

Pentecost 9 – 17th July 16

Readings: Amos 8: 1-12; Psalm 52; Colossians 1: 15-29; Luke 10:38-42

Paul writes a letter to the Colossians. Where did they live? What did they do? Colossae was located in what is now Turkey about 200km east of Ephesus. It had been an important town for commerce, but was declining in importance when the Letter to the Colossians was written, probably not by Paul himself as it happens, but by a follower or followers writing in Paul's name. The town fell into decay, possibly during an earthquake. Its site, near the modern day city of Honaz in Turkey has apparently never been excavated. What possible relevance can a letter written to such a place almost 2000 years ago have?

Well, at its heart (in Chapter 2) is a dispute about false teaching – what the writer describes as deceitful philosophy – and about who Jesus really is – has Christ really liberated those who believe from what were described then as the “powers of the universe” and then given proper access to God. Such disputes, maybe in different guises are with us today. Paul or his follower, writes the Christians at Colossae a letter not only to encourage and support them in the particular controversy enveloping them, but also to help them understand what it means to be church and who it is that they are following.

And much of what the letter has to say hangs on the first five verses of our reading this morning. These verses are actually a very early Christian hymn about the divine nature of Christ and his work of reconciliation through the Cross. The words bring to mind hymns like “Immortal, invisible, God only wise” This very early hymn says in effect that all the brokenness and dislocation of the universe – all of it – people and things, animals, the very largest to the most microscopic pieces of matter – all these things in Christ get properly fixed and brought together into a wonderful harmony – all because of his death, his blood that poured from the cross. It's a wonderful image of the harmony possible through the nature and work of Christ. And the writer wants to move this harmony from the vast backdrop against which he writes – all things in heaven and earth – to a small, possibly struggling Christian community in an out of the way town that had seen better days. Immediately after the verses of the hymn, the letter continues “And you.....” The writer says they understand this wonderful and vibrant harmony that Christ's death enables, because they have experienced that death with Christ. It is from this transformational experience that they have been drawn together, put together, to continue this work of Christ. And, it is clear that this life of faith is something that needs to be worked at with all their mind, soul, and strength in the present moment in their community. They are urged to continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel they have heard.

The key to all of this is a mystery “Christ is in you, the hope of Glory.” One paraphrase of the letter puts it this way: *“The mystery in a nutshell is just this: Christ is in you, so therefore you can look forward to sharing in God's glory. It's that simple. That is the substance of our Message. We preach Christ, warning people not to add to the Message. We teach in a spirit of profound common sense so that we can bring each person to maturity.No more, no less. That's what I'm working so hard at day after day, year after year, doing my best with the energy God so generously gives me.”*

If the Christ-life is to be brought to maturity in the members of the Colossian church so they can be agents of transformation in their own community, they must be convinced that Christ is within them and work at their faith, assuming nothing, taking nothing for granted. It's no different for us.

This passage from Luke is a good match with the Epistle lesson. These few verses in Luke tell a simple story of the supremacy of Jesus' teaching and the priority that should be given to it.

It's a familiar story, the story of Mary and Martha. In some discussions of the story there is a defence of Martha's busyness given. There was work to be done, in this case to extend hospitality to the invited guest (very important in the culture of the time) and Martha is doing that work. After all, work doesn't get done if people sit around. However, the text says that she was distracted by her work and then she tries to pull Mary into her mania. We've probably all seen anxious hostesses, or hosts for that matter spending frantic energy on trying to impress guests – and often it's not a good look. In fact there was a TV comedy series whose basic premise was just that – who can forget Hyacinth Bouquet of "Keeping up Appearances"?

I guess I imagine Martha desperately trying to impress Jesus with her hard work and even drawing his attention to Mary's idleness. Mary is not fulfilling her appropriate role fussing over the meal. She's just sitting around. It is a radical thing that Jesus, as a Jewish male does not send Mary to the kitchen to help her sister. It is even more radical that he is teaching a woman the good news which he has been sharing with men, even more radical again that the woman has adopted the traditional posture of a disciple - sitting at the feet of the teacher.

So I think Luke does make it clear that Jesus' good news breaks gender and cultural barriers and all are welcome to learn God's good news. More importantly than that, the person of Jesus should be the focus of our lives. Also, since Luke places this story immediately after the story of the Good Samaritan, I wonder if this was trying to clarify in a way what type of work was to be done by Jesus' followers. That is, acts of compassion were good; "Go and do likewise", Jesus said. However being distracted by busyness to good look to guests is not.

Both readings, then, can lead us to reflect on the unique, life-giving power of Christ's presence. This presence should be our centre and guide in the work that we do. Consider all the work and all the ministries that we as a parish engage in. Does that spring from that calm centre of Christ's life-giving power? Or are we just planning events? Think about all the things we get caught up in - family, community organisations, work for those who do work, all the things we do in so many ways for the church. Do they distract us from searching for the centre of Christ's life giving power. Often they do, judging by the reasons I've heard over 25 years or so why people can't possibly come to church this week because of this that and the other. Here is one place in the midst of our lives where we can regain our focus on that calm centre of Christ's life-giving power. Frenetic service, even frenetic service of the Lord can be a deceptive distraction of what the Lord really wants.

What does the Lord want? Simply for us to put Christ at the centre of our lives, to reflect deeply on what "Christ in us, the hope of glory" may mean in all that we do; to be convinced that Christ is in us, and to continue steadfastly in that conviction. Of course, the prophet Micah put it best all those

years before; “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”¹

¹ Micah 6:8