

Study following Sunday February 7th

Prepare: Think about parts of creation that impact you most.

Praise: Spend time thanking God for the act of creation, done in love, through Jesus and by the Holy Spirit.

Passage: Read Colossians 1.15-20

Ponder: Our reading today comes at the beginning of Paul's letter to the church in Colossae. Although Paul probably never visited the city, he feels a sense of responsibility towards it as it seems to have been planted by a disciple who was inspired during Paul's three year ministry in Ephesus. By the time of the letter Paul is probably imprisoned in Rome and it seems the Colossae church is struggling to rid itself of false teaching. The exact nature of the false teaching is hard to pinpoint but Paul's focus is Jesus Christ - the Son - and his sufficiency for salvation.

- Read Exodus 20 verse 4

No created image of God is allowed, yet Paul points out to the Colossians that God supplies a self-portrait in the form of his Son - see also John 14.9. When we read that the Son is 'firstborn' we have to be careful to understand this as meaning that he has all the privileges and rights of an only son. Paul is not talking about a physical firstborn, the Son is not part of creation, but 'over' all creation - hence why we recite in the 'Nicene' creed he is 'eternally begotten' and 'begotten not made'. Paul seems to counteracting those at Colossae who would have looked to created things for guidance and support - such as angels or the stars. Apparently belief in the guidance of stars and angels was even more prevalent in Paul's time than it is now. Verse 16 of our passage shows Christ as an agent of creation, 'For in him all things were created'. Christ cannot be the first thing created since 'all things' without exception were created by him.

Verse 17 speaks of Christ the one in whom all things are held together.

- Have you ever had to mediate between two people or groups?

It takes skill and diplomacy to mediate, but it also demands a need to understand both sides of a disagreement or divide. The picture Paul is describing, of the Son holding all things together, is described further in his letter to Timothy and to the Romans amongst other places.

- See 1 Timothy 2.5 and also Romans 8.38-39

Looking on to Verse 18 we may be reminded that Paul talks elsewhere about the Church as the body of Christ, see 1 Corinthians 12.27, but here he adds Christ as its head, see also Ephesians 1.22-23.

As God was said to have filled the temple with his presence in the Old Testament so now Paul describes Christ being filled in a similar way with God's fullness. This is another indicator of Christ being fully divine, filled with all of God's fullness.

Our passage closes with a reminder of Christ's reconciling and saving work done on the cross. Christ reconciles and makes peace because he is the 'Prince of Peace' (Isaiah 9.6). The peace he brings is the 'shalom' of God, a completeness, harmony and wholeness. Now we too are called to be peacemakers, as Jesus proclaims, during his Sermon on the mount, that 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.'

Pray: Pray for all who are requiring mediation of one sort of or another. Pray for a growing understanding, among Christians across the globe, that the head and source of sustenance and God's presence is Christ.

Study following Sunday February 14th

Prepare: Think about the different ways you have seen the gospel portrayed.

Praise: Spend time thanking God for never giving up on us, but continuing to shine his light into our lives.

Passage: Read 2 Corinthians 4. 3-6

Ponder: In the second letter we have that Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church, it is clear that Paul is having to defend himself, and the Gospel, from false teaching that has arisen there. It seems that one criticism, that is levelled at Paul, is that not everyone he has preached to has believed the message. Paul does describe times when people are receptive to his message - see 2 Corinthians 2.12 - but at other times the listening crowd are not convinced and even turn violent towards him.

- see Acts 18. 1-8 for Paul's first visit to Corinth and the varied reception he received. When Paul references a 'veil' in verse 3 of our passage we might look back at another reference Paul makes to a veil in chapter 3 verse 13. Paul's earlier reference speaks of Moses covering his glowing face with a veil - see Exodus 34.33. Coming back to our passage, Paul is showing that those who don't believe have been blinded by Satan, their eyes are veiled to see the light of the gospel. In some ways he seems to be claiming that the result of his preaching is always due to supernatural forces.

- if we think about those we know who don't believe, what reasons might we suggest for their unbelief?

Some may suggest that we do not need to follow up on those who reject the gospel if it is all about the supernatural realm. The truth is that we never know exactly the position of the hearts and minds of those we come into contact with, and we also don't know whether the devil has worked in some faults of the way the gospel was presented to them. As Best explains 'We must always continue lovingly to understand those to whom we present the gospel and to seek to explain and interpret it in our words and living so that they will give it a willing hearing.' The task of displaying the Gospel is a lifelong challenge to show our faith in our deeds and words, thank goodness we don't do it alone but with one another and with God's Holy Spirit to guide and encourage.

- How might we sustain ourselves for the lifelong task of displaying the gospel?

In verses 5 and 6 Paul attempts to counter arguments that his preaching focusses too much on himself. He has encouraged the Corinthians to imitate him - see 1 Corinthians 4.16 - and we are reminded that the gospel is not a set of truths but a way of life. Paul points the Corinthians, and us, to see Jesus Christ as Lord - Jesus the one who lived, died, rose and ascended. Paul knows that this implies he is Christ's servant and so moves on to declare that he, and his companions, are servants to the Corinthians. His hope is that they would get a sense of their own call to be servants to one another.

- How do you see the call to be a servant to others?

Finally in our passage, Paul draws from Genesis chapter 1 verse 3 to speak of a light that illuminates the darkness. Paul himself knows this light personally after his Damascus road experience (see Acts 9.1-3). The outward light was a symbol of the light that shone into his heart and transformed it. The light of Christ draws us to God, the two cannot be separated. God's glory is seen in the face of Christ, Christ exalted in heaven and Christ on the cross.

Pray: Pray for those we know who don't yet believe and ask God to help us to understand them and reveal Christ to them in our words and deeds.

Study following Sunday February 21st

Prepare: Think about the story of Noah, What can you remember? (Genesis 6.9-7.17)

Praise: Spend time thanking God for the community of believers of which we are part.

Passage: Read 1 Peter 3.18-22

Ponder: Peter's first letter (1 Peter) was probably sent from Rome around 62-63AD. In it, Peter tries to encourage his readers in the face of the storms of persecution and suffering that are increasing around them. The recipients of this letter were small scattered Christian communities dotted around the middle and northern part of modern day Turkey. Peter himself was not in prison at this point, but a year or so later he will write his second letter (2 Peter) whilst imprisoned on death row. In verse 18 Peter's focus is the cross and suffering Christ endured.

- Read 1 Peter 2.21-24 to see what Peter has already said about the cross.

What he now adds in verse 18 is a focus on Christ, the righteous one, remaking the connection between us, the unrighteous, and God. The final phrase may refer to him being raised to life by the Holy Spirit after his death.

The phrase in verse 19 'proclamation to the imprisoned spirits' has generated much thought but little consensus. Two suggestions seem to be most probable, either Peter is referring to the unsaved spirits (human spirits) from Noah's day, or fallen angels who were cast down to hell to await final judgement. Either interpretation still leaves us with a lot of questions and puzzlement but Tom Wright points out that it may be linked to a popular book of the time '*1Enoch*'. This was a book not actually written by the Enoch of Genesis 5 but from Enoch's point of view. The focus of *1 Enoch* is that the problems and troubles of the world can all be traced back to the wicked angels from Genesis 6, and that a great victory has been, or will be won by God over them. Peter's point is that since the coming of the Messiah - Christ, these spiritual forces have been crushed and no longer hold the power they once held.

- How do you understand the difference baptism makes to a Christian?

- See Paul's letter to the Romans 6.3-6 for a parallel passage focussing on baptism.

Salvation through water is the shared theme, enabling a new connection to God and all through the power of Christ's resurrection. But Peter is concerned that these small communities recognise that Baptism is just the start of a journey, and a declaration of the baptised ones as set apart. Tom Wright points out that this boundary marker will inevitably create a confrontation between the baptised community and the watching world. Peter's encouragement is that an ongoing relationship with God brings a clear conscience and a recognition of God's power shown through Christ. Baptism places us alongside the Messiah in his victory and as he reigns at God's right hand.

- How have you noticed a confrontation between Christians and non-Christians, as individuals or communities?

It may be easy to see this confrontation played out in distant countries where Christianity is outlawed or despised, and our hope is that the Christians involved will know the encouragement Peter wants them to find. Tom Wright points out that this principle is important for all of us to learn, to inspire us to pray for our suffering brothers and sisters, but also to be ready for the day we might suddenly need to know this ourselves.

Pray: Pray for persecuted Christians, especially those who are isolated, estranged from their families and friends due to their faith in Jesus.

Study following Sunday February 28th

Prepare: Think about what you put your faith in day by day, perhaps clean water from your tap, the chair you're sitting on, the telephone.

Praise: Spend time thanking God for his promises to us.

Passage: Read Romans 4.13-25

Ponder: Paul's letter to the Roman church is seen as the culmination of his theological thoughts and the most systematic of his letters. In chapter 4 he is illustrating that we, the unrighteous ones, receive righteousness or are put right with God by faith. Paul is challenging the Jewish tradition that says fulfilling the law is the way to reconnect with God. So he goes back to the father of the faith - Abraham.

- Read Genesis 12.1-3, Genesis 13.14-18

At the beginning of our passage Paul first identifies that Abraham's relationship with God is all based on promise. It is true that, for Abraham's descendants, the law has gathered around the promises, but Dunn observes that the law does not affect the character of those abiding by it, only a recognition of God's promises can do that.

- How do you see the relationship between law, promise and our connection to God?

In verse 16 Paul shows that if a right relationship with God is found through trusting in his promises then it can be found by both Jews (those of the law) and also Gentiles (non-Jews who have faith). In verse 17 Paul references Genesis 17 vs 5 where God gives Abram the name Abraham, linking to the idea of his being a Father of many nations - here Paul is broadening the Jewish view that God's plan doesn't just involve their nation and the surrounding area but the whole world. Paul reminds his readers that God is not just a one-nation or one-tribe god but a creator God of global proportions.

- Reflect, for a moment, on how big God is but how small we can sometimes make him. Abraham's faith is an example to all, whom the writer to the Hebrews waxes lyrically about in Hebrews 11.8-19. Abraham's was a realistic faith - he knew he and Sarah were old, yet he also trusted in the 'God who gives life'. Abraham was aware of the impossibility of the promise in human terms but he placed his hope and faith in God and his promises, this is the faith Paul is commending.

- How might we compare God the creator with God as shown through Jesus Christ?

Paul moves from the God who brings life into Sarah's womb, to the God who brings life by raising Jesus from the dead. He shows that just as Abraham had to trust in God's promises to him made in Genesis 12, so we are called to have the same trust, the same faith, that God has power to bring life out of death. To believe in Christ's resurrection is a belief in the same God, and yet shows that broadening from the gift of a child who would become a nation, to a life that would save the world.

So how might we grow in our own faith and trust in God? here are three suggestions:

- Rest in God's presence, reflecting on God's love and ask him to grow our faith, just as the father in Mark 9 vs 24 - "I have faith, help me have more"
- Respond to God by stepping out in faith, seeking to bless others with our actions, recognising that, like Abraham, we are blessed to be a blessing.
- Read God's word, remembering God's compassionate dealing with Israel and the ministry, mission and message of Jesus.

Pray: Pray for those who are caught up trying to please God legalistically, pray that they would know God loves them unconditionally and just asks for their trust, for them to put their faith in him and his promises, all shown through Jesus. Pray too for ourselves, that we would grow in our faith and trust in God.