

JESUS HAS PROVIDED RECONCILIATION BETWEEN GOD AND US

Sermon for the 6th Sunday after Pentecost, 2019

Colossians 1:21-23

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the first three verses of our Second Reading from before, Colossians 1:21-23: ²¹ **Once you were alienated from God and, in your minds, were His enemies, because of your wicked behaviour.** ²² **However, now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you before Him holy, without blame and free from accusation,** ²³ **if you continue established and steadfast in the faith and are not moved away from the hope of the Good News, which you have heard. This Gospel has been preached to every creature under heaven, and I, Paul, have become a minister of it.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The Colossian Church had been founded by Epaphras, one of Paul's fellow servants. Although he could report to Paul that the Gospel had borne fruit in Colosse, yet Epaphras was filled with anxious concern for the Christians he served because their loyalty to Jesus and the Gospel was now being threatened by a new teaching that on the surface seemed to be quite similar to the Gospel that Epaphras had learned from Paul. Like the apostle's Gospel, this new teaching claimed to be a universal message suitable for Jew and Gentile alike. It too acknowledged that a gulf existed between man and God and taught a redemption that could bridge that gulf. It claimed to honour and worship Christ. Looking closer, though, one could see that this new teaching was an utter distortion of the Gospel. Earlier in his Letter, Paul warned the Colossians to "*Beware that no one captures you through philosophy and empty deceit as he follows human tradition and the basic principles of the world, rather than following Christ,*" (Col. 2:8). This philosophy and empty deceit was invented by men and riddled with false, human ideas, including a strong interest in Old Testament rituals, laws, and ceremonies, with the false teachers attaching a special significance to circumcision, dietary laws, and the observance of Old Testament holidays.

These ideas were combined with a pagan, superstitious interest in the spirit world and in the worship of angels. There was a hypocritical show of humility combined with an arrogant claim to having received special revelations. On top of this, there also seems to have been the idea that the Christianity Paul and Epaphras taught was too simple and unsophisticated, too easy. A higher wisdom, the false teachers proclaimed, was necessary to achieve "complete Christianity," and they, of course, possessed that wisdom. They used buzzwords like "fullness," "perfection," and "knowledge" to demean the apostles' teachings and promote their own.

The overall effect of this Colossian heresy was to entice people away from relying on the finished work of Christ for salvation. Instead of the simple Gospel, the false teachers wanted those who listened to them to accept a human religious, philosophical system that, for all intents and purposes, negated Jesus' ministry and weakened His Gospel.

What Epaphras sensed, and what the apostle Paul clearly saw, was that this "new teaching" called into question - yes, even totally denied - the sufficiency of Christ. It denied the completeness of Christ's atonement as well as Christ's power to furnish believers with the spiritual strength to live godly lives. However, what made it all the more dangerous was the fact that those who promoted this false teaching did not advertise it as a substitute for the Gospel, but as something that could *supplement* the Gospel and help Christians reach "perfection," "fullness," and "complete salvation." Without directly denying the authority and power of Christ, the Colossian heresy promoted practices and teachings that cast a veil over Jesus' glory, and contributed man's salvation at least in part, *to his own works*.

Therefore, Paul wrote to the Colossians urging them to "**continue established and steadfast in the faith,**" not being moved "**away from the hope of the Good News, which (they had) heard.**"

Paul was adamant that faith in Christ must continue, just as it began - by hearing the Gospel.¹ He unashamedly urged his readers not to let anyone move them from the hope they had in Christ. Through the Good News, the Holy Spirit had been given to them, and they were joined to Christ. They were to use all the spiritual energy the Holy Spirit had given them in Christ to flee from the false and cling to the true. They did not have to seek new and mystical ways of finding Christ and His salvation - human wisdom and philosophy are not necessary to discover Him. All that sinners need to find Christ is the clear and simple message of the Good News - the Gospel. In the Good News, the Colossians possessed Christ in all His fullness. No other revelations were necessary for them, or for us.

¹ John 8:31-32; Romans 10:17

Paul reminded the Colossians, “²¹ **Once you were alienated from God and, in your minds, were His enemies, because of your wicked behaviour.** ²² **However, now He has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you before Him holy, without blame and free from accusation.**”

Paul wanted them to be personally aware of Christ’s supremacy in the realm of their salvation. The Colossians had been recipients of the spiritual blessings brought about by God’s reconciliation of the world to Himself. From their origin as sinners born of sinners, they had been **alienated from God**.

To be **alienated from God** meant to be in a broken relationship with Him, such as that of spouses in a broken marriage or of parents and children from one another. Once the Colossians were strangers, **alienated from God**, shut out from God’s mercy and love. Now, however, by a miracle of God’s mercy, those same people had entered a new and wonderful relationship with God. They had been made to personally share in the reconciliation Jesus brought about between sinners and God. Because Jesus had now come into this world, taking on a human nature, and becoming man’s Substitute, because in His **physical body** Jesus had borne the curse of sin and satisfied the justice of God, the Colossians’ debt of sin had been paid in full. Their salvation had been accomplished without any doing on their part.

Through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit had entered the hearts of the Colossian believers to fill them with the faith by which they believed in Jesus and received His redemptive blessings as their very own. With Christ’s righteousness and His redemptive payment for their sins credited to them, they could now stand **before God holy, without blame and free from accusation**.

Jesus is supreme in the realm of salvation, and Jesus and His salvation are all-sufficient for our own personal reconciliation with God. Reconciled to God, we have been justified (put into a right relationship with Him) by the work of Christ, and on the Day of Judgment will stand before Him as holy ones on the basis of what He Himself has done for us as our Saviour. It is only through the Gospel that Christ and His redemptive blessings come to our lives so that we too share in the blessings of reconciliation, and it is only through the Gospel that all those who have been brought into that vital faith-relationship with Jesus are maintained and strengthened in their faith. The false teachers in Colosse were urging the Colossian believers to accept in place of the Gospel a human message that claimed to be gospel but was not gospel at all.

Firmness and a proper sense of purpose and direction were necessary. “**Continue established and steadfast in the faith,**” Paul unashamedly urges. Don’t let anyone move you from the gospel hope you have in Christ. Don’t let any false teaching from without or sinful prompting from within cause you to turn away from the one message that joins you to Christ. Use all the spiritual energy the Holy Spirit has given you in Christ to flee from the false and cling to the true. Unfailingly renew your spiritual strength by returning again and again to the strength-giving and strength-maintaining Gospel. Through the Gospel, maintain your hold on your all-sufficient Saviour.

The pseudo-gospel that the false teachers were proclaiming in and around Colosse was a message with many strange elements peculiar to that rather small group of teachers, but the Gospel Paul proclaimed was a universal message. It had been enthusiastically carried by the apostles and their successors into almost every part of the Roman world, as Paul wrote, “**This Gospel has been preached to every creature under heaven, and I, Paul, have become a minister of it.**”

Human beings do not have to seek new and mystical ways of finding Christ and His salvation. Human wisdom and philosophy are not necessary to discover Him. All that sinners need to find Christ is the clear and simple message of the Gospel. In this Gospel, the Colossians possessed Christ in all His fullness. No other revelations were necessary for them, or for us.

The truths Paul has discussed express objective truths concerning Christ and the Gospel, but they are also practical, perhaps more so than we might at first realise. Think of what the great truths Paul has so forcefully emphasised here means for our own lives. Jesus is supreme in the world of creation. He has created all things, and He governs all things and holds them together with His almighty power. This assures us that, contrary to what we may sometimes think, the world is not ruled by chaos. It is continually under the command of our all-sufficient Lord and Saviour. There is a plan, a divine purpose in all that happens in our world and in our lives, a purpose determined and brought to pass by the Saviour who loves us.

Sin, evil humanity, and the devil are not in control of this world. Jesus is. He sets limits on their wicked activities. Nothing in this world - whatever it may be - nothing in our lives, including the worst imaginable tragedies, can separate us from our Saviour or from the hands of love in which He continually holds us.² Day after day He is moving this world forward to the end of the age when He, by His almighty power, will deliver us completely and forever from the effects and consequences

² Romans 8:39

of sin, bringing an end to this present evil world, and making all things wonderfully new in the eternal glory that He has promised to share with us, His children by faith.

There is blessed assurance also in the fact that Jesus is supreme in the world of salvation. The Gospel sets before us the great truth that in Christ and His redemptive work, our salvation is complete. We do not have to add one single thing. The eternal Son of God has given His life to provide reconciliation between God and us. The blessings of that reconciliation are personally ours by faith, which is also His free gift to us through the Gospel which reveals to us the all-sufficient Christ and connects us with Him.

In our world today, there are many who, like the false teachers at Colosse, belittle the Gospel and regard it as something irrelevant for our modern age. Their logic is alluring, and their words are enticing, especially to our sinful natures, as they strongly urge us to give up the Gospel. However, if we truly appreciate the unique greatness of our Saviour, and if we understand that it is only through the Gospel that we are joined to Jesus and His blessings, any idea of giving up that Gospel or exchanging it for something “better” will quickly be rejected.

May we, therefore, continue to “*contend for the faith that has once for all been delivered to God’s holy people,*” (Jude 1:3), and stand firm, holding fast to the all-sufficient Christ and the Gospel that proclaims Him. For this Gospel tells us that Jesus Christ has brought reconciliation between God and us. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Lord of all power and grace, since Your eyes watch over the righteous and Your ears listen to their cries, hear our prayers as we come before You in gratitude and praise for all Your mercies.

We remember our great sinfulness before You, O Lord, and confess it with repentant hearts. Do not treat us as we deserve, but forgive us because of Your limitless love, that we may experience anew the joy of Your salvation and always live to Your praise.

We thank You for the daily miracles of Your care and love. Help us to realise always that You open Your hand and satisfy the needs of all Your creation and fill our lives with everything good, and make us thankful people.

We praise You especially for the gift of Your Son Jesus Christ, whom You have sent to be the Saviour of the world. Grant that we may believe in Him with all our hearts, honour Him as our Lord, and live under Him in the kingdom He has established. Help us to obey His words eagerly, to love Him truly, and to serve Him joyfully.

Continue to enlighten our lives by Your Holy Spirit, so that they may produce the abundant fruits of righteousness. Enable us to grow in knowledge of Your truth, in self-control in our lives. Give us a firm faith, pious minds, pure hearts, affection and sympathy for all our fellow-Christians, and love for all people.

Raise up pastors who will be true fishers of men. Help all Your people to put aside human opinions and selfish concerns, and to follow Your Son wherever He leads them. Give unity of spirit to Your people. Uphold those Christians who are suffering for the sake of their faith; and give them strength and courage.

We pray for the nations of the earth. Put down tyranny and terrorism. Raise up leaders who acknowledge You and Your will. Bless our country Australia. Lead its people pursue all that is good, and to put aside all that is evil.

Watch over the members of our own congregations who are unwell or cannot be with us today because of distance or other reasons. Hear the cry of the suffering and guide them for Your mercy’s sake. And, as we are only pilgrims in this world, guide and keep us, and bring us all at last to our heavenly home.

Have compassion on Your land and, if it is Your will, bring us drought-breaking rain.

Receive these prayers, which we offer in the name of the author of life, Jesus Christ, who, together with You and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

6th Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 18:1-14

¹ The LORD appeared to Abraham beside the large trees of Mamre when he was sitting at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. ² When Abraham looked up, he suddenly saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed down to the ground. ³ Abraham said: "My Lord, if I have now found favour in Your sight, please do not pass Your servant by! ⁴ Please let a little water be brought! Wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree! ⁵ Let me bring some bread! Then you may refresh yourselves. After that you may go on your way, since this is why you have come to your servant."

They answered, "Do as you have said!"

⁶ Therefore Abraham hurried to Sarah in the tent. He said, "Quickly, get seven litres of fine flour, knead it, and make some bread-cakes!"

⁷ Then Abraham ran to the herd, took a calf that was tender and good, and gave it to his servant, who quickly prepared it. ⁸ He also took curds and milk as well as the calf that he had prepared and set these before them. Then he stood beside them under the tree while they ate.

⁹ They asked him, "Where is your wife, Sarah?"

He answered, "There, in the tent."

¹⁰ Then the LORD said, "I shall surely return to you about this time next year, and, indeed, your wife Sarah will have a son."

Sarah was listening at the entrance to the tent, which was behind Him. ¹¹ Abraham and Sarah were old, and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing. ¹² Sarah laughed to herself, thinking, "Now that I am worn out, shall I have pleasure? What is more, my lord is old."

¹³ The LORD asked Abraham: "Why has Sarah laughed and asked, 'Shall I really bear a child now that I am old?'"

¹⁴ Is anything too difficult for the LORD? When I come back to you about this time next year, Sarah will have a son."

Colossians 1:21-29

²¹ Once you were alienated from God, and in your minds you were His enemies, because of your wicked behaviour. ²² However, now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death in order to present you before Him holy, without blame, and free from accusation, ²³ if you continue established and steadfast in the faith, and are not moved away from the hope of the Good News, which you have heard. This Gospel has been preached to every creature under heaven, and I, Paul, have become a minister of it.

²⁴ Now I rejoice in my sufferings for you, and in my body I am filling up what is still lacking in Christ's afflictions, for the sake of His body, the church. ²⁵ I have been made a minister of this church by the commission that God has given me regarding you, in order to fulfil the Word of God. ²⁶ This is the mystery that has been hidden from ages and generations, but that has now been disclosed to His holy people. ²⁷ God has wished to make known to them the glorious riches of this mystery among the Gentiles. This mystery is Christ in you, the Hope of glory. ²⁸ We are proclaiming Him, warning every person and teaching every person, using all wisdom, in order that we may present every person perfect in Christ. ²⁹ To this end I am labouring, struggling like an athlete by His power, which is working mightily in me.

Luke 10:38-42

³⁸ As they were on their journey, Jesus entered a certain village, where a woman by the name of Martha welcomed Him into her home. ³⁹ She had a sister by the name of Mary, who also kept sitting at the Lord's feet, listening to His Word. ⁴⁰ However, Martha was distracted with much serving. She came and asked, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do the serving alone? Tell her to help me, then!"

⁴¹ The Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted about many things, ⁴² but only one thing is needed. Yes, Mary has chosen that better part, and it will not be taken away from her."