

Earlier in the year, we started a series on Colossians. Paul had never met the church at Colosse – it had been planted by Epaphras, one of his protégés and who was probably from Colosse. It was a church that had come under the influence of two strands of thought, pulling these believers in opposite directions. On the one hand people were being pulled by Greek thought, possibly an early form of Gnosticism, and on the other there were Jewish people – Judaizers trying to get the Gentile Christians to convert to Judaism.

In the first chapter Paul introduces us to the incomparable Christ – and firmly establishes what both groups had a problem with – the deity of Jesus Christ. As we saw it's a wonderful theological passage but this is not given for us to fill our heads with more knowledge, but that it may have practical outworking in the lives of Paul's readers, and therefore it is for us too.

We saw last time that the deity of Christ has a practical outworking for us. It is only because of who He is that we have been brought into a living relationship with the living God – we were once alienated, but we are now reconciled.

In this latter part of the chapter, Paul now focuses on what he is all about so they understand the distinctive of the gospel in relation to what they have been hearing from those that were trying to draw them away from it.

The first distinctive of the gospel is that it's preached to every creature on earth i.e. everybody. It's message is for everyone. When we look through the narrative of Acts this was the issue that most boggled Jewish believers. Jesus was not just the Saviour of Israel, but of the Gentiles. For us it's an argument long won but good to remind ourselves of – there is no-one out there who doesn't need or deserve hearing the gospel.

One of the things that always concerns me as I read and see things is the way that some people who call themselves Christians, so readily openly condemn others, be they people with godless lifestyles, other religions, or just Christians they disagree with. Over the years it has led to discrimination, persecution and war. In our present age it's things like homosexuality, Islam and the like.

I like the little phrase we have – hate the sin, love the sinner. Paul openly stood against ungodly lifestyles and idolatry, but he was prepared to suffer much and was eventually martyred to bring to people good news. People don't need our condemnation but our compassion – they need Jesus. We are not called to condemn, but to bring good news.

In verse 24 Paul says: *And now I am happy about my sufferings for you, for by means of my physical sufferings I am helping to complete what still remains of Christ's sufferings on behalf of his body, the church.* On the face of it this verse seems strange because we know that Christ's work on the cross for us was complete. What Paul is saying here is that the redemption of the human race was bought at enormous cost and that was the suffering of Christ. But there is also another sense of completeness of the work of Christ. His work on the cross was for the redemption of His church. That work will not be complete until Jesus returns. It will not be complete until the last person who is chosen, predestined, called, is actually redeemed – accepts Christ for himself or herself. Then the work of redemption will actually be at an end, the church of Jesus Christ will be complete.

Until then, the good news must get to people. Even now, today, that message is going out to people at the cost of suffering. We often remember and pray for the persecuted church. 2000 years down the line, getting the most important message out to people who live in darkness, under idolatry, without hope is still a path of suffering for many.

When we reflect on this, then we need to reflect on our own reluctance sometimes to share Jesus with others because we think they won't like it. It's good news! It's remarkable how people find good news offensive. But here in Britain it's still pretty risk free to speak Christ to people. People die daily because they are Christians in Syria. People are jailed in Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, China, India because they share the gospel. Churches are burnt down in Indonesia. Christians have limited opportunities in society in many countries of the world. And we won't talk to someone in a safe country because we think people may get offended or they will laugh at us or take us seriously.

Let me read the verse again: *And now I am happy about my sufferings for you, for by means of my physical sufferings I am helping to complete what still remains of Christ's sufferings on behalf of his body, the church.* It's quite a challenge isn't it?

Let's move on. The second distinctive of the gospel is that our reconciliation something that brings Christ organically into our lives. It isn't a system of belief, a series of laws, an abstract idea, a way of devotion or all the things religions are. It's this - *And I have been made a servant of the church by God, who gave me this task to perform for your good. It is the task of fully proclaiming his message, 26 which is the secret he hid through all past ages from all human beings but has now revealed to his people. 27 God's plan is to make known his secret to his people, this rich and glorious secret which he has for all peoples. And the secret is that Christ is in you, which means that you will share in the glory of God.*

God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory as the NIV puts it.

The good news is about *relationship* not *religion*. I know we say it a lot but it's true. Yet how often we default to religion when we come to our relationship with God. Yet the secret, the mystery revealed now is that it's not about religion. That was the distinctive of the gospel from Greek philosophy on which much of our society is still actually based, and also of Judaism which is about outward law-keeping.

Christ is in us and glory is what it's all about! Not religion: relationship! Why do you think I'm doing a series on glory in the mornings? Because at the heart of the gospel is the offer of relationship with God. An eternal relationship. One which is all about glory. Relationship is about growth, so as our relationship deepens our whole concept of the glory of God gets larger.

And if Christ is in us and we get our little grey cells around that idea, then our view of the world will get smaller, our faith will grow. O may the Holy Spirit help us to understand this and may He transform us inwardly through knowing it!

The third distinctive of the gospel is that it is lifelong in its scope.

GNB28 So we preach Christ to everyone. With all possible wisdom we warn and teach them in order to bring each one into God's presence as a mature individual in union with

Christ.

NIV 28 We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.

One of the biggest misconceptions of the gospel is that its scope only extends to the lost. It goes further. Salvation is not just something that happened to us in the past. We are in the process of being saved and one day we will be completely saved. When we accepted Christ we started a process, came into a relationship that will end in glory. And because Christ is in us, then we have a relationship that should grow into maturity. It was the job of Paul not just to have preached the message, but to teach and to warn. To nurture these people to maturity. That's our job too in our generation. The good news is about bringing people into relationship that prepares people for glory. And that doesn't stop until they get there.

How limited our scope of the gospel, the good news often is. We reduce it to a message of making a decision at a point in time. But it's more than that. It's going on a journey with people, to being them into a situation where they are reconciled to God, where Christ is in them, and then to walk onwards with them into maturity.

And 2000 years on from Paul the task is still the same. Bringing a message of reconciliation, relationship and maturity in Christ. Let's commit ourselves afresh to it tonight.

*Preached by Mark Reid
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