

# Committed to Christ

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne Evensong St James September 9<sup>th</sup> 2018

Keynote Bible passage: Colossians 2.6 – 23

As you heard it that reading from Colossians you may have wondered ‘what’s all this about’, and how does it connect for today? It can be hard to take in the hearing and likely easier if one has the text from which to read. However, we won’t look it up, now, although you may like to when back home. Thus, if I may summarise to help get into the context. As mentioned in earlier sermons on the letter to the Christians at Colossae, the believers were being influenced on one hand by the powerful Greek philosophy and gods. And on the other by Jews some of whom were now believers advocating they should continue with the Hebrew practices including circumcision. St Paul is countering both influences and teaching that the sufficient focus is on Jesus, and commitment to him. And that’s theme of tonight’s sermon.

- 1) The passage begins with the imagery of a tree growing and this relates to *growth in the faith*. Such imagery occurs several times in Scripture. Psalm 1 is a good example and likely familiar. ‘Those who meditate on (God’s law) day and night are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in due season and their leaves do not wither. In all they do they prosper.’ Jesus spoke of trees bearing fruit. St Paul says, in paraphrase, that you Christians, need to be firmly rooted in the faith of Christ, like a tree firmly set in the ground. This for him derives from the earlier teachings of believers growing up and acquiring knowledge. Also, to keep in thanksgiving, thanksgiving of being now in this relationship with Jesus.

How is this for us? It is likely that most of us were baptised as infants and nurtured in the Christian faith from a young age. As we grew we listened to sermons, we were instructed in confirmation class, and gained knowledge from our own reading. Hence the ‘growing in the faith.’ I remember a conversation with a parishioner about this as they were engaged in their grandparent role with a teenager asking lots of questions about Christianity. It’s not till a time like this that we realise just how much we know. This reminds me of Paul’s commendation of Timothy. ‘I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois, and your mother Eunice. (2 Tim 1.5). Surely there will be ones among you for whom this is or has been your experience with grandchildren. Thus, we’re not to be blown over by every wind of doctrine.

- 2) Now to move to the second aspect of the challenge to one’s faith by the *mix of beliefs and doctrines* and practices prevailing in society. That’s how it was for the Colossian believers then. Likely the most influential in our society is *materialism* – one can get on quite well without God, thank you very much. That’s all very well but then things can go wrong, and who to turn to? Then there’s others who find that materialism less than satisfying and are drawn to deeper knowledge and thinking. They are asking, ‘What is the purpose of life? Why am I on earth?’

Paul's concern for the Colossians was that they not become captive to philosophy and empty deceit. My concern for us is of the influence of social media and TV in people's lives. There's much that is trash and indeed to use a current phrase it's 'fake news'. For example, on TV in nature documentaries it can be really hard to discern the real from the virtual, as for example one watches dinosaurs lumbering along in a modern-day Jurassic portrait. That's what's annoyed me about some recent documentaries in the history of mammals and birds in our own country. It's speculation.

3) This influence then wasn't the only one pervading the believers. There were those previously of Jewish faith who continued to advocate the customs of old like circumcision. Here Paul is saying that's not necessary. What is important in initiation is being *baptised* into a relationship with Jesus. Furthermore, this has to do with who Jesus is, one who by his death and rising again rendered it possible to be forgiven and come back into a right relationship with God. Which after all had been the purpose of circumcision. Then he adds there were the food laws and other regulations: Paul asks 'Why do you submit to regulations: Do not handle, do not taste. Do not touch... all these are simply human commands and teachings.' (2.22). And he continues, 'They have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility and severe treatment of the body...'

In this respect thankfully, there's less influences on us. There's so little regard for the traditional – one really needs to visit Te Papa or the like to see things the way they were. Now modern amenities have totally overcome, the cooking, the washing, the means of transport, of our grandparents. Some mantras we learned still apply - I remember my parents saying when we went to stay somewhere, always leave it tidier than when you found it.

4) There's another aspect, summed up as '*spiritualities*'. As well there was the influence of the Greek gods and goddesses and customs related. Paul called them 'the elemental spirits of the universe.' They also had customs and practices in matters of food and drink regarding festivals, or new moons. Actually, St Paul doesn't prohibit these. He writes perhaps surprisingly, 'Do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food or drink or observing festivals...' This would suggest he allowed them to have their place, but they were not to be regarded as the way of salvation. He describes them as 'but a shadow of what is to come.' And he affirms the substance belongs to Christ.' (2.17).

'Spiritualities' are more engaging in these days. And affects all ages. For us there's practices towards *well-being* people have and do find helpful, some with religious foundations: pilates, tai chi, yoga, homeopathy, for example. If we are to take Paul's guidance it is that these are not to dominate our lives. The basis and substance is to be Christ and our relationship with him.

*In summary*, with so many pressures and influences on people these days one might indeed refer to them as 'elemental spirits of the universe'. Our calling is to be committed to Christ. For us to keep a perspective and focus on priorities it's really important to bear in mind what the passage began with tonight – let me read it again: 'As you therefore have received Christ

Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up and established in the faith'.