

## **SERMON – TRINITY 6 – 27.07.2025**

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Paul's letter to the infant church in Colossae is one of his shorter letters, but it has much to say about the supreme importance of the gospel, of the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ, especially as Lord of creation, and as the author of reconciliation between God and humanity. Carolyn and Chris Potter shared about these aspects in their sermons in the past two weeks. And Paul wove these theological themes into his letter with a pastoral intent as I hope we will see as we delve into today's passage from Colossians 2.

Although he had never personally been to Colossae (2.1), Paul knew much about the believers there because his co-worker Epaphras had visited Paul in prison and told him all about this young church. Its members were local folk who heard the good news about Jesus and believed. Paul viewed the Colossian church as one of *his* churches. He felt responsible for them and right at the beginning of his letter, he told the Colossian believers that he was praying for them.

While much of what Epaphras told Paul was encouraging, there was one disquieting feature. An attractive but false teaching had been introduced into the congregation. If it was left unchecked, it could subvert the faith of the Colossian Christians and misdirect the attention of the church from worship of God. The false teaching dealt with matters related to the practice of worship, including imposition of special calendar observances, condemnation regarding

matters of food and drink, and self-abasement and fasting in preparation for angelic visions and self-transcendence.

Paul's solution was to weave through his letter many reminders about God's work of salvation. He kept reminding the Colossian Christians of their shared identity as people who had received Christ Jesus as Lord, and he encouraged them to continue to be rooted and be built up in Christ, and remain established in the faith that they had been taught.

Human beings are created to be meaning makers. This quest for meaning is what separates us from the rest of the created order. It is what marks us as *imago Dei*, created in the image of God. When we confront an event in our lives, be it joyous or tragic, momentous or mundane, we wonder what it all means. And why do we wonder? We do it because the search for meaning shapes our sense of identity. And how we make meaning of our lives shapes our understanding of who we are and why we exist.

Developmental theorists argue that this shaping of individual identity is a crucial task that begins as children use the word "mine" to claim a toy for themselves or insist to their parents and caregivers that "I can do it myself". (I'm saying this from recent memory of two weeks of looking after my six-year-old grandson).

For most of us, this shaping of an individual identity takes on new importance during our adolescent years, when concerns about independence and freedom

become paramount. This task of shaping an individual identity never ceases; it continues for the rest of our lives.

And as we grow in our individual identities, we begin to understand that who we are is shaped in large part by those around us – by the communities to which we belong. Despite the modern concept of the “self-made” man or woman, we eventually come to realize that this concept does not represent reality. No one can survive solely as an individual. Eventually, we come to understand that our individual identity is part of a larger shared identity.

The task of shaping a shared identity was the hard work facing the infant church in Colossae. Struggling with outside influences to which they once adhered, these believers were trying to develop the common, shared identity without which no community can exist. Simply living in proximity to one another or sharing a common language was not enough. Like other new Christian communities throughout Asia Minor, the Christians in Colossae were working to form their identity in the midst of a culture that was sometimes indifferent and at other times competitive and even hostile.

So, what message then would help this community develop further and strengthen its shared identity? Well, Paul decided on a message of memory, because collective memory is an essential component of a community’s shared identity.

Today's passage is an invitation from Paul to the Colossian Christians to remember where they came from and to live faithfully out of that powerful source of remembering. Paul wrote to them, "Remember, now you are rooted in Christ and built up in him. Remember you are established in the faith. Remember what you were taught." This is a poignant and powerful call to shared identity through the practice of collective remembering.

All communities are made up of memories. 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Frederick Buechner wrote that there is no escaping some memories, even if we wanted to avoid them. Every person we have encountered, every place we have visited, every event we have experienced – all these are instilled in our memory and can come rushing back to us, even if we wish to suppress them.

But these are not the kind of memories that Paul was invoking for the Colossian believers. He was calling on that community to active remembering, to a much more deliberate and corporate act. He was calling on them to remember the great facts of their faith: God's love, Christ's death and resurrection, the Spirit's accompaniment and empowerment.

Remember, he says to them, that in your baptism you put off the body of flesh and were raised with Christ through faith in the power of God. Remember that God forgave all your sins and triumphed over the rulers and authorities of the day. The kinds of memories that Paul was calling on the Colossian community to recall were those that shaped their shared identity and gave them a sense of

resilience, power and purpose. And Paul's encouragement to the Colossians is highly relevant to us today.

These are not the kind of memories cited by Frederick Buechner, memories which seem to have control over us. Rather, Paul was focusing attention on the kinds of collective memories that **we** invoke when we sing 'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,' when we declare together the Creed, when we say together the words of the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, and when together we celebrate Holy Communion.

These memories remind us of both who we are and how we have survived. We need to claim these memories as a community, because our own individual memories can be faulty or incomplete. Left on our own, we could, regrettably, drift towards self-centeredness or self-pity or other avenues of unhelpful thinking.. But memory in shared identity lifts us as a community, defines us with a sense of purpose, and draws us closer to God.

By shared memory we grow as a body, and our strength is renewed by faith in the power that comes from God, as Paul wrote in verse 12 of today's passage. The young church in Colossae was going through a challenging time. And still today, when a Christian community receives and draws on the gift of intentional corporate memory, as enacted in healthy practices of corporate worship, prayer and service, it rekindles and strengthens the shared identity that will sustain it now and in the future. Amen.