as a present imperative action. This simply mean it’s a focus, it’s an attitude, it’s a life-style that needs to embraced and lived-out every minute of every day.

It’s interesting to note that in the New International Version of the Bible verse 2 says “Set your hearts on things above” rather than “seek the things that are above”. Now, there is an important point here when it comes to Bible study.

The New Testament was originally written in Greek and the process of translating Greek into English can be a challenging one. There are basically two approaches to translation. One is a “word-for-word” approach where the best literal meaning of the text is sought. The other approach is a “thought-for-thought” or “sense-to-sense” approach where the translator tries to convey the essential meaning of the text. One approach emphasises “word-for-word”. The other focusses on “thought-for-thought”.

The New Revised Standard Version (the text we use here in West Epping) rendering “seek the things that are above” represents a more “word-for-word” approach to translation. Meanwhile the New International Version rendering “set your hearts on things above” represents a more “thought-for-thought” approach.

Both approaches are legitimate. Indeed, it’s advisable, when studying God’s word, to use a number of different English translations of the Bible to take into account the dynamics of the translation process. I use the New Revised Version with the New International Version and I have prepared some notes on this matter to assist you. They are available today for those who are interested.

In Verse 2 Paul again points to “things that are above” and here we are to “set our minds” on such things. In other words, we are to think here. We are to be mindful. Embracing this “higher” life involves a total mindset, it requires a firm attitude that is simply part and parcel of who we are.

In Verse 3 Paul refers to what it means to be raised with Christ to the new life above. “For you have died” means we are now not of a world that limits our vision of God. We are now no longer confined to a world that prevents us from loving the way God loves.

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We are now not held captive to a world that compromises and subverts commitments to justice and peace.

There is then reference to our lives being “hidden with Christ”. I have struggled a bit with these words. To “hide” is to conceal and it would appear Paul is saying our lives are sustained through an inner, concealed connectedness with God that nurtures, encourages and enables us while not being “of” this world, we are to live “in” this world. It’s a hiddenness related to the mystery of Christ that, while veiled and not fully comprehended now, will one day be fully revealed in God’s time.

Friends, Paul up until Chapter 3 speaks strongly in the form of exhortation. Here Paul proclaims the all sufficiency of Christ.

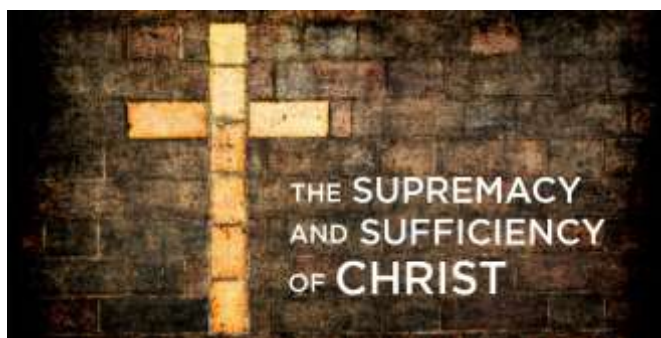
In Colossians 2:10 Christ exalted to sit at God’s right hand – the highest level. He “is the head over every power and authority”. In Colossians 1:15: “Christ is the image of the invisible God”. In Verse 16: we read “.....in him all things were created....” While in Verse 17 “.....in him all things hold together.”

Then in Colossians 3:1-3 Paul tells us that this is not just a proclamation about Christ. We are involved! For in Christ, we secure a place in the highest heavenly realms under his power and authority. Through his death and his resurrection we inherit, we become part-takers in the Kingdom of God now, although its complete fulness is yet to come.

Here, Paul says, we are united with Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension. We are “in Christ” and Christ is in us. Our life in Christ binds us to a new heavenly order where Christ is sovereign.

Colossians 3:1-3 makes the move from belief to action as the Christian community is challenged to not only consider and believe, but to “do”, that is, to seek things above or set one’s heart on those things above.

There is a strong imperative here. We are called to live out our connectedness with God and to bear witness to life above which is one of peace, justice, mercy and love. There is a fervent command here as we are challenged to not only believe - but to be and to act. And it’s not just a thinking about God, it involves a whole orientation to life. It requires a complete devotion to God.



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So, here in Colossians 3:1-3 Paul basically says the all sufficiency of Christ, the sovereignty of Christ that raises us up to new life, means we now have new vision, we gain a new orientation to life, we embrace new priorities and we receive a radically new reason for being.

And it's important to remember the background to this letter, to never forget why Paul wrote such a text as Paul says, don't allow the dynamics of this world way-lay you. Don't let the fads, the crazes, the convictions and the obsessions of this world lead you off in all sorts of directions. What matters, and what matters most, is Jesus Christ is Lord. What matters and what matters most is the life Jesus calls us all to embrace and live.

Now with these things in mind, the most challenging aspect of Bible Study is to discern what God is saying to us through the text today. In my recent hand-out on Bible Study Month I indicated that there are three essential stages in Bible Study.

Firstly, it's important to read and re-read the text. It's vital to look and to listen to the text carefully. What do you see, what do you hear? We call this observation.

Then we need to ask questions of the text. What's is its historical setting? What are the issues that influence the writer and shape the text? How does this passage fit into the rest of scripture? What impact did this text have on those to whom it was originally written? We call this meaning.

And finally, it's vital that we consider what the text is saying to us today. Think about what are the experiences, the struggles, the needs, the joys and particularly, the questions, you bring to the text? And then ask how does God speak to you through these words? We call this significance.



When I consider the text of Colossians, the question of significance is critically important. What is this ancient text, that we believe to be living word of God, saying to us today?

Now, there is not a lot of time to work here. But it seems to me there are parallels with Paul's original concern with the church in Colossae. Today, Paul's concern may be different as the things that cause concern are not so much related to new religions, cults and sects as it is concerning the creeping influence of secularism in our Western society.

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There is a sense, I believe, that the church today is seen more as a public utility. It has a role to play, a contribution to make, but only when needed. Church is seen as something like a community-based provider - to be there when required in the midst of many other utilities that exist to serve the interests of the population. And increasingly the church is becoming disconnected as other providers do it better.

Meanwhile, some suggest the church, particularly those which are still considered to be “successful”, are shaped more like businesses who are in the market for lure customers.

Here Lesslie Newbigin, a great 20th Century missiologist, says the church needs to stand back from its “corporate” identity where programs and organized strategies aimed at bringing people in from the secular world dominate our thinking - and our priorities - to simply creating disciples and empowering people to live out their Christian faith in the home, the workplace, in the wider community and where-ever life takes us.

Building on this, others claim churches in this secular age need to become more missional, again not in terms of an institutionally-based program approach, but in terms of an incarnational commitment where the gospel is lived out by faithful disciples of Jesus in the very midst of a society where God is increasingly being pushed out.

Now, here is some food for thought!

Friends, just as Christians in the ancient city of Colossae lived in the midst of it all, so we, today, are challenged to embrace and live out the Good News of Jesus in our time and place.

This means we need to understand what we believe. This means we must reflect on what that belief means.

And this means we are required to, right now, put those affirmations and those convictions into practice in a society where, through the foolishness and recklessness of humankind, God is being more and more sidelined.

And that’s a tragedy no-one can afford!

Amen.

