

St. Alban's Epping, 11th August 2019

“PEOPLE WHO MATTER”

(Isaiah 1:1,10-20; Psalm 50; Colossians 4:7-18; Luke 12:32-40)

On my first day of High School, we were all quickly sorted into class groups. There were 40 or so boys in my class, which was not unusual in the early 1960's. By morning recess, not much more than an hour later, it was clear that my class master knew who every one of us was, including our names. He had probably known a handful of boys who had been in the Upper Primary school on site, but the vast majority of us he had never met before. Years later, he became a Principal who transformed the school, but also became famous as the School Head who would give a chocolate frog to any boy in the school if he couldn't remember their name. He had that great memory for people and their names. I don't think the chocolate frogs caused him too much financial stress!

Names are important. They make a connection between another person and myself. In scripture classes, I remember that it was much better to call out “John” or “Cathy” if I wanted to get attention from them, than to say “that boy in the middle of the second back row!”

At our weekly Parish staff meeting, we move through our parish roll and include ten individuals or families in our prayers for the morning. Often we come to someone's name, and we have to work out who that person is: if we can't do that, is it someone whose name we just don't know, or is it someone who is not really a regular member?

In fact, this is part of the reason we periodically remind people that it is really helpful to wear nametags regularly. Knowing a person's name makes a connection. Ross and I don't claim to have the gift of memory that my teacher had, and so nametags do help us: and I am certainly aware that my memory is not what it was years ago. But those nametags not only help the two of us, they help new members of the congregation, and I suspect they are helpful for many of us who don't have a perfect memory for names either. So if you have a nametag, try to work out a system that will help you remember to bring it and wear it. And if you don't have a nametag, give Denise a call in the office, and she will organise one for you. Or you could even bring another nametag that you already own.

Names matter because people matter. In fact, all people matter – Jesus pointed that out in his parable of the Good Samaritan. There is no one of

whom we can say “they don't matter, they have no significance, they don't deserve my love.” Our neighbour can be anyone at all.

One of the things you will have noticed in our readings for today is the number of unfamiliar names! We were reminded of the four kings who were on the throne of Israel during the time of the prophet Isaiah. And probably a number of us as we heard that closing passage from Paul's Letter to the Colossians were feeling relieved that we were not asked to read that passage with all its names. At least the Lectionary doesn't give us any of the long genealogies to read on Sundays, although there are a few challenging collections of names from time to time.

In our readings from Colossians we have seen Paul's focus on the unique greatness of Christ, who is truly Lord over all Creation and Lord of the Church. Paul wanted to make clear that once we trust in Christ, in whom we find the fullness of God, there is no one greater that we need to seek. Once we trust in Christ, there is no list of rules and regulations to keep, in order to be accepted by him. Once we trust in Christ, we have the fullness of God's eternal blessings. To try to add anything to Christ is pointless: indeed, that will lead us **away** from Christ, rather than closer to him. The cults always do something like that. Instead of focussing on Christ alone, the focus moves more and more on to the leader of the cult. What a contrast to Jesus' call to leaders to be servants, not powerbrokers!

And yes, it is important to make sure that **we** keep a true perspective on our traditions. In our parish we have our ways of doing things that we value: our liturgy and style, our music and robes. We appreciate and value them, and they help and encourage and support us in our worship and our times together. But one can be a faithful believer, a true follower of Christ, and find blessing in a church that has different traditions and approaches and styles from ours. And that is absolutely OK! We must not take things we find valuable and helpful for us, and turn them into rules and regulations for everyone, and add them to the Gospel of salvation in Christ who is the Lord. We must always keep in mind that **Christ alone** is at the heart of it all.

And of course, as Paul goes on to make clear in the letter, we are to live lives which reflect who we are in Christ. We do not try to live godly lives, or to treat others with love, or for that matter to read the scriptures or pray or worship *because these things will make us acceptable to God*, because

God won't accept us if we don't measure up. It is Christ alone who makes us acceptable to God. We live Christian lives **because we have been accepted by God**. We express our faith and our thankfulness in the lives we live, the service we offer, the love we show to our neighbour.

Well, what about all those people whom Paul mentions in that last part of his letter? He wasn't the one who founded the church in that part of Turkey. It had been founded by Epaphras, who had been converted through Paul's ministry in the great city of Ephesus on the west coast. But Paul knew some people whom the Colossians also knew, and he wanted to strengthen his connection with them, especially because he wanted them to take his message very seriously, and not be led down the wrong track by false preachers.

Tychicus was the one who was bringing Paul's letter to Colossae: he would tell them personally about what was happening to Paul, and his task was to encourage them in their faith and their love. What a lovely description Paul gives of Tychicus: a beloved brother, a faithful minister and a fellow-servant in the Lord. May *we* experience Christian love from our brothers and sisters in Christ, and may we seek to be worthy to be described as faithful servants in the Lord.

Onesimus was coming with Tychicus: he was originally from Colossae, but his return was going to be rather awkward. Onesimus had once been the slave of Philemon, one of the leading members of the Colossian church. But Onesimus had run away. This fugitive slave had met Paul, and become a follower of Jesus. Now Paul was sending him back to his master. As I said, that was going to be awkward! Would Philemon punish him harshly? Or would he do what Paul asked in his separate letter to Philemon? Would he accept him back as a **brother** in Christ, rather than as a mere slave? And would he do what Paul was hinting at in his letter? Would he actually release Onesimus and send him back to Paul so that he could become an assistant to the apostle?

We will hear that letter to Philemon as one of our lectionary readings in a couple of months: keep in mind its connection with the Letter to the Colossians. My guess is that if Philemon had made a harsh response to the return of Onesimus, that letter to him from Paul would have quickly disappeared! But we can really only guess the rest of the story.

Paul was not alone in prison: he may have been chained up in a cell, or perhaps under house arrest chained to a Roman soldier, as we know he was in Rome. **Aristarchus**, a Jewish follower of Jesus the Messiah, was a prisoner with him. And there were two other Jewish Christians with him: one was a man called **Jesus**, who had the second name **Justus**. Jesus, or Joshua, was a popular Jewish name.

The other Jewish Christian was **John Mark**: he had deserted during Paul's earlier missionary travels, and Paul did not trust him when Barnabas asked Paul to give him a second chance. But clearly Mark had matured and become an effective servant of Christ, and a supporter of Paul. And now Mark might be coming to Colossae: "if he comes", says Paul, "welcome him". Salvation is a second chance, and much more: it is eternal life.

Luke the beloved physician sends his greetings too. In fact it looks as if two of the four people who wrote the four Gospels are mentioned in this letter. And even though **Epaphras**, the founder of the Colossian church, is not coming, he certainly hasn't forgotten his fellow-Colossians in the church. He **wrestles** for them in his prayers. These are not just passing mentions in prayer, and they are not the superficial thoughts and prayers that political leaders are so quick to talk about when disaster strikes people. We probably don't think of prayer as hard work, but clearly Paul and Epaphras, as well as Jesus himself found that it could be.

The mention of **Nympha** reminds us that there were no church buildings in the first couple of centuries after Jesus. Churches met in houses, and hospitality was very important.

Well, so many people mentioned by name. They all mattered, and I haven't even mentioned them all. They were from Colossae, or they were known by some of the Colossians, or the Colossians knew about them. The church is a great family. The family life for us begins here and now in our own parish, but it goes far wider: to our fellow-Christians in churches around Epping, and our fellow-Anglicans in the Diocese – yes even the Diocese! And of course it includes brothers and sisters in Christ from whatever denomination and tradition, wherever we meet them.

Names identify people. In the church they identify brothers and sisters in Christ. We all matter to Christ, and we all matter to each other. Let us foster that warm caring Christian love here and beyond, and as Paul calls us to do, let us always stay close and committed above all to Christ, who is the Lord of Creation and the Lord of the Church. Amen. *Paul Weaver*