

How to Walk

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Collected reflections on the Readings
from the Revised Common Lectionary,

from Pentecost, year C (2022 etc.),
to the end of July.

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Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21/ Genesis 11:1-9, Ps 104:24-36, Romans 8:14-17/ Acts 2:1-21, John 14:8-17 [25-27]

Explosion

You might be forgiven for not realising that this Sunday is the third great feast of the Christian year – Pentecost. The story is told in [Acts 2](#), read today.

During his ministry, Jesus had assembled a group – 12 men, and others including women. At first they listened and watched, then they were sent on mission, to practice and learn how God could use them. More learning followed, especially at the Passion, with some shock as God's plan worked out, and they all failed rather badly – which was part of learning to trust God, not least his forgiveness. Jesus is raised from the dead. It takes a while to sink in, but they come to terms with the new reality.

But then comes the Ascension – the Son of God returns to heaven, and they are told to wait. 50 days after Easter, on the Jewish feast of Pentecost, there comes an EXPLOSIVE change. A violent wind – fire. The group which had hidden away in fear bursts out; Peter preaches a public sermon through which 3000 people are converted and baptised. The Holy Spirit, known before as a welcome occasional visitor, has come to stay with believers. In time they would learn the full wonder of his character, including a gentler, transforming side. But the first impact, causing the birth of the Church, can rightly be called dramatic, powerful, even violent.

Now, as then, Christians have to learn to live with the Holy Spirit. In some ways it is a continuation of having Jesus close by – he still directs operations and gives authority – but it is different. The Holy Spirit is everywhere, but not quite like a person. The Spirit guides and makes Jesus known, but, as the gospel ([John 14:15-17 + 25-27](#)) says, he can only be received or consulted or drawn on by Christians – because others don't see or recognise him.

At Pentecost, some of the crowd thought the excitement was drunkenness, but others heard in their own languages the praise of God's deeds of power. That is where we start. Not in a private party, giving rise to sneers about how we have celebrated, but in making known the God who is good, and sharing what we know of his plans for our community and our time. Maybe it still needs an explosion -?

Trinity Sunday

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31, Psalm 8, [Romans 5:1-5](#), [John 16:12-15](#)

The Experience of God

Descriptions can be less than helpful! “Sheets of a naturally derived, cellulose based material, joined and pivoted at one edge, usually of a light colour marked on one or both sides with a darker pigment.” tells you nothing very useful about a book. In much the same way, attempts to describe and analyse God, who is beyond human description and definition, may not be of great value.

Yet reading [Romans 5:1-5](#), we learn something of the Christian experience of God, and how that may be remembered and shared. Jesus, we are told, has sorted out our relationship with God. Now we may find peace and grace, if only we have faith. Having peace does not mean a problem-free life. Yet even troubles lead on to hope – hope which, because of the Holy Spirit, is well earthed and not just hopefulness.

Almost without realising it, we have spoken of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The point is not to define or “pin them down”, but to welcome what they are doing in and around us. Paul is keen to tell the Roman Christians that the events of Jesus life and death apply to and for them. He also wants their lives to be transformed by that good news. As he speaks of God, he talks about the triple activity quite naturally. [We could look at John 16:12-15, today’s gospel reading, and find the same sort of reference to the three, working closely together].

On Trinity Sunday, we think of God. Let it be of the awesome and wonderful God, who has astounded and delighted greater minds than ours, and never of some dry theory. We shall not be examined on theory, whether in the philosophical terms of the early centuries, or of our own time. But we shall be judged on whether we have taken the opportunities to know God in practice. If our prayer, action and reflection have brought us to some understanding of what God is doing and wanting, it will show. If our experience makes us want to be more like God, that too will be plain. A difficult test? But a glorious transformation of human life and relationships.

Trinity and Relationship

Trinity Sunday, but does it matter in practice what the early Christians thought, from a very different philosophical background? I don’t feel bound to their ideas, as I do to the New Testament, but I think there is value in the idea of Trinity.

[John 16:12-15](#) has Jesus telling the disciples that the Holy Spirit will relate “what he hears”, making clear a very close communication and co-operation between Father, Son and Spirit. The New Testament never fully explains the relationship, but shows that Jesus has the Father’s power and authority, as well as approval. (This is a feature of many miracles, and explicitly in the forgiveness, as well as healing, of the paralysed man let down through the roof [Mark 2](#)). Father, Son and Spirit are associated in the Great Commission ([Matthew 28](#)), and the “Grace” [2 Corinthians 13](#), extending the unity of Father and Son [Colossians 1](#), [John 10:30](#), [John 17:11](#) etc.

But why does it matter? I suspect that for many people, God is pictured as a lonely old man orbiting through the universe and looking for someone to talk to. That is rubbish. But it is rubbish because God is a relationship. Father, Son and Spirit are so close, in such perfect communication and unity of purpose that they really are one. You can speak of any of the three being fully involved in what any of the others does. That is not mere theory. It means that relationship is at the heart of Christian life. Difficult though we find other people (rather as we find ideas of the Trinity mind bending), they are not optional. If God is a relationship, and we are made in God's image, relationship is of key importance, to our spiritual life as much as to our practical existence.

When we get tired of "meetings"; when Church politics and personalities irritate or worse, we need to remember that other people are not optional. Part of our Christian living is to learn the quality of communication and unity of purpose which is God. Which takes us to another of Trinity Sunday's readings: [Romans 5:1-5](#) – for those who know God's grace, difficulties are part of the pilgrim route, schooling the character and leading to hope. I suggested, slightly tongue in cheek, at Bible Study that our Ministry Area should adopt the motto "We also boast of our troubles". (The version of "sufferings" in the Good News Bible). It might give a new perspective!

Sunday between June 19 and June 25 inclusive

[Proper 7c, 1st after Trinity in 2022]

Isaiah 65:1-9, Psalm 22:19-28, [Galatians 3:23-29](#), [Luke 8:26-39](#)

Independent?

Do you like being supervised? I imagine not. It doesn't really matter whether we are being formally assessed (at work, in a medical test, even in sport), or just have someone looking critically over our shoulder – it makes for stress, if not resentment.

It should not be too difficult to understand Paul ([Galatians 3:23-29](#)), when he speaks of the Old Testament Law as a “guardian”. Yes, the Law tells us what God is like, and how our lives should go to fit God's intentions and our purpose. But like a schoolteacher, it can limit our freedom, and doesn't actually make us good at learning. We are reminded that children in the first century were sometimes under the control of a slave, who made sure they behaved and did their lessons, even though the slave had no status himself. The slave was hardly a friend, no matter how properly he did his job.

So, Paul suggests, becoming Christians is like gaining the freedom of family members. No longer subject to strict control, we share with other believers the equal status our faith releases. In this letter, Paul has been concerned to reject the demands of some who claimed that non-Jewish converts to Christ had to observe all the Jewish Law and customs. He insists (as did the Council of Jerusalem, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in Acts 15) that while Gentile believers in Christ should be concerned to maintain fellowship with Jewish believers, they do not have to live under Jewish regulations.

The freedom of the Christian is still important, and easily lost to judgmental attitudes or old fashioned habits. Yes, we need to understand how our lives are to be like Jesus', showing the effect of the Holy Spirit. Yes, the Old Testament remains important for us to understand God's interactions and relationships with humans through the ages. But no, we don't have to follow endless restrictions and traditions. Getting it right is difficult, but important.

Gerasene demoniac dialogue

Some years ago I developed the idea of scripted dialogue in place of a monologue sermon. It has some advantages – a conversational style, encouraging the idea of talking about scripture and its application, emphasising the relevance of text to contemporary Christian life etc. This is a dialogue, for two readers in place of a sermon, which I “translated” from a sermon written previously, on the gospel passage [Luke 8:26-39](#).

A It's been quite a week: an MP has been killed, apparently while doing her job and doing it well; at the same time we are looking forward to an important referendum next Thursday

B and there's a football competition, too!

A Indeed. You might wonder if that reading about the man Jesus healed in the cemetery has any relevance.

B It seems to me typical of Jesus that he is concerned about somebody that everybody else has given up on. There is no suggestion that anyone is looking after this man, keeping an eye out for him, leaving him food or clothing, but Jesus doesn't bypass him and go to the "important" people.

A Yes, and that links with the MP's murder. Jesus is reminding us that everybody matters to God, and should to us. All the groups Jo Cox was involved with, including minorities and refugees, but also Thomas Mair, however sad or mad he may be. We have to think about caring for all, not just the ones like us, or the easy ones. Jesus wasn't afraid of dealing with someone demon possessed.

B Now that's a question! Was he mentally ill, or did he really have spirits in him?

A Christians would have different answers to that. There's no doubt that mental illness is real, and thankfully we are learning how to treat it successfully. If you know people affected, encourage them to consult their doctor, take their advice – and then make sure you don't avoid them. Mental illness will affect a fair proportion of this congregation at one time or another. For me, after some years leading a Diocesan Healing and Deliverance Team, I am also confident that demon possession is real – but it has been uncommon in this part of the world. The team that clergy can consult is there to help, and some will need that help.

B So you are saying that mental illness is real, and demon possession can be, too?

A Yes. But let's go on. Jesus' concern for this man is not the only point here. What about the reaction of the local people to the event?

B They don't seem very happy to have a local "problem" solved. I suppose the drowning of the pigs has something to do with it, which doesn't say much about their values. I wonder if they also found the whole thing – well, frightening. Too challenging to their assumptions, and the accepted order of things.

A I think you're right, though it is sad. They actually ask Jesus to go away because they are afraid – afraid of someone who has just restored a man they had given up on! I don't know if there is something there about the Referendum – and no, I am not going to tell you how to vote. But fear is a bad motivation (and seems to have been used on both sides). It is also bad to think that, as Christians, we are allowed to cut ourselves off from other people. How best to move forward, for the good of all, that is the question.

B and we can't make up your minds how that works out. Think, pray, and vote carefully. So, we've talked about Jesus attitude to this man, and then about the community's attitude to Jesus. What about the ending; doesn't Jesus usually tell people not to talk about their healing?

A Yes. When he is among Jewish people, he worries that he will be seen as a revolutionary leader – a "Messiah" in political and military terms, leading an army against the Romans – but here he is among Gentiles. He wants this man to be a reminder of the power and love of God, a testimony if you like. He is to live in the community that told Jesus to leave, a reminder of what happened, and how life might be different.

B So he is to do the things we are being encouraged to do now – live as a follower of Jesus, imitating his attitudes and actions out of gratitude, and ready to explain when people asked things like "What happened?" and "Why have you changed?". I suppose that would have been quite challenging for him, as it is for us, but it certainly gave him something to do!

A – and it gave the people of that community a second chance. With the man living there, and staying in his right mind, they were going to have time to think again

B about the relative value of people and pigs?

A and about what Jesus could do, or what God's plan for them was. I'm sure they didn't think they were bad people, but they missed out in a big way that day, and Jesus finds a way to leave them a signpost, if they wanted to look for a better road. It would be sad to think nobody did.

B even sadder than losing the football?

A much more. Some of us believe in life after football, after all!

B Well, that's our dialogue sketch on this gospel. It's a bit of an experiment, and its not going to replace sermons, but let us know if you found it helpful as a different way to reflect from time to time – and perhaps even as something to start you talking about scripture and how to apply it.

Sunday between June 26 and July 2 inclusive

[Proper 8c, 2nd after Trinity in 2022]

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21, Psalm 16, [Galatians 5:1, 13-25](#), [Luke 9:51-62](#)

Preserving Freedom

Paul has argued through Galatians against a group who wanted to impose full Jewish Law and practice on those who became believers in Jesus from outside the Jewish community. He insists that faith, and not obeying the detailed instructions of the Old Testament Law, is what makes a person free and right with God.

It might sound very remote in the twenty first century, if it were not for the difficulty we have today as Christians understanding how Christian life is supposed to work. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” Clearly it would be terrible, having escaped from the life of a slave, to be returned to it again. But what is Christian freedom, and how is it to be used, and indeed preserved?

Today’s reading ([Galatians 5:1 and 13-25](#)) jumps from that verse to explain the difference between a selfish life, dominated by the indulgence of human appetites, and a free life powered and directed by the Holy Spirit. We have become expert at justifying what we want, having our own way, and imposing on others – yet know that this seldom ends well. What we have to learn is how thankfulness for a life set free can lead us to love and serve, and to cultivate the “fruit of the Spirit”. These are gifts we cannot obtain by self-discipline, but that God will develop in us as we allow them to grow.

Freedom can be lost! When Paul sounds as if he speaks from experience, we can echo his concerns. “Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.” This leads back to the selfish life, enslaved by human desires. The alternative? “Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit”

Tough Jesus?

This week takes us to [Luke 9:51-62](#), which is interesting for what it tells us about Jesus. It starts with his determination to go to Jerusalem – he “sets his face” (or, in The Message, “stepped himself”). This is the tough Jesus, disciplined to the point of being hard on himself, we sometimes forget.

It contrasts with his reaction to an inhospitable Samaritan village. (They, as Samaritans, would not assist those going to Jerusalem because of the dispute over God’s chosen location for worship). James and John, nicknamed “Sons of Thunder”, want to incinerate them, probably drawing on the example of Elijah – [2 Kings 1](#). Elijah may have been demonstrating the power of God against bullying force, but Jesus shows the power of God in merciful restraint – and the group walks further for supper.

With the three would-be disciples, the tough side seems to return:

- does the first candidate want to join in with Jesus success? or is he perhaps poor and wanting an easy life? We don't know, but are reminded that discipleship guarantees neither success nor freedom from care and trouble. Jesus' followers may share some of Jesus' harder experiences!
- Jesus wants the second to follow, perhaps seeing the good in him. But is it that the good impulses lack focus, prioritisation and urgency? How many people now avoid doing what God would call them to (and thus their real fulfilment) by rather aimlessly "doing good"?
- the third is a volunteer, but looking the wrong way. Christians have to accept forgiveness, leave behind the past, including bitterness and retribution, and move on.

Perhaps Jesus was aware that he dare not wait to collect these three because of the urgency of his journey to Jerusalem. But we also have an urgency in faith. The window of opportunity – to share faith, to be the Church God intended and needs for his plans for our world, is limited. Things are changing and more than ever we, like Jesus, need focus, prioritisation, and urgency of action.

Sunday between July 3 and July 9 inclusive

[Proper 9c, but in 2022 3rd July is kept as the Feast of Thomas, Apostle]

Isaiah 66:10-14, Psalm 66:1-9, Galatians 6:[1-6] 7-16, Luke 10:1-11, 16-20
or for Thomas:

Habakkuk 2. 1-4, Psalm 31. 1-5, Ephesians 2. 19-22, John 20. 24-29, [30, 31]

Boasting?

“May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” is a strange statement. We are used to boasting, and more elaborate ways of “showing off”, and find it normal for the rich and successful, for celebrities, and sometimes would-be celebrities. But this is Paul, in the last chapter of his letter to the Galatians. ([Galatians 6:1-16](#) or 6:7-16).

Paul is making a point, being annoyed by those who have tried to lead the Galatian Christians away from the gospel he preached to them. He insists on emphasising Jesus. And so he refuses to state his own claims to respect and fame. He points them to the centre of faith – and it’s not in themselves, or any other teacher.

But I wonder how we react? We could dismiss this line as a bit of religious jargon. If, instead, we take it seriously, there is a challenge. What am I pleased with in my life? What do I think I have done well? What are my successes and strong points? Could I answer “Jesus and his death” to any of these, let alone all of them?

I am not suggesting that we have no good points or successes! But the overwhelming importance of God’s grace, of being rescued and loved, rather than achieving . . This takes some thinking through. Looking in that direction, rather than at our own goodness, will help motivate our work for those who most need our “work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.”

Similarly, a thankfulness for what has been done for us will help avoid a return to selfish living, and the danger of becoming “weary in doing what is right”. Perhaps we need to think of a way of saying, in jargon free language, “the best thing about me – is not me”.

Why So Many?

Lk'ss Gospel records the Mission or Sending out of 70 or 72 (Luke 10:1-11+16-20) , and I want to ask the question “Why so many?”. I get tired of sermons with 3 points, so today I have 7 answers, all of which I hope deal with the text, but also with our context today.

Why so Many? 1. It is encouraging after last week (James & John wanting to call down fire, and 3 disciples not yet ready. .). Here Jesus has 6 dozen ready to go, to preach and heal.

2. 70 or 72, translations, and texts, differ. The number is symbolic; 70 is the number of elders Moses appointed, or of nations of the world. 72 is the Greek version of Genesis 10, and a multiple of 12 (disciples, tribes). Either way, sent out in pairs, which is practical, and valid 2 witnesses.

3. Why so Many? Because then, as now, there is so much work to do. Places to go, people to reach. We talk today about the need to reach people through work as well as home, as well as leisure, holiday . . . We are a minority. Yet these disciples came back excited by what they had been able to do with the help of God.
4. Why so many? Not only much work to do, but a short time to do it. Jesus is heading for Jerusalem. Surely that doesn't apply now, can't we be more leisurely? Yet each generation needs to be reached – and we know we have lost several, and need to catch up. Young and old, educated and ordinary, Welsh, visitors, and people far away. We too have a short time to do what needs doing.
5. Urgency. Travelling light, and avoiding time-consuming greetings on the way (not “Good Morning”). We don't like urgency. It doesn't really matter, does it, if my part is missed for a while? Yes, it does. People will miss out, be in danger and in pain, until they are safely made disciples of Christ. Verse 20 reminds us that it is more important to have our names written in heaven than to cast out evil spirits. It matters.
6. Which brings us to the 6th reason, Why so Many? Jesus was not offering a philosophy to those who might be interested, but a way of safety to those who would accept. His concern for participation was shown in the choice of 12, and more so with 70 / 72, and instruction to them to pray for even more. The importance he gives them is breathtaking:
[Luke 10:16](#) "Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."
7. Finally, Why so Many #7 Jesus concern. Not limited to his friends and family, not limited to home area, nationality, extending to all sorts and nationalities (that is why they are to eat what is given them – don't ask about whether its prepared according to Jewish tradition). If Jesus is concerned for these people, are we to say they don't matter (or matter enough to change our preferences). If Jesus is sending people out, are you off to get a “sick note” as an excuse?
8. Jesus sent out 70 / 72 on a mission that excited them
 - Such a number of volunteers was encouraging
 - the number was symbolic
 - there was plenty to do
 - time was short
 - the work was urgent
 - participation was part of the message
 - Jesus cared for those they went to.

Nothing much has changed; our service will end with a sending out, and you will have to react.

Constructive Doubt (Thomas)

This Sunday we remember Thomas, reading of his doubt in [John 20:24-31](#). Thomas is also remembered as the traditional founder of the Church in SW India, as a disciple of great loyalty ([John 11:16](#)), and one who could speak out and gain an explanation others probably also needed ([John 14:5](#)).

[John 20:24ff](#) teaches us a good deal about the proper place of doubt. Thomas missed Jesus at Easter, and wants evidence. It says something for the disciples' relationships that he was still with them a week later, when Jesus again appears. Jesus is not angry at Thomas, but offers his battered body as proof. Verse 27 refers to doubt (or disbelief or faithlessness, according to translation), suggesting that it is not the opposite of faith, at least for those of Thomas personality. We need to allow questions and doubt, (not cynically and unendingly, but) to reach a more firmly grounded faith. We don't know if Thomas accepted that invitation to probe, but whether it is the wounds, or Jesus knowledge of his words, the reaction is remarkable. "My Lord and my God!" It seems that going through his doubt has brought him further than those who did not share that experience. His words are an embarrassment to those who cannot accept Jesus deity, but also to those who have no intention of being ruled, or living as disciples committed to obedience to a master.

Jesus' reaction contrasts those who "see" him and those who will not. This is a reference to those who shared his company on earth, but perhaps also to those who "saw" his identity as Messiah, and as "God with us". We may not live in the first century, but will find it easier to trust and follow as we recognise Jesus identity, and place in God's plans for the universe and for us.

John ends his chapter recording the purpose of his writing – to bring readers to believe in Jesus and find life. The miracles he refers to in verse 30 are those of Jesus ministry, but should we include additionally the miracle of life given through faith in him?

Sunday between July 10 and July 16 inclusive

[Proper 10c, 4th after Trinity in 2022]

Deuteronomy 30:9-14, Psalm 25:1-10, [Colossians 1:1-14](#), [Luke 10:25-37](#)

Most Important!

Paul writes to Colossae, a place he has never visited, with a church founded by someone else. He's heard that things are going wrong – there is a group whose teaching is seriously different and dangerous – it has all sorts of things: a bit of Jewishness, claims to “advance” beyond apostolic Christianity, mystical teaching about angels, and an “in-club” exclusivism.

So what does Paul have to say to all this, the threat to his teaching, and the true gospel? (You might want to read Colossians 1:1-5 now, the first part of the reading [Colossians 1:1-14](#)). Paul doesn't seem as worried, or as negative, as I was! He wants to give thanks, and picks out faith (one commentator suggests – “Christian confidence”) and love, based on the hope of heaven.

He seems to put his hope for their future in these things, rather than a careful campaign against the false teachers. He will have more to say about them and their teaching, but there's no panic. This is more important.

When we get to verses 9 and 10, his prayer is not for victory over the others, but for knowledge of God's will, wisdom, and understanding. Is this so that they can put other people in their place? No. It is so that they can live properly, and do good deeds.

Paul really seems to think this is most important, as if it brought some protection, some benefit. And there's one more thing. He talks about rescue, being set free, having sins forgiven. And he says God has done that! His opponents would have said that people needed “spiritual development” or some such thing. Paul says – the important things are simple and positive: God has set us free, given forgiveness in Jesus (as Epaphras said). So they (and we, overhearing this conversation by letter) should take advantage, and hold onto that!

Faith, love, the assurance that even when it is hard to do right, its value is never lost in heaven, where all will be safe – these are the imp things. So why am I reading bits of Colossians 1? Because I too easily see the negatives, and worry about how to react. What I find here is a reminder of the simple goodness and reliability of the gospel.

Accept what God has done, and offered you by faith – be sure you accept, and have confidence! Trust God (always more than “people” or “plans”), and love one another. Of course it will sometimes go wrong, but those things are so important!

Being nice and the gospel

The Parable of the Good Samaritan: well known, often quoted, easily misunderstood, [Luke 10:25-37](#) is another trick question, well answered by Jesus. The questioner, who knows his scripture, seems to want a limit. It is almost as if he asks, “Who can I tell to get lost, because they don't qualify for my help?”

It is, of course, the wrong question. But, like annoying children, we are good at asking the wrong questions – the ones with answers too complicated to understand, the ones which don't fit our situation, or our need, or are more concerned with making us look good, or others look bad. "Why is this happening to me?" may be a question like that, but there are plenty of others.

Jesus doesn't sulk or get angry. He may know that this question is meant to get him into trouble, but his answer will have grace, combining continued usefulness with a real attempt to let this questioner, and his listeners, understand. We can imagine that the ordinary people in the crowd enjoyed the criticism of the priest and the Levite. Of course, important people today are never too preoccupied, frightened, or lazy to offer appropriate help – are they? A warning there, for those of us who think we might have important things to do.

What is the story really about? No, it is not being nice to strangers. No, it is not about race relations. No, it is not about generosity, or the importance of first aid (not that I am against any of these things!) What Jesus says is, "Life with God, the good life, the holy life, is never just about keeping within the behaviour not forbidden. If you want to live for God, the question is not 'What have I got to do to make the pass mark?', but 'What opportunities does God give me to reflect the love, grace, generosity and mercy that show God in action?'"

The Samaritan doesn't "do well enough to go to heaven" – none of us do – but he shows more of God than the religious professionals manage in this story. Jesus invites us to live a new life, in the forgiveness and love of God, and in that life to look for opportunities to be like Him.

Sunday between July 17 and July 23 inclusive

[Proper 11c, 5th Sunday after Trinity in 2022]

Genesis 18:1-10a, Psalm 15, [Colossians 1:15-28](#), Luke 10:38-42

Spiritually Advanced?

Nearly 2000 years ago, Paul wrote a letter to a small town in modern Turkey – and it still has something to teach (it supplies Sunday readings for 4 weeks!). Colossae: Founded on trade in sheep wool – fleeces dyed purple with a cyclamen based dye. The Church, with Gentile and Jewish believers, was established by Epaphras, probably himself converted in Ephesus. But there was a problem in the Church in Colossae; they were getting their faith wrong, in a way which mattered. We won't worry too much about how they wanted to improve on the gospel, but let's look at what Paul said in [Colossians 1:15-28](#).

First, 1:15-20. Its all about Jesus. Jesus is how we see what God is like – is God remote, severe, judgemental, or is God a pushover, a sugar-daddy? Well, the answer (to those and lots of other ideas) is – look at Jesus. Get to know the stories about him. He's friendly (to all sorts of people), very human, but also powerful, and has deep understanding and sympathy.

For the Colossians, Jesus might have been the start, but they wanted to “improve” this faith in one way or another. Paul isn't having that. Jesus continues in charge, superior to the powers of heaven. It is Jesus who died to set us free, it is Jesus who is head of the Church, the source of its unity – an important point, because of division. [And whether you are a new Christian, or have been in Christian things for years, you don't get away from needing Jesus, and the forgiveness he gives].

Then, verses 21-23 talk about how that affects the Colossians. Their past had been one of alienation – led astray by the false values of a corrupt society (does that sound familiar?). But Jesus (yes, focus on him again) had intervened to set them free by his death. They are not being allowed to get away from the physical – because of their delight in the metaphysical and “spiritual”, Paul ties them down to the actual, bodily death of Jesus. Their future depends on their holding on to their initial commitment to the gospel they once heard and accepted.

After the central and continuing importance of Jesus, and God's purpose for the Colossians, Paul talks about his own role. He sees himself as entrusted with a message – not some secret knowledge to be passed on to initiates, but the gospel taught to believers openly. That is your message, too. If you know what Jesus did and does, don't keep quiet about it. The glory is not some religious experience, but the presence of Christ among believers – the new life they share, and in which they grow in holiness and service.

There are lots of people who need to know these things: Jesus has to come first – in Church, in my life, in the way I do faith. There are many round us who forget, or don't know, that without Jesus death for us, we are lost in the false values of a corrupt society. And there are those, even in religion, who do not remember the responsibility we have of sharing the gospel message, and living and working for it – even when that means suffering.

Sunday between July 24 and July 30 inclusive

[Proper 12c, 6th after Trinity in 2022]

Genesis 18:20-32, Psalm 138, [Colossians 2:6-15 \[16-19\]](#), [Luke 11:1-13](#)

Managing your “isms”

How are your “isms”? I don’t mean rheumatism (though I hope that’s not a problem!), but the human systems and theories which sometimes threaten to take over our lives. They can be political: conservatism, liberalism, socialism. Or religious: catholicism, evangelicalism, liberalism, pentecostalism. All have something good to offer, but there is danger if the “ism” becomes more important than the life you should be living with its help.

Paul wrote to the Christians in Colossae (a place now in Turkey). We are reading [Colossians 2:6-15](#). They had 2 problems. One was a group of Jewish believers, who wanted Christians to follow every detail of Judaism. The other was a group who wanted to mix Christian faith with other religions and philosophies. They dabbled in astrology and the occult, and talked about special exercises and disciplines to achieve “spiritual maturity”.

Paul isn’t having any of it. *“As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him,⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving”*. Christian life begins in receiving Christ as Lord. I hope you understand that it still does. There is no true version of Christian faith which does not put Jesus in charge – of me, my life, ambitions, morality, money . . .

And having started in that way, we go on *“⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.”* – there’s your “isms”, and the danger of being kidnapped by them.

Against the force of “hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition” (NIV), Paul insists on Christ *“⁹For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,¹⁰ and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.¹¹ In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ;¹² when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.”* Christ, in charge. Christ supreme over all spiritual forces. Christ who had set us free, when we were helpless.

“¹³And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses,¹⁴ erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.¹⁵ He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.”

Of course these false teachers would have been much more flattering than Paul, with great sales pitches. But they threatened the gospel – the good news, about a Father who loves us, and encourages us to ask (for the good of all in the Kingdom, not our personal advantage).

Isn't it strange how people are much the same, despite 2000 or more years of cultural and technical change? We still so easily get taken over by what is popular with our friends. We still invent new "isms". Much of that is fine, if Jesus is Lord, and our lives are built on that loyalty and on obedience to Him. But "isms" so easily take over. Be careful, and mind how you manage your "isms"!

Prayer

Jesus prayed, and what his disciples saw made them want to pray, too. (Was it the effect on Jesus, or the renewal of his power or creativity, or just so much part of his life? We aren't told.)

The instructions he gives in [Luke 11:1-13](#) are short. This is no "formula", but teaching to be pondered and understood. (Compare the account in [Matthew 6](#), and you will find rather more words, but the same impression of an outline).

The familiarity of the words to many of us can blunt their impact. They start, not with us, but with God. That is important. We might be happy to dive into our problems, requests, worries – but we are told to begin with God. (God as "Father" may cause problems to those whose parent was not much loved – but we know of good parents. A parent remains one with power, perhaps to direct our behaviour, always to know what we are, and have been. It is not an equal relationship).

We are to communicate, understanding that God is somehow personal, contactable, and involved with us. Luckily, as with a good Father, we are known and understood. Still, there is the effort of seeing another person's point of view, and what plans and directions we may need to hear, and then obey. We have to listen, as well as speak. (Though many Psalms suggest that we can expect a sympathetic hearing when words pour out in pain or anger, with little hearing.)

After beginning with this mysterious and wonderful other, we are encouraged to ask for what we need. The following verses (5-13) underline this. Ask – the Father wants to give us what is good. Good, not necessarily indulgent. Good, for life in service of the Kingdom, and life which finds its real purpose. The parable is about finding the means to be hospitable, not about living comfortably.

That brings us to forgiveness. We ask for it, with a strong reminder, not only of our need for being forgiven but also of our need to forgive others, reflecting the grace we receive! It is a demanding line, but one close to the heart of Christian living. How can we, who hope for heaven only by being forgiven, criticise or look down on others who need forgiveness too?

Let's not forget the last line, that we are not lead into the time of trial – or temptation. No, of course our heavenly Father is not making trouble for us. Remember Jesus words to the sleepy disciples in Gethsemane – [Luke 22:39-47](#). Twice Jesus uses this phrase (v40,46), and the meaning is clear. Temptation may come in many forms, all dangerous. We ask the Father's help to come through the hard times with faith.

So, what's the problem? It is not that prayer is complicated, rather that we all find good relationships hard, and honest communication demanding. God is as close as a good parent, but the stakes are high, the distractions pressing. But the disciples wanted to learn; it must have been something important for Jesus, and for them.

Sunday between July 31 and August 6 inclusive

[Proper 13c, 7th after Trinity in 2022]

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23, Psalm 49:1-12, [Colossians 3:1-11](#), [Luke 12:13-21](#)

Art thou peculiar?

You have probably heard the criticism that “Some Christians are so heavenly minded, they are no earthly use!” Certainly you will not go far without finding some who talk a different, “religious” language. It has many forms, but they are all a long way from ordinary conversation, and have the effect of alienating everyday people.

At first sight, what Paul has to say to the Colossians (today’s reading is [Colossians 3:1-11](#)) might seem to point in this direction: “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth”. Indeed, he goes on to list a number of things which have to be “put to death” – fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). Isn’t this the negative, judgemental religion that is often criticised and avoided?

Perhaps not. These may be common temptations, but they are hardly things we would want to encourage. “Let’s have more greed” might please the advertisers, but most of us would not be in favour. In fact, these are things we would be happy to avoid (especially if it were easier).

Paul is talking about the consequences of faith, and about the new power at work in Christian believers and the new motivation driving their transformed lives – the Holy Spirit. The new life is only possible because of Jesus, and it is a good life – something we perhaps do not emphasise enough?

As you read on, notice that there are not only things to get rid of, but also things to enjoy and celebrate. Truth is important, and a key to good relationships for family and community life. The other thing mentioned in this section is the breaking down of the barriers of race and wealth – again, an important issue today, as well as for the Colossians.

I’d like to think that Christians have a “heavenly mindedness” which makes them all the more practical and useful on earth. Most of us probably have a way to go yet – we are still being worked on – but the transformation and the newness of life need to be real, not just theoretical.

Not mine!

It is hard being poor! Not that I have direct experience, but working with Christians Against Poverty Swansea Debt Centre brings reminders and stories. It might be enough to make me anxious, or reinforce my mean nature, but this weeks reading in [Luke 12:13-21](#) is a good antidote.

Jesus refuses to arbitrate an inheritance dispute (did he want to leave it to those appointed for this, or recognise that to divide a small inheritance would leave no-one enough, or was he just making a point?). He goes on to talk about greed, and tells a parable about a rich man who plans a life of idle luxury, and dies before he can enjoy it.

He doesn’t complain about the good harvest, nor even the man’s riches, but about perhaps three other things. First, this man is stupid to forget his mortality; he can’t control how long he will live.

Death isn't something we talk much about, but perhaps it ought to be better prepared for – hopefully not because terrorism makes sudden death more common.

Then there is his obvious selfishness. He either totally fails to recognise the needs of others, or thinks they are none of his concern. It looks almost as if the person has been taken over by his possessions – who is making use of who? In any case, he is quite wrong; the whole point of the abundance of the earth's resources is that they are for the benefit of all God's people. Those who are rich have added responsibility, and an opportunity for good (remember [the Good Samaritan](#)?).

Thirdly, he misses a safety net. If he had only paused to thank God for his gift, he might have been led to remember that nothing we have is “owned”, but only ever “lent”. Just as we tell children to be specially careful of how they treat something belonging to someone else, so we need to relabel “mine” as “God's loan”. Perhaps it is only a verbal trick, but it helps sort my attitudes.

Generosity is not something we talk about much. Which is odd, when from a world point of view we in Britain are so rich. Luke, and the other gospel writers, make it clear that this is a gospel issue. How we own / deal with God's loan, is central to our life with God. Poverty is hard, but wealth may be even more disabling if not handled with faith and generosity.

Excuses for this Booklet:

Why yet another collection of comments on the Revised Common Lectionary? There are better scholars, more skilled preachers, and professionally produced productions. But there are some people who know my style (of humour, as well as exposition), some worship leaders and others looking for reflections to read for their congregations, the housebound, and not least those who hesitate to spend money and may welcome a free offering. If nothing else, it keeps a retired cleric out of mischief!

If you enjoy this collection, do get in touch and let me know

(e-mail “andrewknight@phonecoop.coop”).

If there are further collections, should they be in the same form, or is there anything missing, or a possible improvement? Please read the Biblical text that is being reflected on, as well as the reflection – that is the point, and without it the comment is empty. There is a note at the front that this work is licensed under the Creative Commons scheme – meaning that you are welcome to copy and share it, read it on your own or for others, and adapt it without charge. You are not allowed to sell it, or pass it off as your own, however!

Of course the mistakes are my own, but I would like to thank those who have helped me to learn and preach, including congregations in several places, and the College of Preachers MTh course.

You will see that the Revised Common Lectionary works by Sunday dates in the “after Trinity” season. I have given the Sunday names for 2022, but each 3 years afterwards the readings will recur, but may be on different “Xth after Trinity” Sundays.

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