

Synod Sermon
September 2007
Colossians 1:18 - 2:10

I'd like to begin by reading a fairly long quote from an author who continues to challenge me to an authentic faith.

In his book 'The Signature of Jesus' Brennan Manning writes the following:

'The greatest need for our time is for the church to become what it has seldom been: the Body of Christ with its face to the world, loving others regardless of religion or culture, pouring itself out in a life of service, offering hope to a frightened world, and presenting itself as a real alternative to the existing arrangement. The church that is worthy of the name is a band of people in which the love of God has broken the spell of demons and false gods and which is now making a dent in the world.

I want neither a 'blood-n-guts' religion that would make Clint Eastwood - not Jesus - our

hero; nor a speculative religion that would imprison the Gospel in the halls of academia; nor a noisy 'feel-good' religion that is a naked appeal to emotion.

At the dawning of the 21st century, what separates the committed from the uncommitted is the depth and quality of our love for Jesus Christ. The superficial among us build bigger barns in the euphoria of a prosperity gospel; the trendy follow the latest fad and try to hum their way into heaven; the defeated are haunted by ghosts of the past.

The signature of Jesus - the Cross - is the ultimate expression of God's love for the world. The church is the church of the crucified, risen Christ only when it is stamped with his signature; only when it faces outward and moves with him, along the way of the cross..

Turned inward upon itself in bickering and theological hair-splitting, the church loses its identity and its mission.

I long for passion, intelligence and compassion in a church without ostentation, gently beckoning to the world to come and enjoy the peace and unity we possess because of the Spirit in our midst.'

It is really good to be home after almost two months away on study leave - as well as a short SOMA mission to Vanuatu: to come home with a sense of enthusiasm and excitement for the mission of the church - and then almost immediately head off (with five others from the Diocese) to the Provincial 'Hui on Hermeneutics' in Wellington.

This Hui was the initiative of Archbishop David Moxon who rightly identified the crisis facing our church regarding human sexuality, as a conflict in the way we understand and approach scripture.

Therefore, if we could gather and listen to one another and focus again on hermeneutics (which is simply a fancy term for the way we interpret

scripture) we might be able to appreciate our differences.

I have always been challenged by the example of William Temple who once said;

'In our dealings with one another let us be more eager to understand those who differ from us than either refute them or press upon them our own traditions.'

However as the Hui progressed it became increasingly clear that our crisis is not based on our *interpretation* of scripture. Nor is there conflict on the *importance* of scripture. But we found ourselves at polar extremes when it came to our understanding of the *authority* of scripture.

Let me explain as quickly as I can.

Biblical Hermeneutics has noted three elements or dynamics that come into play when we begin to study the Word of God.

Firstly there is the text - the written passage that we are seeking to read and study.

Secondly there is the author and his world. An intelligent study of the passage must involve some understanding of the reason the passage was written and the cultural environment within which it was birthed.

For example it really helps us understand some of the subtleties in today's epistle to the Colossians when we become aware of Paul's situation when he wrote it and the issues facing the church in Colossae that he was addressing. And by the way I am one of those who firmly believes that Paul was the author of this letter - just as the introduction says!

But thirdly there is the dynamic that the reader brings to the text. We come to the Bible with our own agendas and pre-conceptions based on our own cultural experiences.

And this is where the great divide occurs. Evangelical Christians come to scripture with an awareness of their own agendas and

preconceptions in order that we might lay them aside and let scripture interpret us.

If you like, we place ourselves 'under' the authority of scripture.

Liberal Christians on the other hand come with their agendas and preconceptions and allow *them* to shape and mould what the text is saying.

They place themselves 'over' scripture.

And in these last few days we heard of one writer who had interpreted the story of the prodigal son as the story of a child who was running away from an abusive father!

And one of our feminist presenters interpreted the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman as an oppressed woman who challenged and moulded Jesus own theology.

No surprise we have come to a place where we wonder if there is any possibility for communion. Kind of gives our epistle for today extra poignancy.

Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead.

So he is first in everything.

For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself.

He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross.

This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault.

But you must continue to believe this truth and stand firmly in it. Don't drift away from the assurance you received when you heard the Good News. The Good News has been preached all over the world, and I, Paul, have been appointed as God's servant to proclaim it.

I am glad when I suffer for you in my body, for I am participating in the sufferings of Christ that continue for his body, the church. God has given me the responsibility of serving his church by proclaiming his entire message to you. This message was kept secret for centuries and generations past, but now it has been revealed to God's people. For God wanted them to know that the riches and glory of Christ are for you Gentiles, too. And this is the secret: Christ lives in you. This gives you assurance of sharing his glory.

So we tell others about Christ, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all the wisdom God has given us. We want to present them to God, perfect in their relationship to Christ. That's why I work and struggle so hard, depending on Christ's mighty power that works within me.

I want you to know how much I have agonized for you and for the church at Laodicea, and for many other believers who have never met me personally. I want them to be encouraged and knit together by strong ties of love. I want them

to have complete confidence that they understand God's mysterious plan, which is Christ himself. In him lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

I am telling you this so no one will deceive you with well-crafted arguments. For though I am far away from you, my heart is with you. And I rejoice that you are living as you should and that your faith in Christ is strong.

And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him. Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness.

Don't let anyone capture you with empty philosophies and high-sounding nonsense that come from human thinking and from the spiritual powers of this world, rather than from Christ.
For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. So you also are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority.'

It seems very likely that Paul was in prison in Rome when he wrote this letter and that Epaphras was with him.

Epaphras had been converted by Paul during his three year ministry in Ephesus and if he hadn't actually been responsible for planting this church in Colossae he certainly had a pastoral love and concern for them.

It wasn't a big city - it had no strategic importance and more than likely the church was also comparatively small.

But it was a church that was unified in their love for God, evident in their love for one another.

Their commitment was not an issue.

However there were strange ideas creeping into the church.

Secular philosophies were questioning the supremacy of Christ.

A new formalism was wanting to take people back into the legalism of the old food and dietary laws.

There even seems to have been a kind of 'new-age' interest in angels and heavenly beings.

And Paul was concerned about the immaturity of faith that allowed these philosophies to take root.

He writes earlier in the passage

'Don't let anyone deceive you by fine-sounding arguments'

'See to it that no-one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy.'

Philosophy itself not at issue.

'Philosophy' simply means 'love of wisdom'

Philo (love)

Sophia (wisdom)

And the Bible strongly affirms the pursuit of wisdom - a whole series of Old Testament books are collectively known as 'the wisdom books.'

It is wisdom that Solomon asks for from at the beginning of his reign.

And in Proverbs 4:6-7:

'Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you.

Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding.'

Nothing wrong with philosophy - the Bible clearly commends it. We don't want to be a church that invites people to 'Leave their brains at the door.' Instead Paul encourages the church in Rome to *'be transformed by the renewing of your mind.'*

What is at stake here in Colossians, are good folk who were getting sucked in by *'hollow and deceptive philosophies'* that were drawn from human tradition and based upon the values and principles of the world.

Human thought and the secular wisdom were being used to interpret and distort the truth about Jesus and to undermine the foundations of these new and growing churches.

And nothing much has changed as my experiences last week showed.

On the one hand our faith is being undermined by the postmodern moral relativism that is fed and nurtured within our liberal academia. And I've probably said enough about that.

But on the other hand we face a hollow and deceptive philosophy that has formed within our all-pervading consumer society.'

It has birthed, amongst others things, the 'prosperity gospel' and an individualistic faith that seems to have its focus on personal needs rather than the will of God.

Interesting that at the same time I was preparing this sermon I read a commentary reflection on my daily reading.

It's from the NIV's application commentary on 2 Corinthians:

'In the contemporary church the popularity of topical talks concerning our 'felt needs' far outweighs any interest in contemplating

the God as revealed in the scriptures. When was the last time you heard a sermon series on the attributes and purposes of God as revealed in the history of redemption? 'Theology' as the study and nature and purposes of the transcendent God is viewed as arcane, abstract and out of touch. Instead, surrounded by a new-age Gnosticism that champions personal enlightenment through private spiritual experiences as the pathway to knowing the god within each of us, even the church finds herself self-absorbed.'

Paul is deeply concerned for these churches that were being seduced by this attractive and powerful teaching - look at verse 1.

'I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea,'

It is very tempting to take the offensive and confront these false teachers head-on; to devote this whole sermon to a blistering attack

on these hollow philosophies; to develop a website that seeks out any heresy within the church.

But what does Paul do?

He encourages the churches he was writing to, to EMBRACE THE TRUTH FOUND IN JESUS CHRIST.

He reminds the Colossians of this truth:

Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So he is first in everything. For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross. This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical

body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault.

We can argue against falsehood and heresy in the church until we are blue in the face. It has always been there and it will always be there. But as someone once cleverly said, the greatest way to defeat darkness is to turn on the light!

I was deeply moved to read John Stott's final public address at the Keswick Convention just under two months ago.

In the light of all that is happening in the Anglican communion and all the challenges to orthodox evangelicalism the opportunity for him to speak into the issues in his last public address must have been very inviting.

And what did he do?

He talked about Jesus and told the audience that 'Christ-likeness' is the will of God for the people of God.

He warned his audience that being 'Christ-like' in patient endurance may become increasingly relevant as persecution increases in many cultures and he highlighted the importance of the incarnation for Christians.

One of the organisers said that Dr Stott's final address had been deeply moving. He wrote:

'He may be known as one of the greatest Christian leaders of the 20th century, but few of us could remain unmoved by the sight of a stooped figure, now quietly spoken, calling on us to become more like Jesus Christ.

How fitting that his final visit to Keswick should deliberately point to the Lord Jesus whom he has served so faithfully.'

This is the light that dispels the darkness and it was the way that Paul chose to walk when faced

with hollow and deceptive philosophies. He spoke of Jesus.

When Jesus said, "*I am the way, the truth and the life.*" - recorded in John 14:6 he was answering three great questions that philosophers have struggled with for centuries.

What is good?

What is true?

And finally, what is beautiful?

In Jesus' day, "the way" referred to a moral course of action. By claiming to be "the way," Jesus claimed to be the standard for right and wrong.

When He said He was "the truth" He said that the nature and character of God defined all reality, and that He himself was God made flesh.

When He claimed to be "the life" Jesus established himself as the standard for that which was worthwhile, that which was beautiful.

In this simple statement, Jesus revealed himself to be the answer to the philosopher's quest. Only one pursuit in all of life yields unending satisfaction: a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Paul encourages the churches in Colossae and Laodicea to do just this. (verses 6 and 7)

And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow him. Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness.

I so want this to reflect my life and ministry.

And I hope and pray that as a Diocese we will become known for what we stand *for* rather than what we stand *against*:

That we will point people to Jesus as he is revealed in scripture.

That we will not accept hollow and deceptive philosophies that contradict the truth of scripture.

That we will be a grace-filled church, maturing in our faith and growing in Christ-likeness.