

## **Colossians 1:1-14     A good start**

“The Word became flesh and lived among us for a while.”

**Jesus** lived at a particular time in history, and if we want to understand what he was saying it helps if we know something about the world in which he lived.

The **NT** was not written in a vacuum. It was written at a real, unique time in history to real people who were just as much part of their time as we are of ours.

**Paul’s letter to the Colossians** is no exception. It was written by Paul to a young community of followers of Jesus in what they called Asia which was part of modern Turkey. Colosse was probably the least important town that Paul ever wrote to. It was a small market town where the soil was poor and they could not grow crops. They were kept going by 2 things: their sheep (and the associated dyeing and woollen business) and trade. But the trade was dying too, and the nearby town of

Laodicea was growing in importance. By the time John came to write his letters to the 7 churches in Asia, Colosse does not even get a mention. And yet this letter from Paul has put the town on the map for all time.

Paul had an amazing ministry in **Ephesus** (approx 52-55 AD). One person who probably came to faith in Christ at this time was a man called **Epaphras**, who came from Colosse. He seems to have quickly become a mature Christian and was acknowledged by Paul as one of his valued fellow servants (1:7). In fact as Paul ministered in one place, he was keen to send other believers out as evangelists, tellers of the Good News about Jesus. It seems that Epaphras was given the job of taking the new message back to his home town. That is never an easy thing to do. I think it is always more difficult to witness to Christ among people who know you – in your own workplace, your own town, your own family – because there people know what you are like. Jesus himself found that he was readily accepted in many places as

he started his ministry, but rejected in Nazareth, his home town. Anyway, Epaphras worked and witnessed and prayed and planted churches in Hierapolis, Laodicea and Colosse – and with success. We know that because some years later (in about 62 AD) Epaphras was visiting Paul who was now in prison in Rome. And he was able to tell Paul about the love shown by the church in Colosse (1:8), the great hallmark of true Christian living. But there were other, more disturbing tendencies which Epaphras could see and reported to Paul as he asked for Paul's advice, tendencies which led Paul to write this letter. We get hints of these throughout the letter, but we have to guess at what the problems were because we don't know what Epaphras said to Paul, only what Paul said to the believers in Colosse. It does seem certain that they were being influenced by the spirit of the age. As Paul writes to these believers whom he never met but loved in the Lord, he sends

“grace and peace” (verse 2). Paul always includes grace, God's undeserved love, in his greetings to churches. He never forgot that he was the man who had persecuted God's people and whose life had been turned around only because God had taken the initiative by breaking through into Paul's life on the Damascus road when he least expected it. And peace with Christ, a gift of the Holy Spirit. The believers in Colosse did not have the kind of back-up that we have to confirm their faith. Unlike us, they did not have a written NT; they did not have knowledge of the OT; they did not have the reassurance of knowing that they were part of a world-wide family of believers. And so they needed reassurance, which explains Paul's words to them in verses 3-8. Firstly, Paul assures them that they **are true believers**. And he does this by saying that he has heard of their **faith** in Christ Jesus, their **love** for all the saints and the **hope** laid up for them in heaven. These are a kind of “heavenly

hat trick”, a basic but sufficient description of the genuine Christian.

The Colossians have **faith in Christ Jesus**.

This is the evidence of the Spirit of God at work in their lives. We can be sure from the rest of the NT that this means 2 things: they had an understanding of who Jesus was, of his birth, life, death and resurrection; but this lead on to something much more, a personal relationship with Jesus. Epaphras had told them about Jesus and now they knew him for themselves. Can I bore you with a bit of French? In French there are 2 verbs which mean to know; *savoir* and *connaitre*. *Savoir* means to know a fact (as in *je ne sais pas*); *connaitre* means to know a person or a place. Becoming a Christian requires both; we need head knowledge; as Paul puts it in Romans 10:14 “*How can people believe in someone of whom they have not heard?*”

We need the basic facts. But Biblical faith in Christ goes much further; it involves trusting Christ, committing our lives to Christ,

acknowledging him as Lord. It is a relationship which involves personal knowledge. If you get purely head knowledge ...

In house groups we are looking at the letter of James. In his letter, James makes it clear that true faith shows itself in actions

So faith is a sign of true Christian life. But so too is love, **love for our fellow Christians**.

This is a love which binds together people of different nations and cultures and makes them one in Christ Jesus.

And love too is not a cosy feeling; it involves everyday awareness and caring, looking out for the needs of others. We only need to read Paul’s famous words in 1 Corinthians 13 to see how all-encompassing love is:

*“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”* (Romans 13:4-7)

Faith and love go along with **hope**. Hope here has to do with the ultimate future. It is the expectancy of the vastly greater blessings to come in heaven. Think of the best moments of spiritual blessing in your life; the times when God has been perhaps very close, perhaps overwhelming in his love, perhaps giving direction or comfort, perhaps drawing you nearer to himself. These moments are just a foretaste of what is to come.

We live in a society which is focussed very much on what we can see, on the here and now; people are obsessed by property at home and abroad, wealth and celebrity status. But faith demands that we look beyond these, as the writer to the Hebrews reminds us:

*“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”*

(Hebrews 11:1)

Paul tells the Colossians that their faith is in Christ; their love goes out to their brothers and sisters in Christ; their hope is in heaven. The reality of their Christian experience is not just

tested by looking inwards at their own hearts, but outwards at Christ, at their fellow Christians and at heaven.

Paul then goes on to reassure the Colossians that **the message which they have heard is the true gospel**.(verses 6-8). Remember that this young church had never met or heard the apostle Paul. Perhaps they were wondering whether Epaphras has given them the whole message or whether there was more to come. Paul answers this by referring to the gospel as *“the word of the truth”*.

Jesus himself of course said

*“I am the way, the truth and the life.”*

That is not a popular statement today. It was not popular in the first century either. The early Christians realised from the beginning that Jesus was God’s final revelation.

But we also have to bear in mind that the gospel is *“bearing fruit and growing”* (verse 6). It is not something static. The God who said to Isaiah *“See, I am doing a new thing”* is still doing new things in his church. And Jesus,

when he painted a picture of God's word going out into people's hearts compared the process to a farmer sowing seed. *The seed is the word*, he said, and went on to make it clear that the purpose of the seed was to grow and bear fruit. The authentic gospel is known everywhere by the fact that it is living and bears fruit. As Paul says (verse 6), this is happening all over the world, as it is still today.

Just a little aside; I was recently talking to a Jehovah's Witness on the doorstep. Now the JWs do not believe in the Trinity, God the Father, Son and Spirit; nor do they accept that Jesus is God. He challenged me to point out any place in the Bible where it is claimed that Jesus is God. I referred him to Thomas' words in John's Gospel where Thomas meets the risen Jesus and falls before him saying *"My Lord and my God"*.

The reply I got was: "Is that the best you can do?" to which I said: "Almost every page of the NT has Father Son and Spirit working together, either stated or implied." And I would suggest

that this page we are on tonight is an example. In the first 8 verses we see the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (verse 3), several mentions of Christ (verses 1,4,7) and (verse 8) we read of their "love in the Spirit".

### **Paul's prayer for the Colossians**

The effectiveness of Paul's ministry comes to some extent from his prayers for other people. He had never met the Colossians, but he always thanks God for them (verse 3) in his prayers; now we read (verse 9) that he also prays for them.

The prayer is best understood as taking up the 2 themes of **knowledge and power**. Paul's intense longing is that these young believers:

- *"may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding"* and may also be
- *"strengthened with all power."*

There was a dangerous idea creeping into the early church which was going to cause huge problems in the second century. The idea was that there was a secret, deeper

knowledge of God which was only available to people who were initiated into a special group.

Paul is not asking God to give these new Christians new knowledge, rather he is asking that they will use what God has already given them in order to discern the will of God for their lives.

Paul's goal is not some kind of mystic experience of God, reserved for an elite. It is rather an intelligent grasp of what the will of God demands in our daily lives – and this is for all believers. In the NT, knowledge and understanding of God's will is always followed by a command to follow and do it. The detail of how this works out in our lives is something which Paul deals with in the second half of his letter. But for the moment he gives, in verse 10, 3 general guidelines of what a Christian life should look like.

### **Worthy of the Lord**

A Christian must lead a life which is worthy of such a great Lord. That means following

the example of Christ. It means a life of humble service and of walking in harmony with other Christians. Just think for a moment of the way in which Jesus served his disciples and was so patient with them when they could not or would not grasp what his kingdom was all about.

### **Please him in every way**

Wanting to please other people is a natural human desire, but it can become an unhealthy obsession. If the aim of our lives is to please Christ, we are free of this obsession. When Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, as he tells us in his account in Acts 22, he asks:

*“What do you want me to do, Lord?”*

There was this desire to do what God was asking, which incidentally

### **Bearing fruit and increasing in good deeds, growing in the knowledge of God**

The good deeds are not just religious deeds. We are to serve God in the ordinary things of life.

We could compare this with being in love. When we are in love we try to please the other person. Paul is saying in effect: “You are in love with God in Christ. So go out of your way to please him. Then God will smile on everything you do as you bear fruit and grow in the knowledge of what he wants you to do.”

The **power** which God gives is for joyful endurance and patience, or as The Message puts it, “*the strength to stick it out over the long haul – not the grim strength of gritting your teeth but the glory-strength God gives.*” The Christian life often calls for patience, but hopefully not a miserable, depressing patience.

Paul finishes this section by mentioning some of the reasons which Christians have to **give thanks**.

There is an **inheritance** for us in the kingdom of light (verse 12). An inheritance only comes to you when someone dies. Who has died? Jesus has died and has released the

benefits of his death for all mankind – the salvation of the world and our hope for the future.

We are **rescued from darkness** and brought into the kingdom of the Son he loves.

What a description of what happens when we become Christians! Most of us do not have the kind of dramatic conversion experience which Paul had on the Damascus road. We did not suddenly go from persecuting the church to being followers of Christ. But our experience is just as real. Jesus repeatedly made it clear that it was not just those who were outwardly and obviously sinners who needed to be rescued. We all need redemption, the forgiveness of sins. You remember the story which Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector? (READ Luke 18:9-14).

We all need to be rescued; we all need to be forgiven. And when that happens, we all have so many reasons to rejoice in God’s love.