

Hinde Street Methodist Church

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How do we recognise God's power?

Our bodies use energy from the oxygen we breathe in to power our body cells and keep us alive. God, the Holy Spirit is more powerful and can bring us eternal life.

Colossians 1 verse 24 to 2 verse 15 (Contemporary English Version)

I have a grandson who loves transformers. In his hand he has a car and then he moves parts of it and it changes from a wheeled vehicle into a mighty robot warrior. It was Revd Sheryl Anderson who likened this in the Methodist Prayer Handbook to us playing with God. She writes (in prayer to God) 'I wonder if you sometimes watch us twisting and turning your Word (capital W), that is, our Saviour Jesus Christ, into a rescuing hero.' She reminded us that we forget that through his love for us he became what we are that he might bring us to be what he is himself. Instead we make Jesus into a person he is not. He is not a rescuing hero much as we may like. If we transform Jesus into an imaginary being, this forms the basis of misconceptions today. It is not unlike long ago when the misconceptions of the Colossians triggered the letter we have read part of from the New Testament. Whether or not the letter was written by Paul himself is hardly relevant to the general message of the letter; it could have been dictated by Paul so as I proceed I will refer to the author as Paul with this proviso.

In the letter we are not told specifically what 'fancy talk' (Colossians 2 verse 4) the Colossians were listening to. However, because Paul or another writer emphasises the deity of Jesus in this part of the letter it has been assumed that some of the false teaching related to Jesus as Lord and Saviour. In order to combat these alternative beliefs, Paul goes to the basics of who Jesus was, what he has done and what he is doing. What passage in the bible could therefore be better for the basis of a sermon or for a focus on our individual and community life? I have chosen two groups of verses to illustrate this: (Chapter 1 verse 27) 'And the mystery is that Christ lives in you, and he is your hope of sharing Christ's glory' and verses 6 and 7 in Chapter 2 'You have accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord. Now keep on following him... and be grateful.'

Beginning with the latter verses; they speak to us today of recognising Jesus as Lord and describe our Christian journey, from its beginnings to the long haul, that is, the resilience to focus on knowing Christ, and the Holy Spirit, active in our lives. In Chapter 1 Paul outlines his own journey which finds him in prison though still working to encourage Christians. He describes struggles and suffering in this journey not only in relation to his physical body but also in relation to other people and offers help to the Colossians through the medium of this letter. He recognises his imperfections and how they can distract from following Christ Jesus. Similarly, in the life of the church we can probably name people who have become distracted by others or the world around them and have lost sight of Jesus Christ as the centre of their lives. It may be a gradual slowing or alternatively a strong attraction to things learnt on the way such as theological ideas, religious history and so on. They compare themselves with others, take pride in their knowledge, form specialised groups and end up debating theories without getting anywhere near Jesus Christ. As Paul says (verse 8) 'these arguments may sound wise but they are only human teachings. They come from the powers of this world and not from Christ.'

Paul, thankfully, was not a lone Christian and he took advice from another Christian man, Epaphras. Epaphras lived at Colossae and was probably the founder of the church there as well as

neighbouring churches (Colossians 1 verse 7). It is likely that when Paul visited Ephesus on one of his journeys around Turkey (modern day Asia Minor) other churches were set up in the region and Colossae was one such place. Without help and support Paul would have been much less able to function as he says a 'servant' of the church (Colossians 1 verse 25). This is why when we try to find similarities between Paul's and our own experiences we can use this letter to confirm that God in Jesus Christ has intimate relationships not only on a one to one basis but also across communities. We have an individual journey and also communal activity in the name of Jesus Christ.

I have cause to be thankful for this and as Paul says 'be grateful' (verse 7). There have been times when my call to be a local preacher has clashed with my professional activity. Interestingly it has often been my patients who have been the encouragers, people from different walks of life who spoke or wrote to me. One was terminally ill and severely depressed yet sent me a wonderful bouquet of flowers. Another was addicted to drugs and travelled around yet kept me in her prayers. So Paul's encouragement to 'keep on following him' (Jesus Christ) has been for me a journey of at least 48 years with its ups and downs. I am sure there are folk here who can identify longer journeys and some who are just beginning. As a group we make up the church of today; so Paul's message to '**Now** keep on following him' can be applied to all of us in this present moment.

However, one noticeable aspect of this part of the letter to the Colossians is that many of these verses are written in the past tense: 'God's plan was.... God did this.... You have accepted Christ..... Christ has taken away your selfish desires.... Christ defeated all powers...' There is certainly an emphasis on what God in Christ has done for this group of people and in bringing this letter to our attention today we can consider our own past, present and future spiritual wellbeing.

I have reflected on the message to keep on following Jesus. For me it is one thing to keep going but another to change beliefs or behaviours as Paul tries to do through this letter to the Colossians. He has past personal experience of how Jesus Christ can change society. It was Paul's advocacy of reaching out to non-Jews that altered the beliefs and behaviours of the early Christians. In our own life span as a community in Christ one of the major changes is that we have recognised the ordained ministry of women within the church. It has taken decades for this to happen and has needed spiritual energy or as Paul says 'mighty power'. Individual women have worked to make this happen. I was reminded recently that my brothers in law who are twins are only alive because of the work of Mary Slessor in Eastern Nigeria. I carry her portrait with me on a Scottish Clydesdale Bank £10 note. It was only in 1975, a year after the first women Methodist minister was ordained, that women, apart from royalty, were represented on sterling pound notes. The Clydesdale note pictures Mary Slessor working as a girl in the mills of Dundee. She grew up in slums and only had part time schooling because her family was poor. She attended Sunday School and by the age of 28 years had been accepted as a Scottish Presbyterian missionary to Calabar. On the back of the £10 note is a map of the region in Nigeria where she worked until her death in 1915 at the age of 67 years. She learned the local languages, lived with the Efik people and earned their respect as a Christian woman. One of the beliefs of the local tribes that troubled her was that if a women had twins, she had committed a great sin, one of the twins was a devil and in order to remove this evil, both twins were left to die and the mother shunned. It is probable that this belief arose from natural limitations of food sources for the twins. Nevertheless, Mary Slessor working in Calabar showed that this belief was hurtful and unnecessary. She acted as a Christain to save the lives of many abandoned twins often by adopting them. Her influence in the South East of Nigeria in Calabar State then spread and had a wide impact across the region into Igbo land so much so that my mother in law who delivered twins and was delivered by her mother was forever thankful for Mary's interventions. Hence I have a close connection to one remarkable

woman who again took decades to make changes to beliefs which as Paul so ably writes 'sounded wise but they are only human teachings' (verse 8).

Where does that leave us now you may ask? It leaves us giving thanks for Christians who have acted with courage and compassion because of the saving grace of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It leaves us recognising the ups and downs of Christian life in others and ourselves. Paul describes his own anxieties on behalf of the churches which he has founded or of whom he has heard. I think it is also true to say that many of us hold anxieties about our church today as well as our own response to the life of Jesus. It is Paul's hope that the Christians of his day 'grow and become mature' (Chapter 1 verse 28). Is this our concern today? Perhaps this is better phrased as: is this God's concern about us today? For example, is reading Colossians in June across churches in the UK an exercise in Pauline theology or is it bringing people together to discover what Jesus did for them, for us, and how 'God lives fully in Christ' (Chapter 2 verse 9)?

It is a bit of a mystery why God has done so much for us without us having to reciprocate. Here is my second verse. Paul describes this gift in Chapter 1 verse 27 'And the mystery is that Christ lives in you, and he is your hope of sharing Christ's glory.' Paul uses pictures in this letter to the Colossians that would be influencing Christians at that time in order to explain his meaning. For us today they may seem obscure. He talks about spiritual circumcision and how obstructions to faith can be removed. He uses baptism to signify the death by immersion of our sinful life and the cleansed person who comes out of the water. He describes our sins as being nailed to the cross of Jesus in contrast to the usual notice that was nailed to the cross of the crimes committed by the person who was being crucified. The metaphors come thick and fast as Paul tries to grapple with the ideas of how God in Jesus Christ saves us.

Let us roll on about two thousand years to today in London. We are sitting down and breathing steadily. We are surrounded by oxygen in the air but if we do not breathe it in, it will not be of benefit. If we breathe it in, we will also breathe in other gases and substances. We live by breathing and oxygen powers our physical life. It's the same with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is around us and keeps us spiritually alive through God's power. However, in the air we breathe we know there is pollution. In the past you would see black blobs on your handkerchief from the carbon of coal fires. Nowadays the pollution is hidden but it is a risk to our health, our physical health. Pollution affects individuals and you see people wearing masks as they cycle around the streets. Recently its solution has been within the community rather than each person doing their own thing. So we have the ULEZ zone, the ultra low emission zone 24/7. For protection against air pollution we therefore have options including individual responses e.g. by changing from diesel to electric cars and corporate action as exemplified by the ULEZ enforcement. Similarly on a spiritual level we can invite God to be in us as individuals. However, we have to be careful about pollution in our spiritual lives just as Paul recognised was affecting the spiritual wellbeing of the Colossians. There are individual solutions to do this and community strategies. In the Christian community it became important to clarify what people believed about God, Christ and the Holy Spirit hence the Nicene Creed was agreed after much debate in 325 AD. It is now part of our Holy Communion service.

We say that we **believe in** one God, in one Lord Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit as distinct from the **belief that** there is one God, one Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The distinction between these small words is immense because the belief that God comes into us, like the oxygen we breathe in - in order to live - is putting belief into action. In other words there is belief that the whole of the Christian doctrine is true, that God exists, without doing anything whatever to put that belief into practice. It is in changing belief that something is true but you do not need to do anything about it into belief in it that generates action. So as individuals and as a body of Christians in our act of

worship we come together to affirm our belief in God at a deeper level than intellectual assent. Yes, we have come a long way from the time of the Colossians and the Christians in Nicea but as humans we still have to face difficulties in our individual and church life which the mystery of Jesus Christ living in us can help resolve.

Asking God to fill you with his Spirit is one of the useful habits that develop as we keep on following him. It's as simple as breathing. You offer yourself to God; you can say or think – come into my life, energise me so that I can bless others and be thankful. When you sense that something other than God's spirit is lurking such as anger, fear, and pride for example, you can wait, breathe out whatever has been the pollutant and breathe in forgiveness. For those of you who like a good deal consider this is a two for one offer. The oxygen you breathe in will power your cells keeping you alive and as you action your beliefs so you energise your soul and invite God's power through the Father Son and Holy Spirit into your life.

I return to Mary Slessor for completeness. She prays to God:
'We put everything into your hands. We lay everything at your altar. We take nothing back and we yield all things to your glory; now and for ever' Amen.
(Mary Slessor, Methodist Prayer Handbook 2018/2019 Day 16 Page 56)