Colossians

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 8th November

John 1:14-18, Colossians 2:5-15



Colossians in a nutshell - You are secure in Christ.

Intro: How does a Church become a Cult?

V 6-7 Rooted - Built up - Established - Thankful
V8 Don't be fooled
V9-10 Filled with His fullness
V11-12 Death & Resurrection
V13 Made Alive in Christ
V14 Free from Debt
Free from Control

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth"

Let's pray, Lord Jesus, as we look again into your word in Colossians may we see you, the redeemer of our lives, and the one in whom we will find truth, security, hope and life, amen.

Read Colossians passage

I recently watched a troubling BBC documentary on “The Jesus Fellowship Church” more commonly known as the “Jesus army”. Beginning in 1969 it was closed down around 2020. At its height in the early 2000s it had some 3,500 members living in 50-75 communal houses across the UK.

Here’s the disturbing part. What started as a group of Gospel and evangelically minded people, who wanted to live authentic Jesus shaped lives, ended as a cult, marked by sexual, physical and emotional abuse. It happened under the leadership of a charismatic leader who preached powerfully, but increasingly controlled the lives of the followers up until the time of his death.

He preached sexual abstinence and holiness. But after his died stories started to emerge. He was just one of a number of sexual predators active within the group. It is alleged that one out of five of the children raised in the cult had been abused in some way.

It’s hard to imagine how such things could happen without people realising it. A police investigation found early allegations had been either ignored, and or dismissed by those in leadership. Some of the teenagers who came forward in the beginning were shunned and further victimised.

Thankfully nowadays protective procedures are firmly in place as churches all over the world have “safeguarding” training built into their structures. For example, in our own Anglican Church you can’t hold a license as an ordained minister unless you go through what’s called “boundary’s training” periodically.

Anyone who works with children have to have police checks before they begin, and periodically after that. Given I worked as a chaplain in a sex offenders wing for a number of years I know you can not be careful enough.

In the case of the “Jesus Fellowship Church”, the “Jesus Army”, what started as a church became a cult. How could that happen? The most basic answer is people end up following someone other than Jesus.

Most usually it will be a highly charismatic character that gathers a group of people around them, and the more loyalty they show to the leader, the more recognition and standing within the system they will get. So how is it that well meaning, probably intelligent and competent people come to be deceived and deluded? How is it that sometimes these people become complicit in the manipulative and abusive behaviour by the leadership, because they failed to challenge and expose it?

Not to oversimplify, but there could be many reasons why some in power are able to take advantage. Be it in a church, a home, or a workplace. One one of the reasons leaders get away with not being challenged is because of insecurity.

It takes courage and confidence to challenge those in power. I'm always mindful of what my ordaining Bishop, Derek Eaton, said from the pulpit. "Don't believe it because I say it." "Believe it because it's in the word of God". Of course the proviso is also that the bible is being rightly used. Cult leaders will more often than not wave the bible around and speak as if they have great authority. We all know the bible can be misused with tragic results.

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth" Loose sight of Jesus and we are in dangerous territory.

The Apostle Paul was always wanting to build people's confidence in the Gospel. He was always wanting believers to see Christ, and know how secure they were in Christ. Security of salvation is Paul's message to the Colossian church. Hold fast to the truth. Hold fast to Jesus, the very presence of God living within you.

V6-7 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him, established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Three metaphors are used. Rooted. Built up. Established in the faith. This points to the work of God and the effect of the Gospel in our lives. Our part by way of response is a grateful outpouring of praise. We are rooted, built up and established in Christ as we hold to the gospel, and we should jolly well have some confidence in that.

Just this week my weekly podcast from Philip and Peter Jenson, a previous archbishop of Sydney, and past principle of Moore theological college, dealt with the matter of assurance. The issue is as follows, though we are assured of our salvation in Christ, we are not always assured or confident in our understanding, our thinking, our spirit if you like.

Though the Word of God is clear and we are firmly and completely saved from God's perspective, given the work of the cross, we might not feel saved.

- We might be plagued by doubt and insecurity.
- What about when I stumble and fall?
- What about when I let the side down?

If we had time we could unpack a little of what the apostle Paul says in Romans 7 as he talks of his struggle with sin. “Wretched man that I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death,” Paul cries. Paul gives his answer. “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Paul, I believe, is speaking as a believer. He is being honest about the battle he faced. It was a battle though that did not shake his conviction that it was a battle that had been fully won by Jesus on his behalf, and he was fully and completely safe and secure in the grace and truth of his saviour.

Again, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth Assurance of salvation in Christ, confidence in the gospel is not arrogance. It is not saying we are great and we deserve anything. It is simply the recognition of a fact. A fact to which we give God the glory, the thanks, and the praise.

A friend of mine recently bought a 2016 electric car at a great price. The reason he got a great deal was the lady who was selling it was experiencing range anxiety. She felt safe and secure when driving round town, but any further…… In effect her anxiety was not matched with reality. The car was not as limited as her confidence. Or to say it another way, her range anxiety was disproportionate to the power in the battery.

Some Christian’s have assurance anxiety. Listen to what the text says. Given that you have received Christ. Given you are rooted, built up, established in the faith… Given those facts, facts validated by the death and resurrection of Christ, V8, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.”

How does a church become a cult? When people are taken captive by falsehood to the point where they lose their freedom, and will do the bidding of one who is most certainly not walking in the light, or the power of gospel truth. Cults aside. How to stay safe in any church. Hold fast to Christ Jesus as Lord, v 6. Hold fast to the gospel, our source of teaching and faith v7.

Putting it all together. Hold fast to Jesus, hold fast to the gospel and we will not fall prey to human trickery and deceit. We will not be susceptible even to spiritual forces of deception and counterfeit demonic forces.

V9, for in Him, that is Christ, the whole fulness of God dwells bodily. Let’s read in all that Paul assured us of in vs 15-23.

- Christ the image of the invisible God.
- Christ the creator of the universe.
- Christ the one above all powers and principalities be they in heaven or in earth.
- Christ the one who is the head of his body the church.

V9 for in him the whole fulness of God dwells bodily, V10 and you have been filled in him who is the head of all rule and authority.

Let's ask another question. Why do most people get into trouble through life? Often it's because they are looking for something. A person may not even be aware they are searching. They may not even be aware of a lack, or that something is missing. Aware or not, life without Christ is an endless and futile attempt to do for ourselves what only God can do for us, and in us.

As someone once said "even if you win the rat race, you are still a rat." V 11-12. Points to our identification with Christ. "In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands by putting off the body of flesh by the circumcision of Christ having been buried with heaven baptism in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God who raised him from the dead.

Look carefully at the text. Two circumcisions are mentioned. The first is ours, and it points to a spiritual circumcision. The second circumcision referred to is the circumcision of Jesus. What's that about? It is a pointing to the death of Jesus on the cross. Jesus had the flesh torn from his body leading up to his death. Jesus was stripped of life itself for our sake.

Jesus death showed God true to his word when he said in effect, way back in the garden, "reject me and you will surely die." Sin pays wages, and thought Jesus did not sin, he paid the price of our sin. Our creed states it clearly and succinctly. Christ died for our sins, was buried and was raised.

So then, V6, as we receive Christ Jesus as Lord, V11-12, we are circumcised in heart and mind as we enter into his death through baptism. Then having been buried with him we are also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God who raised him from the dead.

Putting it all together. Jesus who gave himself for us on the cross, who had life stripped violently from him, as pointed to in referencing the circumcision of Christ, was also raised, and we who are in Christ are one with him in his death and resurrection.

Verse 13-14 and you who were dead in your trespasses, and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive, together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside nailing it to the cross.

It would seem most of most people's lives is about getting free of dept. At best we reach retirement in the hope that we get a few years where life is not a case of chasing our tails, keeping ahead of the bills. That is would seem is something that is increasingly hard and was a major plank as various political parties canvased by promising to solve all our ills. As I said in an earlier Colossians message, politicians may have some answers, but do they have the answer?

Being debt free. How excited we would be if someone came along with a magic wand and cleared all our debts. We would be probably jumping up with excitement and joy. But financial debt is not the most serious debt in the world. What of spiritual debt? What about accountability as sinful people before a holy and righteous God? In one of the stories Jesus tells, a king forgives a debt of his slave. A dept equivalent to 186,000 years of the daily wage. It is of course a story about God forgiving an unforgivable debt, and how we should live in light of that.

V 6-7 again, "Therefore as you received Christ Jesus the Lord so walk in him rooted and built up in him and established in the faith just as you were taught.

Free from debt, the debt we owe to God, because of sin, Ch 1:14, "we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins". Ch 2:14 "the record of debt has been cancelled."

- "It has been nailed to the cross".
- It has been paid in full.
- We are free.

V14, free from debt, the debt of sin.
V15, Freed from, or at least not subject to, the powers that stand in opposition to Christ and the purposes and power of the Gospel. Paul's conclusion therefore verse 16 therefore, or given that you have been set free, let no one pass judgement on you. V 18 let no one disqualify you. Instead hold fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knitted together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

Trust in Christ. Hold fast to truth. Be assured that we have come to fulness of life in him.

- That is our safeguard against empty deceit.
- That is our protection against that which deceives us and leaves us empty.
- That is the antidote when the world tries to entice and tempt and wraps it up in high sounding arguments that would undermine the truth of the Gospel.

V2, See that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit according to human traditions according to the elemental spirits of the world and not according to Christ . That one in whom the fulness of God dwells. That one who forgives us, sets us free, and fills us with every good thing as he himself fills our life. What more can we say but thankyou? What more can we do but walk in his truth and give our lives in his service?

Whatever the shape of our to be formed government, and we are called to pray for them, there is only so much hope we can put in our fellow human beings. As that wonderful modern hymn about the work of Christ proclaims…

In Christ alone my hope is found.
He is my light, my strength, my song.
No power of hell, no scheme of man
can ever pluck me from his hand,
till he returns, or calls me home
here in the power of Christ. I'll stand.

Thanks be to God.