

SERMON - 12/08/18
(ST JAMES EVENSONG SERVICE)

Texts: Isaiah 42:1-9
 Colossians 1:24-2:7

Focus of text: Jesus Christ is the centre

Title: Christ is the centre.

~~~~~

May the word of God be spoken and heard. Amen.

Albert Einstein is probably the most famous modern example of a scientific genius.

A lot of modern physics is based on his insights into the universe.

One of the noticeable things about Einstein's work is that he sought to find the simplest way of explaining things.

There is an elegance about  $E=MC^2$  that overturns our expectations.

We would have naturally thought that such an important insight into our universe as Einstein's theory of general relativity would have been very complex.

It's true that the universe is hugely complex, but at its heart there is this staggeringly graspable nugget of truth.

In the same way, in the spiritual world, Paul has a very simple but staggering insight.

At the centre of the whole spiritual and physical universe - at the heart of creation - is God in Jesus Christ.

Last month introducing our sermon series on Paul's Letter to the Colossians, Derek Lightbourne spoke of "the cosmic Christ" - Christ at the centre of the universe. His sermon particularly related to the great passage in Colossians chapter 1 verses 15-20, but the sense of Christ at the centre of all things permeates this whole letter. And we will find this in the passage we're looking at today.

There are two parts to the passage from Colossians we have heard today.

In the first part (chapter 1 verse 24 to chapter 2 verse 1) Paul continues on from verse 23 in introducing himself as a messenger of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

His own experience of service to Christ and his Gospel is about putting Christ at the centre of things.

The second part of the reading (chapter 2, vv. 2-7) consists of what Paul wants for the Christians to whom he is writing.

Here again, Christ is at the centre.

Christ is the gift given to them - and to us.

He is the mystery at the centre of the universe that has been revealed to us.

He is the one through whom and in whom we can participate in God's plan for the universe.

And so, he wants them to stand firm in their faith in

Christ.

Let's look at these two parts in more depth.

In the first, Paul has introduced himself to the Christians in Colossae, a place that he has probably never visited, although he did spend some years not far from their town when he lived in Ephesus on the coast of Asia Minor - modern Turkey.

This part of the passage is constructed in what is known as an inclusion, or inclusion.

Paul focuses on one topic, he goes on to talk about another topic, and then refers back to the first topic again.

His topic is his struggle for the Church, which is so costly for him personally.

"I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church."

The noticeable thing is that he relates his own sufferings to the sufferings of Christ.

He finds fellowship in Christ even in suffering, because Christ too suffered to bring God's salvation to the world. In this there is an idea that a certain amount of suffering will be endured by Jesus' followers before he comes again.

Paul considers it a privilege to have his own part to play in enduring some of that suffering so that in due time Christ will return to make all things new.

In this sense he rejoices in the sufferings he endures.

I think it's important to notice this.

This isn't just Paul's pious expression.

It is his real experience of life with Christ.

Even suffering with Christ is a privilege, because it is life with Christ and in Christ, working in his service.

It is not just the great apostles or the spiritual leaders who are called to share in Christ's life including in suffering. Suffering in itself is not a good, but suffering for the sake of Christ, for doing what he wants us to do, that is a good. This means that our frame of reference is not "am I suffering? If so, that's bad. Am I free from suffering? If so, that's good."

Like Paul, all of us who follow Jesus are called to live life in Christ and for his sake.

So, the sort of question we should live by is far more, "What is Jesus asking of me in the situation I'm in? If I can discern what he is asking of me, I will ask God to help me enter into that even if it involves suffering. Because this is the way that I can follow Christ as his disciple and share in his life."

This is good news...and bad news - but it's absolutely fundamental to Paul's way of thinking for himself and for those he is writing to.

If we suffer with Christ and for Christ, we are blessed, because we are living with Christ at the centre of our lives.

Paul then goes on to speak of Christ as the heart of his message.

The message of God through Jesus Christ is that all people, not only Jews, can live in fellowship with God through Jesus.

We and the Colossian Christians and all people are invited to belong to God through faith in Christ.

This was not understood in former times and so Paul speaks of it as a mystery that has now been revealed.

And he expresses the mystery as: “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

Christ’s life in ordinary people like us gives us hope of living a glorious, empowered, holy life, sharing Christ’s life not only in heaven but right now on earth as well.

And then Paul rounds off this inclusion by repeating that he is toiling and struggling for this.

He is probably in prison in Rome as he writes this.

So, he is well acquainted with suffering and spiritual struggle.

But he is determined, and he rejoices in his mission.

In the second part of the passage Paul speaks of what he wants his letter to accomplish.

He says, “I want the hearts of all to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s

mystery - that is Christ himself.

He wants them to have Christ because “in him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

Paul continues, “I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments.”

He doesn’t want Christians to be looking for the secret to human life and salvation anywhere else than in Christ.

He doesn’t want people to argue that something else apart from Jesus is necessary, because God’s will and God’s goal for humanity is revealed in the life of Christ.

For Paul the mystery has been revealed.

Now it needs to be lived out in believers’ lives.

So, Paul ends this passage by giving an exhortation to the Corinthian Christians.

“As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”

The appropriate response to God’s great gift to us in Christ is worship, thanksgiving and lives lived in Christ’s power and to his glory.

That is our task as Christians.

Not only to recognise in our minds and hearts that Jesus is our Saviour and Lord, but to live that out in our daily choices – in the attitudes we bring to life and in our

relationships with God and with others.

It's said that physicists are still searching for the Theory of Everything that will link gravity with all the other physical forces in a single theory of how things work. Einstein didn't discover it, and no one has discovered it since then.

Amen.

But spiritually speaking, Paul had come to a theory of everything, and it was Christ.

Christ is at the centre of the universe, Christ is in us and we are in Christ, God is in Christ and Christ is in God.

This vision of Christ was not just an intellectual insight or theory from Paul.

It was his own lived experience.

His life was so bound up in his relationship with Jesus Christ that he could say "for me to live is Christ" or "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me".

While it is unlikely that any of us will have this close a sense of union with Christ, we are all called to grow in union with him – we are meant for union with him.

This week let us constantly be encouraged by Paul's letter to move closer to Christ, to enter more fully into his life, to let his thinking transform our thinking and his love transform our love.

And may our lives bring glory and praise to Christ, whom we serve together.