

**‘CHRIST’S MINISTRY CONTINUED’
COLOSSIANS 1:24-2:5**

[St Mark’s Online Services, Sunday October 24, 2021]

1. The Damascus Road Discovery.

The Paul who wrote this letter to the Colossians was originally called Saul. And many years before writing this letter his life was going along very well as a Jewish religious leader. He was known especially for his zeal in trying to stamp out what he saw as the new Christian sect that had arisen. But then one day he had an encounter on the road to Damascus that changed his life forever. He met the risen Jesus. And you can read about it in Acts chapter 9.

In that encounter Paul learnt many life-changing things, but this morning/evening I want to hone in on one discovery in particular. Because when Paul fell to the ground that day, overwhelmed by a blinding light, the voice he heard said the most remarkable thing: ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’. And then when Saul asked who it was that he was talking to, the voice replied: ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’. In that moment it became blindingly clear to Saul, pun intended, that when his people suffer, Jesus suffers with them. When his people are persecuted, Jesus himself is being persecuted. He is not detached from his people in any way. He is not a head severed from his body. He is one with his people, and their experience is his experience.

What Paul discovered in that moment is that even though Jesus had bodily returned to heaven, he was still with and in his people. Christ’s ministry on earth did not end with his incarnation. It continued. And continues still. It continues because the Spirit of Jesus is with the people of Jesus, and wherever they go he goes. And as they bless people in his name, Jesus blesses people. And as they suffer for the sake of his name, he suffers too.

And I suspect Paul spent the rest of his life trying to plumb the depths of this. Because that truth needed to frame the whole way he thought about his new life and ministry. And it needs to frame the way we think about Paul’s ministry too, and ours. Sometimes I reckon we tend to think that after Jesus ascended to heaven his ministry was given to the apostles like a baton being passed on. But Paul would never thought of it like that. Because he’d come to learn that any ministry he exercised for Jesus was a continuation of Jesus’ ministry in every way. And it’s that conviction which I think lies at the heart of the verses we’re looking at today/tonight.

And my aim today/tonight is to consider the significance of these verses by examining what they say about the key characters within them. So these are my three headings. Firstly- Paul. Secondly- God's people. And then thirdly- Christ himself.

2. Paul.

But we begin with Paul. What does he say here about himself and the work God had called him to do. Last Sunday's passage ended with Paul describing himself as a servant of the gospel. And what he's doing in this next section is fleshing out for us what that means. I'll point out three things.

- suffering

Firstly, he's suffering. This is what he makes clear in verse 24¹.

[Read 1:24]

Of course, a lot of ink has been spilt on this verse. It sounds strange to our ears and it isn't easy to understand. Paul says that he rejoices in what has already been suffered for the sake of the Colossians², and that he continues to suffer for the sake of the church, filling up in his flesh what is still lacking. I think the idea here is that God in his providence ordains a fixed amount of suffering for Christ's body to undergo- an idea that's not so strange for those who believe in God's complete sovereignty over everything. It's in this sense that he means some of the sufferings of Christ are still lacking. Not insufficient but incomplete.

But part of why this verse is tricky to understand is because Paul's also saying that his suffering is an extension of Christ's suffering. And this is where the Damascus Road discovery is so critical. Because it has radically shaped how Paul understands the afflictions he experiences. Just like the sufferings of those Paul had once persecuted were the sufferings of Christ, so too this is now the reality of his life. Paul's ministry was no Caribbean holiday. It was often agonising³. And as he suffered, he was participating in the sufferings of Christ.

- serving the church of God with the word of God

¹ And in 1:29 and 2:1 where the word 'contending' translates a Greek word from which we derive the English word 'agony'. Note too that given his ministry at the point of writing Colossians is a ministry in jail, it's highly likely that Paul's 'contending' for the churches mostly involves prayer.

² The NIV 2011 translates away the ambiguity which exists in the Greek (which was retained in the 1984 version) about whose suffering this is. Most translators and commentators think it is Paul's suffering but I think an excellent case can be made for the fact that Paul is actually talking here about the sufferings of Christ for the Colossians.

³ See footnote # 1.

And his suffering with Christ was also suffering for the body of Christ. Because he was serving the church of God with the word of God. This is the second thing to say about Paul here. As he says in verse 25, God has called him to be the church's servant. And his key responsibility as the servant of God's people is to feed them with God's truth. Notice the way he puts it there at the end of verse 25. His task is to present the word of God in its fullness. Just as he is fulfilling the sufferings of the Son, so he is fulfilling the word of the Father⁴.

The content of his teaching and preaching is not something of his own creation. It's the word that comes from God. As he explains in verses 26-27 it's the gospel 'mystery' that was previously unknown but which has now been fully disclosed in Christ. Paul's task is simply to pass on to people the riches God has already revealed.

- passionately purposeful

But the third thing to notice about the ministry of Paul is how passionately purposeful he is. Verse 28.

[Read 1:28]

Paul's proclamation is all about Christ. And his clear goal in proclaiming Christ is the maturity of Christ's people- all Christ's people⁵. It's striking, I think, that Paul didn't see his aim merely in terms of conversion. It wasn't as if Paul was running around evangelising people and then when people became Christians he got them onto his bus, drove them up to their local church, kicked them out, wished them all the best, and then drove off to go and find some more recruits. No, Paul saw his ministry in the context that he explains here. The goal was maturity in Christ. And that's why he wasn't just proclaiming and then leaving. He was also admonishing and teaching with all wisdom.

And he fleshes out this goal further in 2:2.

[Read 2:2]

For Paul, there's no mistaking that the maturity that counts is maturity 'in Christ'. It's the maturity that comes from knowing Christ fully, richly. This is Paul's purpose in serving the church.

⁴ This sentence reflects well the way Paul uses the word 'fill' in verse 14 and verse 25. I think there's a deliberate parallelism in Paul's expression that is lost in the NIV translation.

⁵ Paul never wanted the Colossians to forget that they were part of something bigger than the church at Colosse. He underlines that again in 2:1 when he says that his struggle is not just for them, but also for the Laodiceans and others. And he's echoing here the reminder in 1:6 that the gospel that was bearing fruit among them was also bearing fruit all over the world. See also the reminder in 1:20 that their reconciliation to Christ was part of the reconciliation of all things to Christ.

But you notice this is not just some kind of occupational “deliverable” for Paul. It’s something he cares deeply about. He’s emotionally engaged in it. This is why I say he’s ‘passionately’ purposeful. He can become anxious about what may undermine his purpose- thus 2:4. And when he sees his purpose being fulfilled- 2:5- it brings him great joy.

Now, before we move on we should stop and reflect on how Paul’s self-description here speaks to us and our church. Because what Paul says here is entirely consistent with what the rest of the New Testament says about the shape of all Christian leadership. Like how it’s no picnic. It often comes with suffering. Like how leadership in the church is about serving God’s people. And the chief way we serve God’s people is by feeding them with the word God has revealed. And like how church leaders should be passionately purposeful just like Paul was. Paul’s example here presents leaders in our church with a clear reminder of what ought to characterise our ministry. [Pause] And it presents everyone in our church with a standard we can use to evaluate the legitimacy of the leadership we receive. [Pause] These verses ought to shape our expectations of our leaders. And our prayers for them.

3. God’s People.

But we move on now to my second heading today/tonight. God’s people. What do these verses say about the Colossians themselves, and, by implication, about us?

- being made mature

Firstly, as we saw in 1:28, we are being made mature. This is Paul’s goal for the Colossians because it’s God’s goal. And it’s God’s work. Christ saved us for this- not just that we might dodge the judgement bullet, but that we might grow up into his likeness. God’s work in our lives is not just rescue, but also redemption, restoration, reform. He who begins a good work in us also carries it on to completion. He purchases us in Christ in order to perfect us in Christ. We are being made mature.

- at risk

But, at the same time, this maturing process is not always plain sailing. There are dangers along the way. So the second thing these verses remind us of are that God’s people are always at risk. In 2:4 Paul expresses a concern that the Colossians aren’t deceived- by fine-sounding arguments that might lead them away from Christ. This is the same concern we heard him express in the verses we looked at last week- especially 1:23. We must continue in the faith, never moving from the hope held out to

us in the gospel. Paul says this to help us avoid the temptations, and distractions, and falsehoods that might threaten our continuation. He reminds us of that again here too.

- enriched in understanding through fellowship

But we're not left to face these risks on our own. And this is the third thing to say under this heading. Because Christ has called us into a fellowship that enriches us. And this enriching fellowship is an excellent protection against spiritual danger. And at the same time, a great joy. This is what he's saying I think in 2:2.

[Read 2:2a-b]

'Encouraged in heart' and 'united in love' are phrases that describe a healthy church. And this is what Paul works for- that the churches he knows would be marked by this kind of holy fellowship. But did you see that this too has its own purpose? It's 'so that' they might have the full riches of complete understanding. Do you see what he's saying? He wants people to be in strong fellowship with each other because it's only then that people understand Christ in his fullness. So Paul rejects the idea that Christ can be properly grasped at a merely intellectual level. And he rejects the idea that Christ can be properly understood by someone who's not yet a Christian. And I think here he is even rejecting the idea that a Christian can understand Jesus completely without being part of a church. Paul says that it's only as your heart is moved by the gospel and it's only as you join together with other Christians in loving mutual encouragement that you can understand the riches of Christ fully. And again, I think this thought is closely linked to Paul's Damascus Road discovery. That Christ is not a head without a body. That to know Christ is to know him in and with his people.

So next time someone says to you that they don't need to go to church to be a Christian perhaps you should show them Colossians 2:2? This is why Paul wants his ministry to encourage hearts and unite Christians- because it's as this happens that people enter into all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge in Christ. And if that doesn't make you value the church community, then nothing will!

4. Christ.

So, we've seen what Paul has said here about himself. And we've seen what he's said about the Lord's people. But I want to finish today/tonight by reflecting on what Paul says about Christ. So, under that heading, three final things.

- in his people

Firstly, Christ is in his people. This is again what Paul learnt on the Damascus Road. And it's what Paul explicitly says here in 1:27. This, he says, is the mystery God has revealed. This is the gospel.

[Read 1:27]

This glorious rich gospel is for all, as we've already heard. The mystery that was not known before has now been made known amongst the Gentiles. All who trust in Christ have the hope of glory- no matter their cultural background. All who trust Christ have that same Christ within them. But let's just stop there a moment and think on that.

Because

given the things Paul's already said in this letter about Christ, the thought that he might be 'in' his people is staggering. Take for example what we read last week in 1:15-20. Jesus is the firstborn over all creation, the one through whom all things were created, the one who holds all things together, the head of the church, the one in whom all God's fullness dwells. This is Jesus Christ in all his cosmic greatness. It's almost incomprehensible isn't it that he might be in us. But is this not what Paul is saying? That the one in whom all God's fullness dwells is the one who dwells in us. If you're a Christian here today/tonight Paul believes that the fullness of God dwells within you in Christ! It's breath-taking.

Of course, Paul can also say, as he does in 1:28, that we are 'in Christ'. And this is one of the great paradoxes of the Christian experience. That it's only as we find ourselves in him, that he is in us. It's only as he dwells in us that we truly dwell in him. But in him, we have everything we could ever need or dream of⁶. To be in Christ, and to have him in you, is to have more than the whole world can offer.

Last week after we looked at the portrait of Christ in 1:15-20 I was introduced to a new emoji. I'm slow on emoji uptake, I know! Someone posted it this emoji in the Youtube chat and someone else sent it to me in a text message. This is the one I'm referring to. [Show slide] I think you would probably called it the "mind blown" emoji. It's designed to symbolise that you just heard something or learnt something that metaphorically blew the top of your head off. [Remove slide] Well, what I'm saying here is that if the portrait of Christ we saw in chapter 1 was mind-blowing, how much more mind-blowing is it to consider that Christ is in me! Glorious riches indeed.

- giving energy to those who serve him

⁶ Dick Lucas cites B B Warfield at this point who says: 'we do not obtain the benefits of Christ apart from, but only in and with His Person; and that when we have him we have all' (*The Message of Colossians and Philemon*, BST Series, p.75)

But secondly, because Christ is in us, he is able to strengthen us- to give us energy to serve him. And this too is an outworking of the Damascus Road discovery. If Christ is with his people so that when they suffer he suffers too, then it's also true that the power of the risen Christ lives within his weak people and makes them strong. How wonderful is that? This is Paul's point in 1:28.

Paul's already told us that ministry involves suffering. It's strenuous, and sometimes agonising. So what sustains him? How does he keep going? Is he just one of those guys who only needs a couple of hours sleep a night, and who shrugs off adversity? Is he powered by Duracell batteries? Has he got a sponsorship with Red Bull? No- Paul says that his ministry is sustained by the energy of Christ working powerfully in him. Because if you're going to proclaim Jesus to 'everyone with all wisdom' so that everyone might have 'all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge', then you're going to need 'all Christ's energy', aren't you? And that's what Paul says he has. Because this is what Christ does. From within, he gives his energy to those who serve him. And my own testimony resonates with this hugely. I know many of you would say the same. There's no way I could have served Christ for all the years I have without his strength. If it were just up to me I would have given up years ago. But I press on, I continue, because I depend upon the energy Christ gives. And so can you.

- the one in whom all the treasures are found

Finally today, I want us to come to see the stunning thing Paul says about Jesus in 2:3. He is the one in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found. The image here is of Christ as our treasure chest. All the most valuable things we possess are within him. And he is within us. Everything we might have learnt some other way is not of comparable worth. The best things we've ever learnt have all had their roots in Jesus and his gospel. Who God is. Who Jesus is and what he's done. How to be forgiven for every sin. How to possess the hope of glory. We could go on and on couldn't we? All this and more. It's ours. We know it because he's revealed it to us. We've been made wise with his wisdom. And, as a result, we are wealthy beyond compare.

There are many of Christ's treasures in these very verses. And we've had a little bit of time today to grow in our appreciation of them. But what I hope you will see binds today's insights together is that discovery Paul made on the Damascus Road. That the cosmic Christ is the personal Christ. The incarnate Christ is the risen and exalted Christ. And he is with and in his people. These verses are a study in what it means that Jesus is the indwelling Christ. These are the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you.