Colossians

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 15th November

Romans 6:1-6, Colossians 2:23-3:4



Each week as we open the scriptures there is great opportunity for us to be is encouraged and empowered.

- Encouraged, because we look into truths that give us a perspective.
- Empowered, because the gospel, is powerful.

As the Apostle Paul said in Rom 1:16 "For I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."

While others were ashamed of the message of a "suffering Messiah" and a "crucified Christ", scandalous to the Jews and foolishness to Greeks, Paul was not ashamed. Paul also had a conviction that as the gospel was proclaimed, God's power was actively at work.

"I am not ashamed of the gospel. "It", that is the gospel, "it" is the power of God for salvation to all who believe." Paul finishes v17 by saying "the righteous shall live by faith." That is, those who are righteous will live rightly before the God who is righteous. Those created in the image of God will reflect God's character and nature.

And so we enter our section of Colossians through Romans 6, dead to sin, alive to Christ. It important we understand that leading up to chapter 6 Paul has already talked about:

- Faith,
- Judgement,
- The righteousness of God,
- Grace and life in Christ.

And so positive the message, so hopeful the outlook, one could be tempted to think that God's grace will overcome everything. Including, ongoing rebellion that either denies God's existence, or results in lives lived as if it really does matter that God calls us to a certain kind of life.

Paul raises the problem with this kind of thinking by asking a question. "What shall we say then?" "Are we to continue in sin that Grace may abound?" In Ch 5 of Roman's Paul has already said "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more."

So here in chapter 6, in answer to thinking that relies too heavily on grace, what Bonhoeffer would call "cheap grace" Paul asked the question, "are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" The thinking exposed by Paul's question hits on something that many people in our world, then and now, would hope to prove true.

It's this, many people put there hope in the idea that God, if indeed there is a God, that God is so loving, so forgiving, so filled with grace, that it really does not matter how we live. In the end everything will turn out okay for everybody. It's an idea summed up in what's called "Universalism." The idea that in the end everybody will end up in the loving presence of God.

One who held this view, and probably one of the most recognised, and widely read biblical scholars, including among conservatives is William Barclay. Undoubtedly he was a great scholar in biblical languages. He was also a historian of the first order. And given his accessible way of writing his books are seen on many a pastors shelves, including friends of mine in ministry.

However, if you unpack his understanding of the gospel question marks arise. In a publication printed a year before his death he called himself a "convinced universalist." Let's follow that through because a universalist view makes the cross and resurrection of Christ redundant.

No surprise then that Barcley rejected substitutional atonement. That is, that Jesus died as a substitute to pay for human sin. No surprise also then that

Jesus resurrection was seem more in terms of being a “spiritual” one as compared a literal, physical one. No surprise even, that he denied that Jesus was fully God. He was simply divine in character. The most evolved human and a wonderful example of goodness and spirituality. So Jesus was not God. And the cross was simply a wonderful example of God’s sacrificial love for humanity.

Here’s the question though. If the cross is not also about “penal substitution” or “atonement”, among other things, and if Jesus is not fully God, as well as being fully man, how exactly is the cross an example of God’s sacrificial love?

Subjecting Jesus to such horror, merely, and solely as an example of sacrifice and love? Frankly it’s a monstrous idea. It plays into the charge of those who are keen to accuse God of being guilty of committing a form of cosmic child abuse. A chance that was actually first voiced by liberal scholars before being picked up, and popularised, by 20th C atheists.

Conservative Gospel interpretation would argue that the cross only makes sense, if it is also about God, in Christ, taking our sin, and the punishment of our sin, upon himself. Without an “atonement dynamic” the cross does not show God’s love. Neither is God sacrificing anything of himself, if Jesus is simply the most perfect example of spirituality and evolution.

Universalism, so pushes God’s love, forgiveness and grace, that even Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Mussolini, Jack the Ripper, or whoever else you might want to add to the list will be ok. It means all those who through history have committed incomprehensible evil, have shown no remorse, have shown no desire to be with God will be with God in the end.

Equally those who have denied God's very existence. In the end, God will simply wipe the slate clean. In the end all will fully enter into God's love.

When you really consider what the universalist is saying there is no justice. There is no accountability. There is no reason not to follow the law of the jungle. I find it very disturbing to think I might meet an unrepentant Hitler in heaven. Who wouldn’t?

“What should we say then? Are we to continue and sin that grace may abound?” “By no means how can we who died to sin still live in it?” Paul’s question is answered with a question. It is then followed up in v3-4. “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death.

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

As we very briefly look to our the first section of our Colossians passage let's recap what we saw last week in the preceding passage. Believers are rooted and built up in Christ, established in the faith. That means,

- We are safeguarded from the philosophy and empty deceit of the world.
- Our debt of sin has been cancelled having been nailed to the cross.
- We are free also in respect the evil intent and machinations of spiritual forces hostile to God and the purposes of the gospel.

Paul in the first section of our passage this morning applies this freedom to religious practices and spirituality in vs 16-23. In a nutshell. Walk with integrity before God, and let God's Word and Spirit shape your life.

- Don't let people who do not understand the gospel pass Judgement on you.
- Do not let those who do not understand the gospel disqualify you by pointing to a spirituality that does not have Christ at it centre.

V23, "these" that is these other and counterfeit spiritualities, " these have indeed an appearance of wisdom and promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh".

In other words we can be as spiritual and religious as we like. But if our spirituality, and religious practice is not cantered in Christ, if it is not based on the work of the cross, and the truth of the gospel, it will be of no use in regards dealing with our fleshly human nature.

In Christ our flesh, that is our base human nature, our flesh has been killed. We have died with him and we have been raised with him. So now to the part of Colossians I want to unpack and focus on.

Ch 3:1-4 "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

“If then you have been raised with Christ.” Or “since then you have been raised with Christ”. “seek the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.”

So often our expectations and hopes are somewhat earthbound. We rejoice rightly that we have been raised from the grave with a Christ. But I wonder, what of our goals, and what of our focus?

“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Listen to the apostle Paul in Galatians chapter 2:4-6 “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”

We have not just been raised from the grave to be left foundering in the mud. Paul is calling us to see things from God's perspective. Do we see ourselves according to the finished work of Christ? Do we appreciate the power and authority that the body of Christ, the church rightfully has in this present age?

The church is redundant. The church is shrinking and heading for irrelevance. Good riddance many say. Not a bit of it. Firstly, the Gospel church is growing if we look from a global perspective. Secondly, and importantly, it’s God’s church, and the purposes of God it is as if we are already seated with him in the heavenly places.

What were Jesus last words from the Cross “It is finished” “into your hands I commend my Spirit. That same Spirit that Jesus would send back to us at Pentecost. How we see ourselves and how God sees us are quite probably worlds apart. How we see the church and how God sees the church are quite probably worlds apart as well.

V1 “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. V2 “set your minds on the things that were above not on the things that are on earth”.

And if we want to put all our eggs in the “this world” basket. How many are the stories of those who reached the top to be left feeling empty and unfulfilled. Worse. Having reached the top they can no longer hold to the dream that success will fill the vacuum. A vacuum that if the Gospel is correct can only be filled by the Lord Jesus.

Here's what I believe. Fully acknowledging that there are of course many wonderful thinks in life, ultimately life without Christ is not life. It is existence. Existence with the prospect of a none to positive future.

"set your minds on the things that are above not on the things that are on earth". I think we could interpret that to be saying. Think rightly. Think with a sense of perspective. Think in terms of looking through a Gospel lens.

Set your eyes upon Jesus.
Look full in his wonderful face.
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
in the light of his glory and grace.

V3 "for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God". You can't really hurt a dead man. Dead people are generally not prone to temptation either. Sometimes when I'm hurting or I'm tempted, I try to remind myself that I'm dead. I try to remind myself that dead people are not usually dominated by their fears, disappointments or desires.

I try to remember that Jesus has already won the battle for me and I try to let a little of what will one day be shape my reality now. v4, " when Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory".

In ch 1, Paul has already given the answer to the great mystery kept hidden for ages and generations but now made known to the saints. "Christ in you the hope of glory". "when Christ who is your life appears then you also will appear with him in glory".

It is of course, somewhat impossible to put into words that which is indescribable, and beyond our current experience. C.S.Lewis in his book "The weight of Glory", says this. "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink, and sex, and ambition, when infinite joy is offered us." "Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum, because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea, we are far too easily pleased."

Every so often we may get a glimpse of glory and it can happen in the most unexpected way.

I was walking around the supermarket this week and there was a fellow there with very obvious challenges in life. He was standing alone, rocking backwards and forwards, waiting, probably as his carer was fetching something.

As I passed him, I paused for a moment, caught his eye, waved, and said hello. To which he waved in the same way and said hello. I can't describe what happened at the moment, except to say it seemed to me to be a little moment of glory.

To quote CS Lewis again. He suggests that if a Christian was to see another Christian in glory before they saw Christ, they might be tempted to fall down in worship. Imagine if we saw each other as God sees us. Imagine if what will be true one day shaped how we live now?

"Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

May it be so in our day, in our time, and in our lives, we pray, amen.