

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, July 31, 2016
Rev. Andrew Reid
Colossians 3:1-17
Letter to the churches – Colossians

Colossae. There is nothing in Scripture to indicate that St Paul ever visited Colossae. It was a small Greek town in the western part of what we now know as Turkey. In Greek times, it was an important trading city, though its importance was declining in New Testament times. The church there was established through the preaching of Epaphras. Paul calls Epaphras *our beloved fellow-servant and a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf* Colossians 1:7. It seems that Epaphras had shared with Paul a concern he had about false teaching that was creeping into the church in Colossae and in nearby Laodicea. His concern was that this false teaching might distract the Colossians from the Gospel and bring them into spiritual complacency. It was the church in Laodicea that was accused in Revelation 3 of being "lukewarm" and told that it would be spat out of God's mouth. Paul's letter to the Colossians was written to address that concern. His Paul's reply was that believers in Jesus Christ had been given fullness of life in the One who was master over every ruler and authority. And for that reason, they were in a position of confidence and faith to stand against false teaching.

And as we saw last Sunday as we were looking at the letter to the Philippians, for Paul it was a matter of the interplay between Christology and ecclesiology. Paul's understanding of what it meant to be the church – his ecclesiology – grew out of what he believed about the person of Jesus Christ – his Christology. He expressed what he believed about Jesus in different words from the words he used in Philippians 2, but they are still glorious words: ¹⁵*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;* ¹⁶*for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him.* ¹⁷*He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.* ¹⁸*He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.* ¹⁹*For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,* ²⁰*and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross* Colossians 1:15-20.

And in chapter 2, he moves to his reason for writing to *the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae* Colossians 1:1. He wanted their hearts to be *encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* Colossians 2:2-3.

Part of that assured understanding, that knowledge of God's mystery, had to do with the way the believers were to live out their faith in a culture that was at best unsympathetic, and at worst hostile, to the Christian faith.

And on the face of it, it seemed to be so simple for Paul. He framed it as a choice, pure and simple. The choice was between right and wrong, between good and evil, between light and dark, between *things that are above* (and) *things that are on earth* Colossians 3:2.

On the one hand, what he called *whatever is earthly*: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed, idolatry, anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language, dishonesty, discrimination. And on the other hand, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, love, harmony, peace, thankfulness, wisdom, gratitude, song.

And all it takes, Paul seems to be saying, is the determination to hold to the one and reject the other; to seek the one, to set our minds on the one, to clothe ourselves with the one, and to put to death the other. And at all times, to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Sounds simple enough, but life is rarely simple, nor is the Christian life. The things that are on earth are potent and compelling. They have the power to hit hard against higher things in the lives of followers of Jesus Christ. All it takes is the loss of a job, or a troubling report from a doctor, or an encounter with a drunk driver, or a lunatic with a gun or a knife or a bomb, or even the kind of rhetoric that we have heard coming out of the United States in the last couple of weeks.

Any of these can drag followers of Jesus down from the things that are above. Any of these can leave us struggling to hold on to faith and hope and love and the determination to build a better world.

Paul seems to have known that. Because before he addressed these things in our text for today, AND while he was addressing them, AND after he had addressed them, he kept on reminding the Colossians of something that he wanted them to hold on to: that, whatever may happen in the world around us, followers of Jesus can and should find confidence in the life they now live, now that they *have been raised with Christ ... (and their) life is hidden with Christ in God Colossians 3:1,3.*

I want to close this sermon today in the same way that I closed my sermon last Sunday – with some words of Paul himself. As I read them, I invite you to ponder them, and let them speak directly to you. *you have stripped off the old self with its practices ...*

(you) have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator ...

in that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free ...

Christ is all and in all ...

as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience ...

bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other ...

just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive ...

clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony ...

let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body ...

be thankful ...

let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God ...

whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him ... Colossians 3:9-17.