Sermon preached by Revd Dr David Cornick on 13th July 2025

Readings: Deut 30:9-14; Col 1:1-14; Luke 10:25-37

It's the early 50s, a couple of decades on from the cross and the empty tomb. We're in Colossae, an inland town in the Lycus Valley in what is now south west Turkey. It's a town with a great past. It was a large city when Xerxes, the Persian king, passed through it nearly five hundred years ago. Now, it's just an ordinary township, outshone by its near neighbours, Laodicea which is now the provincial administrative centre, and Hierapolis which draws the tourist trade with its famous hot spring.

In Christian terms though, these are days of heady excitement and missionary expansion. Paul tells us that he had never visited Colossae, but there was a church, or churches, there, founded by his 'team'. More precisely, by Epaphras, himself a Colossian. At the end of the letter we learn that there was a church meeting in the house of Nympha, probably a widow of some substance, with a villa capable of holding about thirty to fifty people, judging from archaeological evidence in other places. Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave, Paul tells us, is returning to Colossae with Tychicus (4:9), so we can assume that Philemon's house church was also in Colossae. It's hard to conjure figures from such scanty evidence, but we can safely say that there was a small Christian presence in the town, some wealthy like Nympha and Philemon, but most probably not. However, their presence was small indeed by the side of the substantial Jewish population whose roots date back in Asia Minor to the 3rd century BCE. One educated guess puts the Jewish population at 2-3,000 in Paul's day. That puts the hundred or so Christians gathered in house churches into perspective. The great pioneering Cambridge Biblical scholar of the 19th century, J.B. Lightfoot, called Colossae '…the least important church to which any epistle of St Paul is addressed.'

That makes the juxtaposition of the theology of the epistle all the more remarkable. One aspect of that is its extraordinary confidence. These years long pre-date creeds and doctrinal finality. There is a real fluidity around theology and church order, but in the beautiful, poetic hymn in chapter 2, we can see the firm spiritual and intellectual centre of the faith, that Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is Lord, reaching to cosmic levels – the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, all things visible and invisible made through him. Concepts that still command Christianity's finest minds. If there is intellectual confidence, there is also what we might loosely call an evangelical confidence, that the gospel '…is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world' and that it has been 'bearing fruit amongst yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God.' (1:6) All that in a couple of tiny house churches up a backstreet of a very ordinary little town.

The exploration of the theology must belong to another day, but to-day's epistle invites us to linger on that idea of 'bearing fruit'. The first thing to note is that the Colossians shouldn't be getting above themselves. The gospel is bearing fruit 'in the whole world', so it's only natural that it should be doing so in Colossae as well. No room for self-congratulation here. As Isaiah noted, God's word does not return to him empty (Is 55:11), and as a modern commentator notes, '…just as a tree without fruit and growth would no longer be a tree, so a gospel that bore no fruit would cease to be a gospel.' That fruit might be simply evangelical success, but more likely, as elsewhere in Paul, it's about a change in character, a growth in Christlikeness, the development of a morality which cherishes love, joy and peace above idolatry, enmity and strife (Gal 5:16-22). Indeed, Paul's prayer for the Colossians is that they may '…bear fruit in every good work as you grow in the knowledge of God.' As Paul explained to the Galatians, divine grace works itself out in human lives in '…love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.'

That concern with fruit, with living a godly life, lies close to the heart of all the world's faiths. It was certainly on the mind of a lawyer who came to Jesus, albeit in a confrontational way. When Luke uses the word used here for 'lawyer' elsewhere it always yoked with the Pharisees. So, not solicitors and barristers as we think of them, but teachers of the Jewish law, those whose legitimate study is the Torah, one whose responsibility it is to tease out the implications of rules and commands and moral imperatives for the living of good and godly life. Confrontational because Luke tells us he came to test Jesus. So his question to Christ is 'What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?' Quick as a flash, and completely predictably, Jesus asks him what is written in the Law. The lawyer, who is good at this sort of stuff, responds instantly by reeling off part of the shema Dt 6:5 – 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' Got it, says Jesus, go and do it.

And now the casuistry steps in. Who counted as a neighbour was a much debated issue, and there were endless arguments about who was included, and who excluded. For some, including probably our lawyer, the answer was that the Torah was about defining the boundaries of Israel, and the answer was therefore obvious – my fellow Jews. But others, drawing on a well-established stream of thought in the prophets argued for wider responsibility. It was live issue.

Ah, well, yes, said the lawyer, and who is my neighbour? He doubtless hoped for Jesus to opt for the former, a hope captured with wicked neatness by the American preacher and expositor Fred Buechner – 'Very well, henceforth a neighbour (hereafter referred to as the party of the first part) shall be defined as meaning a person of Jewish descent whose legal residence is within a radius of no more than three statute miles from one's legal residence, unless there is another person of Jewish descent (hereafter referred to as the party of the second part) living closer to the party of the first part than one is oneself, in which case the party of the second part is to be construed as the neighbour to the party of the first part and one then oneself relieved of all responsibility of any kind to the matters hereunto appertaining.'

But Jesus doesn't do that. He tells a story of a 'certain guy' (which is a reasonable translation of the Greek) who falls into the hands of robbers on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, and left half-dead and naked by the side of the road. Those two details are crucial. He's half-dead – unconscious, unable to speak or identify himself, and he has no clothes so there is no way of guessing his group identity or ethnicity from that. In other words, he can't be identified as a neighbour at all, Jewish or not. He's just 'a certain guy'. Traditional interpretations of the story which suggests that the priest and Levite walk away because there is a danger that they might make themselves impure are wide of the mark. The priest isn't going up to Jerusalem, but rather coming down, and in Jewish law saving a life trumps all laws. Indeed, the Mishnah, the earliest compilation of rabbinic law insists that even the High Priest should attend a neglected corpse. And ritual purity laws around corpses wouldn't have applied to Levites. That's not what the story is about, and indeed, neither Jesus nor Luke say anything about purity or the Law. This is rather a story of confounded expectations.

Jesus' hearers, just like us, would have expected the priest and Levite to stop, but they didn't – possibly because they couldn't identify a Jewish neighbour, but probably for more mundane reasons, like fear that the robbers might still be around, or because they thought they wouldn't be able to help, or (let's face it because we all do it) because they couldn't be bothered to get involved. But they pass off-stage and we await the third, and he's – a Samaritan. There were strained relations between Jews and Samaritans. They were geographical neighbours who were so similar religiously that the difference between them became exaggerated into a simmering stand-off.

The last thing Jesus's hearers would have expected the third traveller on the road to be was a Samaritan. Neatness would have led them to expect a Jewish lay person – priest, Levite, ordinary bloke. But expectations are confounded once again, because it's a Samaritan who stops, cares, puts his cash and reputation on the line, and saves 'a certain guy's' life. And just for the completeness of confounded expectation, he is left in the care of an innkeeper. Innkeepers didn't have a good reputation. Inns were

one of the familiar features of the imperial Roman road system, and good Jews were wary of them, preferring their own network of private contacts whilst travelling. Inns were associated with prostitution, drunkenness, disorder, and robberies. Josephus claimed that female innkeepers were forbidden to marry priests – ' he forbade them to wed such women as gain their living by cheating trades and by keeping inns.' Hardly a place of recuperation for an almost dead. But here health and wholeness lie by way of an axis of trust between a Samaritan and an innkeeper.

My, could Jesus tell a story! The parable of confounded expectations. A priest and Levite passing by. An axis of love managed by a Samaritan and an innkeeper. That technical question which so exercised the lawyer and his scholarly contemporaries – who is my neighbour? Where are the boundaries? – doesn't interest Jesus. He was never a great one for boundaries, lines in the sand, and all that. What really interests Jesus is another question, and that is, 'Are you a neighbour? Because that is the fruit of the Spirit which he expects to see in us as we grow in the knowledge of God, the same fruit that Paul was thrilled to see in the church at Colossae. May it be so here too. Amen.