

Daily Inspiration in St Paul's letter to the Colossians

Day 1 – Colossians 1:1-2 'First things first'

Not many of us write letters anymore – at least not by choice. Emails, texts, posts, tweets, blogs – but a letter? Only for formal replies to institutions: and even then, usually typed on a computer and printed out.

To receive a handwritten letter nowadays is a rare and beautiful thing. However, whilst it is tempting to imagine that this is only a modern phenomenon, you may be surprised to learn that letter writing was equally rare 2,000 years ago – paper was expensive and difficult to make or acquire. A handwritten letter was just as precious then as it is now.

Today we begin a detailed look at one such precious letter written 2,000 years ago – by St Paul to a fairly new Christian community living in the city of Colossae, now in modern-day Turkey. Paul had not started this church, although his protégé Epaphras had likely started it following Paul's fruitful time in Ephesus. However, he did want to encourage them in their faith, so he sent another friend Tychicus to them with this letter, and encouraged them also to read the one he sent to the church down the road in Laodicea at the same time.

Although the letter is only four chapters – this is typically the amount of text that could be squeezed onto one sheet of papyrus, which is why most of Paul's letters are roughly this length – there's so much in it which is just as relevant to us today. The Colossians (i.e. people who live in Colossae, hence the English name of the letter) lived life in the spiritual supermarket, just as we do. They had a vibrant faith but faced pressure to add unnecessary things to their faith, just as we do. They needed to keep grasping just what a glorious message we have, and who we really are in Christ – just as we do.

And it starts with a simple greeting: '*grace and peace*'. It was Paul's adaptation of a typical Roman greeting... but so much more. In three simple words he defines the beating heart of our faith, of what it means for us to be followers of Christ. First, grace: God's undeserved mercy to us, his heart of love for humanity, shown in Christ. I was brought up to understand grace by this simple acronym: God's Riches At Christ's Expense – and it's hard to get a better definition, even now. Philip Yancey describes grace as the 'last, best word of the English language,' defining it as: 'nothing you can do can make God love you more, nothing you can do can make God love you less.' I like that.

And the outcome of grace is that second word: peace. More than just the absence of conflict, it derives from the Hebrew word shalom, which means complete wellbeing in every dimension. Whilst we may feel a long way short of that, to know the grace of Christ slowly brings order and peace to all our relationships: with God, with others, with the wider community, even with ourselves.

Grace and peace. What better way to greet someone – even someone you meet today? And what better thing to pray as we begin our series: may God fill us all with a deeper understanding of his grace, that we too might overflow with peace. Amen.

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Day 2 – Colossians 1:3-5 'Faith, hope and love'

Yesterday we looked at the foundations of our good news: the two pillars, if you will, of grace and peace. God's gift of undeserved mercy, which in turn brings shalom to our relationships in every dimension. God's *grace*, our *peace*. These are the twin foundations on which our walk with Jesus rests – and as such, it's a perfect way to introduce a letter designed to strengthen our spiritual lives.

Today, Paul builds on that image by describing how to build fruitfully on those foundations. What are the defining characteristics of this life-giving journey, of what it *means* to live in grace and peace? As Paul gives thanks for what God is doing in the church in Colossae, he talks about three old friends, which form the basis of our reflection today: faith, hope and love.

You may be familiar with something called the 'rule of three'. It's a very old concept, formalised in ancient Greece, though you can see it in the earliest chapters of scripture – the idea that things go better in threes. As an aside, theologically I think that probably has something to do with the nature of God himself: we worship God as 3-in-1, as Father, Son and Spirit. So, it would be natural that human beings – made in this divine image – have a deep connection with things that come in 3s.

And in the bible, alongside the Trinity, probably the most well-known 'set of 3' is the set we encounter today. It was something Paul had famously developed in a letter written a few years earlier to the Christian community in Corinth, and still used in many wedding ceremonies today: 'and now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.'

In this letter, Paul develops this '3' by focusing on where each attribute is directed. First we need *faith in Jesus*. This is vital. We often commend faith in a generic sense, but the bible always insists that our faith has to be directed *somewhere*: specifically, our faith is to be in Jesus. Why? Because we need to place faith in someone we can trust, who loves us, who is completely dependable, and has both the compassion and the authority to make things right. That would be Jesus.

Empowered by this faith, we are then able to *selflessly serve (i.e. to love) our fellow Christians*. That's not to say that we don't love all people, but we are to give particular love and support to those who also try to follow Jesus – who could you apply that to today?

Finally, this life of faith and love has a future purpose: we are living for eternity, the *hope of heaven*. Time and again, we are encouraged to see heaven as a motivating factor in our here-and-now lives: the firm and confident conviction that we are headed somewhere much better than here. Yes, we seize every day on this earth, and give thanks for every blessing: but we are on a journey somewhere better.

Faith, hope and love – it's 'the true message of the gospel' (v5) and what Paul gives thanks for in the lives of his readers. May it be our 'rule of 3' too, and may God stir in us ever more completely these golden threads of: faith, hope and love.

Day 3 – Colossians 1:3-8 'All over the world'

The Church is a very big thing. *Very* big. It's hard for us to get a true handle on just how many people claim to follow Jesus. Think of a big crowd that you've been part of. One of the biggest for me was the crowd of 80,000 in the Olympic Stadium in London in 2012. That was an amazing experience – but, if current figures are roughly correct, the global Church is more than 25,000 times larger than that crowd!

25,000 London Stadia all joined together... that's the true size of the Church in our time. It's pretty hard to get your head around, isn't it? And maybe a bit unsettling, too. I like being in big crowds, I find them energising. I've always loved the thrill of being part of something bigger, that sense of losing yourself in a collective experience. But the last phrase is suggestive: 'losing yourself' is also not necessarily something we like to feel too often. Does the size of the Church mean that we as individuals don't matter any more?

In today's passage, St. Paul speaks joyfully of the fact that, even in his day, just thirty years after the 'Jesus movement' began, it was 'growing throughout the whole world' (v6). And within the more limited understanding of the size of the world at that time, this was certainly true. Paul himself had travelled all round the Eastern Mediterranean, including Greece and Turkey. He had first met Jesus on the way to Syria. It had already spread to Rome without his direct influence. It was known to be in North Africa, and Paul no doubt knew of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian official, so was likely to be further south, too. 'Throughout the world....'

At the time Paul wrote, the actual numbers would have been small: a few tens of thousands at most – they could have fitted comfortably into one London Stadium! But a movement had begun which would truly spread across the world. Today there is at least one follower of Christ in every country, and millions in most of them. How great is our God!

But – and this is our other encouragement for today – it is *not* an impersonal gospel. Or to put it another way – you matter. The amazing thing about God is that he still knows and loves each one of us. Each of us is precious. And each of us plays our part. The church in Colossae came to faith because of the work of one faithful follower – Epaphras – from whom this small group of believers learned about Jesus (v7). In turn, this small community of individuals now loved each other (v8).

Huge as it is, *in the kingdom of God everyone matters*. The mustard seeds that grow the great tree are still vital seeds in their own right.

If you get the chance today, find a mature tree or large shrub in bloom. Enjoy its magnificence – a glorious sight! Then choose just one leaf or petal, and look closely at it. It's amazing. It's beautiful in its own right. That's you. Yes, there are tens of thousands like you on the same tree – but your leaf matters. Your small act of 'bearing fruit and growing' plays its part. Thanks be to God!

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Day 4 – Colossians 1:9-14 (i) 'Wisdom and understanding'

I wonder what you like to pray for? If any of us took a good look at the content of our prayers, we would likely find that most of us – me included – focus a lot on practical requests. And that's fine: Jesus encourages us to ask God for what we need today (our daily bread), and there's no harm in naming those things. Or indeed for naming others who need particular things, too.

But I always find it helpful to look at the content of biblical prayers – especially the prayers of St Paul in the letters he wrote. Whenever I read them, it seems to open out a new dimension for me in prayer. It's like Paul is praying on a different plane, you might say a deeper foundation. It's the difference between asking to be given bread and asking to learn how to bake – at least some of what we need. Now that would be something, wouldn't it?

And it usually starts with our *minds*. Before Paul prays about people's lives, he prays – like he does here – for 'God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives.' (v9) If we know God's will, then it's much easier both to pray for that will to be done, and also to try and do it. We're no longer stumbling along in the dark, but walking more confidently in the light.

It's deceptively simple, but powerful. And as I've tried to grow in my own walk with Jesus, I've learned to give more time in my prayers to asking God for *wisdom to know what to pray for*. I've found that offering this prayer – which is usually answered more surprisingly clearly than you might think – both fills me with more confidence, boldness and inspiration than to pray whatever that is, and also saves precious time and energy, which can be invested in other ways.

But let's observe that this wisdom is *given by the Spirit*. It's vital that we give time in our prayers asking for God's Holy Spirit to fill our minds as well as our hearts. To think 'God-thoughts', to take the words we read in the Word to heart. Word and prayer go hand-in-hand: and as the two feed off each other – the Word inspires our prayers, which inspires us to go back to the Word for more, which inspires our prayers in turn, and so on – so we receive a different, more nourishing kind of bread. We start to co-operate a little in the baking process, so to speak.

Don't hear me wrong – I'm not preaching a gospel of self-reliance here. The Christian life is God's gift at its heart: it's just that Paul encourages us to pray for different gifts, a different kind of bread you might say. This kind of bread, Paul says, is remarkably energising, if verses 10-12 are anything to go by. We'll look a bit more at this bread next time.

But today, let's take a few moments to pray verse 9 for ourselves and for any situations where we particularly need wisdom and understanding. Ask God to reveal that wisdom to you by his Spirit – and may that wisdom feed your prayers and energise your walk with Jesus today. Amen.

Day 5 – Colossians 1:9-14 (ii) 'A worthy life'

'Wisdom is proved right by all her children.' These words of Jesus are beautifully turned into prayer by St Paul in verses 10-12 of this marvellous passage, which we return to today. Yesterday we looked at how Paul encouraged us to pray for spiritual wisdom and understanding as the first priority of his prayers for fellow Christians like us. How we need it!

But this kind of wisdom has good outcomes, and it is these outcomes that Paul now prays for us, too. In summary, spiritual wisdom enables us to 'live a life worthy of the Lord and [to] please him in every way' (v10). What a good aim in life to have – but thankfully Paul doesn't stop there, he puts flesh on the bones of the idea. This kind of worthy life manifests itself in several ways:

We bear fruit in every good work. I like the emphasis that it's not just good work – it is fruitful work. So many of the practical choices we make as followers of Jesus are to do *God stuff and not just good stuff*. It's a good habit to develop, to ask God to discern the 'God' things from the good things. Don't get me wrong, good things are still good things. But life is finite and time is short, there are usually several good things we can do at any point in time. What a blessing to have confidence that the particular good thing we aim to do is also the '*God thing*' – the thing which God will most use for his glory.

We grow in the knowledge of God – which is pretty self-explanatory, except to say that knowledge in this sense is always practical, life-orientated, and not just academic. We are to know God like we know how to bake a cake or drive a car – we could write down the recipe if we wished, but best of all we can actually do it!

We have great endurance. As we've observed before, it's not how you start, it's how you finish. Following Jesus is a long old journey. Simply keeping going, faithfully and consistently, is a very underrated quality. When asked about his qualification for becoming a missionary, William Carey – the father of overseas missions – simply said: 'I can plod'. God loves plodders!

We give joyful thanks – so often we come back to this thought: retaining a spirit of gratitude in our lives. Counting our blessings. It is easy to get stuck in a negative mindset – I do quite often. But gratitude is so powerful: it not only gives glory to God, it lifts our spirits, and inspires us to keep following our Lord wholeheartedly.

So... God stuff, not just good stuff; continuing to learn; plodding faithfully, whatever life throws at you; staying grateful – this is the worthy life. And I love the fact that it's, well, *normal*. It's not for the super-spiritual, it's the sort of list all of us can look at and say – 'well, I can manage at least two of those, and on a good day I can manage three or even all four.' And that's how it's meant to be. Following Jesus isn't easy – but it is for people like us! And God has all 'glorious might' (v11) to enable it to happen. How good is that?

Day 6 – Colossians 1:15-20 'Before all things'

Between Autumn 2022 and Spring 2023 we've witnessed the accession and then the coronation of our new king, Charles III. The pageantry and drama of the ancient ceremonies has captivated many of us, not least because the long reign of his mother meant that much of the country has never witnessed this in their lifetime.

One of the things that has struck me is the long list of titles which King Charles inherits. At his accession he was proclaimed 'Charles the Third, by the Grace of God of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of his other Realms and Territories, King, Head of the Commonwealth, Defender of the Faith.' Specifically, this means that he is now king of the following, in alphabetical order: King of Antigua and Barbuda, Australia, The Bahamas, Belize, Canada, Grenada, Jamaica, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, St Christopher and Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and, last but by no means least, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

A pretty impressive list... but it's nothing compared to the list we see here in our glorious passage for today. The small community of Colossian Christians were facing pressure to 'add things' to their faith, as if Jesus wasn't enough. Paul's answer was to write them this letter to remind them just how awesome Christ is – in other words, that he is more than sufficient for all we need in the spiritual life. Fundamentally, and put bluntly, Jesus is top dog, best of the best, numero uno – or, to use the language of the text, 'before all things'. The One who was, who is, and who is to come.

How can we possibly declare how great Christ is? We can't – but St Paul attempts a 'cosmic list' to try and give us a picture. Just look at Jesus' amazing titles in the passage, in the order they appear – a top ten to beat all top tens: (1) image of the invisible God; (2) firstborn over all creation; (3) creator of all things; (4) the reason that all things were created at all; (5) the One in whom everything holds together; (6) head of the church; (7) first to rise from the dead – note, in the sense that he has life within himself – we know of course that Jesus raised others in his earthly ministry; (8) possessor of the fullness of God; (9) the reconciler of all things to God; (10) the One who shed blood on the cross.

The last one jars, doesn't it – in the list of titles, it sticks out a mile. And yet, strangely, it is the one which decisively demonstrates the truth of all the others. It is the way Jesus himself declared that he would be glorified (John 12:23) – and through it, everything else is brought to fruition. Jesus' legacy is, extraordinarily, sealed through his death on our behalf: it is the fulcrum for his surpassing greatness which existed from the beginning of time, and is afterwards manifested in his resurrection power and authority.

We can never exhaust the greatness of Christ – there is no-one more amazing, no-one more worthy of our worship and adoration. Take a few moments to adore this extraordinary Saviour today, who died – and rose – for us. Hallelujah!

Day 7 – Colossians 1:21-23 'Presented holy'

When I was training in my previous role in the commercial world, an old colleague once said to me: 'If ever you feel intimidated in a meeting, just imagine them all sitting in their underpants.' It's a fairly comical strategy, but many will testify that it works!

This idea of finding ourselves in the presence of someone or others 'with no place to hide' is a hidden fear for many people. But if that seems scary in the presence of another human, imagine what that must be like in the presence of Almighty God. 'With no place to hide' wouldn't even come close to it!

Or so you would think. Certainly we have to acknowledge that the awesome presence of God throughout the bible was enough to make people fall on their faces before him. And yet, St Paul is able to talk of a very different reality for those who are in Christ. Thanks to the work of reconciliation effected by Jesus – through his bodily crucifixion and resurrection – the incredible news is that can now be presented to God 'holy in his sight' (v22).

The word 'holy' means set apart, chosen, special – and that is what we are. We might not *feel* like that – but the bible consistently affirms that it is true. For many of us, a key point of growth in our faith is to really accept the *fact* of our holiness – set-apartness – even if it doesn't always feel like it.

This act of being presented holy has two particular blessings attached to it: firstly we are '*without blemish*' *i.e. clean*. Many of us feel 'soiled' by things we've done wrong, or by the more general sense that life rubs off on us. But in Christ we are clean – 'not just nearly clean, but really clean', as the cheesy old ad put it. 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow,' as God promises in Isaiah 1 – praise God!

Second, we are '*free from accusation*'. And who accuses us? Most of the time, it is ourselves. Our consciences nag us, occasionally we get that little voice in the ear, whispering lies: 'You'll never be good enough for God' – or somesuch. But such lies are destroyed by the good news of our faith, by the *fact* of Jesus' death and resurrection. It is not a leap of faith as such, but an historical event. Feelings rest on faith. Faith rests on facts. And because Jesus really died and really rose, the voice in our ear can be silenced. There is no-one now to accuse us, because Jesus has declared us holy!

So whatever our past life – and Paul talks openly about the reality of that in v21 – our future is assured. In Christ we can be presented before God – holy, clean and 'in the clear'. 'This is the gospel that you heard...' Paul says (v23). It's the same gospel we hear now – and it is life, joy and peace to us. May we live clean, and free, today. Amen.

Day 8 – Colossians 1:24-27 'For the sake of his body'

Who'd be a leader? As General Hopper declares in the great animated film 'Ants': 'The first rule of leadership is – it's always your fault.' And we are all too painfully aware of the damage that can be done by leaders who are corrupted by power.

Which is why the Christian perspective on leadership is so refreshing. Jesus began a revolution in our understanding which has been our pattern ever since: 'Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant.' To lead we must serve. The very concept of 'public service' which still prevails even in secular government models could not exist without the Christian tradition from which it originates. It was unknown before the first century AD.

And it's also clear that the earliest Christian leaders adopted Jesus' model from the word go. St Paul here talks very personally about his own leadership journey, and describes it as follows: 'I have become its (the church's) servant by the commission God gave me.' (v25) And this servant leadership was hugely costly: most of us will be well aware of the suffering that Paul endured in order to fulfil the commission God gave him. Here he rather cryptically describes these trials as follows in v24: 'I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions.'

It's worth stressing that Paul is *not* saying that Jesus didn't suffer enough. But what he is saying is that to follow the pattern of Christlike leadership involved trials which were not unlike Jesus' own.

This reflection is certainly challenging for me to write. Many of us leaders are fortunate not to have been called to the same level of suffering to fulfil our particular callings. And yet leadership remains costly. And we are all called to live lives of service, after the pattern and example of Jesus.

So do take a few moments to pray for leaders today – outside the church, but especially within it. In particular, remember those leaders around the world who have to pay a similar price to the one Paul refers to here – but even for those who don't, may we all continue to fulfil a pattern of servant leadership, 'for the sake of his body,' and for the glory of Christ. Amen.

Day 9 – Colossians 1:24-27 (ii) 'Glorious riches'

If you were asked to summarise the purpose of life in a few words, what would you say? What's the point of it all? What represents the 'grand plan'?

It's a tough question, but in these stunning verses we get close to an answer. God's ultimate purpose for all people is this: 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (v27). This is the mystery that humanity has been waiting for – one that 'has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people' (v26).

It might sound fairly innocuous, but it goes to the heart of what it means to be human, what we were designed for. We were made to be in perfect, loving relationship with our creator. This was designed to be a beautiful, intimate friendship that would last forever. Our selfishness wrecked all that – but *in Christ this pattern can be restored*. We can know God intimately again – so closely that Christ dwells 'in you' by his Spirit. We have Jesus' constant loving presence abiding with us – teaching us, encouraging us, strengthening us, growing and maturing in us all the qualities of a flourishing life: peace, joy, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness. It is what we were made for – it is how things were always meant to be.

And this relationship is meant to last forever. Death was never meant to be the end – we were made to live in the embrace of God's love for eternity. Again, our selfishness shattered that, the world became dislocated. But in Christ we now have 'the hope of glory' – i.e. the assurance that we will enjoy this relationship, this healed state of being, for all time. God's glory never ends.

'*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*' Two simple phrases which define the ultimate purpose of life – and our destiny, praise God. These are indeed glorious riches, taking us well beyond simply 'saving souls' (and yes, it is that – but it is so much more!). It is the renewal of humanity, becoming the people God designed for us to be; and eventually, it is the restoring of all creation, which waits in hope for this new humanity – the children of God – to be revealed.

Today, let these awesome truths lift your spirits. Christ is in you – welcome him again! And you are walking in hope from earth into eternity – one day at a time.

Day 10 – Colossians 1:28-29 'Complete in Christ'

Today I want to introduce you to a word that is not very well-known, but is one of the most important words in the bible, and that is the little Greek word *teleios*. Now *teleios* is quite a hard word to define, but it's the word used here in verse 28 which is translated in modern translations as 'mature' or 'fully mature'. If you look at dictionaries, they'll use other words to define *teleios* like: completeness, perfection, integration, wholeness – the finished article, if you like. You get the idea!

The reason it's so important is that St Paul describes it in today's passage as *the goal of all discipleship*, indeed this text reads like his personal mission statement, the Big Idea that has defined and energised his whole life: 'to present everyone *teleios* in Christ.'

The word not used in many other places in the bible, but whenever it is, it's pretty big stuff. Jesus himself uses it in the iconic Sermon on the Mount as his summary of what a life submitted to God looks like: 'be *teleioi*,' (plural of *teleios*) Jesus says, 'as your heavenly Father is *teleios*.' (Matthew 5:48) In other words: God is a fully whole and complete being, he's the finished article – and we're made in his image, so his plan is for all of us to be, too.

Elsewhere, St Paul in another of his letters tells the Ephesians that, when leaders exercise the full range of their giftings and the body of Christ is built up accordingly, then we become *teleios*, 'attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ' (Ephesians 4:13).

It's quite a big thought for us to get our head around, isn't it? *God's purpose for you is nothing less than to become completely whole, fully perfected in Christ.* Wow! And as you read this, you're probably thinking: that is quite a long – let's be honest, a very long – way away. I sympathise: it is for me, too.

But that is the finish line – and the other good news for us today is that we don't aim for this on our own. We have people to help us, like Paul did for the Colossians – leaders, teachers, each other – and we also have the God's help: the Spirit of Christ, which 'so powerfully works' in us (v29).

However far you feel on this journey, give thanks that you *are* on this journey. God will get us to the finish line as finished articles, each one of us – and that finish line will be glorious. Take heart – you're further along than you think!

Day 11 – Colossians 2:1-5 'All the treasures'

Who's the smartest person you know? I suspect there'd be a range of answers to that question – you might have a particularly brainy friend or family member. Some of you will naturally think of famous big brains, like Albert Einstein or Alan Turing.

I bet not many of us said 'Jesus'. It's funny, isn't it? He's the Son of God, co-creator of the universe, the one holding it all together (1:17). He can rise from the dead, heal people spontaneously, calm the natural elements at his command, and know what people are thinking without saying it. He can do all that... but we don't usually think of him as clever.

I wonder if this is partly to do with our image of Jesus which tends to be of the 'wandering hippy' variety – we think of Jesus meandering around with long hair and sandals. Charismatic, yes; approachable, definitely; clever... er, maybe?

It's also partly to do with a strong anti-intellectual current in modern Christian culture. Whilst ultimately our faith does rest on... well, faith – that doesn't mean that it lacks rigour, or good evidence, or that we only believe so long as we don't ask tough questions. That is the kind of 'fine sounding argument' (v4) aimed at us by both clever atheists and spiritual teachers peddling 'add-ons' to biblical faith, and deep down many of us are worried that it might be true.

And it's nothing new. It was around right from the early years of the church. Greek culture was very sophisticated, and from the beginning the church faced suspicions that its belief system was a bit lightweight and needing beefing up with a bit of Greek philosophy or hidden knowledge (*gnosis* – its adherents were called Gnostics. It's where the word agnostic comes from: literally 'no hidden knowledge' i.e. I haven't made up my mind yet!)

The little Christian community in Colossae were under particular attack by these gnostic teachers. And it was denting their faith. But Paul has good news for them: *Christ has everything we need. Absolutely everything.* We don't need to look anywhere else for true wisdom, because 'in [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.' (v3) Jesus is not just all-sufficient for love, peace, hope, joy, comfort and strength in times of trial. He has all the wisdom we need as well!

I'll leave the final word to the great writer on the spiritual life, Dallas Willard: 'Once you stop to think about it, how could he be what we take him to be in all other respects and not be the best-informed and most intelligent person of all, the smartest person who ever lived? ...[Jesus] is not just nice, he is brilliant. He is the smartest man who ever lived. He is now supervising the entire course of world history (Rev 1:5) while simultaneously preparing the rest of the universe for our future role in it (John 14:2). He always has the best information on everything and certainly also on the things that matter most in human life.'

As we draw this reflection to a close, let's be amazed afresh at how awesome Jesus is: the One who is before all things, completes the great act of reconciliation in history, dwells in us, leads us to his glory and has all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge... that's quite a list – hallelujah!

Day 12 – Colossians 2:6-7 'Continuing in him'

Today is one of the great 'so what' passages of Scripture. Last week we basked in the greatness of Jesus, day after day. Today we get to the punchline: 'so, then....' if Jesus is all of that, how do we respond? Not surprisingly, the answer is quite simple: (v6) 'continue to live your lives in him'. Jesus was all we needed at the start – he's still everything we need now, and for the future. Don't lose heart or get side-tracked by whispers that he's anything less than what we really know him to be.

To make the point, Paul uses a fantastic mixed metaphor: we are both to be *rooted* and *built up* in Jesus (v7). 'Rooted' picks up the image of a strong and healthy tree, whose roots spread far out under the surface of the ground. Followers of Christ are to put their roots down in Jesus ('rooted... in him'): he will provide all the nourishment we need, and give us grace to withstand all the seasons of our lives; and not just survive those seasons, but flourish.

But it's not just what's below ground, it's above ground too, i.e. visible growth: we are to be 'built up in Jesus'. The structure of our lives is slowly constructed brick-by-brick, according to God's will. Any of us who've tried it know that this kind of human building takes time – a lifetime, in fact! We are all works in progress. But we can also look back and see the ways we've grown. A new wall of kindness, a new column of patience, a new flowering garden of peace. Sometimes the odd brick gets knocked out and has to be built again – but little by little, God is at work, the master builder.

And the image has that sense of 'reinforcing the structure' – we can all pursue personal growth, but often that feels shaky. God's type of building has built-in reinforcements – the presence of the Spirit, the power of community support. And Paul mentions two particular visible supports to the growing edifice of our lives: first, staying strong in the faith that we were taught. We keep the main thing the main thing. We choose to remember what led us to Jesus in the first place, and we continue to believe the heart of biblical truth – that Jesus died and rose and is Lord of all, and that he loves us and desires to abide continually with us.

And second, we cultivate thankfulness. Not always easy – but modern science has proved that thankfulness is actually good for our health. Thankful people are happier and kinder. St Paul knew that 2,000 years ago – he also knew that thankful people stay closer to God. God designed us for thankfulness: so it's no wonder it's good for us, too. There are times when that is easy, and times when that is hard. God knows which time you're in.

So – rooted and built up. What is God building in you at the moment? Pray for grace for that work of God in you to continue, and also grace to be as thankful as you can, whatever season you find yourself in.

Day 13 – Colossians 2:8-12 'Christ – all the fulness of God'

In modern life we're familiar with the idea of add-ons. Maybe you buy something big, like a car or a holiday, and discover that only a basic specification is included in the listed price: to get the exact one you want, you have to add on this or that or the other – all at extra cost, of course!

It's not just products, either, where we see this approach at work in our culture – anyone who uses Youtube will very quickly be bombarded with ads from various entrepreneurs promising that they have some sort of special insight that 'they don't want you to know', and that if you click on this link (and pay your money, of course), you can be healthier/more successful/make a small fortune/insert desired lifestyle outcome here.

Whether it's commodities or something deeper about the way we live, the underlying idea is that the basic product is OK, but it could (and should) be better. We need add-ons. And even better if these 'add-ons' are some sort of secret or special knowledge that not everyone has discovered, making you part of an exclusive club, or group of people.

Sadly, we can apply this principle to the spiritual life as well – in fact, I fear that the subtle but pervasive effects of the culture in which we live have made us more susceptible to this way of thinking about the spiritual life than for many generations. We are encouraged to take a 'consumer' approach to the spiritual supermarket as well. Following Jesus is all very well, but there's a whole lot of other great ideas and techniques out there. Why not add a bit of this or a bit of that, otherwise surely our beliefs are too 'narrow'?

Part of the appeal is that these practices are often dressed up as 'wellbeing' or 'health/leisure' activities (and it's always useful to ask if there is in fact a spiritual belief system hidden behind these innocuous-looking endeavours) – but today's passage reminds us that this kind of temptation is nothing new. Our 'ultra-modern' society, ironically, looks very much like the world St. Paul and the church in Colosse inhabited. The tiny group of Christians who received this letter faced exactly the same challenges: a culture of wandering teachers and mystics offering spiritual add-ons and secret knowledge (for a price, obviously).

And Paul's advice is direct: Jesus is all you need. He is the full revelation of God (v9) – not just a bit or even a lot, but '*all* the fulness of the Deity... in bodily form'. You don't need to add on other bits of secret knowledge, which he describes as like being 'taken captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy' – such things are either just empty tradition or, more sinisterly, derive their power from 'elemental spiritual forces' (v8), which are certainly not forces which will bring us closer to God.

Although Paul is uncompromising in his advice, the point he is making is ultimately very good news indeed. In the spiritual life, Christ is all we need. We don't need to add other bits and pieces – in fact any 'upgrades' are really downgrades, as we'll see a bit later in the week. The path, therefore, to spiritual maturity is to go deeper into Christ. Since all the fulness of God lives in Christ, the deeper we go with Jesus, the richer our spiritual lives will be: (v10) 'in Christ you have been brought to fulness.' Today, let's choose to trust St Paul's advice and resolve to seek the Lord Jesus Christ more single-mindedly – and may God graciously grant us this beautiful desire of our heart.

Day 14 – Colossians 2:9-15 'Joining God's family'

Reading yesterday's reflection, some of you may have wondered if I'd deliberately ignored the last couple of verses, and the really tricky teaching about circumcision. Well, maybe! Though actually I'd said plenty already, and this section of the letter is the hardest to explain, with the most technical theology. So, I'm going to pick it up today, and try to take you all through what Paul is teaching here. If the overall cultural context is (as we observed yesterday) relatively similar to today in certain respects, this is one of those sections of the letter where not living in that culture means we are missing a lot of background understanding. So, bear with me, we'll take it bit by bit....

The fundamental contrast St Paul is drawing is between the life of the 'flesh' and the life of the Spirit. This is a common theme in Paul, and the overall idea is the same as it is in his other letters: in Christ, we live life in the Spirit, we are no longer driven by 'the flesh' i.e. our worldly inclinations and desires, or indeed any human wisdom and tradition which has nothing to do with God's view of things.

However, in Colossians Paul gives it a particular twist. Much Greek thinking of the day – influenced by the great philosopher Plato – drew a similar contrast between the material world and the spiritual world, but interpreted the consequences in a totally different way. In Platonic thought, the body had to be mastered and disciplined. Harsh treatment of the body and various rituals, combined with other 'spiritual practices', were offered as the solution. Paul refers to some of these directly in the next section.

But the point he makes first is that *Christ is the full spiritual revelation of God*. We don't need to add lots of rules about how we treat our bodies or which rituals we practise to somehow 'improve' what Christ has already done. Our spiritual inheritance is *already* secure – note the past tense in v10: 'you *have been* brought to fulness.'

He then uses two specific examples to illustrate how Christ's spiritual victory over the 'flesh' has already happened. We'll look at the second tomorrow in vv13-15, but the first is circumcision in vv10-12. Since the time of Abraham, circumcision was the sign of being part of God's covenant people. And of course it's a physical act, done literally to the flesh. But now, our membership of God's people is guaranteed not by a physical act, but by trusting in Christ. So, Christ 'circumcises' us (v11) in the sense that he is the one who brings us into the redeemed, covenant people of God.

This is entirely a spiritual thing – what Paul calls elsewhere the circumcision of our hearts, as Christ comes to dwell in us by his Spirit – though note that the one physical way we mark it is through being baptised (v12). Baptism is a public marking of our new spiritual life in Christ: dying to sin ('buried with him' v12) and rising to new life (v13 – more on that tomorrow!).

What does all this mean? Simply put, we have new life in Jesus! We also have a new family: the family of God. The shared nature of our faith is vitally important: Jesus comes not just to rescue individuals but to create a new humanity, a community of people filled with his life-giving Spirit. That is our reality, too – give thanks today for your Christian family, and pray for grace to know ever more deeply that we *have been* brought to fulness.

Day 15 – Colossians 2:13-15 'Christus Victor!'

In 1931 the theologian Gustaf Aulen published 'Christus Victor', which persuasively argued that arguably the most overlooked dimension of the saving work of Christ is that he has conquered all the powers that hold human beings captive: sin, Satan and death. It's not just that, on the cross, Christ paid the penalty on our behalf (which he did) – he also overcame our great spiritual enemies and destroyed their ultimate power. Simply put, the cross is also a symbol of triumph: he is Christ victorious, *Christus Victor*.

This book represented a powerful contribution to our understanding of the saving work of Christ – and today's passage is one of the key inspirations for it. What Aulen was teaching was nothing new; rather he was able to show how, right from the beginning, the New Testament always had this understanding included within its remarkable exploration of the cross and resurrection of Christ.

The backdrop to the whole book of Colossians is the wonderful completeness of the gospel of Christ – that it doesn't need improving or adding to; Christ is the whole ball game, the means *and* the end, the alpha and the omega. Two days ago, we saw how Christ is the full revelation of God. Yesterday, we reflected on the first detailed example of how this works in practice: that it is Christ who enables us to become part of God's family. Today, Paul demonstrates the total sufficiency of Christ's saving work on the cross. He starts on familiar ground: through the cross we are forgiven and made alive (v13). But then we get to the difficult v14 – which tells us *how* this works.

The fundamental principle here is that we are all lawbreakers – if we remember Jesus' words that our thought lives are included in keeping God's law, then even those of us who think we do pretty well at following the rules are convicted by what goes on inside us. This is what condemns us. Wrongdoing must be paid for – we all know that, it's how our entire legal system works, in almost every culture and every age – so we all have what you might call a 'charge sheet' against us.

It is this image that Paul uses: imagine a charge sheet against you, with your name on the top, and all the ways you've let God down, or just plain disobeyed him, written on it. Now imagine that all of these charge sheets are nailed to the cross with Christ, and thereby cancelled. That is what it cost Jesus to make us all free – but it is also what gives us complete assurance of the reality of our forgiveness and new life. God himself cancelled the charge sheets when they were nailed to the cross with Jesus.

It gets better: the final verse is an image taken from a triumphal procession, the sort that victorious Roman generals received when returning to Rome after a military success. Their captives would be led in a train behind the victorious procession, paraded in humiliation for all to see. Although the English translation doesn't quite pick this up, the original Greek makes it clear that this is the image Paul had in mind: following Christ's complete victory on the cross, now he returns triumphant back to God the Father, with sin, Satan and death trundling disconsolately in chains behind him. Christus Victor!

These verses are hard work to mine – but it repays the effort, because what we dig up is pure gold. Thanks to Christ, who has not only forgiven us but defeated our enemies, we are free: free to live as his followers; free to grow as human beings, slowly being transformed and overcoming our besetting sins; and gloriously free to live with hope in an assured future of peace, joy and life forever with this victorious Christ. And if that doesn't lift your heart today, nothing will!

Day 16 – Colossians 2:16-23 'Adding or subtracting?'

After a week doing the hard theological yards, today is Paul's practical advice to the little church in Colosse. 'Therefore.... don't let these frauds pull you off track!' might be a candid paraphrase of our text for today. As we've observed, the church was struggling with teachers who insisted that the way to grow spiritually was to add lots of things to what they might call 'basic' Christian faith. It's all very well believing in Jesus, but what you really need is a set of rules about diet, about various ways we need to 'discipline' our bodies, about observing this festival and that festival... oh, and don't forget all the other spiritual beings like angels, who need a bit of worship as well as Jesus.

The Christians in Colosse were confused: do we really have to do all this? These teachers certainly seem very persuasive, even intimidating. And the fact that they can have all these rules and proclaim their benefits counts for something, right?

Wrong. Paul begins his demolition of what you might call fake spirituality by describing it as 'shadow religion' (v17) – the best you could say about it is that it is old hat, which points to the real deal, which is Jesus. Even worse, it doesn't work: it might have an *appearance* of wisdom, but in fact it 'lacks any value in restraining sensual indulgence' (v23). Strip away the mask and these teachers are just as driven by their desires (note the similarity with what Jesus says about the Pharisees) – so in fact, all these rules, regulations, and 'secret insights' are just a waste of time and energy,

Finally, Paul's most devastating critique is in v18 – all this kind of secret knowledge is just *unspiritual*. It is the exact opposite of what it claims to be: far from opening up deeper realms of spiritual life, they are 'merely human commands and teachings' which are 'destined to perish with use' (v22). And the way to spot that it is fake is *what it does to the person who practises them*: it makes them arrogant and full of themselves (v18). In other words, far from going deeper into Christ they just go deeper into themselves. That is why it is not spiritual growth, but the opposite.

For those of you who like equations (might be some of you!), you could summarise the whole of this teaching in Colossians like this: 'Christ plus always equals Christ minus' i.e. if you try to add anything to the (fully complete) work of Christ, all you do is take away from it. Christ is all you need, and the way to grow is to grow deeper into Christ.

In a world where we are constantly bombarded by new techniques and spiritual fads, this is very good news! Give thanks that we have the full riches of Christ at our disposal, and pray for grace to grow into these riches ever more, day by day.

Day 17 – Colossians 3:1-4 'Hidden with Christ'

Often the most powerfully subversive things are those which look very similar to what they are challenging. I am a great lover of Renaissance art (I studied it many years ago) and Leonardo da Vinci's iconic 'Last Supper' is a great example of this. All the traditional features are there: the long table, the twelve apostles seated around Jesus, the bread and wine centre stage, and so on. But what made this picture so influential – and it became legendary almost as soon as it was finished, even in a pre-modern age without the sort of press coverage it would get now – is what Leonardo did to make it *different*. He changed the moment depicted from 'do this in remembrance of me' to 'one of you will betray me.' He changed the composition from a flat table to a long room in perfect perspective, and he replaced the usual serenity of the disciples with shock and horror. It is one of the greatest paintings of all time for good reason.

St Paul does the same today. Colossians chapter 3 – especially verses 1-17 – is one of the most famous in the New Testament – and again, it's for good reason. It begins today with Paul at his most surprisingly subversive; just like Leonardo he *appears* to fit the normal religious culture of his time – but instead he radically subverts it.

As we've observed before, the dominant Greek religious culture valued the spiritual world over the material, and relied heavily on hidden knowledge revealed to the discerning spiritual seeker. At face value, this is also Paul's starting point: (v2) 'Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.' Similarly, he also talks of being hidden – but, as he's been arguing brilliantly in chapter 2, the traditional religious culture has been looking for hidden treasure in completely the wrong place. Rather than finding new secrets, for a follower of Christ our lives are *already* 'hidden with Christ' (v3). We don't need to hide anywhere else!

And instead of accessing 'things above' with rituals, strange diets and secret knowledge, we do this simply by setting our hearts and minds (note: heart and mind – will *and* intellect) on these realities. This is because Christ already dwells in us: we have died to our old lives (v3) and have been raised with Christ (v1). Again, note the past tense: not 'will be raised' if we do this or that or the other, but 'have been raised'. It is a done deal, a spiritual reality. We don't need to add to it, just go deeper into it!

So, just as we wondered if Paul was back-tracking on everything he'd said in the last chapter, we find he's actually reinforced it. The only 'hidden' thing we need is to trust that we are (eternally) hidden with Christ, our very life and future hope. What marvellous news this is! May God grant us grace to set our hearts and minds on this awesome reality, and find our life today permeated by these glorious 'things above'. Amen.

Day 18 – Colossians 3:5-9 'Live no lies'

For my birthday this year, our best friends bought me John Mark Comer's new book. Comer is one of the most celebrated of the new Christian writers, and his latest book is called 'Live no lies'. It's a modern exploration of how to deal with the 'the world, the flesh and the devil' – the traditional way of describing the temptations we all face.

It speaks directly to today's passage, which is one of those stern texts we know is true, but makes us feel a bit twitchy. I heard the late great comedian Billy Connolly talk once about growing up with a presbyterian grandmother, whom he found terrifying and who used to warn him as a teenager: 'Don't smoke, don't drink, don't chew; don't go with girls that do.'

Don't this, don't that – it all sounds quite negative, at first reading. But if we get no further than that, we miss the point. Tomorrow we'll look in detail at the 'new self' we have become in Christ. But to really live a new life, *we have to leave the old life behind*. And 'live no lies' would be a great way of summarising that old life in its entirety. Yes, Paul talks specifically about not lying (v9) – but in many ways the first part of the reading is also about not lying, either.

The root issue of pretty much all sin and temptation is that it lies to you – it makes promises it can't keep. It's why Paul talks about greed as idolatry – we make an idol of whatever it is that we lust over, it replaces (even temporarily) God in our affections. Similarly, mistreating others gives the lie to our calling to love our neighbour. We can't claim to do that and slander someone at the same time – that would be to live a lie.

Paul's advice is blunt: whatever it is that keeps you bound in your old life, get rid of it (v8). Even 'put it to death' (v5) – a strong image calling to mind the cross that Christ suffered on our behalf. Let's note in passing that Paul always uses such strong terms to refer to sins and not people. Paul locates these temptations in our own minds and wills. We may find certain people encourage us down wrong paths – but the responsibility for taking those paths is always ours.

Live no lies. As we reflect on this very direct passage today, perhaps the Lord is putting his finger on one thing in particular for you. Be bold – own it, take it to God and ask for grace to live the new life we'll rejoice in tomorrow. As we've seen throughout this lovely letter, God's grace in Christ is always sufficient – it's a prayer he loves to answer! Bless the Lord, O my soul.

Day 19 – Colossians 3:10-14 'New clothes'

Most of us like some new threads from time to time – or in my case, new to me! I've always enjoyed a hunt round the clothes rails of charity shops. I have a weakness for good quality shirts, but can never justify the price of them new – so I look for pre-loved versions instead.

Whatever your sartorial fancy is, the idea of putting on new clothes is the central image in today's passage. Only this time, Paul applies it to our new life in Christ – you've taken off your old self (v9), he says in yesterday's passage, that shabby old shirt with stains, the sort of grubby ways of living Paul describes in the preceding verses... and you've put on the new self (v10), 'which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator.'

And Paul doesn't stop there – he actually goes on to list the new 'clothes' of our life in Christ: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience (v12) and forgiveness (v13). These are the clothes we wear now – understated but of real quality. Last of all, the big overcoat which we can put over all of them is love (v14).

It's a great way of looking at it. When we come to Christ we are born again spiritually – so we are *already* a new person. The great change has taken place, as Christ's Spirit fills us and lives in us. But it takes time for us to grow into the new life – we put on the new clothes bit by bit. It's a lovely way of thinking about how we develop virtues – slowly dressing ourselves with kindness, humility, and so on.

It's also helpful to think of our new selves as being clean – or as Paul puts it 'holy and dearly loved' – just as we'd never get out of the bath or shower and put on the dirty, sweaty clothes we'd just put in the washing basket, so our new clean selves can't go back to the old ways of vv5-9. We need clean clothes, befitting a holy and dearly loved child of God.

What clothing do you need to put on today? Pray for grace to wear it well – after all, Jesus has bought it for you!

Day 20 – Colossians 3:11-15 'Called to peace'

One of the great dimensions of following Christ is that it calls us both to personal and corporate transformation. We lead new lives, not just as individuals but within communities – especially communities of believers. In this marvellous chapter of Colossians, St Paul moves seamlessly from one to the other. Over the last two or three days, we focused primarily on personal transformation – on what it means to put on the new self, and be clothed with Christ.

However, this renewal of self inevitably has implications for our community life. Indeed, it is easy to forget that nearly all references to 'you' in the New Testament – including in this chapter – are *plural* and not singular. Qualities such as compassion, kindness, gentleness and forgiveness can only be practised in community, since we need to have someone (or some people) to be compassionate or kind or forgiving towards.

It is natural, then, that as Paul talks about these qualities growing in our lives, he finds himself reflecting on our broader community life. The start point is our fundamental unity in Christ. Because the same Christ dwells in all of us, we carry a deep unity which transcends our different circumstances in life. Whatever our religious or ethnic background, 'Christ is all, and is in all.' (v11)

So, our shared community life begins from a place of equality and mutuality in Christ. Therefore, we can all practice the kinds of virtues that Paul encourages in vv12-14, since it is the same Spirit of Christ working renewal in all of us. We are members, as Paul also reminds us in v15, of *one* body – the body of Christ.

It follows, then, that as we live as one body, we are 'called to peace' (v15). Peace in the bible is a much bigger word than we often give it credit for. It is derived from the Hebrew 'shalom' which means complete wellbeing, a place where the love and grace of God dwells pervasively and endlessly. It's where we began on day 1 of these reflections, with Paul offering 'grace and peace' to all its readers – the peace of Christ which he describes here.

And let's note that we don't manufacture this peace: Christ's work has already done what is needed for this state of peace to exist – all we have to do is *let* (i.e. allow) this peace of Christ to rule in our hearts (v15). The peace is there for us to claim and live by – but we need to let it have its way. No doubt there are things for each of us that make us anxious, that beckon us towards un-peace. So, today, make a choice. Choose to let Christ's peace, Christ's shalom, have sway in your heart. It is Christ's gift, and our calling.

Day 21 – Colossians 3:15-17 'The power of thankfulness'

Colossians 3:12-17 is one of the most treasured portions of all scripture. It just seems to encapsulate perfectly what a loving, healthy lifestyle should look like – even to those who may not consider themselves to be followers of Christ. For example, this is the second most popular passage chosen by couples marrying in church (the 'hymn to love' in 1 Corinthians 13 is inevitably first!). I speak on this passage in about a quarter of the weddings that I conduct, and in each case it is the couple that chooses this passage, not me (although I love the text, too).

We have already looked at the lovely image in vv12-14 about wearing virtues as part of our new lives in Christ. Today we think about vv15-17, where Paul gives us three wonderful pieces of wisdom: 'let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts... let the message (or word) of Christ dwell in you richly... do [everything] in the name of the Lord Jesus.' The peace of Christ, the message of Christ, the name of Christ. Not a bad guide to life, that, is it?

As an aside, Paul is here showing a bit of rhetorical skill – let's remember that those undermining the church in Colosse were claiming special knowledge, probably steeped in Greek philosophical rhetoric. There are at least two sections in this letter where Paul gently reminds the church that he is just as well educated – 1:15-20 and here in 3:15-17, when he uses the classic rhetorical device of 'three', where each element repeats or alliterates. Paul had the equivalent of an Oxbridge education: he can talk the talk as well as anyone when he needs to, but his priority is always to *walk* the talk, which is where these other 'teachers' are letting the church community down.

But what is often unnoticed about these three little gems is what underpins them – in each case, the foundation is thankfulness. In fact, he describes thankfulness progressively as a state, an attitude and an activity. So, as we let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, Paul reminds us to *be* thankful (a state). It's wise advice – peace can't live together with ingratitude.

Then, as we let the word dwell richly among us – and note this is a community instruction more than a personal one, though it is that, too – we sing '*with* gratitude in our hearts'. The late, great Rev. John Stott put it like this: 'Our favourite attitude should be gratitude,' and there is nothing quite like sung corporate worship to raise thankfulness in our hearts. (As an aside, even in the early church there were psalms, hymns and spiritual songs – there is space for all kinds of sung worship, then as now!)

Finally, as we do everything in Jesus' name, we give thanks. Thankfulness is not just an act of will and an inner habit, it is something we do. We *give* thanks. We declare it – especially to our loving heavenly Father. If love binds all the Christian virtues in unity, thankfulness empowers this kind of lifestyle. In my own life, I have also found it self-reinforcing. I have had 'desert times', when instinctively I didn't think there was much to be thankful about. But when I chose to be thankful, it's amazing how many things I was able to name, with gratitude – which in turn stirred hope, and joy, and led to more thankfulness. In other words, Paul's advice really works. My prayer is that all of us would discover it to be true – this day, this week, every week.

Day 22 – Colossians 3:18-22 'Christ and the social order'

One of the thorny questions that the church has always faced – and individual Christians, as part of the church community – is how followers of Jesus relate to the social order around them. Where do they conform and where do they stick out? Or, to put it another way, what do they challenge?

It is hard for us to get a sense now of just how radical the original church community was. The fact that Paul assumes that Jews and non-Jews, as well as slaves and slave owners, are in the church meeting listening to this being read *together* would have been almost unheard of in the culture of that time. Such groups simply didn't mix socially, and certainly not as equals. The Christian community, therefore, was seen as more than just unique, it could even be dangerous. Such mixed communities implicitly challenged and even undermined 'the way things are'.

Paul often has this question at the back of his mind, including here. He's spent the letter wonderfully describing our new life in Christ, and emphasising that *all* can enjoy this life – 'no Gentile or Jew... slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all' (v11). So, does that mean that all previous social norms have broken down? Is there no 'social order' at all any more?

The Christian community is radical, but not anarchic – and so, just in case this letter is read as a recipe for revolution, Paul emphasises in this next section (which forms today's passage) that certain patterns of relating still exist for followers of Christ. Although we now treat elements of this passage as controversial, it is fascinating that what would have made it controversial at the time of writing was not what it said, for example, to women or slaves, but rather what it said to husbands, fathers and slave owners.

In the longer version of this teaching in Ephesians 5, and more briefly here, Paul lays expectations of care and servant-heartedness on husbands and fathers that would have been well beyond the norms for men of that time. Gentleness is emphasised – and gentleness is well defined elsewhere as 'strength under control'. Our mutuality may be expressed in slightly different ways, but the underlying themes of equality before God and mutual loving service of each other, following the pattern of Jesus himself, are at the heart of all our relationships within the Christian community, especially these most foundational relationships here.

Ultimately, this passage makes most sense if we ask the question: how would Jesus be a spouse, or a parent, or a child? How would his model of humble love manifest itself in that relationship? It's a high bar, certainly – but may God grant us all courage to aim for it, and the anointing grace of his Spirit to (even in a small way) live like it today.

Day 23 – Colossians 3:22-4:1 'With all your heart'

This passage is not a defence of slavery. It's worth stating that at the start; as we saw yesterday, Paul is acutely conscious of the perceived danger of Christ to the social order – putting the church itself at risk (not just reputationally; more widespread persecution is beginning, indeed may have already begun, by this time).

It's also worth bearing in mind that Christians numbered a tiny percentage of the population, and many were expecting the return of Jesus very soon – there was no sense in the first decades of the church that its role was to challenge established power structures, save in the implicit challenge each church provided by the way that it lived within its own community. So, slaves and their masters were expected to relate as peers *within the church family*, but the early Christian leaders were pragmatic that this was not going to be the norm in the culture around them.

So, what's the best advice that Paul can give to these relationships, once the Sunday church meeting was over? The overarching principle is the same for everyone: we serve a higher Master. This Master not only sees the work we do, but gives value to *all* work – so all work can be a sacrament i.e. dedicated to God, and done for his glory.

Masters – or bosses, we could say in today's world – should treat their workers well, because they too have a Divine Boss (4:1). And here we could add that Paul probably knew the saying of Jesus that 'with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.' He applied it elsewhere to generosity, but here it underpins his advice to bosses – you reap what you sow.

Similarly, slaves – and I think we can legitimately apply this to all workers now – should work obediently, not because their boss/master deserves it, necessarily, and definitely not to serve their own ambition, but because we serve a higher Master/Boss: 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.' (v23) And there's a promise that goes with it – if we seek only recognition from God, then 'you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a result.' (v24)

This passage has long been precious to me, as I had a normal working career for twelve years before ordination, and Paul's advice dignifies all work as being done for the glory of God. There is no hierarchy of value, where, say, bosses do more important work than workers, or church leaders more important work than the people in the congregation. It's *all* for God, and God can bless all of it. In that sense, all work is ministry if it's done for the Lord.

May God bless each of us in our work, doing whatever we do with all our heart, for the glory of God. Amen.

Day 24 – Colossians 4:2-6 'Maximising every opportunity'

In 1873 Thomas Edison approached the British government – then the most powerful government in the world – asking for investment in his new invention, the lightbulb. The Committee which assessed it turned him down, saying this new-fangled idea was 'okay for our transatlantic friends...but unworthy of the attention of practical or scientific men.' The lightbulb went on to transform society – no doubt later government committees which met in the evenings could hardly fail to notice what they'd missed out on. It would have been, I imagine, all around them!

Life is full of missed opportunities. Most of them are small, some are much more important. When Paul writes this amazing letter, he is in prison, but what is fascinating and inspiring is how he still lives as if life remains full of opportunities: (v3) 'Pray for us, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains.' The prison door, he knew, would remain shut for a while yet – but other doors could open. There were still opportunities for him to share the good news of Jesus. Indeed, he had, quite literally, a captive audience.

This sense of choosing to look for the opportunities in life was something Paul was keen to pass on to his readers in Colosse. 'Make the most of every opportunity,' he says to them – meaning primarily opportunities to share faith. This needs wisdom (v5), but also grace (v6), and I am struck by the strong implication that, although we are always 'outward-looking', we should always treat these opportunities with respect: 'full of grace [and] seasoned with salt.'

Salt was less a flavouring in those times than a preservative and a fertiliser – so our conversation should help to guard against decay, and also promote growth. We stand up for what is right, but also encourage what is good and uplifting. Full of grace, seasoned with salt.

This approach can only be bathed in prayer (v2, v4). Watchfulness is not just in social situations – it begins on our knees or in our 'prayer chair'. As we watch in prayer, so we find opportunities revealing themselves in life. You may have had such opportunities recently, you may not; let's resolve to pray for them, watchfully and thankfully. And let's be inspired by Paul's example, choosing to live hopefully, seeing life as pregnant with possibilities, even in the most difficult of circumstances.

Day 25 – Colossians 4:7-11 'Personal connections'

Sometimes it's easy to forget that 'the church' is made up of individual people. Everyone has their own story, and their own connections. This little section in the letter, when Paul – whose piece of papyrus is probably running out of space – is firing off some quickfire messages, is a great reminder that what we are dealing with here is not just 'an apostle' and 'a church', but an intricate fabric of friendships and connections. As such, they give us a wonderful insight into the personal world of the early Christians.

Of the six individuals named in today's passage, only Justus is mentioned nowhere else (this is a different Justus to the one in Acts 18:7). The other five appear in other places, all connected to Paul in significant ways. Aristarchus and Tychicus are both close associates and fellow ministers with Paul. They act as representatives of the early church communities, journeying with Paul to Jerusalem with the financial aid collected from around Paul's missionary work (Acts 20:4).

But their importance to Paul goes further: Aristarchus was with Paul when he was seized by the Ephesian mob (Acts 19:29) and Tychicus is the one tasked with bringing this letter directly from Paul to Colosse (v7), and commended by Paul here in the warmest possible terms – a task he also fulfilled taking Paul's famous letter to Ephesus (Ephesians 6:21-22).

Onesimus is a freed slave who became the unwitting subject of Paul's letter to Philemon. In that letter, Paul testifies to how much Onesimus has helped him while he was in prison – no doubt the same spell in chains that Paul refers to in this letter to the Colossian believers.

Most intriguing of all are the references to Mark and Barnabas. Barnabas is a major figure in the church and was instrumental in launching Paul's ministry. It was Barnabas who commended Paul to the apostles in Jerusalem after Paul first came to faith (Acts 9:27) and then found Paul living quietly in Tarsus and took him to Antioch, where Paul's ministry of preaching and evangelism first took off (Acts 11:25-26).

Paul and Barnabas then set off on what became Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3) and they planned again on a second, but Paul refused to take Mark as he hadn't lasted the course on the first journey, while Barnabas – ever the encourager – wanted to give him a second chance (Acts 15:36-41). It led to Paul and Barnabas parting ways, but this little snippet (v10) gives us two special insights: first, Mark was Barnabas' cousin. Given what we know of Barnabas, I think it's likely he would have stuck by Mark anyway – but the fact that he was family makes it easier to see why he backed Mark, even at the risk of falling out with Paul.

Second, whatever had happened in the past was clearly healed. Mark was now visiting Paul in prison, and Paul instructs the Colossian church to 'welcome him' (v10). It's an affirming story of grace and restoration. Indeed, these personal snippets complement the heavy-duty teaching of Paul's letters, revealing a group of believers who love and support each other, and face great challenges together. Take a moment today to remember your Tychicuses, Barnabases and Marks – and may those memories and relationships prove a comfort (v11) to you, too.

Day 26 – Colossians 4:12-18 'Continuing the ministry'

And so we come to the end.... The Book of Colossians is an amazing portion of scripture, and you won't be surprised to learn that it's one of my favourite books of the bible. Reading Colossians is like enjoying a bar of rich, dark chocolate – an intense experience, best enjoyed in small mouthfuls to savour. Each bite has so much packed into it, so many layers to taste.

At its heart, though, the underlying message is simple. Christ is all we need. He is the Lord of creation, our Saviour, the source of wisdom and knowledge, and the way to reach real depth in our spiritual journey – the means as well as the end. We don't add things to Jesus, we simply grow in our love and understanding, and go ever deeper into his inexhaustible riches.

As Paul draws his letter to a close, what is clear is that the end of the letter is not, of course, the end of the story: the ministry of the gospel continues. Paul brings greetings from the church's founder (in human terms), Epaphras. We learned at the start (1:7) that he brought the gospel to Colosse, and it now appears that he is engaging in ministry elsewhere, probably under Paul's supervision. Certainly, he and Paul are in close contact, and although Epaphras is not ministering personally among the Colossian Christians anymore, Paul assures them not just of his love but also of his hard work for them still (v13) – only this time in prayer, the intensity of which Paul indicates by use of the image of 'wrestling'.

In another fascinating snippet, we also have greetings from Luke (v14, whom we know as the writer of the gospel and the book of Acts) – and it is here that we learn that Luke was a physician. He almost certainly joined Paul's inner circle in what's known as Paul's third missionary journey (perhaps to treat Paul's 'thorn in the flesh'? – 2 Cor 12:7), around the same time as the Aristarchus and Tychicus mentioned in our last reflection. Although Luke never mentions himself by name in the book of Acts, we know that he teamed up with Paul at this time because the descriptions change from 'Paul' or 'they' to 'we' – compare Acts 20:1 with 20:6.

So, the work continues... as it has done ever since. There are always new people to share the love of Jesus with, new church communities to encourage, new opportunities for the kingdom of Christ to spread. Paul is ever mindful of this, so he encourages them to read the letter he wrote to nearby Laodicea. (As an aside, although officially no such letter survives, it's possible this was what's now the book of Ephesians, since some of the content is similar and it was written about the same time – and, tantalisingly, one extant manuscript of the Ephesian letter is written to 'Laodicea'.)

He also has one more personal instruction, to a chap called Archippus (v17). Even now, Paul wants to use every moment to encourage the flock. We've no idea what Archippus was meant to do – but he presumably did, and Paul was determined to ensure that he stayed faithful to his calling. Paul's only request for himself was that they 'remember his chains' (v18). In other letters he has practical needs, but here he seeks only prayer (see also 4:3).

We've come full circle: the letter started with Paul's prayer (1:3) and ends with his request for prayer in return. It also begins with grace (1:2) and ends with grace (4:18). It's been quite a journey.... and as we draw it to a close, may Paul's blessing go with us: may the grace of God be with us all.