

St. Aidan's West Epping, 28th July 2019

“KEEPING GOING WITH CHRIST”

(Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians 2:16-29; Luke 11:1-13)

Last week at St. Alban's I was suggesting that we live in a spiritual supermarket. There are so many ideas around for people to pick up and even to combine. There are the great world religions like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and the others. And each of them has a number of versions, just as Christianity has its denominations and traditions. By way of contrast there is full-blown atheism and humanism, as well as all sorts of ideas which we might call “new age” approaches to life.

How do we choose between all these approaches which we find on the shelves of today's spiritual supermarket? Do we just stick with whatever it is that we grew up with? Or do we abandon all belief and take on an aggressive atheism, such as we see a fair bit of these days? Of course, the belief that there is nothing beyond what we can physically see or scientifically demonstrate is itself a faith! Or perhaps we say, “There are so many ideas out there. I will just choose what looks good for me: what looks as if it will make me feel good”.

In the days when Paul wrote his letter to the church of Colossae in Western Turkey, the apostle had heard news of this church which concerned him. Those days were certainly days when the spiritual supermarket was doing a roaring trade. There were the well known Roman and Greek gods, as well as the local pagan gods. You had quite a choice there. There was an increasing idea that the Roman Emperor himself should be worshipped as a god. Quite a few Jews had come to live in this part of the world, and so belief in the one God, the Lord, was certainly one possibility for people who wanted a faith that took them away from the fairly appalling stories of the traditional gods: these people wanted a faith that gave a basis for living a righteous life.

There were also new ideas beginning to emerge, arising from some developing philosophical ideas about God. Surely the true God was too pure to have anything to do with this evil and physical world. He couldn't be its creator. And the idea began to develop that the creator of this world must be a lesser being than the true God. The true God had nothing to do with the world, and to reach him, you would have to go via a collection of lesser beings, who might help you to get closer to the true God.

To many thoughtful people this idea made sense, and it was gaining traction. And within the church a number of people were being influenced by some such ideas. And this letter is Paul's response to what he was hearing.

In Colossians 1, which Bruce Hunter has been preaching about, Paul emphasised the uniqueness of Christ: he made clear that in Christ we truly see God himself. Christ is Lord over Creation and Lord over the church. When the Colossians turned to Christ in repentance and faith, they were placing themselves in the hands of one who is both Creator and Saviour, the supreme Lord over all. There is no one greater than him.

And in today's reading from Chapter 2, Paul tells the Colossians that as they have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so they need to continue to live their lives in him: to keep living as true followers of Jesus, staying close to him in faith and in faithfulness. Like a great tree, they need to have strong roots: roots of trust and commitment to him. Like a great building, they need to be built up in Christ: growing in knowledge and understanding of him and his purposes.

They need to be established in their faith just as they were taught: they are not to wander away into any false beliefs, but to stay firmly committed to the truth as it is in Christ. And when they reflect on the wonder of a deep loving relationship with God through Christ, they will see every reason to abound in thanksgiving.

Hang strongly onto the truth as you received it, says Paul. And it is still an important message today. The truth does not need to be “corrected”: to try to do that would in fact mean falsehood and error. The truth in Christ does not need anything added to it: it is complete in itself.

And so Paul warns the Colossians against those who will try to lead them down the garden path and into danger and error. They will take people captive through their philosophy, their so-called “love of wisdom”, but it is merely human wisdom, however spiritual it might seem. Paul believed that there was a spiritual world of which he might know little, and about which he didn't need to know much. But some of these false teachers were saying that there were beings in that spiritual world who were greater than Christ, who were more important than Christ, who were more worthy of attention than Christ. These teachers were trying to point the Colossian Christians towards these spiritual beings.

Whether they were real or not I don't know, but if you trust in Christ in whom the whole fullness of Godhead dwells bodily, why would you want to divert your attention from Christ?

One other aspect of the ideas that were going around was the importance of religious practices, often as signs of humility. So some teachers were encouraging circumcision, or special diets, or fasting, or the observance of Jewish festivals.

Paul must have been very frustrated about all this. He thought that this type of issue had been dealt with long before. His Letter to the Galatians, written perhaps ten years earlier, was written to shut down the idea that circumcision and Jewish practices were an essential part of the Christian life. True faith in Christ, a faith that is lived out, is what actually matters.

But the only circumcision which a Christian needs is spiritual circumcision, or entry to Christ's spiritual family. It means repentance and faith, and it is expressed outwardly in baptism. Baptism is a sacramental way of expressing the cleansing of forgiveness, and the new life we have in Christ: it also symbolises being buried with Christ and rising with him – it points us back to those unique events of Good Friday and Easter Day, through which we find forgiveness and life in the crucified and living Christ.

We are sinners, but Christ nailed the charges against us to the cross, and they are therefore dealt with. Remember that when Jesus cried that day “It is finished”, he was saying, “It is completed! I have fulfilled the task I came to do!” Our sin has been dealt with for eternity. Through the cross he has destroyed the power of sin, and the power of all who stand up against him and his purposes. Once again Paul is saying that if there is anyone, any being that seeks to stand up in opposition to Christ or in competition with Christ, their power was defeated through the cross.

What does all this mean for us?

Firstly it means that we need to hold fast to our faith in Christ. There is no other faith, no other philosophy, no other system that can bring us forgiveness or life or real truth.

Secondly we need to resist the ideas of those who want to add something to the Gospel. Jesus plus circumcision? Certainly not! Jesus plus some other heavenly beings just in case he needs a bit of help? That is falsehood. Of course, those are probably not the temptations for us. But there are more obvious parallels today in the Christian church.

Speaking in tongues is still believed by some Christians not just to be a gift of God, but something essential to be a real Christian. But to insist on it as essential for all true Christians is to add to the Gospel.

We had Andrew Hall from the Baptist Church speaking at our Men's Breakfast yesterday. He pointed out the importance to Baptist Christians of what they call “Believer's Baptism”: that you are only baptised when you are able to make a meaningful statement of faith for yourself. Hence there is no baptism of infants in the Baptist Church. I see the Biblical evidence that led the founders of the church to insist on believer's baptism, but I am not convinced that their conclusion is necessary. It would concern me if the Baptist Church started saying that you're not a real Christian unless you have been baptised in this way.

It seems that Israel Folau's church does claim that unless a person does things exactly according to their rules, that person will go to hell. I think sadly that Paul would say that the Folaus are distorting the Gospel of grace.

And part of the value of an ecumenical openness is that we begin to see what we Christians share in Christ, and what are extras and nonessentials. We might value our traditions and our ways, but they are not necessary for all Christians. What really matters is that we hold fast to Christ. And to do that we need to be wary of ideas which distort the Gospel, which add something to the Gospel, or which distract us from the centrality of Christ.

So let us continue with our spiritual roots deep in Christ, as Paul calls us to do. Let us keep growing in our faith and in our discipleship and in our understanding of the Gospel and the message of the scriptures. As Paul puts it, “let us hold fast to Christ our head”, who not only opens the way to forgiveness and hope. He brings us nourishment and true spiritual growth. Yes, let us hold fast to Christ. Amen.

Paul Weaver