



Good News Bearer

Colossians 3:1-17

Colossians in the New Testament has a powerful message for Christian people in each and every age. It is a letter which emphasises the centrality of Jesus Christ and his sufficiency for our daily living. Paul, the author, was increasingly aware that this was a Christian community that was in danger of losing its way because it was embracing all kinds of religious and cultural ideas from its surrounding community. In doing so, they were likely to lose their focus.

We are called to be “good news bearers” – that is those who demonstrate by the way we live that we have been transformed by the newness of life that has been gifted to us in Christ.

Where we live is an essential component that will help to shape and give purpose for our lives. This factor alone sets the stage for the many influences upon us in life. A key factor in preaching from the Bible and in studying it to any depth is to ask serious questions about the “life setting” of the first audience to which it is written. We are all too aware, here in Australia, that life in bush, town or city has its own distinctive qualities and are certainly not the same thing. In exactly the same way, the life settings of the epistles vary greatly.

Sydney, Santiago or Seattle are not just separated by journey time but they are worlds apart. Paul’s audience to whom he is writing lived in Colossae, which was a city of the Lycus valley about 160 kms east of Ephesus. A main trade route from the Eastern world ran directly through Colossae. As a city, however, it was overshadowed by Laodicea and Hieropolos. In some ways the concentration of people’s attention would be on these cities rather than upon Colossae.

There are some important points to note about this particular communication of Paul:

- The gospel was probably carried to Colossae
- The letter is not a circular letter, but one written to a specific community
- Many have drawn attention to the fact that this may be the least important city that Paul ever wrote to.

Having established these things, it is not difficult to ascertain that it is not the commercial importance of the context that makes this letter significant, but rather its highly developed sense of being a cultural mixture, which embraced a wide variety of racial and social identities. For this very reason, it may well be an epistle that we should turn our attention to in a modern Australia, North America or Europe. The church at Colossae, like ourselves in Australia, may have a brighter past than our present and future.

Paul had a genuine regard and concern for this Christian community and in the letter addresses some deep and profound aspects of Christian thought.

He opens the chapter with a call for this church to have a particularly higher focus:

“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.” (Colossians 3:1-2)



When I consider the earliest churches and Paul's relationship with them, especially those he was responsible for founding, I sense from him an enormous pastoral concern.

There were some churches that he directly founded; others for whom his influence helped to bring them to birth. There was an equal concern for all such churches. Here we have a community which was increasingly taking its life and pattern from its setting which was not overridingly Christian.

For this reason, we can spend some helpful time in considering what it means to live in a setting where strange ideas infiltrate our thinking and popular ideas confuse our lifestyle. This is particularly true for the church at this point in time, living in a Western democratic system where we value openness and honour broadmindedness in a way that opens up the door to very mixed ideas.

In the preceding passage (2:16-23), Paul had made it clear that he is not opposed to laying out guidelines of how we live out the Christian life, but equally he warns against a straight-jacket approach which makes far too much of binding rules and regulations.

In those opening words, we were encouraged to "set our minds" and some have preferred to translate this "seek". The idea that lies behind this thought is not unlike the needle of a compass, seeking the magnetic South or North Pole! However you steer your ship, or you drive your car, the needle automatically finds its focal point.

Now let us be clear that Paul is not suggesting that a community that belongs to Christ must be entirely detached from the world, though one has to say there have been unhealthy examples of this in the history of the church. It certainly does not mean that we neglect all human relationships and earthly interests, if we are to live the Christian life. This requires us to at least begin to understand the difference between what he called "things above" and "earthly things".

To set one's mind on things above is a thought which Paul expressed to the Philippian Christians (Phil 4:8) and it is certainly not to become "otherworldly"; it could be said to be precisely the opposite. In practical terms, it means taking all the affairs of life utterly seriously and seeing them all in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

I suppose it could be said that it is this truth which will decide where the centre of gravity of our lives is to be located.

I want to paint a picture of a community alive in faith where we are "bearers of the good news". To be this kind of community, Paul helps us by giving us the incentive: "Whatever you do, work at it with your whole heart ..." (3:23):

- This is splendid advice
- These are words of encouragement
- This is the call to live life to the full.

If we are a community of faith, then we will allow the principles of the gospel to guide and shape what that community life might look like.



Our total life is bound up with the Gospel

People understand “the gospel” in different ways, but what is clear it is far more than a book of the New Testament or even two or three precepts from the New Testament. Essentially it is the good news about Jesus Christ. This is clearly identified with the life, death and resurrection of Christ. For Paul, it was not only something that had happened at a point in time, but also something that was real and present within his life. We see this in the earliest verses of Chapter 3.

- For you died – v.3
- And your life is now hidden with Christ in God – v.3
- When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory – v.4.

In the latter part of the chapter, Paul goes on to turn from a practical discussion on the new life in Christ to speak very plainly about relational principles worked out in relation to family and other areas.

I was once driving on a journey and listened to a radio program where a small business expert was answering calls from listeners. One person rang in to seek advice on setting up a partnership. His answer was essentially to hover between don't set one up or be very careful if you do. Partnerships are notoriously problematical and yet the partnership between ourselves and God is entirely reliable. In a community such as Colossae, which was a highly developed cultural centre with a rich variety amongst its constituency, to discover what Christian partnership might look like was extremely important.

- There were Christians from a Jewish background where law and related issues would be a priority and matters would arise through which this priority would be present
- There were Christians from a Gentile background, where mixed ideas would be driving their thought patterns and contribution to debate.

If this church at Colossae is to be a community where they are “good news bearers” then the relationship between the life and teaching of Jesus and their daily community activity would need to be explored and applied. We read, “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all in all.” (v.11)

Slavery was a very real issue in many of the Christian centres, for it was endemic in the ancient world. It would be dangerous to minimise the numbers involved and we have to confess that it took some time for many Christians to join in the battle to remove such unhelpful barriers.

However, I think Paul's conviction runs much deeper and the gospel brings into question any adoption of attitudes of superiority of one group or person over another.

- Superior and inferior structures in our society
- Black and white relationships
- Late comers and Indigenous
- Rich and poor relationships
- Employed and unemployed
- Culturally accepted and those denied.



This list could be considerably extended and each and every setting would have its own contribution to make. The vision of God's love drives a pathway through the divisions which are at odds with the gospel.

Total life is joined up because of the gospel

Putting aspects of life into separate compartments is one of the ways people deal with life. Religious people are very adept at this and I would suggest that this has contributed historically to our inability to take on board fresh ideas and living within new environments. Part of the cause of this is negative, but at times it has helped to protect us from taking on each and every new idea and thought.

- For the Colossian Christians there needed to be a vital link between loving God and loving each other
- It also meant discovering the synergy between belonging to a Christian community and identifying with a localised geographical environment.

Paul vision of the Christian is of one who is a new self as described in verse 10: "... have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."

This is a revolution of life and the impact may and often does spread way beyond the life of the church. Wherever it gains energy, then it ought to bring down all social barriers.

This passage is an essentially practical picture of the good news and its impact upon its surrounds. Paul is very frank in the way he writes and for him the death of Christ is not only a theological statement or a part of liturgical worship, but a deep sense of understanding of what it means to live our lives. What was true then is also true today. This takes a lifetime of learning.

There is a splendid story of a young couple and the husband played golf regularly. She asked if he would teach her to play golf and on the practise green one Saturday morning he showed her the different clubs and irons. She thanked him and before they set off for their first real lesson, she said, "And now, tell me which club do I use to make a hole in one?" Of course, it does not come all at once any more than our discipleship, which takes a lifetime of practice and prayer.

- Our total life requires complete engagement
- Our total life requires addressing all unhelpful separateness
- Our total life requires grasping the challenges before us.

Dick Lucas, in his commentary, suggests that the chief business of the Christian can be understood in terms of our living relationship with Jesus Christ and "four imperatives of Christian spirituality":

- *Seek the things above*
- *Set your mind on things above*
- *Put to death what is earthly in you*
- *Put away the life you once lived.*

These priorities are a vivid description of the gospel as it impacts on the totality of our lives. If only we could see from the beginning!



In every home I have lived in, with the exception of one where there was no garden, I have looked at the garden and tried to picture what it might look like. But I know it takes years to come to fruition. There was the story of a young couple who employed a gardener and the husband's response to the gardener's first visit was, "It looks just the same!"

Our total life requires no holding back

This aspect lives at the core of Paul's understanding of life and faith. We are set free to serve. In 1938 just before World War II, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, *Life Together*, a modest and yet moving book on the principles of Christian community. Towards two thousand years ago, Paul the Apostle wrote his first letter to the Christian community at Corinth. It was a far from perfect community:

- There were cliques and power-struggles
- They were plagued by the concept of superiority
- They were in danger of self-destruction.

One writer suggested that both comedy and tragedy are found in the account of the Corinthian church. There was the comedy of a dynamic, gifted Christian community composed of uneducated and often uninfluential people. Morals were so bad in Corinth that the citizens had inspired a word for license – to Corinthianise.

However, there was also tragedy, as many forgot their humble roots and started to lord it over one another. The resulting tensions and schisms would boil over and cause great concern for Paul.

I remember a very early wedding ceremony that I was to conduct. I met with the couple for a final rehearsal and the bride-to-be looked at me and said, "Can we have 'obey' included?" The husband-to-be looked just a little smug – and I said, "Both of you?" The concept of submission means on all our parts being given totally to God.

There was a Hollywood film called *The Bad News Bears*. The Bears were a baseball team of losers and Walter Matthau was their unconventional coach who led them to gain self-respect once again. This bumbling baseball team of losers became winners again. They thought of themselves as bad news bearers and so did everyone else.

What the world needs is "good news bearers"!