

**Col 1:24 - 25*****Intro: What gets Paul excited: suffering for Christ, v24***

Well we're going to turn to Colossians now. If you're just visiting us today let me just say that we're studying the Bible because we believe the way God speaks to people is through the Bible. And so what we normally do at St Nick's week by week is to work through sections of the Bible in order to hear what God is saying. And for the past few weeks we've been working through this section called Colossians, which is actually a piece of Correspondence – it's a letter which the apostle Paul wrote to a newish church in the town of Colossae. Paul had never actually been to Colossae but one of his team had – a bloke called Epaphras had been there – he'd told them about Jesus and a church had started.

And as it happens I've got a letter here which might have been written a few weeks before Paul wrote to the Colossians. It's written to Epaphras, who first brought the good news of Jesus to these Christians (he's moved on somewhere else now). It's a slightly old copy of the letter, the date's a little smudged, but I think it's headed, 5 Lycus Bridge Street, Colossae, and it reads as follows (I've had to translate it):

Dear Epaphras,

I bumped into my brother in law in Sainsbury's the other day – you know the large out of town one on the Hierapolis road – and he was asking me about my new-found Christian faith. So I told him about Jesus being Ruler of the Universe. He seemed interested and rather impressed. He asked me from whom I heard this, and I told him about you. Then he asked me from whom you'd heard about it all, and I told him about Paul. He still seemed quite interested, and asked what Paul was doing now. I think he expected me to say that he had been appointed Chaplain to the Emperor, or something grand and successful like that. When I said to him, 'Well actually Paul is in prison at the moment...' you should have seen his face

drop! You should have seen the sneer that appeared. ‘That isn’t very impressive, is it? You don’t expect me to back a movement whose messenger is such an obvious failure now do you?’ What should I say to him, Epaphras? Thinking about it I’m rather puzzled and unsettled myself. Are you sure Paul’s message is true? If it is, why is he such a failure? Why’s he in prison? Best wishes as ever...

Now I guess Epaphras must have passed on those kinds of comments to Paul because this section of Colossians seems to be a response to those kinds of questions – did you notice as we read it that it’s autobiographical – Paul’s writing about himself. And the surprising thing is that far from being ashamed of being in prison – by the way we know Paul’s in prison from the last verse of the letter – and far from being ashamed of being in prison – Paul is actually rather excited about it: look at verse 24: **24 Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you**, Paul is in prison and rather than being depressed or embarrassed he’s rejoicing – now why is that?

Well look how the verse goes on: **24 Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions**, Now that’s a funny verse isn’t it?

- ⌚ Christ’s afflictions? Well we know Christ suffered and died on the cross – but do you remember the words he said as he died – he said ‘it is finished’. In other words my death on the cross has done the job: I’ve died in your place, I’ve taken your sins, and there’s nothing left for you to do – it is finished.
- ⌚ So how come 20 years later Paul says **I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions**? Well because Paul’s not talking about Christ’s afflictions on the cross. He’s talking about afflictions the risen Christ feels through his people.

Do you remember when Paul was converted – he was on the road to Damascus and Jesus appeared to him and do you remember

what Jesus said to him – he said to him – Saul, Saul why do you persecute...me.

And that's interesting because Paul hadn't been persecuting Jesus at all, he'd been persecuting Christians.

- ⌚ But there is such a close connection between Christians and Christ – it's the like the connection between a body and the head – it's such a close connection that Jesus can say on the Damascus road - Saul, Saul why do you persecute...me?
- ⌚ And it's such a close connection that Paul can say just here **I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions**. In other words Paul knows that as he suffers Jesus feels the suffering with him. And he knows that there's more suffering to come – so he says **I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking**

So that's why he rejoices for being in prison – he's sharing in Jesus' suffering. But why? Why is he suffering? Well look how

goes on - <sup>24</sup> **Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.**

And then he says a similar thing down in v1 <sup>1</sup> **I want you to know how much I am struggling for you**

Do you see that's why he's glad to have suffered – sure he might be in prison now, but he's been put there precisely because he was helping churches like this Colossian church. In fact he thought that they needed his help so much that he was willing to risk everything for them – even his freedom.

And so now we can imagine the Colossian Christians reading this letter for the first time. And they might thinking – gosh – I'd never thought of it like that – I thought it was all a bit embarrassing that Paul had got imprisoned – but actually he's there because he was helping us.

And the question now is this – what kind of help was so important that Paul's was willing to risk even his freedom to provide it? It's vital to know – we're a church too – what were Paul's priorities, the things he lived and died for?

Well he tells us. There's three things and I've listed them on the outline: here's the first:

**1. Paul was suffering to make the word of God fully known, 25-27**

Do you see that from V25 - <sup>25</sup> **I have become its – the church's – I have become the church's servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fulness**

I discovered a button on my email programme this week that means I can get rid of my junk email messages - any message I think isn't very important – it just gets filtered out. But do you see Paul's saying my message isn't like that – it's not unimportant – it's not junk mail – how does he describe it: it's the word of God. That's the first reason why Paul willingly endures suffering – he's labouring to get the word *of God* into people's hands and heads and hearts.

- ⌚ We met up with a friend last week who works for one of the big advertising companies in London and she was explaining to me the masses of research and the huge amount of effort and the millions and millions of pounds that spent on advertising campaigns. All that just so that we'll buy a beef burger or an aerosol to stop us sweating. In other words when MacDonald's and Lynx give Alice and her team a message to get out to the public they really go for it.
- ⌚ But Paul's saying I've got a message here for you...from God! And look I will go to any lengths to get it out...I will risk anything, everything to get this message into your hands.

I wonder if that strikes you – it may well be that you don't regard the Christian message as a message from God – but doesn't this give you pause for thought – here is a man who was willing to risk his life to put this message into people's hands. At the very least it's worth a serious look. If you look and think he was wrong – well at worst you've wasted a bit of time. But if you look and discover he's right – well then what could be more important than

actually hearing what God himself has to say...because that's what Paul is claiming the Christian message is – the word of God.

But did you notice how Paul described his task – he says his job is to present the word of God *in it's fullness*.

Why does he say that? Well v26 explains it: The Word of God is

**26 the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints.**

In other words for centuries it wasn't clear exactly how God's plan for the world would work out, what was it that he was going to do to bring the world back to him? How would he deal with sin? How would he put an end to evil? It was all something of a mystery – but then Christ came – and the mystery was revealed – or as he puts it there: **disclosed to the saints**, disclosed to Christians.

And so now Paul can preach the word of God in all its fullness -

#### And he won't limit it's scope

Do you see that in v27: **27 To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles.** The word of God is not just for some – it is for everybody – the Gentiles, literally the nations.

But for some people that's far too inclusive. Much of the suffering Paul endured was from Jews who were offended that Paul was offering salvation to Gentiles without any need to become Jewish. And the same thing happens today – it can be very uncomfortable to realize that the gospel is for everyone – for people who just aren't like you and me –

- ⌚ From East to West – it's for every kind nationality
- ⌚ From Rich to Poor – it's for every kind of background
- ⌚ From High Court Judge to Pedophile – it's for every kind of sinner.

Paul preached the word of God in all it's fullness – he won't limit it's scope.

#### And he won't limit it's subject

V27 again **27 To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ.** And

this the Christ he described earlier in chapter 1 as the ruler and creator of the universe – the Christ who is the only way to know God. And to know God in the most intimate of ways – do you see the end of v27 – this message is about Christ in you – the God of the universe dwelling in us, by his Spirit.

But for some people that is far too exclusive. The gospel *is* for everyone, but if only if you come to Christ – so only if you give up your Hinduism, or your Islam, or your atheism or whatever. And because Paul insisted on Christ as the only way to know God – he suffered for it. He preached the word of God in all it's fullness – he won't limit it's subject.

And he won't limit its promise

In other words Paul's message was about eternity. He calls it **the hope of glory**. In other words it's a message which is about the promise of going to heaven.

Which is far too certain for some people. To say I know I'm going to heaven is far too confident a thing to say – arrogant even. And Paul was scoffed at and laughed at because of it – but he insisted on it – he preached the word of God in all it's fullness – he won't limit it's promise.

And the question is – do we still believe that same message?

- Ⓟ The Colossians were in danger if abandoning it.
- Ⓟ Our country and culture have basically already abandoned it.
- Ⓟ And even most of the church of England has drifted from it.

## **2. Suffering to make the people of God fully mature, 28-29**

Now do you see that this message about Christ is not an end in itself. What's the purpose of it? It's there in v28 - **28 We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.**

Now what does Paul mean by perfect? Well actually he means just that. He means that he can see a day when the members of this church will be perfect.

- ⌚ He can see a day when after years and years of battling against sin, and finding it hard to say no to temptation and often frankly failing – he can see a day when the members of this church will be perfect – sin no longer troubles them.
- ⌚ He can see a day when after years and years of trying to put Jesus first, and finding it hard to keep him there – he can see a day when the members of this church will be perfect – when Jesus is Lord over every area of life – in practise.
- ⌚ He can see a day when after years and years of draining struggles, or painful and puzzling suffering, when it's felt like they're just clinging onto faith by their finger nails – he can see a day when the members of this church will be perfect – doubt no longer assails them.

He says that's his aim – **that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.** And of course he's talked about it already back in verse 22 – do you remember he said **22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation...**

And of course the day that Paul can see is the last day – or at least the last of day this age – but the first day of the rest of eternity when at last we'll be presented before Jesus as perfect people, fully mature.

And the question is – OK Paul – how do you propose to get us there? And the answer is – by the word of God. Or as he puts at the beginning of v28 – **We proclaim him** – that is Jesus.

- ⌚ Now we know the way we become Christians is by learning about Jesus.
- ⌚ But what Paul's saying here is the way that Christians then get to heaven is by...learning about Jesus.

There is a constant need to be corrected – that's what that word **admonished** means – I'm constantly finding that my life is out of step with Jesus in all kinds of ways and those things need pointing out to me.

And therefore there's a constant need to be taught with all wisdom – because I need to know how to go on – I need to know how to avoid the bad and to how to choose the good and how to keep following Jesus until that day when I'll be presented perfect in Christ.

And do you notice that little word **everyone**. There should actually be an extra everyone in there - **We proclaim him, admonishing everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ**. You can't miss the point – In the Christian life you never get beyond Christ.

Everyone – everyone needs to keep growing in their knowledge of him.

And so Paul made it his business to make sure everyone did.

So there's an encouragement there for every Christian – are you still learning to live for Christ – are the L plates still on? Is the Bible still eagerly open like it used to be?

And there's also an encouragement for every Christian leader in our church. Because Paul's reminding us to be concerned for every single individual in our care – which is quite a task – or as Paul puts it in v29 **<sup>29</sup> To this end I labour, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.**

It's a funny verse isn't it – you'd think that if God was helping someone then the task would be easy. But Paul says no – God helps us as we labour...

### **3. Suffering to keep the church of God fully focussed, 1-4**

Now we've been saying that the church in Colossae is in danger of being polluted by false beliefs – things which just aren't true. But that's just a threat, that's the danger and if you glance down at v5 you can see Paul gives us his current diagnosis of the state of the church. And for the time being it's a good one – v5: **5 For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.**

So in fact by and large the church in Colossae is a healthy church.

So why does Paul write verse 1? Let's read verse 1 again – **1 I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally.** Why is Paul struggling for a healthy church? Well because he knows that there's no room for complacency. There's a *threat* from false teachers, but as yet they haven't got a hold.

And do you see that's rather like our own situation – there's always a threat or a temptation to be drawn away from the Bible. Paul himself was a living example of how unpopular a thorough going Biblical ministry can be – it landed him in prison.

So how does Paul keep a church fully focused on the true gospel? How does he prevent a church from being seduced by something more popular?

Well he says -

### **You need love**

Do you see that in v2 - <sup>2</sup> My purpose, he says, is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love. Because whenever false teaching comes along it threatens the unity of the church. And as these Colossian Christians have to grapple with new ideas to see whether they're true or not it's vital that they do so in a loving way – so that the church doesn't get blown apart. To stay fully focused you need love.

But Paul's goal isn't just unity – it's unity in the truth. You don't just need love, he says -

### **You need truth**

V2 again - <sup>2</sup> My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, <sup>3</sup> in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

A church which doesn't keep its eyes on Jesus will soon lose its way.

### **And so Paul says You need discernment**

V4<sup>4</sup> I tell you this so that no-one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. So for example a church should always be asking –

- ⌚ Is this message faithful to Christ? Does it put him at the centre? I suppose that's an obvious question to ask.
- ⌚ But what about this one – is this message faithful to Paul? Because although many would be glad to call themselves Christians, they'd be embarrassed of what Paul taught as Christ's messenger – embarrassed of what he taught about salvation, and Christ's cross, and sexuality, and hell and evangelism.

So Paul says don't be deceived – keep your eyes fixed on Christ as I preach him. Not everything that calls itself Christian is Christian. You need discernment.

Conclude with Josh Moody in order to explain v1

Well we started by seeing that Paul wasn't ashamed of being in prison – he was actually rather excited about it. And actually now we can see why – he was there because of his concern for

Christians: v5- <sup>5</sup> **For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.** Paul was excited about their firm faith in Christ.

- ⌚ And so he suffered in order to make the word of God fully known. So we have to ask ourselves do we treasure and stick close to that word – it's clearly of supreme importance?
- ⌚ And Paul suffered in order to make the people of God fully mature. So again we have to ask ourselves – are we growing in maturity, in our knowledge of Christ – that's clearly supremely important too.
- ⌚ And then he suffered to keep the church of God fully focused. So we have to ask – are we keeping our eyes on Jesus, sticking with the truth, being discerning – that's what Paul lived and longed for in the churches he served. Let's pray it's true of us too.