

COLOSSIANS: AUDACIOUS HOPE IN A MIXED-UP CULTURE

A GLORIOUS TRAIL OF TRUTH

Colossians 1v12-14

Living in a pluralistic society Christians constantly face new challenges. This week Caroline Petrie, a community nurse from Weston-super-Mare hit the headlines. She was suspended from duty for offering to pray for an elderly patient, apparently breaching her code of conduct on equality and diversity. The public backlash was such that she was quickly reinstated.

Then on Friday the Daily Telegraph ran a story with the headline: *'NHS staff face sack if they discuss religion.'* Apparently a recent vague set of guidelines could mean dismissal on the grounds of harassment and intimidation. Dr. Peter Saunders, the general secretary of the Christian Medical Fellowship is quoted: *"Much of the ethos of the NHS arose in a Christian environment and many of the great pioneers in medicine were people who were motivated by a very strong Christian faith. It is quite ironic that people seem to be seeing Christian belief as something unhelpful. We live in a post Christian society and that's fine as long as we don't end up with a system where people are actually discriminated against, bullied and not allowed to express their Christian values...We're seeing a culture of thought police emerging where it seems no longer acceptable to express what are really just orthodox Christian beliefs or the exercise of Christian conscience"*

Neil Addison, a Roman Catholic barrister who specialises in religious discrimination cases says: *"To what extent do you stop ordinary conversation? What they're doing is saying you cannot even talk about religion and that means a whole area of human experience is cut off."*

The Colossian believers also lived in a pluralist culture. There were many different beliefs and contrasting lifestyles. Christians were in a minority and sometimes targeted because of what they believed. Every day they had some new challenge, some new issue, to face. How then were they to live as believers in first century Colosse?

Paul starts his letter with lots of encouragement. This then flows into a mighty statement of what God has done for them in Jesus Christ. Paul is intent on refocusing their attention on the great truths of the faith. Sometimes we spend so much time listening to the voices around us that we neglect the great truths of the gospel – the truths we need in order to guard our minds and keep us rock solid.

Using a series of key words Paul highlights one great truth and this teases us on to the next one - like a treasure trail. One discovery leads to the next. So let's follow this glorious trail of truth. Some knowledge of the Old Testament will help us decipher the word clues. The trail begins with this word:-

Qualified

v12: giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light: Believers have the necessary qualification for the greatest inheritance of all. Have you ever come into an “inheritance”? You usually inherit in the family. In the Old Testament this involved belonging to the family of Israel and was associated with certain blessings and privileges. But this says there are no outsiders now. Through Jesus Christ people of every nation and status qualify to inherit the blessings of God’s people!

It is this great truth which has caused such a backlash in some parts of India. People of low caste, untouchables, have been responding to the gospel and received as equals, and militant Hindu fundamentalists have reacted furiously.

We are all equal, and we are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3v28) We all qualify now. This includes you and me! It is **the Father** who has qualified us. We are now His sons and daughters qualified to share in **the inheritance with the saints in the kingdom of light**.

But what has God done to qualify us? The trail leads on to the next word:

Rescued

v13: he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness: We used to live in a terrible dark land. This brings to mind images from ‘The Lord of the Rings’, of the land of Mordor ruled by Sauron. Far from belonging to God’s family, we belonged to the enemy. We were under his rule and at his command. This is how the Bible describes life without God. We were groping around in the dark. We were spiritually blinded by sin. **The dominion of darkness** is the very opposite of **the kingdom of light**. This doesn’t just describe a place where there is an *absence* of light – but where there is a deep *hatred* of the light.

This was once our state. The next time you fill in an official form and it asks for “place of birth”, a biblical response could be “the dominion of darkness”; *I don’t recommend this however*. But now we’ve been rescued from this dark tyranny. Sin’s power over us has been broken. God has rescued us from the dominion of darkness.

And the trail doesn’t stop here; the next key word is:-

Transferred

v13: for he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought (RSV: transferred) us into the kingdom of the Son he loves: In the ancient world when a mighty empire conquered another nation it was their custom to transfer the population to the conqueror’s land. We see this in Jewish history. In 722 BC Israel, the people of the northern kingdom were transferred to Assyria. In 586 BC the people of Judah were transferred to Babylon.

God has done something like this, says Paul. Having rescued us from the dominion of darkness He has transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved son. He has moved us from a *“loveless condition of darkness and death”* (Carson) to a place where we are enveloped by the love the Father has for the Son.

Recently the Brazilian football star Kaka turned down a transfer from A.C. Milan to Manchester City. We are told that a world record fee of £103m would have exchanged hands and he would have earned half a million pounds a week (before tax!) But Kaka said “no”. This is the young man who wears a T-shirt under his team colours bearing the words *“I belong to Jesus!”* If you belong to Jesus, then like Kaka you can say that the most important transfer of all has already taken place in your life.

You belong to another now. This leads us on neatly to the next key word.

Redeemed

v14: in whom we have redemption: In Jewish thinking the word “redemption” also recalled one of the great events in their history, deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Two weeks ago Liz and I visited the British Museum in London where we wandered around some impressive Egyptian artefacts and statues. Egypt was a mighty world power. But David Rohl, an Egyptologist, says that at the time of Israel’s exodus Egypt’s native population was a mere 3 million, while they had about 600,000 slaves. The Egyptians had become utterly dependent on this slave population. Most of these slaves lived in the eastern delta within the province the Bible calls Goshen. No Pharaoh would let thousands of slaves go. But the Israelites were redeemed out of slavery by God’s mighty power.

In the first century “redemption” was associated with the emancipation of a slave. Slaves from many nations were sold in market places throughout the Roman Empire. But occasionally, a slave would be redeemed. A price would be paid and the slave declared a free man or woman. They usually remained in the household of the redeemer, of their own free will, no longer a slave.

.For the apostle the word primarily proclaimed what God had done in Jesus Christ - His mighty act of redeeming all humanity from slavery to sin through the cross. The dominion of darkness wouldn’t let slaves go just because someone said *“please”!* Our redemption took something immense, nothing less than God the Son coming on a great rescue mission and giving His life. This is the most wonderful truth, one which should set our spirits soaring.

We have just one more word to pick up on our trail this morning.

Forgiven

v14: in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins: This is what our redemption involves; forgiveness! This word for “forgiveness” is not the one Paul usually uses. Here he chooses a word associated with the theme of

release from debt. Yes, debt! There's plenty of that around. Personal debt in the UK is immense. It has been growing at a faster rate than the income our nation generates. There is an increase in the number of people becoming insolvent. Many are losing their homes because of debt. It is breaking up marriages. It is at the heart of the present worldwide economic crisis.

Debt has always been a huge issue. In Old Testament law the Year of Jubilee meant that every 50th year land and property returned to its original owners. Israelite slaves were set free and all debts cancelled. So, writing to the Colossians Paul chooses the word *aphesis*, which was used in the Greek Old Testament of the Year of Jubilee. So, *to be forgiven* is to be released from the immense debt we owe to God. Because of sin we were hopelessly in debt; but Christ paid our debt on the cross. His coming announced, not just a "year" of Jubilee, but a whole new age of Jubilee. (See Luke 4v16-21.)

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All this is great cause for joy and thanksgiving. It is also at the heart of the good news we proclaim.

But we also need to realize that there are plenty of people out there who may have a very different perspective on life, but still feel there is something missing. Many wish they did believe and could have this kind of assurance. Recently the Daily Mail carried an interview with Sir David Attenborough to celebrate the 200th birthday of his hero Charles Darwin. Attenborough insists he is not an atheist; he simply doesn't know if there is a God. In fact he wishes he could come down more strongly on one side or the other. His famous brother, Sir Richard, says much the same. But last year he admitted he wished he did believe because in the midst of life's tragedies he would have either had God's comfort - or someone to blame!

Of course our trail of great truth doesn't end here in verse 14. From verse 15 it leads us on to discover a glorious store of treasure which exclusively belongs to Jesus. But this must wait until next week.

John Wilthew. February 2009.

A GLORIOUS TRAIL OF TRUTH

Colossians 1v 12-14

MESSAGE SUMMARY

Please read the passage and then use this summary prior to your discussion.

Like ourselves the Colossian believers lived in a pluralist culture. Every day they had some new challenge, some new issue, to face. How then were they to live as believers in first century Colosse? Paul starts his letter with lots of encouragement. This flows into a mighty statement of what God has done for them in Jesus Christ. He is intent on refocusing their attention on the great truths of the faith. Using a series of key words he highlights one great truth and this teases them on to the next; a glorious trail of truth.

Qualified: v12: giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light: There are no outsiders now. Through Christ, people of every nation qualify to inherit the blessings of God's people! But what has God done to qualify us? The trail leads on to the next word:

Rescued: v13: he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness: Far from belonging to God's family, we belonged to the enemy. We were groping around in the dark. We were spiritually blinded by sin. But now we have been rescued from this dark tyranny. Sin's power over us has been broken. The next key word is:-

Transferred: v13: for he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought (RSV: transferred) us into the kingdom of the Son he loves: In the ancient world when a mighty empire conquered another nation it was their custom to transfer the population to the conqueror's land. God has done something like this, says Paul. Having rescued us from the dominion of darkness He has transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son. The trail continues with another word:

Redeemed: v14: in whom we have redemption, (i) In the first century the word was associated with the redemption of a slave. Occasionally, a price would be paid and a slave declared a free man or woman. (ii) In Jewish thinking the word "redemption" also recalled one of the great events in their history, deliverance from slavery in Egypt. (iii) But for the apostle the word primarily proclaimed what God had done in Jesus Christ - His mighty act of redeeming all humanity from slavery to sin through the cross. There is one more word to pick up on our trail.

Forgiven: v14: in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins: This is what our redemption involves. This word for "forgiveness" is not the one Paul usually uses. Here he chooses a word associated with the theme of release from debt: 'aphesis' was used in the Greek Old Testament of the Year of Jubilee when all debts were written off! So, *to be forgiven* is to be released from the immense debt we owe to God. Jesus paid our debt on the cross. His coming announced a whole new age of Jubilee.

All this is great cause for joy and thanksgiving. It is also at the heart of the good news we proclaim.

Our trail of great truth doesn't end here in verse 14. From verse 15 it leads us on to discover a glorious store of treasure which exclusively belongs to Jesus. But this must wait until next week.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

Remember, you don't have to use all, or any of these questions, if you have other questions arising from the message or the text you want to talk about.

1. What did you make of the case of Caroline Petrie, a community nurse from Weston-super-Mare, who was suspended from duty for offering to pray for an elderly patient, apparently breaching her code of conduct on equality and diversity?
2. Every day the various media assault us with the values and beliefs of secular humanism. How could you spend more time taking in the great truths of the gospel – the truths we need in order to guard our minds and keep us rock solid?
3. Which of the five key words in this study causes your spirit to soar especially at this time? Yes, we know it's difficult to choose one, but have a try!
4. Kaka is a highly paid Brazilian football star who proudly displays a T-shirt when he scores - proclaiming "I belong to Jesus." If you were his pastor what wise counsel might you be giving him to guide him as a high profile believer in the world of football? (*No Adrian – "sign for Man United" is not what I had in mind!*)
5. Do you know some people who wish they believed and could have the kind of assurance you have as a Christian? Maybe you could invite them to our Guest event on Sunday April 5th. Pray for them by name together now.
6. Do you know people struggling with debt at this time? (We are not asking you to name them to the group!) '*Christian Against Poverty*' have just launched a branch in Morpeth. (Simon Napper, who is one of The Steels – the band leading our worship next Sunday - is working in this capacity). Several newfrontiers churches in the north have worked with CAP over recent years and seen people come to faith; their aim is not just to help people with the money side of debt, but to point them to Jesus. Pray for CAP and other Christian agencies involved in debt counselling at this time.