

20th October 2020

Chaplaincy Plus- Annual Thanksgiving Service

Colossians 3: 11-14

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Rolling Stone Magazine (October 2020)

Rolling Stone magazine spoke about the COVID-19 Pandemic in a recent article:

Pandemics and plagues have a way of shifting the course of history, and not always in a manner immediately evident to the survivors. In the 14th Century, the Black Death killed close to half of Europe's population. A scarcity of labor led to increased wages. Rising expectations culminated in the Peasants Revolt of 1381, an inflection point that marked the beginning of the end of the feudal order that had dominated medieval Europe for a thousand years.

*The COVID pandemic will be remembered **as such a moment in history**, a seminal event whose significance will unfold only in the wake of the crisis. It will mark this era much as the 1914 assassination of Archduke Ferdinand, the stock market crash of 1929, and the 1933 ascent of Adolf Hitler became fundamental benchmarks of the last century, all harbingers of greater and more consequential outcomes.*

Perhaps more viscerally, Neil Atkinson a football writer who lives in "Tier 3" Liverpool wrote this week on the eve of the Merseyside football derby:

I didn't sleep last night. I'm angry and I'm concerned for the city. The lack of sleep was nothing to do with the game, was due to all the ways I feel powerless, feel completely blunted, totally lack literal mental engagement by the crisis. It has put lives on hold. Genuinely, just put lives into limbo. And limbo is at best. Actual jeopardy at worst.

I don't know about you. I got over the complete disbelief stage pretty early on. I think it came at about Week 3 of Lockdown where I'd been cast into a tidal wave of busyness- whether it was managing my team, my business, dealing with constant calls from worried clients, having emergency meetings with all of the charities where I sit as trustee, finding all my children home from School. I began to wonder- was it all a dream?

And I think that all of us had that moment at some point over the last 7 months- and going to this Second Wave seems actually worse than the first. Our hard fought

liberties. We are left clinging on to anything in our lives that provide them with purpose, that provide them with meaning.

Back to that football writer Neil Atkinson:

But then the footballers played that game of football and showed how much they cared for the game and one another and for what it all means. We all felt alive, raw, suddenly alive.

Some people have found meaning and purpose in watching sport- however briefly that may be felt.

Because if there is one thing that we know about human beings. When they cease to believe in God, they don't believe in nothing. They believe in *anything*.

The COVID pandemic has tipped a lot of people's worlds over. And as I was walking around my town of Kenilworth at the weekend- the town in which we have planted a church in order to reach the very people of that town- it dawned on me that we have people living amongst us who may be face be asking these questions properly for the first time- what is the purpose and meaning of life?

People are realising that by the curtailment of their freedoms, by having to face up to a poorer existence, that by facing up to prolonged illness or even worse death- that there is a need ever more for both meaning and identity in life

Context

So why have I chosen a letter written by a reformed Jew to an obscure church 2000 years ago? What relevance could it possibly have for Birmingham in 2020?

What could Paul be writing to Birmingham in October 2020?

Paul wrote to that Church in Colosse because of a fundamental problem at the heart of that Church. They believed in Jesus OK- but they had lost their way because they had started adding to him- they'd included mysticism, superstitions- they had tried to get Jesus to fit into their world view rather than let him shape their worldview. They had in effect lost their identity in Jesus.

And of course if you start to add to Jesus the effect is not amplification of him- its reduction.

We are probably all familiar with the stand run by the Islamic Group at the bottom of New Street (by Waterstones). I walked by it June of this year and it announced that Jesus was one of Islam's prophets- a significant one. They were seeking to appeal to a wide range of people who probably all think that Jesus is a good person, but do not rank him any more highly than that. The effect of that is that we reduce Jesus.

Our passage today is found in the middle of Colossians Chapter 3.

And Paul begins by talking about identity.

V.11 We see our identity in Worldly Terms (no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free)

YET (for those who come to him and form his Church) Christ is all, and is in all

At the very start of this passage in verse 12, Paul says something very significant- he reminds the Colossians that they are God's *chosen* people.

This was a status that could now be enjoyed by all nations and all tribes. The opening lines are an echo of Deuteronomy 7 v. 6 where it say

You are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the people on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession."

The language of verse 12 shows the status that we now enjoy as God's chosen people- we are holy (which literally means "set apart") and dearly loved - an echo of God's words when Jesus emerges from the waters of his baptism in Matthew 3:17

This my Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased.

We are given **the same status as Jesus Christ**. Let that sink in for a moment.

1. The reality of being Chosen

So we are chosen- we are called. The challenge and my first point today is how should we live actively in response to being chosen?

Because let us not pull any punches here. God has **chosen** the people we see around us in our church today.

- People from different backgrounds areas and countries
- People with different views
- People who are extroverted and people who are introverted
- People with different outlooks on life
- People with different levels of education
- People with different levels of spiritual maturity
- People you will disagree with because you are sinful and so are they.
- People who are at different levels of brokenness- some of whom you know about, others you do not
- Different people...yet one thing in common. If they are true believers- chosen by God.

We are chosen, we are family. In the light of that, we have to face up to the challenge of how do we relate to one another when times are hard? How do we show the World around us the reality of God's church on earth?

The Church has not faced such a testing time for 100 years. We have been forced apart relationally and we see that at all levels of the Church- older people isolating, working age people striving to keep businesses going or serve the public or being unable to work, children not going to school- and through all of this Churches have been closed for the majority of the time. As from this weekend the churches in Wales will be closed for a further three weeks.

We need to work harder than ever to get along **relationally** which is why this reminder of Paul's words is so powerful.

We are to put on new clothes, to leave behind the rags of verses 5-8 (our old sinful life) and take on the characteristics of none other than Jesus.

These truths are counter-cultural to our Society. And yet if we do them we will show ourselves as being distinctive. We are called to take on the characteristics of Jesus. Notice how they come in pairs- describing a behaviour followed by an action:

- Compassionate (I care for you)- leading to kindness (I will do things for you, expecting nothing in return)
- Humility (I put myself below you)- really counter cultural as most of us are proud- the truth is that conflict and discord comes when two proud people have relationships. Yet true humility lived out this leads to “gentleness”- “meekness” (strength with control- being both tough and tender- it’s the soldier who comes home from war to cradle his infant son. It’s that Athena poster from the 1990’s (one for the kids there))
- Patience (a challenge for many of us- being patient when our brothers and sisters in Christ are being maddening) - leading to bearing with one another (essentially putting up with the weakness and foolishness of others for the sake of the relationship)

These are the **fruit of the Spirit** that we hear so often I suspect that we almost become blasé but if we actually took these to heart they would transform us.

These qualities are all **relational**- there is not a single one that you can do on your own.

Because doing these things will create relationships between us because it will build trust.

Have you ever noticed that dealing with difficult issues is so much easier if you have a good relationship with someone? I have found that it is much easier to bring bad news to a client whom I’ve acted for for 20 years than one whom I’ve just started working for,

For example look at parenting. If you enjoy a good relationship with your children, it is easier to have difficult conversations with them.

So how does this break down in practice?

Well if we see someone in trouble- not perhaps an obvious physical need but a messy situation- do we get involved and help them?

If we hold an opinion on something strongly- how something should be done- and it's not a matter of conscience, sin or Biblical Truth - perhaps just a way of "doing" something and we disagree with someone else- how do we react? Because if we both act humbly, if we both seek to preserve the relationship actually better decisions can be made. You may well have all the strength and arguments on your side- but how do you deploy them? As a lawyer I can relate to this- the temptation to crush someone with your argument as you become more experienced is sometimes overwhelming- but is that always the right thing (for me) to do?

If someone is taking a while to come around to your opinion or is just not getting it- how are you behaving patiently- how are you "bearing with" that person.

And all of this leads on to my second point. Paul makes a big deal here about **forgiveness** and we will focus on that next.

2. **Active forgiveness demonstrates the love of Christ**

In verse 13, the Colossians are told to *forgive as the Lord forgave you*.

So how does Jesus forgive us? Well he goes to the Cross for us- as he hangs there on the cross we see Jesus say in Luke Chapter 23:34 "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing."

Notice here what Jesus does not do- he does not hold a trial to establish right and wrong. He does not enter into some kind of plea bargain. No- he passes it back to his father- he puts forgiveness in the hands of the Father and by going to the Cross in place of us- he offers the perfect sacrifice.

So what does that teach us about forgiveness of someone who has wronged you- we must do it absolutely even when the person is undeserving.

Now you might say- wait a minute- how can I rebuild the trust in a relationship that is broken. I can never be reconciled with that person. Well the truth is we are not necessarily required to rebuild trust if a relationship is damaged- we are not even absolutely required to reconcile. However we are absolutely required to forgive.

I personally went through a long journey after a major breakdown of a relationship with someone whom I felt had really wronged me (albeit looking back on it I had a degree of blame). It took me 2 years to get to a place where I could forgive them- it was far too long and affected me and my family as the anger I held was not healthy. But God through his Holy Spirit convicted me in a seminar about prayer and I felt an amazing sense of the Holy Spirit as I was able to forgive that person. A weight lifted off me and I felt incredible peace.

Paul then goes on to say that all of these relational virtues are **cloaked by love**. And when he talks of love, he talks of that perfect love (agape) which comes from God himself and brings together these qualities harmoniously.

Conclusion- So how do we respond as Christians to the Pandemic?

Well we need to begin by looking at ourselves. Do we live in ways that glorify Jesus Christ in our every day? Do we show compassion to one another, do we bear with one another, do we prize the relationship first , do we forgive one another?

I lived in a Christian postgraduate house in the late 1990's. There was one guy there who had lived in that house for years, remaining the only "non-Christian". I asked him once why he put up with living with Christians for so many years. He answered me surprisingly. He said that he liked living with Christians because they "cared" for one another.

The reality is that if the Church or the Christian Community can lead the way in showing what a life modelled on Jesus Christ really looks like- a group of people genuinely caring for one another and those they come across- that will be radical to the World around us. That is what true identity looks like.

I want to issue a challenge here to each of us from Scripture this evening. If we are carrying any hurt or bitterness in our heart whether it be against a brother or sister in Christ or whether it be against someone outside of here then please can I urge you to deal with it now. If you have unresolved anger, if you need to repent of impatience with someone, of hardness of heart, of arrogance, of callousness examine yourself and forgive. Because if we truly want to live in love with one another in perfect unity or harmony then we have got to deal with these things. We have a saviour who loved us so much that he went to the Cross for each one of us.

The challenge for us is that are we willing to live up to his example?