

As we approach **Christmas** time, it's time to think like Paul as he prayed for the Colossians: our **faith** in Christ Jesus - the **faith** and **love** that spring from the **hope** that is stored up for us in heaven. Just as Paul spoke about faith, hope and love in his letter to the Corinthians, he's doing it here in his letter to the Colossians.

We always **thank** God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we **pray** for you. Paul says this in verse 3, as he starts out on his letter of **encouragement** to the brothers and sisters at Colossae. Yet he had almost certainly **never** met them. This doesn't mean that he doesn't pray for them: when he hears of people who have come to faith, he prays for them, just as we should continue in our prayers for our brothers and sisters, even those we have never met.

But why does Paul **thank** God when he prays for these people? In verse 4, because we have heard of your **faith** in **Christ Jesus** and the love you have for all the saints. That's the key: faith in Christ Jesus: faith in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ: this is not faith in a system, or a doctrine, or a philosophy - it is faith in a person, the Lord Jesus Christ. So often we hear people saying that you've just got to have faith, and that's not enough. That's where we go wrong if we're like Prince Charles, who wants to become "Defender of Faith". That's no use. We need to have someone at our head is "Defender of **The** Faith". Of course, that's where we start to hit trouble with people today.

Paul is encouraging and reassuring the people of Colossae that they have heard the true gospel: that's what we have in the next verse, verse 5: **the faith** and **love** that

spring from the **hope** that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have **already heard about** in the **word of truth**, the **gospel** that has come to you.

What is the “**hope**”? The Second Coming! That's a key to the whole message of the gospel, and as we are in **Advent**, we are looking forward to the coming of Christ - not just looking forward to **Christmas**, when we remember Christ born in Bethlehem, but also looking forward to the Second Coming - the great hope in the return of Christ!

Faith is the soul looking *upward* to God; love looks *outward* to others; hope looks *forward* to the future. Faith rests on the *past* work of Christ; love works in the *present*; and hope anticipates the *future*.

So why is Paul stressing this? It seems that it is because there were some other people round in Colossae who were questioning whether what had been presented to the Colossian church was the whole truth. When Epaphras came back to Colossae with the message of salvation that he had heard from Paul, had he got the **whole** message? Had he got it right, or had he missed a key part? Well, Paul is stressing that they have got it right, and there isn't any more. The good news about Jesus Christ is very simple: in the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul writes

"I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you...by this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preach to you...

- that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures
- that he was buried

- that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures
- that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve"

And really, that's it. There were other teachers in Colossae, who had something to add to the faith, but what they had to add was a **false teaching**. Probably these false teachers were Gnostics, who taught that Christ could not have been fully man because they believed that flesh is **itself** sinful. Others taught then, and still teach or believe today that Christ was **just a man**, or that he was a **good teacher**, or that he was a **prophet**.

Isn't that what the Deceiver does? He takes something straightforward, and then uses doubt and tries to make it into something far more complicated. He's been doing this since the very beginning. Back in the Garden of Eden, there was just one simple rule: don't eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And then the serpent planted the first seed of doubt: Did God really say...? And then he called God a liar. That's exactly what's happening here in Colossae. The free gift of salvation is very simple. Anyone can understand it and accept it, but there's the suggestion from the false teachers that there's more to it than that. It just can't be that simple. There must be more to it than this. And it happens here too. I can't accept a gift: I must give something in return. I'm not worthy.

And that's another thing that the Deceiver does. He is telling us that we can't have **Christ in Christmas**, yet there doesn't seem to be anyone who is offended by it. Those of other faiths seem to think it quite **reasonable** that we celebrate Christ at Christmas, while others insist that they have nothing against it but don't want to offend

the people who have told us that they aren't offended. Last Christmas, Steve James told us that without Christ, there's nothing left: let's **celebrate**...because it's **winter**!

Now, as I said before, Paul had never been to Colossae, so it's quite likely that the visitors were **driving a wedge** between Epaphras and Paul, perhaps confusing the people of the young Colossian church. They would be **questioning** whether the message from Epaphras was the whole message, or whether there was far more to it. That's why Paul stresses this is his letter.

Now, I don't know whether any of you here have ever been in **court**. I know I have, **several times**. When you take the stand, you swear that you will - perhaps I should mention that it was just as a witness - anyhow, when you take the stand, you swear that you will tell

- **the truth**
- **the whole truth**
- **nothing but the truth**

and in just the same way that we can only see justice done in court when all these three are in place, it's just the same with the **gospel message**. If any of those three (the truth, the whole truth, nothing but the truth) is missing, then we have done serious harm to the unique message of salvation through Christ.

If we add to the gospel message, or take away from it, we don't have the **gospel**. As an **example**, how much is our Christmas the same as the one described in the Bible? If I think of the Christmas I celebrate, I can see there are things that aren't too much in the message: now, I'm not saying that

- turkeys or robins,

- tinsel and crackers,
- trees or snowmen

are bad, but none of them are in the Christmas story. And if we take away the **manger**, or the **shepherds**, or the **angels**, we have lost the story.

So, do we **possess** and **preach "the truth"**? You have all heard here many times how our claim to **the truth** is a **scandal** or an **offence** to others. But we simply **cannot** compare our message with any other religious teaching. "That is truth for you but not for me". But Christianity is absolute: Christianity is universal: "This is truth for everyone."

I am at a loss as to where the idea of tolerance comes from. I can understand the point of view of the extremist Muslim, who proclaims that his way is the only way. I **struggle** to understand the mind of the one who says that we must value faith wherever it is found, and who say that we must be tolerant. That **isn't** what the Bible teaches! I will certainly acknowledge that he has a right to believe as he chooses, but I **will not say** that he has his truth and I have mine: there is one truth, and it is absolutely true.

On the one hand, we have an enormously popular hymn that proclaims:

"In Christ alone my hope is found
He is my light, my strength, my song"

"For I am His and He is mine
Bought with the precious blood of Christ"

and on the other hand we have a society that doesn't seem to believe it at all.

Yet Paul says in verse 6 "all over the world, this gospel is

bearing fruit and growing". Alongside that, our experience in the **western world today** is quite different, and we can find people who tell us that missionary effort is **offensive**, and we should leave people to their **own** belief systems. But I've already talked about that, and how we should be proclaiming an **absolute truth** to **everyone**.

Hear a survey from the National Christian Council of **Kenya**: "Wherever the Word of God - the preaching of the Good News - went amongst the animistic tribal populations of Kenya, the response was **instantaneous**, **immediate** and **enormous**."

And again: Statistical analysis shows very clearly that although the first seed was **originally** a foreign import, the resultant Christianity in Kenya **cannot** be thought of as a foreign transplant, but rather must be seen as an **indigenous** plant from the very first. Its expansion has not been due primarily to external forces (foreign missions, colonial pressures, western education or civilisation): it has been due **primarily** to **internal** forces within the African churches themselves.

So we can see that there is no need for the dodgy additions that the false teachers were claiming to bring.

But now let us look at **prayer**: from verse 9 on, Paul gives us as helpful an insight into **prayer** as anyone can:

In verses 9, 10 and 11, Paul prays for certain blessings
In verses 11 to 14, he lists those things for which he gives thanks.

So, verse 9: from the day we heard of it, we have not

ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding

Right through his **life** and his **letters**, we can see clearly that Paul is a great intercessor. And he urged us to be the same. So he wasn't afraid to pray and ask God. And in his prayers, he made **specific** requests. If Paul, or anyone else, asks God a **vague** request, then a **vague** response will be all that we can reasonably expect.

And when you don't pray, nothing happens.

On the other hand, a **specific** prayer will get a **specific** answer. So it's no surprise at all that when Paul started to receive good news of the progress of the church in Colossae, he started to pray **without ceasing** for the young Christians there.

May you be strengthened with **all power**, according to his **glorious might**. How can you put it any better than that? This is an extraordinary prayer. Yet it is what a disciple is asking God for fellow Christians.

And the prayer continues, calling for us to enjoy God's power for great **endurance** and **patience**. Now, is that an anticlimax? I don't think it is. It's a prayer for those of us who need endurance and patience in our daily lives, and that, of course, means all of us. We need God's almighty hand to help us keep on despite whatever **suffering** or **opposition** or **disappointment** we meet, and we do this without being despondent or downcast, but with joy.

So we need to be confident when we pray and when we

do what God has told us to do. So we endure and we are patient, and by the faith and the hope and the love, we keep on. It has been so much easier for us to come back to Bebington with a solid faith and a confidence that we are doing what God wants us to do. Our hope is in the God who leads us forward to the future, and the adventures that we will have.

So, in our prayers and our thoughts this Christmas time, let us think about the gospel Paul preaches to us...by this gospel we are saved, if you hold firmly to the word he preaches to you: **the faith** and **love** that spring from the **hope** that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have **already heard about** in the **word of truth**.

Amen.