

**Downing Place United Reformed Church**

**Sermon - Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> July, 2019.**

**The Revd. Dr. John P Bradbury.**

Deuteronomy 30:9-14; **Colossians 1:1-14**; Luke 10:25-37

“To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae”. In Christ in Colossae. There is something about this particular formulation which rather leaps off that page – these people are both these things at once: ‘In Christ’, and ‘in Colossae’. Were Paul writing to us today, would he address us as those ‘In Christ in Cambridge’, I wonder? Right at the outset of this letter, Paul in this formulation we might barely notice in passing, calls attention to something vital that he will go on to address in varying ways. What does it mean both to be ‘in Christ’, and to be a community in a particular place, shaped and formed by that place just as we shape and form it by our living? Colossae, something of a melting pot of different religious views, practices and philosophies. What did it mean to be faithful to Christ, whilst still fully being in that place. It is the ‘in not of the world’ question. What does that mean? How do we live that?

Paul does not at this moment dwell on this ‘in Christ and in Colossae’, but it frames much of what will come. He moves on quickly though, as is his wont, to give thanks for the church that he has heard reports of ‘in Colossae’. He gives thanks for their faith in Christ Jesus, and the love they have for their sisters and brothers – ‘all the saints’, ‘because of the hope laid up for you in heaven’. Faith, hope and love – vastly important categories for St. Paul – and he sees all of them in this church, and he gives thanks to them. And other vital things to Paul spill out from his pen as in a long, convoluted sentence he refers to the ‘word of truth’ that is the gospel – the good news. He speaks of the bearing fruit of that gospel and its growth, he speaks of comprehending the ‘grace of God’, he references the ‘love in the Spirit’. He prays that they might be filled with ‘knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding’ and living lives worthy of the Lord. He speaks of the ‘power of God’, ‘enduring with patience’, ‘joyfully giving thanks’, the ‘inheritance of the saints in light’, the kingdom of the beloved son, ‘in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins’. The ideas come tumbling out, one after another. Each would make a great basis for a sermon – but Paul seems not too worried about unpacking them all at this point. Rather, it is as though he is surveying the horizon for all that is significant and important when thinking about how one might live well ‘in Christ and in Colossae’.

So perhaps this abundance of thoughts, ideas, practices might also begin to point us in the direction of the things we might do well do dwell upon when we come to ask what it might mean for us to live well as the saints, the congregation, of those who are ‘in Christ’ and ‘in Cambridge’.

Paul commends the Colossians for their ‘faith in Christ’. Part of the context they were living out their faith was one where there were varying different faiths, religious practices, philosophies vying with one another in the public realm. Part of the problem seems to be that some of those rather alien to God’s revelation of God’s self in Christ were seeping into the life of the Church. Our problem is rather different. Radically different, in fact. We live in a time and place where to have any faith at all places us in a minority. Just this week, the social values survey has informed us that 52% of people say they have ‘no faith’. Of those that do have faith, they are radically skewed to the older end of the population. As younger folk grow up, the numbers professing no faith, will increase very significantly – unless something drastic happens. As the philosopher Charles Taylor has pointed out, underneath that is a reality that we now live in a world which makes having no faith far more possible. Faith is now an option. A few generations ago, it was kind of taken as read, a given. You might be more or less religiously active, but the assumption was that most people believed – or said they did. Now, to choose to believe is an act of the will we have to very deliberately make, increasingly against the odds.

And I suspect, to many who grew up in a world where one did just generally believe, and perhaps even more so if one grew up in the kind of household where one just went to church, we’ve never had to make that very active choice to believe. We’ve never had to think our way through the decision to believe, or to not believe. We just absorbed it, as if by osmosis. Never having had to go through that process, we then, perhaps, find it extremely hard to help others facing that existential decision – do I believe in something more than visible, common sense, daily reality or not? Never mind why very much more specifically believing in Christ Jesus might be compelling, true, and life changing for us as individuals, for the communities we live in, and for the whole globe. If we don’t become very much better at having compelling conversations with those who increasingly have no reason to even stop and consider becoming a person of ‘faith’, we will give folk no reason to believe that in Christ we see God’s ways with the world, and a way of life in the world that brings flourishing, healing and peace. To be ‘in Christ, in Cambridge’ and to be that well, probably requires us to give far more attention to this that any of us, up to this point, have.

‘Love for all the saints’ – Paul commends the Colossians for this aspect of their faithfulness – this marks out part of what it means for them to be ‘in Christ and in Colossae’. The Church at Colossae was clearly quite a mixed-up kind of place. A lingering Jewish population from a deportation from Babylon some centuries ago; on something of a trading route, bits of Greek philosophy and religion; all in the context of Empire – Rome bearing down over all things.

Being 'in Christ and in Colossae' was in part about living out these differences, and indeed, tensions, well. What might it mean for us to live out 'love for all the saints' as we work out what it is to be 'in Christ and in Cambridge'? Well, perhaps the first thing I might, with some discomfort, note, is that those of us gathered here are not all that different from one another at all, really. We might have spent a long time lingering over the niceties underlying subtly different liturgical practices between Emmanuel and St. Columba's, but look around you? Whilst not exclusively any of these things – and thank God for that – we're extremely white, in the midst of a city that draws folk from every corner of the globe. We're very middle-class – in a city that has one of the greatest divides between rich and poor in the county. We tend in rather one direction when it comes to age – I wonder if it would take one or two hands for me to count the members of the church younger than I am...? And yet – we've committed ourselves to a vision of becoming a community of communities, of beginning pieces of evangelism and witness in slices of the life of the city radically alien to us. That is brave, and that is bold - and already bearing fruit. Open table has become a space in which many father younger folk worship with us – it is a part of our life which is 'bearing fruit and growing'. For this we give much thanks. How will we, though, live out our love for one another, indeed, all the saints, when folk begin to come into membership of Downing Place from that community, or other worshipping communities which emerge here? How will that change us? How will we allow ourselves to be challenged and shaped by a generation who have had to struggle to come to, and articulate, faith in a way many of us did not? And how might we live well with sisters and brothers in Christ both in Cambridge and to the ends of the world, with whom we might very disagree over very significant things? In something like the Churches Homelessness Project, we see the good that emerges when we work creatively with others with whom we would disagree over much. Through the family of the Council for World Mission around the globe, we see something of the fruit that grows when folk work together for good when we are shaped by very different cultures and histories. There is much to give thanks for – and yet much to be challenged by, as we seek to be 'in Christ, in Cambridge'.

And so what about 'hope'? I don't know about you, but I don't find 'hope' terribly easy at this moment in world history. As extinction rebellion has brought to our attention more explicitly than ever the extremely plight our planet home – God's creation – is in, as rising populism looks for a quick fix in a strong man – and these strong men seem to have scant regard for human beings created in the image of God as we see pictures from across the globe of the terrible suffering inflicted on asylum seekers and refugees, many fleeing violent and impoverished regimes – put all this together, and hope seems hard. It is hard to have hope in the future of the church when one looks at the bear statistics. And yet, for Paul, as he writes to those 'in Christ and in Colossae' the faith and the love the community have, they have because 'of the hope laid up for you in heaven'. It is also a hope that is heard of in the 'word of the truth'. And this points to something vital, for the Colossian's and too for us. Hope comes not from within us, as weak, frail and fallible creatures. Hope comes from outside of ourselves. Hope comes from God – and the reality that in God's good time all will not be as it is now. 'All will be in all in Christ' – as Paul will go on to say. In contrast to the kind of fake hope which comes from speaking falsehoods of the variety that people want to hear and would like to be true but are not, real hope comes from Truth itself. A Truth, that Paul will leave us in no doubt, is ultimately found in the person of Jesus – the image of the invisible God.

Hope comes from the fact that this is ultimately God's creation. Hope comes from the fact that God is ultimately good. Hope comes from the fact that God will ultimately restore all things in the Kingdom. Hope comes from the knowledge that we can be, and are, a sign and a foretaste of that Kingdom in the here and now. None of which must become a recipe for quietism – Paul is quite clear to the Church in Colossae that this faith, love and hope must be lived out to the full in their lives. For only that way does it become good news for all.

So, Paul opens his letter to the sisters and brothers who are 'in Christ, in Colossae' by turning to this array of vital realities. Truth. Wisdom. Understanding. The Kingdom of the Son. But the things he turns first too – both in thankfulness for, and reminder of – are faith, love and hope. Qualities we know from elsewhere in Paul's letters are central to his vision of the Christian life. As we continue to grapple with what it means to be 'in Christ and in Cambridge', we too must give thanks for the faith, hope and love that God has planted in our midst. And we too must rise to the challenge, in our own time and place, a very different time and place, to work out what it means to be truly a people of faith in an increasingly faithless world. What it means to be people of love with those very different to ourselves in a moment when the popular will seems to be to eradicate difference, not rejoice in our unity in diversity. And we must seek to be a people of hope – hope rooted in the reality of God, hope rooted in the reality that God's will for creation is the redemption of all things. If, in the power of the Spirit and growing ever into Christ, we become more of these things, we will find that here too, in this place, we are bearing fruit and growing. Thanks be to God. Amen.