

Colossians 1:24-2:5

Devoted to the empire or to Christ?

One of the things which empires try to do is not only to conquer people by force but to break the **imagination** of the people they have conquered. As long as a conquered people retain memories of life before exile and harbour hopes of a life beyond the Empire, they are not completely conquered. Their liberated imagination keeps them free even in the face of violent suppression.

During its long history the people of **Israel** lived in the shadow of several empires. In particular, they were taken into exile by the Babylonians, the time of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The prophets wrote poems which were subversive, designed to keep the people hoping for something better and greater than what they were suffering at that moment; something which was rooted in the past (they looked back to God's promises) and looked forward to the

future beyond the empire. The prophets wrote about homecoming and restoration, dimly burning wicks which were about to re-ignite, free food and above all about a Messiah who would do a new thing. These prophetic messages broke the monopoly of the empire in people's minds and gave them hope.

The **early Christians** knew all about empires. As I mentioned last week, Rome was very clever at shaping people's thinking. Images of the emperor surrounded people in much the same way that logos surround us today. The images of Caesar were literally every where. The sovereign rule of Caesar was assumed to be the divine plan for the universe. People were certainly not encouraged to think that there might be an alternative.

It is against this background that Paul writes **verses 15-20** of Colossians 1, almost certainly quoting an early hymn, starting:

"He (=Jesus) is the image of the invisible God"

In a world populated by images of Caesar, who is taken to be a god in the making, this poem is treason. Paul subverts every claim made by the empire. Paul states very clearly who is sovereign in creation, who is the image of the invisible God, who holds the cosmos together in peace – and it isn't Caesar!

Paul leaves no room for Emperor-worship. He tells the Colossians that the gospel they have received is the “*word of truth*” (1:5); he goes on to pray that the believers may be filled with “*the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding*” (1:9); and he looks to “*Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*” (2:2, 3)

Indeed, throughout this letter Paul repeatedly uses the words all and every. It may well be that, as he wrote, he was very conscious of the claims made by the Empire and he deliberately sets out to counter its claims with claims which were just as great. It is as if he was saying: “Do you think that true wisdom is to be found in

Rome with all its religious cults, all of them under the cult of Emperor-worship? Are you impressed with the Empire and the way it encompasses everything? Well, let me tell you that true wisdom is found in Christ alone and that his word of truth is now bearing fruit in the whole world.”

While the headlines in our Bibles are not part of the original text, often they give a useful summary of what follows. The title of the section 1:15-23 is rightly called **the supremacy of Christ**.

We move on to verses 24-29 and a new section headed **Paul's labour for the church** and immediately we meet a very puzzling phrase: “*Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions ...*” (24)

It makes it sound as if Christ's suffering was incomplete and that Paul had to do something to make it complete. The rest of the NT makes it clear that there was a world of difference between Christ's suffering and Paul's

suffering. Christ suffered and took our place, opening up the way back to God. Paul's suffering, and the suffering of other believers, does not save anyone. The suffering of Christ is complete and it is sufficient to save the whole world. But we need to respond to Christ, and our suffering does have this in common with Christ's suffering; we too suffer from a desire to serve God and bring other people to Him. Or to put it another way, Christ's suffering had a purpose and that purpose is not yet fully complete.

In what sense has Paul suffered for these people whom he has never met? He has suffered so that the gospel might spread. In 2 Corinthians 11:24-29 Paul lists some of the occasions when he has suffered for the sake of the gospel. (READ P. 1165)

The mystery revealed

Paul has become the servant of the church because God has given him a special job to do, presenting the word of God in its fullness. And what is the essential message? It used to be a

mystery, in fact it was hidden for ages, and has only now been revealed – it is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

The writer of Hebrews expresses this long wait through the centuries:

“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in many ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (Hebrews 1:1, 2)

And Peter tells us that the prophets searched to understand the time and circumstances of the coming of Jesus whose birth and death they predicted hundreds of years before he came, but it was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you – a *you* which includes us in 2007. God's purpose all along was to bring Jesus into the world and to bring the world to Jesus, but the mystery was only revealed in God's perfect time.

Sometimes we have to confess that we like having a secret. We know something that other people don't.

Sometimes our church services must look like that to outsiders; bizarre behaviour where we huddle together and talk and sing to an invisible being. One of the questions we must keep asking ourselves is this: how should we go about making the gospel message less mysterious and simpler for people who have no knowledge of Christ and no church background?

The secret Paul has in mind is an open secret; it is for everyone. We meet in the place of worship in order to go out and make it known. It is an open secret; it is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Jesus is in us, his Spirit to make us more like him, giving us his power and his love to reach out to others.

The mission announced (28, 29)

Paul's mission was not just to see people becoming followers of the way. He wanted to see people becoming mature in Christ. So he not only proclaims Christ, he also admonishes and teaches; he does not pull his punches but tells it as it is.

One of the greatest handicaps of the church is believers who never get beyond the baby stage as Christians. They may be mature in other ways as well as rich and intelligent, but in their faith they fail to live as Christ has called us to. If people outside the church see this they will never accept that Christ makes a difference. Mission and maturity go hand in hand.

Verse 29 reminds us of the partnership I was speaking about this morning:

“To this end I labour, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.”

Paul works, but God is at work in him. This is the secret for every Christian. We work, but God works in and through us. If we work in our own strength, we shall find ourselves powerless and ineffective.

Paul's ministry

Agony of spirit (1)

Since the original text had neither headings nor chapters and verses, we can see Paul moving from chapter 1 to chapter 2 by saying in effect:

“God is working powerfully in me and I can tell you I am finding it a struggle.” Paul had never met the Christians in Colosse, but he agonised over them nevertheless. His gifts were not just in church-planting and teaching; he was a pastor with a loving heart. And through the Holy Spirit he also reaches out to us; his writing touches our hearts just as it touched the hearts of the early believers. It is a pattern for all who are involved in any form of ministry or service in the church. We are called to care, not in a casual way but with true love; and love is always costly.

Unity and love in Christ (2, 3)

Paul wants to build up the church, not tear it down. But he will also have some hard things to say because of the false teaching that was coming in. And so he spells out that his purpose is that they will be encouraged, united in love and have full understanding. False teaching always destroys unity and love. In verse 2 Paul writes of the full riches of the mystery of God, namely Christ. It appears that

the false teachers were saying in effect: “Yes, what you have heard about Jesus is fine, but you need something extra; you need a mystical experience; Jesus alone is not enough. And against this Paul is saying that there is no greater fullness than the fullness of the Son of God. You may have noticed that Paul has already brought them back to this point already:

“Jesus is the image of the invisible God.”

What more do you need? We should never be ashamed to focus on Jesus. He is both simple and profound; both the One who so clearly enjoyed the company of children, yet is the source of all wisdom and knowledge. Christ is everything that the Christian needs. But that does not mean that we can sit back and be complacent. None of us have grasped all the biblical truths we are going to need. We will all spend the rest of our lives exploring God, because as Paul says in Romans 11:33;

“Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

*How unsearchable his judgements,
And his paths beyond tracing out!”*

But what a wonderful prospect, however many of few years we may have to live on this earth, that we can spend them exploring more of the riches of God as we follow his purpose for our lives.

Do not be deceived (4, 5)

If we possess the wisdom to be found in Christ, we will not be led astray by fine-sounding arguments. Christians who are immature or backslidden are so liable to be blown about by every wind of change. Those who are immature may lack the knowledge to resist false teaching; those who have wandered from the Lord may lack the warmth of love for the Lord and so be attracted by something which looks exciting but is not true to the gospel.

World-wide and across denominations Christians have differing views on many different matters. And yet we share a precious unity because we are one in Christ.

It is sometimes interesting to debate issues which separate us in our various churches. But this should never blind us to the much more important things which unite us.

What is undoubtedly difficult is knowing which divisions should concern us and which are unimportant.

2 final points

Paul wants his readers to be **encouraged “in heart”**. When we use the word heart we mean either the organ which gets our blood round our body or the centre of our feelings. “Affairs of the heart” are romantic. When the Jews wished to refer to the centre of emotions they talked about their bowels.

But the way they used the word heart was to refer to the centre of human experience, including what we would call mind as well as heart. When Paul wants his readers to be encouraged in heart he is not talking just about a feel-good factor. He is concerned with thoughtful faith tested by experience; with encouragement at our core which keeps us

going on and on; with the full riches of unity in Christ. Encouraging in heart is something which we should all be trying to do for each other.

The second point comes from Paul's phrase in verse 5:

"I am absent from you in body. I am present with you in spirit."

This is one of those phrases which Christians sometimes use as a cop-out. "I can't come to the meeting tonight, but I'll be with you in spirit." Sometimes a speaker can be addressing more spirits than bodies! "With you in spirit" does not mean "I'd rather watch football on TV." It reflects the pastoral heart of verse 1. Paul is really agonising over these believers whom he has never met but loves.

What an example he has left us of devotion to Christ and love for our fellow-Christians.