

Transforming lives through following Christ in love and service

Following Christ Colossians 1:9-20 and Luke 9:18-27

I lost complete control of my garden this summer. Everything grew too fast, and in the wrong places for me to keep up with it. So I stopped trying! The birds loved it, lots of dappled shade and secret places in hedges, shelter from both the sun and the rain. The foxes could barely be seen when lying down in the grass. The apples didn't bruise when they fell to the ground, cushioned by the grass. This week order has been restored. You could say that the space has been transformed. Quite apart from the fact that the garden is probably 2 foot bigger all round as a result; I also feel as if I've come out into the light. I wasn't aware just how hemmed in and dark it had become. I feel as if I've been rescued – by a gardener. The birds though are probably quite confused.

Paul's letter to the Colossian's opens with a prayer; that they might be filled with the knowledge of God's will, live lives worthy of the Lord, bear fruit in every good work, be made strong by God's power and endure everything with patience and joy. He reminds them that they have been rescued from the power of darkness. And that rescue was done by Jesus.

But who is Jesus? Who was Jesus? I think we have to have some idea of that in order to know who we are following. There are so many ways in which those questions can be answered and I'm going to explore some of them, barely touching the surface and hopefully that will whet appetites enough for you to find out more.

One answer is in Colossians 1:15 – 20 which you can follow on the weekly sheet.

Christ is: the image of the invisible God – The Message says: we look at Jesus and see the God who cannot be seen. Jesus shows us what God is like.

Christ is: the first born of all creation – echoing the words of the beginning of John's gospel – he was in the beginning with God - and therefore everything was created through him and for him. The lavish generous beauty of the world was given to us by him. I walked in the cool of yesterday morning as the day was warming up – still slightly misty, the simple everyday view from the junction of Henleaze Park Drive and St Margaret's Drive, looking over to Blaise was stunning. It was one of those softly joyful moments when one was filled with gratitude to God. And of course the everyday miracle of new life is given by him and for him. Helena and Paul have known that joy in the birth of Henry.

Christ is: the first born from the dead – his death and resurrection are a new beginning of a new relationship that people can have with God.

Christ has first place in the lives of those who are part of his church. God lives in him. Peace with God was bought at a price – the blood shed on the cross.

When Jesus asked his disciples who they thought he was, in our reading from Luke – Peter proclaimed him to be the Messiah – the person that Jewish history believed would restore the fortunes of the nation – release it from its' enemies. Jesus saw the enemy not as the obvious foreign ruler – Rome, but as evil and injustice.

Jesus described himself in many ways – the great 'I am' found in John's gospel – I am the bread of life; the light of the world; the gate; the good shepherd; the resurrection and the life; the way the truth and the life and the true vine.

And so this is who we follow, our leader. Jesus is not just an historical figure. Paul uses the present tense to describe him. It's as if the gospels are a biography of a friend who is still alive and still liable to surprise us. It also means that we can read the gospels, listen to the words that Jesus spoke, understand them as best we can in the context of the time and place where they were first heard, and yet apply them to our own time and place. And of course our own time and place keeps changing, and so we hear Jesus' words differently according to the circumstances we find ourselves in, and thus we are being transformed. Jesus' words remain the same; we are the ones who change. Curiously there is a sign in UN HQ in Lebanon that says: If you understand what is going on then you haven't been properly briefed. No doubt that could have been on the wall in Pontius Pilate's office in Jerusalem. Wherever you are the world is a strange and turbulent mix of culture, politics and power.

We could sum up Paul's statement by saying that Jesus is where heaven and earth come together. By heaven, I mean God's dimension, not somewhere in the sky, and so we can talk about heaven being on earth. And whilst it is through Jesus that we see God, he also the way in which we can learn what true humanness means in practice. He

demands our attention, our thoughts, he opens our eyes, ears and hearts to those things that touch on the human condition and asks us to learn to see them as God sees them.

How does he do this?

One of the greatest things that Jesus does is to show us what the Kingdom of God is all about. This was at the core of his teaching. It is something that we should all desire. In seeking it, we are following Christ.

There's a lovely hymn, which I don't think we sing, though I'm happy to be told otherwise! You can look it up later, it's 646. This is a précis. The kingdom of God is justice and joy; is mercy and grace; is challenge and choice; is gift and the goal.

So much of what Jesus speaks about teases us, challenges our preconceptions of the world and inspires us to be involved in his work of bringing the kingdom into being.

Jesus summarised the standards required to live in the kingdom. This is the price of following Christ. You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and you must love your neighbour as yourself. And he describes the characteristics of those who live in the kingdom; those who are following him and being transformed by him. These are some of the marks:-

Integrity – they do what they say they will do. Consistency – they practice what they preach concentrating on the major things, not the trivial. Prayer – simple and sincere, not to glorify themselves. Forgiveness – because God has forgiven them, so they forgive others – there is no room for revenge in the kingdom. Humility – as the kingdom is open to all, there is no reason to boast and no reason to judge others. Service – that's the advert for next week's sermon. Love one another – see next week! Being prepared to give away wealth and possessions, to use them for the kingdom. Joy - we've touched on that already.

Seems a tall order; one which we are bound to fail in some way or other. I think that is what Jesus is hinting at when he tells us that we must take up our cross. For the Romans the point of the cross was not that it was an appropriate punishment for criminals but that it deterred crime. How can I be deterred from doing those things that will cause me to fail? I must take up the 'thing' (my cross) that is making me act in ways that are contrary to the way of the kingdom. How do I do that? How do I know what that 'thing' is? One way is to learn what are my pressure points are. Where am I tempted? I like to do and experience new things. And so I can end up promising to do more than I'm actually able to do. And instead of hiding that characteristic away in the dark, hoping that no one will notice, I'm learning to pick it and carry it out into the daylight with me and asking others to challenge me when I say 'I'd like to do that!' Do I really have time, energy and commitment to see it through with everything else I'm already doing? That's one of my current crosses. I have many. The experience of the light coming back into my garden encourages me to continue to keep bringing my failures out into the light.

And of course, we are not carrying our crosses in our own strength. We are helped to follow Christ by each other, in our fellowship together, and by the Holy Spirit.

And that is what the prayers for Helena, Paul and baby Henry are part of. We have welcomed Henry, promised to support him and his family in prayers and fellowship. His family have promised to encourage him in the new life that Jesus offers.

Transforming lives through following Christ in love and service. May we encourage one another to follow Christ. Sharing our stories, our sadnesses, our hopes, our joy. So that, like the Colossians we too may be filled with the knowledge of God's will, live lives worthy of the Lord, bear fruit in every good work, be made strong by God's power and endure everything with patience and joy.

Amen.

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