

THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST

Colossians 1v23, 25-27; 2v1-4.

Most people enjoy a mystery. Some people are fascinated by great unsolved mysteries – the Shroud of Turin, Bigfoot, UFO's, the Bermuda Triangle, black holes in the universe - and the mystery of where all the odd socks disappear in the wash. Many of us buy a mystery novel to take on holiday or enjoy dramas like 'Poirot'. Or maybe "Lost" is more to your taste - the American TV drama following the lives of plane crash survivors on a mysterious island.

Well, this morning our section of Colossians is about a mystery. In our text Paul uses the word *musterion* "mystery" or "secret" - three times. 1v26: **the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages.** 1v27: **the glorious riches of this mystery.** 2v2: **the mystery of God.** In the New Testament the word *musterion* is a truth previously hidden but now disclosed, something beyond human discovery but known by revelation.

There is a reason for his repetition of the word "mystery". The believers in Colosse lived in a culture dominated by Greek ideas and beliefs and "*mystery*" was one of the buzz words at that time. Among the ancient Greeks '*the mysteries*' were religious rites and ceremonies practised by secret societies. Those who went through these rituals became possessors of certain knowledge which was to be kept from the uninitiated.

Thrillers about secret societies are in vogue today. The latest Dan Brown novel to be filmed (following 'The De Vinci Code') - 'Angels and Demons', revolves around this world of secret societies. A Harvard University "symbolologist", Robert Langdon (Tom Hanks) must try to uncover the mysteries of a legendary secret society called the *Illuminati* who plan to annihilate Vatican City in Rome. In the story he has to retrace their ancient initiation process called the 'Path of Illumination' in order to save the city.

The apostle Paul is not writing a blockbuster novel. But his letter is written against a background of secret societies and mystery religion. It would appear that some Colossian believers were in danger of being seduced by these groups. So he writes to help keep the church on track. He does this by presenting a far greater mystery, God's Mystery.

1. The mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. (1v26)

This is no ordinary mystery. This is an ancient – even an eternal mystery. But what is it? It is the mystery of God's great cosmic purposes. What will become of the world? It seems to be in the grip of such terrible darkness and chaos. Will God just destroy the world and rid Himself of the aggravation? Or does He have some plan to restore His fallen creation; if so, what is it? What has He been doing through the centuries? Why has been bothering with an obscure people in the Middle East? And who is this Messiah figure?

This great mystery surrounding God's comic purpose has now been disclosed. It has not been solved by a "symbologist" but revealed by God and now Paul's great mission in life is to proclaim it.

God did have a plan all along! And His plan has now been activated. God Himself has come into the world in Jesus Christ. He has given His life on the cross for our sins. He has been raised from the dead. There is now hope for this life and the next. This is the mystery hidden for ages. It has now been disclosed to "the saints".

v23: This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant. No secrecy here. This great mystery unveiled in the gospel can be proclaimed openly. It is not for whispering behind closed doors during secret rituals. It is to be proclaimed fully. Nothing is held back! And it is for everyone; for people of every nation, every culture and every colour. It is not just for Jewish people. God's plan all along was to smash racial and cultural divides and have a people drawn from every nation. And His great plan all along was to do this by coming into the world Himself in Jesus.

2. The glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (1v27)

Jesus Christ is at the heart of the greatest mystery of all. He is at the epicentre of its glory and splendour. This great truth is an infallible guide to keep us from going astray. Any cult or sect a religion or ideology which takes away from the glorious riches of this mystery – Jesus Himself, is false.

At Colosse one of the challenges the church faced came from dodgy teachers who mixed mystery religion with Christian faith and in the process robbed the gospel of its glorious riches. This still happens today. I am amazed that some still don't see that Freemasonry is incompatible with Christian faith. William Larson a mason from Oregon, USA describes what he says to newcomers at initiation ceremonies.

"On the Alter you will notice that the Bible here displayed is of the King James version. This is the Holy writings that this Lodge prefers to use. However these holy writings could just as easily be the Veda, the Koran, the Jewish book of faith, or any other sacred book that you prefer. During any prayers which are offered up you will notice that we referred to God. We as Masons believe there is only one Supreme Being. You may refer to that Supreme Being as you would please. You may ask the blessing of Jehovah, Allah, Yod, Mohammad, or any other Supreme Being that you believe in. We make no distinction in what you believe that Supreme Beings name is. This is your preference and the preference of all Masons everywhere."

Paul says to the Colosians: don't have anything to do with these societies and their mixed up religious talk. They are not harmless businessmen's clubs. Any group which robs Jesus of His place of supreme glory, or offers some substitute, is to be given a wide berth

The glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. These words contain yet more mystery – God not only entered history two thousand years ago, but He also lives *within* you when you believe! You and I can enjoy a deep, personal intimate union with Him. This is the new covenant promised by prophets – something has happened on the inside, it is not just a new idea. **Christ in you** – what a mystery! He lives in you now, by His Holy Spirit; and this reassures you that you are His – **Christ in you, the hope of glory.** One day you and I will see Him and be with Him for ever, and be like Him, and we will reflect God’s glory as we were created to do. No other mystery comes close to this one for glory and wonder and importance.

My friend Geoff was a Freemason but a few days after putting his trust in Jesus he didn’t need anyone to tell him to leave the masons. He resigned from his lodge and got rid of his regalia. The secrets and rituals looked empty and foolish. He had discovered something far greater: **the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.**

3. The mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (2v2,3)

The theme of hidden treasure has always been a favourite in mystery stories. Some of you will have seen the 2004 Disney film ‘National Treasure’, set in the USA, follows treasure hunter Ben Gates (Nicholas Cage) searching for lost treasure based on a code hidden on the back of the Declaration of Independence. This leads to a trail of clues involving the Knight’s Templar and – yes, the Freemasons. But the Bible says there is no greater treasure than God’s Son, Jesus Christ **in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.** He unlocks everything that matters.

This is treasure worth searching for. He is the Pearl of Great Price; He the treasure hidden in a field worth selling everything for. And when discovered, in Jesus Christ, we find riches which entrance us for a lifetime. The treasure that is Jesus becomes richer and more fascinating and reveals more and more of His glory and beauty and wonder.

On many people’s journey to faith they catch a glimpse of this. In our post-Alpha group we have been going through John’s Gospel. It has been exciting to see the way some in the group have begun to be entranced by Jesus.

And those of us who have been believers for some time can expect the same week by week. In personal Bible study or prayer or song we suddenly glimpse another aspect of His glory and grace. And there is still plenty of mystery to explore concerning Jesus - great theological themes like the Trinity, the incarnation, the atonement, Christ’s Resurrection, His Return in Glory. There is so much to explore, and the more we look at Jesus the more attractive and fascinating He becomes. Indeed, the mystery of Christ will continue to entrance us throughout eternity. He is like a glorious mine containing all riches of wisdom and understanding which can be explored forever without being exhausted.

He is, in fact, the answer to everything!

Fans of The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy may recognise this theme of the answer to everything. A group of hyper-intelligent pan dimensional beings decide to find the "Ultimate Answer to Life, the Universe and Everything". So they build a supercomputer, "Deep Thought" and after seven and a half million years the answer is announced. The ultimate answer to Life, the Universe and Everything is... 42! They realize that the real problem was not the Ultimate Answer, but the Ultimate Question.

As far as the Gospel is concerned the ultimate question is 'Who is Jesus?' At Caesarea Philippi Jesus asked the disciples "*Who do you say I am?*" and Peter replied with his great confession: "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*" But Jesus didn't congratulate him on how clever he was. He said "*Blessed are you Simon for this was not revealed to you by man but my Father in heaven.*" (Matt. 16v16-17) Who is Jesus? When you know the answer to this question it unlocks everything.

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