

Texts: Colossians 1:1-14

Sunday 24th February 2019 (evening)

Brightons Parish Church

When I reached that stage of looking at potential charges, for a multitude of reasons Brightons stood head and shoulders above so many other parish profiles, and one of those reasons is that you said increasing and enhancing your prayer life was core to our vision for the next five years.

And so, over this first year, I'm thinking that our evening services will seek to be a place where we nurture that prayer life, **because as I quoted last week**, "there has never...been a revival in the church that did not begin with a renewal of prayer." (Justin Welby)

To aid us in that, we'll probably look at the prayers of Paul over this first year because through those prayers we can see what to pray for, and how to approach God, and why we can do so confidently and expectantly. But our evening services need to have something else as well, we need to have time to pray; to put into practice what we hear, for it would be too easy to speak about prayer, have a quick cup of tea, and go home never to take the prayers of Paul upon our own lips before the very throne of God. So, tonight we'll try one way of doing that, and it won't require you to pray in front of anyone else, so please don't be worried. But first, let's get into this prayer for the Colossians. I'm going to go through it portion by portion, from beginning to end, and unpack it briefly as we go that we might catch the flow of Paul's prayer and his concern for this church.

V1-2: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to God’s holy people in Colossae, the faithful brothers and sisters in Christ: Grace and peace to you from God our Father.”

Paul often begins his letters this way, where he takes the customary greeting of the time and changes it to integrate the Christian faith. What’s noteworthy here is that Paul calls the Colossians “God’s holy people” who are “faithful brothers and sisters in Christ”. By calling them “holy”, Paul reminds and encourages them that they are set apart to be God’s people, that they belong to God, they are now His treasured possession.

Paul also calls the Colossians “faithful”, which is unusual in Paul’s letters, because normally he is writing to a group of people who have got themselves into trouble. But the Colossians are “faithful”, they are steadfast under pressure, holding tightly to the Christian faith, to the truth that they are genuinely “in Christ”, that this in their new identity, an identity which goes beyond any category or label or status marker.

These are words which we need to know and own for ourselves, for they can fuel our prayer life, they can help us understand who we are and what it means to be Christian. **This past week, a committee met to reflect on how we as a Church might fulfil our mission statement “to show Christ’s love to all and be a blessing to the wider world” in particular to our young people...**

and the young people of our parish. Identity is such a crucial area for anyone, but especially for young people, and in a world where so little is stable and sure or hopeful, to have one's identity rooted in God is a strong foundation, knowing you are part of God's holy people, you are God's treasured possession, heir to the promises of God because you are in Christ. Our young people need to know this, but we need to know it too. For when we know it deep down, then we too might remain as faithful as the Colossians, who were surrounded by a plethora of religions, and an attitude that it was OK to take bits and pieces from each one. The purity of the Colossians' faith is being threatened and squeezed, just as ours is in our time, and yet they remained faithful - will we? If our identity is in Christ, then we shall.

V3: “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you...”

Paul now moves into a thanksgiving section and is genuinely thankful for these brothers and sisters in Christ, but he has never actually met these Christians – he has only heard of them. But Paul is thankful and that presents two challenges for us. In our prayers, are we genuinely thankful to God for our brothers and sisters in Christ, are we thankful for God’s work in their life? And secondly, do we restrict our thanksgiving purely for the people we know?

V4: “...because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God’s people...”

The source of Paul's thanksgiving is that these people in Colossae have responded to the Good News and it is affecting their way of life. These men and women have come to put their faith in Christ Jesus – not just in God, not just in some mysterious power or influencer behind the scenes, but in Jesus, the God-man. In this particular person they have placed their “faith” – and faith is much more than just having the right knowledge or ideas about God or Jesus, to put your faith in Jesus is to act on your beliefs, it is to come to that place where Jesus becomes core to who we are, to how you live, He becomes the centre of your life.

And when that happens, we live differently, He helps us to change and to show His love to one another, across the boundaries of age, class, theology or any other division...

in this world. And to love is to intend every action to bring benefit to another, it is to be “for” the other person, for their benefit, for their well-being. Jesus said the world would know by our love for one another that we are His disciples.

V5-6a: “- the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel that has come to you.”

Paul here emphasises the “true message of the gospel” and most likely that is because, at the time, some outsiders were belittling and maligning the Colossians’ hope, prompting some to develop nagging doubts, and so Paul wants to revive their certainty...

of what the gospel promises, of the “hope” they have. This “hope” is not wishful thinking, it is not “I hope the weather will be OK tomorrow”. True hope in a biblical sense is the confident expectation that God will fulfil his promises, that what we have now is but a foretaste of a much greater future ahead. That doesn’t mean we live solely for the future, for as we saw, it should fuel love in action now. But without that hope, we would simply give up on the now. But the Christian has a hope that cannot be torn away, that cannot spoil or fade, a hope that a better day is ahead and has begun to break into this world even now. In my own life this has been crucial...It’s a hope which keeps fuelling faith and love.

The Colossians are bearing the fruit of faith and love and hope, and Paul writes that this is happening in other places, for which he is as equally excited and thankful. We read...

V6b-8: “In the same way, the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world – just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s grace. You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.”

The fruitfulness of the gospel has come about because ordinary, everyday Christians like Epaphras are sharing the Good News, are investing in the lives of others,...

are expending themselves for the sake of Jesus and a world which He died for. Friends, do we have that same concern as Paul, to see the gospel bearing fruit here? Are we an Epaphras in our neighbourhoods and workplaces, in our families and with our friends?

It's because of all that has been written up till now – of Paul's thanksgiving, of his concern for the faith, love and hope of the Colossians, for his passion for the gospel to bear fruit, that Paul now tells them of the regularity and content of his prayers.

V9a: “For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to...”

In this verse, Paul says he has “not stopped praying”, that he does so “continually”. It’s unlikely to be 24/7, more probably Paul has set times of prayer, as was the Jewish custom, and during those he consistently brings the Colossians before God, Paul has not forgotten them. What’s striking also, is that these words suggest that there are some things we must pray again and again, even when things are going well.

V9b: “...We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives...”

As soon as we read “his will” we probably begin to think of specific situations, that this is a prayer about helping us to discern God’s will for our future, our family,...

our church. But that's not generally what Paul has in mind when he speaks of "God's will". **Instead, for Paul**, having the knowledge of God's will is to recognise how Jesus is the Messiah, the fulfilment of God's promises. The knowledge of God's will is also to recognise that God's salvation is open to all people and is important for all people. And finally, the knowledge of God's will is how to live in response, and in light of, this Good News. Paul writes about these kinds of things again and again, for he wants these early churches, who don't have a New Testament, to understand what it means that Jesus is Messiah and how that should shape our lives. As he writes **later in Colossians**: "My goal is that [you and those at Laodicea] may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery

of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” (Col. 2:2-3)

And for this, we need wisdom and understanding from God’s Holy Spirit, to help us know what is truly important in life from God’s perspective, to lead us into deeper faith, and greater likeness to Jesus. Thus, Paul prays for God to fill the Colossians with the knowledge of his will. How often do we pray for that for ourselves, or our young people? As we have been thinking about in the morning services, what might have happened if the early church had not been confident in these very things? Might the issues in the Church in Scotland today stem from the reality that many folks in our pews struggle to hold on to these truths? And have struggled for generations. So, Paul prays for the knowledge of God’s will and continues...

V10a: “...so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way:...”

For Paul, knowledge is never the end goal, knowledge is always for something. In Ephesians, the prayer for the knowledge of God’s love has as its goal that believers to be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Here in Colossians, the filling of the knowledge of God’s will is so that those in Christ may live a worthy life, a fitting life, a consistent life with who they are and what Jesus has done, and that in doing so they may please Jesus instead of seeking to please others. Again, a great need in our day. What it looks like is spelt out by Paul in the next few verses.

V10b: “...:bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,...”

So as Paul prays for the Colossians to grow in the knowledge of God’s will, and to live a life worthy and pleasing to Jesus, one outworking of this is that they will bear fruit in every good work. Paul uses “fruit” in his letters to refer both to the fruit of the Spirit, as in Galatians, and to seeing people coming to faith, as earlier in Colossians, and probably both are in mind, since Paul also wrote about the love the Colossians have “in the Spirit” (v8). Both are fitting and good here, because as Jesus said, “let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” – as Christians give themselves to good works in the community and within the church,...

then it can bring forth and show the fruit of the Spirit, as well as nurture the seeds of faith, and either can lead to God being glorified and that is worthy and pleasing.

Paul also says that growing in the knowledge of God's will shall lead to growing in the knowledge of God. It sounds a little bit strange, a little bit redundant, but as we realise God's will in Jesus, and what God was up to in Jesus, then we see more of the character and ways of God – for example, in the New Testament we see that God is a good heavenly Father, a revelation that really only came to fruition through Jesus. It is through the knowledge of God's will that we are led to a deeper knowledge of God Himself, and how our congregation and society need that too. Moving on...

V11: “being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience,...”

The knowledge of God’s will is also for our benefit in that being filled with this shall help us to endure and to be patient, we shall continue toward the goal. But to have such endurance and patience, indeed to know the will of God and God Himself, we need to be strengthened by the power of God, not in a once-for-all experience but as a continuous activity of God. **Paul prays similarly for the Ephesians: “I pray that you...may have power...to know [the love of Christ] that surpasses knowledge.” (Eph. 3:17-19)**

There is no true knowledge of God without God's help, for it is by His power that it goes beyond our intellect into every fibre of our being, strengthening us for the life we are called to. Lastly, Paul concludes...

V12-14: "...and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

As we are filled with the knowledge of God's will and seek to live appropriately in response, one final mark is to live in thankfulness, joyful thankfulness to the Father, who so very much loved this world...

that His Son died for us that we might have forgiveness of sins, and be brought into the kingdom of the Son, the kingdom of light; set free, redeemed, from the dominion of darkness. The gospel is not only forgiveness but freedom, deliverance, into a life that reflects the One who rescued us and as such is pleasing to Him and worthy of all He has done for us.

What Paul writes, what he prays is staggering. Do we pray similarly? Are we thankful? Do we pray such things for one another? Do we recognise our need for such prayers? Are your prayers as focused on Jesus as Paul's are?

It's a mighty prayer and one we should seek to bring into our own prayer life. May it be so. Amen.