

Today as we start a new term and begin thinking about how we can be built up into a spiritual house we start looking at Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Paul was probably in jail in Rome around about 60AD. He was writing to this group of Christians in Colossae which was a small town about 100 miles inland in modern day Turkey. These people had come to faith as we see from v7 through Epaphras and it is most likely that he heard the gospel from Paul during the three years that Paul was preaching in nearby Ephesus. Now v8 Epaphras has gone to Paul in Rome and told Paul all about the church in Colossae. So Paul has written this letter and sent it to them with Tychicus.

You can perhaps imagine the situation with these Christians gathered together in the main room of Philemon's house called there by Tychicus and eager to hear what Paul has to say to them. It may well have been that some of them were looking for assurance because while I am by no means sure that there was false teaching going on in Colossae as there was say among the Galatian churches some of what Paul has to say does suggest that a number of these Christians needed the assurance that their faith based wholly on the gospel was sufficient. Perhaps we need the same. Anyway it was with a sense of anticipation that they got ready to hear the letter from Paul and I hope it is the same for us.

1. Jesus speaks through his representative v1

We don't get so many letters nowadays but when we do get a few in one drop I tend to grade them and open what I think is the most important first, so it might be the one marked from HM revenue and customs or a hand written one from a friend. This letter comes with a heading which shows it is important. "Paul an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God and Timothy our brother" (v1).

The letter was from Paul. They probably all heard of him and his faith and preaching. Epaphras would have spoken of him. Paul referred to himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus. He addresses himself as Christ's representative. That meant he was not speaking about but on behalf of Jesus. He is Jesus representative. Elsewhere Paul refers to himself as Christ's ambassador and as "Christ making his appeal through us" (2 Cor 5:20). What they and we are hearing is Jesus speaking.

I have often heard people refer to sections from the letters and say in effect "it is only Paul". No this is the word of God. It is Jesus speaking so sit up and listen because those Christians in Colossae did. He spoke with the authority of Jesus and their and our response to Paul will reflect something of our attitude to Jesus. We ought to be a thrilled to hear from Paul as we would be from Jesus.

That was why they were gathered round in that room eager to hear and why we are gathered round today and I hope we are eager to hear from Jesus through his apostle.

2. what God has done through the gospel v2-5

Just look around the room this morning and see the other people who are here. It is a bit odd isn't it? What a mix of people. It is extraordinary that we are all in one place together. As those early believers looked round that room in Colossae, they were probably amazed as well. What on earth had brought them together?

The answer is there in the last two words of this section – the gospel.

The gospel had had an impact on the people in Colossae as the people in Ephesus, Philippi and lots of other places in that area. What impact had it had?

Well let's work backwards v5 they had heard the gospel and the power of the gospel message had changed their lives for ever. Neither Philemon nor Epaphras were Jews and so would have been seen by the Jews as 'without hope' because they were not God's people. But now they were through the gospel God's people and v5 they had the hope of all that is stored up for them in heaven and through that hope had come faith and love. The gospel was changing lives. Those who were outside the pale and without hope were through the gospel brought into hope and into faith in Jesus and love for him and his people.

We have all seen pictures of the refugees behind fences seemingly in a hopeless position as they are unable to return home but no one else seems to want them.

At the heart of the gospel message is the reality that we humans are cut off from God. The barrier of our sin cuts us off and there is nothing we can do about it. The result of sin is death we have no hope of God's acceptance and no hope of heaven. However, through the death of Jesus on the cross there is now a way through which our sin can be forgiven. We can be restored as God's children and know that heaven is open to us. That was what these Christians had heard and accepted that had brought them hope and through that faith and love. It had changed them and it can change us. This was an extraordinary wonder.

So it is small wonder that when Paul prayed for them v3 he did so with thanksgiving

Just look how Paul described these people to whom he was writing.

- a. they were "holy". What comes to your mind with that word? Someone who is pious, upright, moralistic, very good? It actually has nothing to do with character or conduct but simply means someone who God has set apart by God and for God.
- b. "faithful" refers to the fact that they were believing or trusting. They were dependent upon someone else, upon Jesus v4.
- c. "brothers" – they were part of a new family which Jesus was drawing together in which very different people love each other and have a unity as "brothers".
- d. They were 'in Christ'. This is the essential relationship which accounts for all Paul has said so far. In Christ they are holy, in Christ they trust and in Christ they are brothers.

e. In Colossae – they were really people in a real place.

You can almost imagine them as the words were read out looking round and sharing shy smiles and glances with each other both at the reality of what Paul was saying but also at the incongruity of it. Me, us, holy and faithful, brothers it was true but almost too good to be true. It was an extraordinary wonder.

The news of the effect of the gospel on the lives of these Christians caused Paul to thank God.

As a Pastor I have to say that it is always a great joy to hear and see people coming to faith and growing in faith love and hope. But then for all of us as we reflect on these words and our own lives if we are those who have heard and responded to the gospel then our response may well be wow see what God has done for me and for us. Another quick look round the room and see what God has done, people come to faith, people from very different backgrounds sharing the love of Christ as brothers and then thanking God for the fact that “As you come to him he living stone you also like living stones are being built into a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:4-5). This is what God is already doing. God is at work among us as he was at work in that church in Colossae to build us together into a spiritual house.

Just last week I had an email from a church member who is about to move away saying, “. One of the things which I will miss most of all about Basingstoke is Christ Church. It has been an incredibly welcoming place and I’ve not only really enjoyed the services, but also the different courses and groups which I’ve been fortunate enough to be a part of. I know that the Church only works because so many put so much into it, and I know that you guys all give so much. I have found it very humbling as I appreciate I have been a pretty passive member of the congregation, but the contributions of so many people from Homegroup and Junior Church have had a really profound impact on my own faith and my family’s.”

God is at work here just as he was in Colossae using the gospel to bring people to hope, faith and love and then build them into a spiritual house. I thank God for all he is doing and I hope we all do. It is an extraordinary wonder!

3. the message and the messenger v6-8

The change had come to these Christians through the gospel and that was nothing unusual because the same was happening as Paul says in v6 “all over the world”. But at the heart of what had happened and what God had done was the message and the messenger.

a. the message - V6 “you heard it and understood God’s grace in all its truth”. Paul describes the gospel as “the word of truth” (cf v5) about God’s grace which they had heard. It is through the message of the gospel that people come to faith. “Faith comes from hearing the message and the

message is heard through the word of Christ" (Ro 10:17) and please don't say that rules Paul out because we have already seen what he says is the word of God, of Christ Jesus.

Friends it can't be much plainer can it? If you wish to come to faith then listen to the message of the gospel. If you wish your friend or contact person to come to faith then find a way for them to listen to the message of the gospel. That might be as you share your story of faith with them, as you encourage them to come to a breakfast, or to church or to Christianity Explored. It is by hearing and by hearing about God's grace that is his love for us so wonderfully shown in the fact that he sent his only son to die for us even though we didn't deserve it.

Let me make this as clear as I can in case someone has brought a friend this morning in the hope that they might hear the gospel message. God has made us and he wants us to have a relationship with him. However we all at some point or another decide to live without God in our lives. We make ourselves god and that is sin. God is holy and can have nothing to do with sin and so our sin cuts us off from God and will do for all eternity. However God hasn't given up on us and he still loves us. So he sent his only son Jesus who died in our place taking the punishment we deserve so that we can be forgiven and restored to God.

In my script that is 103 words. Not much is it but that is the gospel.

If we accept what God has done for us he will forgive us and give us his life now and forever.

If we will not accept what God has done then God will allow us to go our own way but that means we will be cut off from him for ever.

This was the message these Christians in Colossae heard.

b. the messenger – they heard it from was Epaphras who is described by Paul v7 as "our dear fellow-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf".

What a great testimonial, especially from Paul the apostle. I tell you what when I die I hope that someone might be able to say that about me, wouldn't you like that too?

He had been faithful to Jesus and faithful to the gospel and centuries later we know his name – Epaphras the messenger.

What about us because Epaphras was no different to you or I. He had most probably heard Paul, come to faith and simply passed on to others what he had heard. That surely is the task God entrusts to you and I as individual Christians and to us as a church. Are we being faithful ministers of Christ? Are we being faithful messengers of the gospel?

If we are not then let's get on with it. There is still time but we don't know how much.

Let me again encourage us to think about our contact people and to again ask God how we might be used to help these people on towards Christ. Faithful messengers, fellow-servants.

Paul had heard what God was doing in the church at Colossae and he gave God thanks for what he had done and was doing.

As we take one last look round this morning at each other and recognise what God has done and is doing this morning let's take time to thank God for that. He is building his kingdom here. He is making us his people. He is building his house and we should thank him. But then we must not be complacent. We have the gospel message and we are called by God to be faithful in sharing that message with others so that other stones can be added to his house.