

7 August 2022
St George's Epsom 10am

COLOSSIANS 3: 1- 11 HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE?

As a parent you learn pretty quickly what to rock on and what to roll on. Some fights, frankly, are just not worth having. Cleaning your teeth twice a day - well that's non-negotiable. That's a rock – must stand firm. But letting your kid decide what clothes, the colours, and the combinations they are going to wear to church – now that is definitely something to roll on... if for no other reason than a tutu, tiara and tights combination sashaying up to communion brings a smile to all our faces. Sure there is likely to be a mountain of discarded clothes at home as your precocious child decides which particular combination appeals to them the most, or just as satisfyingly will infuriate their parents the most. But - hey at least you got them to church.

Well in today's passage there is plenty of taking off and putting on of things and a very large pile of discarded items. But as far as Paul is concerned it is all rock, and there is absolutely no roll.

Here's a taster:

- Put on the new self and take off the old self
- Put on your new nature and put off your old nature
- Set your mind on what is above and not on earthly things
- Put to death your lusts, desires, and your greed
- For you have died and you have been raised with Christ

So seatbelts on we are about to rock our way through a particularly dense piece of Scripture which is stacked full of metaphor, theology, and practical advice on how to live as a follower of Jesus. I will only get to pick some the eyes out of it – but for those of you who are interested let me commend to you our very own Bruce Nicholls commentary on Colossians and Philemon.

So a brief precise first – remember Paul is in prison, around 60 AD, and the letter is to the fledgling church in Colossae – which Paul has never visited and to a church he did not found. He has recently had a visit in prison from Epaphras, a resident of Colossae and the founder of the church. Epaphras has brought Paul mixed reports about the Christian community:

- On the one hand - their faithfulness and love for each other;
- On the other - the activities of a group of Jewish converts to Christianity who are seeking to assert their authority and impose an additional, largely Jewish, set of practices on those who claim to follow Christ (and to follow all the laws of the Torah e.g. circumcision, food laws etc) (NB these are very similar issues that Paul addresses in his letter to the Galatians).

Remember Paul is among the finest intellects that has ever lived and in the first part of his letter he writes about Jesus as the exalted Messiah, and how Paul's suffering in prison is for

the exalted Messiah. He then addresses the pressure on the Colossians to turn away from Jesus.

He now switches focus and starts answering the question – “As a Christian, how then shall you live?”

He starts on the front foot:

“Since you have been raised with Christ, get on with it. For you died and your whole life is now hidden with Christ”. When Christ returns – you too will return with him in glory”

This identification with Christ is:

- **more than** a likeness.
- **more than** seeing Christ as a role model and an inspiration
- **more than** an appeal to be more like Christ,

For Paul writes our new identity is to be found **in** Christ, in fact so strong is that identification, we are now ‘hidden in Christ’ says Paul. This new identity is so extensive and demanding that in choosing to follow Jesus we are choosing to be buried with Christ, raised with Christ, hidden with Christ, and one day to appear with Christ in glory.

This new identity is so all encompassing, it supersedes any other identities we use to define ourselves or others:

- Greek or Jew
- Circumcised or uncircumcised
- Barbarian, Scythian
- Slave or free

We take on a new identity which unites us and transcends old social religious and ethnic barriers and divisions.

Best way I can illustrate is this a gay friend of mine who refuse to define himself as a gay Christian, but rather as a follower of Christ who is same sex attracted. Do you understand the difference?

It is a radically new citizenship of a country you have yet to visit – for we are now citizens of heaven. And Paul is challenging us to live in the present as the kind of human beings we will become. This means we will always and increasingly feel a degree of dislocation, isolation and even a sense of exile within our own country. Our new citizenship demands nothing less. For this new identity is radically counter cultural. Our present cultural moment tells us our autonomy and identity are everything and our ultimate freedom is to be our true self, to self-define as we choose and the ultimate aim of life is fully realising our self-defined identity and potential, all in the pursuit of happiness.

But Paul is saying – no. Put any such thoughts to death. In choosing to be a follower of Jesus, it is no longer I that liveth but Christ living in me – I choose to forfeit the various rights I once aspired to, including autonomy over how I live, who I choose to live with and how I spend my time. By extension, the extent to which I have been successful in throwing off my

old life will be reflected in how radically different my life and its motivations are to my contemporaries. It is a completely new and transformative life, not an add on to our existing lifestyle. Inevitably it will prove to be a costly obedience, largely hidden from the world.

How then shall I live? It as if I have discarded every piece of my old life and instead the designer label on every new piece of clothing I now wear says 'in Christ.'

We are what we set our sights on

There is increasing body of scientific evidence saying we are what we set our sights on. We are what we think. Hence in Romans Paul talk about a transformed mind.

Paul writes *"Set your heart ... and set your minds on the things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God and not on earthly things. (v1,2)*

If you want to learn to ski, to paddle board, or something as common place as carrying an overly full cup of tea across a room, you don't look at your feet, you look at the horizon, you don't shuffle but step out confidently.

Paul is saying don't look at the ground but set your sights on heaven if you want to be any earthly good. Start looking at the world through the same perspective as Jesus sees the world. It's only by looking up that we truly learn to see and by looking up we bring the mindset of heaven to our daily walk. By setting our sights on heaven –we start living here on earth what we will be in heaven. Slowly we find we are living out the Lord's will on earth as it is in heaven.

And what are the things of earth that we must discard and put to death? They are the three things that Jesus faced when he was tempted by the devil in the desert, all of which are referred to specifically or at least alluded to in the passage:

- Appetite – I will give you food
- Ambition - I will make you king
- Avarice – All of this is yours.

And instead seek first the kingdom of God. The significance of Christ having to face these temptations head on and to put them to death immediately following his baptism and immediately before the start of his public ministry should not be lost on us.

Let me tell you what a personal struggle this has been for me. For much of my life I have been introduced by what I do – CEO of this, the Chair of that, or a Fellow of them. Those roles commanded a public platform, professional esteem and certainly when I was a DHB CEO awards and rewards to match. Even to this day I am introduced not by what I currently do, but most commonly by what I used to do - the former CEO of World Vision or an ex DHB CEO. Today I work for a small philanthropic trust that supports Christian ministry across NZ. Hardly anyone has heard of it or is particularly interested when I talk about it. And yet I am convinced, most of the time anyway, that I am where God would have me be. But let me tell you it has been a real struggle to leave the stage.

Being willing to set aside ambition and my desire for approval, esteem and professional respect from my colleagues, my family, and friends and to instead accept the relative obscurity of working for a philanthropic trust has not come easily.

- I miss the stage
- I miss the applause
- I miss the awards
- And I miss the rewards

It has been a struggle to say to the Lord – “wherever you call me Lord I will follow, whatever you call me to I will go, whenever you call me, I will go and whoever you call me to I will be there”. The Lord has been gracious to me and today, mostly, I can say it is an honour to serve you Lord where I am. Setting my sights on heaven my hope is that one day I will be commended by Christ to the Father as “Here is Chris – a good and faithful servant of ours”.

Put to death the appetites

Paul now turns his attention, specifically towards our appetites - those things that are fed by our desire, our impulses, and our greed. Put them to death he says. Do not let your life be shaped by things or your feelings. Put to death whatever belongs to your earthly nature. You have been set free do not allow yourself to be reimprisoned.

Putting to death our appetites is extremely challenging in our current climate – where we are encouraged to give life to our appetites, as a means of becoming fully human and an expression of our authentic true self.

Most of us will of course try to seek an accommodation – where we can have the lifestyle and Jesus. I know I do it – “Lord, I will follow you wherever you call provided I don’t have to sell my house, change my job, give up my lifestyle, or feel any pain”

Put it all to death says Paul and embrace the strange, exuberant, largely hidden lifestyle of obedience that I am calling you to.

I think the sternness in Paul’s rebuke “put it to death” – is because he well understood our human nature – our appetites - expressed in a lust for food, for sex and for the things we do not possess. He is not the counsellor saying learn to temper your appetites, or curtail your ambitions, or moderate your avarice. He knows just how hard it is to slay the beast. For him there can be no accommodation –No – put it to death – slay it, for otherwise inevitably, like a stunned cockroach it will revive and come back around.

In case you don’t get it, he goes still further and says:

Because of these things, the compromises you are constantly seeking between your old life and your new life – the wrath of God is coming. The idea of a wrathful God seldom figures in western theology these days – but alongside our bucolic images of God lies the God of justice, the holy God and yes even the wrathful God.

Conclusion

The tutu tights and tiara assortment of ill matched clothes and colours is irresistible in a 7-year-old. As parents you hope that by the time she reaches 17 she will be expertly matching the old and the new, clothes from op shops, stolen from older siblings with some treasured purchases.

But in spiritual terms there is no place for the accommodation of the old and the new. We are told to put on the clothes of righteous and to take off the clothes of our earthly ways. We are told to put to death any appetite, ambition or avarice that comes between us and God. We are told to be heavenly minded so that we become part of the answer to the Lord's prayer – 'on earth as it is in heaven'.

Take a moment to consider how you are clothed today? Which parts of your ensemble bears the designer label – in Christ? Which parts are anything but? Are you clothed in the garments of righteousness or is it an accommodation – barely distinguishable from the world around you?

It is time to put the old life to death – to discard it and what better place to do that than in the company of the new citizenship of heaven. Self-will and iron determination will not be enough. It will only be made possible through your identification with Christ:

- in choosing to be buried with Christ,
- raised with Christ,
- hidden with Christ,
- and one day to appear with Christ in glory

and by setting our hearts and minds on the things above rather than the things of this earth.

Chris Clarke
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