

**‘CHRIST WHO IS YOUR LIFE’
COLOSSIANS 3:1-11**

[St Mark’s Northbridge, Sunday November 7, 2021 – All Services]

I’m a big believer in sermons that don’t teach us anything new. For the same reason that I think reading the Bible is immensely valuable even if I don’t make some new discovery every time I read it. We are endlessly forgetful people. And being reminded of the things we already know is endlessly good for us.

But sometimes we do need to entertain a new thought. Sometimes the Bible says something to us that seems to take our minds in a direction they haven’t travelled before. And when that happens we need to listen well, and think hard, and work out how to integrate the new thought with all of our existing thoughts.

And that’s the kind of work I think many of us will need to do this morning/evening. Because I think these verses from Colossians 3 press us into thinking about our faith in a way that’s different to how we often think and speak. I think for many of you there might be some new thoughts this morning/evening. So I hope you’ll listen well to what Paul says, and think hard, and try to bring the perspective of this passage into coherence with what you already know. But I also want to say, from the outset, that I don’t want this to be a sermon that’s just interesting for those who like a bit of intellectual stimulation! Because learning to think about our lives the way Paul encourages us to here, has a very significant practical effect. Learning to think God’s thoughts after him is always transforming. And I think that’s definitely true of what we find in these verses. If we’ll embrace what Paul says here I think we’ll find it makes a real difference to day to day life. So let’s pray that that will be our experience.

[Pray]

So what I want to do today/tonight is just unpack for you three of Paul’s thoughts from these verses. The headings are on your outline.

1. The Salvation of God = Relocation.

The first is this. Paul asks us to see the salvation of God as a relocation. We normally tend to think of our salvation in terms of rescue- Christ saves us from sin and judgement. We think of it in terms of victory- Christ conquers evil and Satan. We think of it in terms of sacrifice- Christ stands in my place as the sacrificial lamb so I can be cleansed and forgiven. And all those things are true. I’m not asking you to erase any of those thoughts from your mind. But I am asking you to see that Paul has something different to say here- something that enriches our knowledge of Christ. Paul says, God has saved us by relocating us. He has changed our address. He has transferred us from the earth to heaven.

- dead and raised

Listen again to verses 1-3.

[Read 3:1-3]

Paul asks us to see ourselves as being united to Christ- in his death and resurrection. So when he died, we died¹- verse 3. And when he was raised, we were raised with him. When we died with Christ we died to sin, to the life we once lived apart from Jesus. But having been buried with him in baptism², we were also raised with him to heaven³. Paul began to teach us this in the passage we read last week. But he draws the threads together here at the start of chapter 3.

- earth and heaven

And it's because he says we've died with Christ and been raised with him that we are to now see ourselves as living simultaneously on earth and in heaven- physically on earth, and spiritually with Christ, who is seated at God's right hand.

- hidden and revealed

And of course, our life on earth is visible to us, and others. But our life in heaven is, for now at least, invisible. And I think this is what Paul means in verse 3 when he says that our life is now 'hidden' with Christ in God. In the same way that Christ is not visible to us now, but we know by faith, not sight, that he lives and reigns in heaven. So too us. Spiritually, we live there with him. This reality is hidden for now, but one day it will be revealed. Verse 4.

[Read 3:4]

One day people will come to see that they may have known us as one of their neighbours in Northbridge but we've actually been living in heaven that whole time.

Paul's point is that we are now people of two addresses. And the life that matters most is the life we have with Christ, in God. Christ. He is our life- as verse 4 says. And the life we have with him is the life we will have for ever. Our addresses on earth may change. And one day our homes here will be no more. But the home we have in heaven is here to stay. And that is where we now belong. Because Christ has relocated us. Paul asks us here to think of Christ not just as our rescuer, not just as our victorious leader, and not just as our sacrificial lamb. Paul asks us to think of Christ as our removalist.

- heart and mind

¹ Cf. 2:20

² Cf. 2:12

³ Cf. 2:12

And because this is our new eternal reality, Paul wants to ensure that our hearts and minds have grasped this. So he tells us in verse to set our heart on things above- to seek the things that matter to Christ and his kingdom because are now residents of his home. He's the master of the house in which we live. So we seek his interests more than the interest of the earth. And, as he tells us in verse 2, we're to set our minds on these things.

This is thought 1 for today/tonight. God has saved us by Christ relocating us. All who belong to Christ now dwell with him in heaven. And so we're to set our hearts and minds on the things of heaven.

2. The Life Lived for God = Integration.

And, we're to live on the earth like people who dwell in heaven. This is Paul's second thought for us to grapple with today. In verses 1-4 he reminds us of our new relocated identity: died with Christ, raised with Christ, hidden with Christ in God, destined to appear with Christ in glory. This is our story. This is who we are now. And in the rest of this chapter Paul simply urges us to live in such a way that there is congruence between our identity and our conduct.

So this is thought number 2. The life lived for God is a life of integration. We tend to think of sin as disobedience. And so we think of the life we must live as a life of repentance and submission to God. We tend to think of sin as ungodliness. And so we think the call of Christ is to make every effort to be godly. Of course those things are true. Once again, I'm not asking you to erase those thoughts from your mind. But I am asking you to take on board a different thought Paul has for us- one which also enriches our knowledge of Christ.

In these verse Paul speak less of sin as disobedience, and more of sin as incongruence. Sin in the life of a Christian is when their identity and their conduct are incongruous. They are dis-integrated. For Paul, sin is dis-integration. So living for God is about living an integrated life. I trust you can see the unique perspective Paul offers us here. When we sin, our instinctive reaction is so often: 'I've been a bad Christian'. But Paul is suggesting that our first reaction when we sin could perhaps be something more like: 'I've been an incoherent person'. It really is a different way of looking at it, isn't it?

And Paul makes this point in a few different ways through these verses.

- death and judgement

Firstly he talks about putting sin to death because of the coming judgement of God. Verse 5 reminds us that there are things that belong to our earthly nature which are inconsistent with our relocation to heaven- sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed. And greed, as he points out, is especially inconsistent because it causes us to worship things other than God. And Paul says in verse 6 that these are the sorts of things that explain God's coming wrath. So far from being congruous with our heavenly address, these sins are the very things that stir the God of heaven to anger.

I trust you can see the logic here. In heaven you would never have an impure thought or commit sexual immorality because every desire you've ever had has been perfectly and abundantly fulfilled in Jesus. So if as a Christian that's already true for you- you have everything you could ever want in Jesus, then why would you be sexually immoral or impure- even now? The same is true of greed, isn't it. You would never be greedy in heaven because there would be no need. All the treasures of heaven are yours in Christ. So if that's already true for you- that all the treasures of heaven are already your possession, then why would you be greedy on earth? That is why we put those sins to death. This is the point Paul is making.

And of course, this is the life Jesus lived. He too was a man of two addresses. He came from heaven but lived on earth. But what we see of his life on earth is the perfect expression of a heavenly life lived in plain sight. And this is why we look to his example, and continue to pray that God would make us more like him. Because he was the most integrated man who ever lived. His conduct and his identity were always congruous.

I learnt something this week I'd never heard before. Did you know that the road rules for L-plate drivers in the ACT are different to the road rules for L-platers in NSW? But what's really interesting is that when ACT learner drivers drive in NSW they are subject not to the NSW laws but to the ACT ones. It's a little curiosity in the legislation. But it means that a NSW L-plater can go no more than 90 k's an hour on a NSW freeway, but an ACT L-plater could drive at 110! And this is a great illustration of what Paul is saying here. In the same way that a driver with an ACT address can drive even in NSW under the ACT code, a Christian with a heavenly address should live on the earth like a citizen of heaven. If we belong to heaven now, we should live like that here. Our identity and conduct integrated.

- then and now

But let me quickly point out the other ways Paul makes the same point here too. In verses 7 and 8 his contrast is between then and now. The sins of anger, rage, malice, slander and filthy language are all part of an old way of life. They are part of then, but not part of now. And again, I want you to notice that Paul's not saying- Jesus is the boss so make sure you don't swear or slander because he doesn't like those things. Rather, Paul's saying, by relocating you Jesus has liberated you from a life in which these things are normal. Now you lead a life in which these things are in the past. In this sense, Christian sin is the equivalent of an adult who starts wetting their pants, or resumes eating baby food and requiring someone to feed them. This is how Paul depicts Christian sin here.

- old and new

Thirdly he says something very similar in verses 9 and 10. There the contrast is between old and new. This time Paul uses lying as an example. The new self is for truth, honesty, and integrity. Lying is a practice of the old self- so not congruent with who the follower of the truthful Christ now is.

- undressed and dressed

And fourthly, associated with this is the idea of being undressed and dressed. Here Paul kind of mixes his metaphors. Because when Paul talks about the old life he talks about putting it off- like your dirty clothes. And he talks about putting on the new self, like fresh and clean clothes.

The point is that with all these word pictures, Paul calls on us to live in a way that's entirely consistent with our new address. This is the integration that follows relocation. It's the transformation that follows transfer. It's less about a rescue that demands obedience, and more about a new identity, and living in a way that's congruous with it.

There's an expression that's gained traction in our society in recent years and I've found myself really hating it. The expression is "you do you". It's a way of saying to someone that they should just be themselves without worrying about what other people think or expect. Whenever I hear it, it sounds pretty vacuous to me. It's emblematic of a culture that's obsessed with individual freedom and expression. I'm probably sounding like an old man- but it just seems silly to me.

And yet, reflecting on these verses has caused me to think that "you do you" is actually an expression that captures very well what Paul is saying here. Of course, I don't mean it in the way that people in the world use the phrase. But what Paul teaches us here is that when you actually understand who you are in Christ, then being your true self is exactly what God wants from us. If you come to see that you are in fact raised with Christ, that you belong now more to earth than heaven, that your life is hidden with Christ in God- if you know that that's who you are, then Paul says: you do you. Be the true you. The "you" Christ has relocated and renewed. The "you" who lives for now not then, for the new not the old. Just live in a way that's entirely congruous with who you are. Live the integrated life. This is Paul's second big thought for today/tonight.

3. The Work of God = Recreation.

But the third and final thought I want to share with you this morning/evening is the point Paul makes about the work of God. And this is the right place to land today/tonight. Because it's all very well to be reminded that Christ has relocated us, and that what should follow is an integrated life- a life in which a person's conduct is congruous with their heavenly identity. But we can still be left, can't we, asking how this is going to happen? Just because I understand Paul's concepts, doesn't mean it all works perfectly in my experience. What if I understand the joy of being raised with Christ, and if I get why anger, and impurity, and lies just don't make sense in my life any more, and yet I'm still living incongruously? What if I still act in dis-integrated ways? What if I find myself, against my best desires, being malicious, or greedy, or untruthful? Where do I turn? Paul has an answer for this question too. And it's an answer full of sweet relief and profound, profound hope. And it's the answer to this question we've already heard from him in Colossians 1 and 2. It's here at the end our passage today/tonight. I'll read again from verse 9.

[Read 3:9-11]

This new “me” which I seek to put on is the “me” that God is renewing. I’m not renewing myself. God is renewing me. And he renews me by deepening my knowledge of Christ. Remember 2:2-3?

[Read 2:2-3]

This is the work of the apostle Paul because it was the work of God. And it’s the work of God that continues in his people to this day. And his renewal of us is renewal in the image of our creator. I am being made to be like God himself. I am being made new in the image of God’s Son- the son who is the firstborn over all creation- the one through whom all things were made. And as he made me in the first place, so he is re-making now. As he breathed life into me at birth, so now he breathes into me the new life of my heavenly home. He was my creator before. And he is the author of the new creation in me even now. This is what God does in us. He not only relocates us in Christ. But at the same time he recreates us in him.

And, as verse 11 reminds us, he does this work in community. This is not just something that happens between me and God. But it happens as God works in us- in all his people irrespective of race, or background, or status. No person anywhere who trusts in Christ is excluded from God’s recreating work. Christ is in all of us. Because Christ is all. He is everything. And everything good and true that can be said about us, is said about us because Christ is in us. Christ who is our life.

Sisters and brothers. I don’t come to you today with a sermon about how you must repent of your sexual immorality, or how you must flee from the greed which so pervades the world in which we live, or how you must weed out the seeds of anger and malice and falsehood that might take root in your hearts. Instead I come to you today with a sermon about three fascinating, stretching, and transforming thoughts. I come to you today to ask you to think of yourself as God does- to see yourself as someone relocated- living now in heaven with Christ, raised with him, and one day to appear with him gloriously. And I come to you today to ask you to think of your life not as a constant effort to be better, but to see yourself as someone who can take steps to be integrated- to think and speak and behave in a way that’s congruous with who you are. And I come to you today to remind you not to believe that this all rests on your shoulders, but to hear again the stunning promise of God that he is at work in you, that you are being recreated, and that the renewal he has begun in you he will most certainly complete.

[Read 3:1-3]