

Advent Reflections

Dear Brothers and Sisters

This Advent (it starts on Sunday) we shall study Paul's letter to the new church in Colossae (some spell it Colosse). Most scholars confirm Paul as the author of the letter. Paul (assuming it was he!) probably wrote the letter when he was in prison. Although he doesn't express it directly in his letter, it seems that there were some odd goings-on in that church. We'll attempt to read between the lines to see why Paul, who never went to Colossae himself, writes the letter.

Each reflection will have a Bible passage, some thoughts, a question or two and a prayer. The questions are for thinking about rather than quiz questions that have a single answer. We'll include some internet links – just click on the link and it should take you to YouTube or another web address.

If any of my thoughts leave you baffled or more baffled than you were before then please do get in touch by replying to the email and I'll try to ease the bafflement if I can. You might also like to ask others! That way, you'll get a wider discussion going.

Encourage others

We have a number of people from outside the Benefice who receive this email, and so far, none of them has asked to stop receiving! We still have quite a few people in our benefice who do not receive these mailings, and I'd encourage you, if you know the email address of someone in that situation or would like a friend or family member to receive this, simply to forward each message on.

Did someone encourage you?

If you email me (paul@wtandw.org.uk or paul.laughlin@gmail.com) I'm happy to add you to the distribution list. You will not be placed on any other list and you can email to unsubscribe at any time.

(This email came directly from my personal mailbox. The following ones will come through an online scheduling system – you may be warned that the email may not actually have come from me, which is technically true.)

With Blessings

Sunday

Colossians 1:1-2

From Paul, chosen by God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and from Timothy, who is also a follower. To God's people who live in Colossae and are faithful followers of Christ. I pray that God our Father will be kind to you and will bless you with peace!

The Apostle Paul (aka the Pharisee Saul of Tarsus) was used by God in two significant ways.

Firstly, he was sent by God around the Gentile world to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ in towns and villages, setting up fellowships in people's houses, teaching them about Jesus and how they should worship together and reach out to others with the Gospel message, before God moved him on to another place.

Secondly, he wrote letters to them. His letters reveal Paul's powerful intellect, his expertise in the Jewish faith and its traditions; the scriptures; and how these formed the seed bed for Jesus Christ. These are presented to his listeners with an infectious joy and a sense of gratitude to God. The letters were not documents to be read and then discarded. They were not just for their time or for the audience that they were addressed to. They contain teaching and theological insights that are just as relevant today for the Church and Christians across the world as they were for the individual churches that received them.

I should point out that Paul did not visit Colossae. He went close by. It was situated only a hundred miles from the port of Ephesus on the west coast of modern Turkey where Paul stayed for quite some time. It's possible that he trained up people to start churches in the surrounding areas. The fellowship at Colossae was probably started by a man named Epaphras, who'd learnt from Paul.

As Paul did not go to Colossae you might want to ask why he wrote to them. Keep that in mind as you continue to read. His greeting to them is as if from a long-lost brother.

How would you worship if there were no guide books written yet?

**What do you think our churches would be like if Paul's letters had never been written?
Continue to ponder on it.**

Father God, if I could take a little of the joy, the gratitude and the hope that Paul reveals in his letters then I would be blessed. Come in Christ into my life and encourage me as a faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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Monday

Colossians 1:3-6

Each time we pray for you, we thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have heard of your faith in Christ and of your love for all of God's people, because what you hope for is kept safe for you in heaven. You first heard about this hope when you believed the true message, which is the good news.

The good news is spreading all over the world with great success. It has spread in that same way among you, ever since the first day you learned the truth about God's wonderful kindness...

Paul gets excited when he writes –take a look at the opening verses from some of the other letters he wrote. Here he bubbles over with gratitude to God, and his joy at seeing how the gospel message is spreading is revealed in the words he writes. Prayer with thanksgiving. Perhaps we can see the zealotry that he first displayed when persecuting Christians before his encounter with the Risen Lord Jesus being now channelled into a desire to seek the very best for those he'd nurtured or knew.

Paul cannot stop sharing the gospel message. He reminds his listeners (the letter would have been read out) that they have grasped hope in both hands, a hope that is certain (being kept safe in heaven) and will be cashed in when Christ returns in glory.

Paul speaks of the gospel message as good news. It can be easy for us who heard it long ago to let its currency fade, that first encounter with Christ to slip from our memory.

What sort of news coming out of your fellowship would cause, say, a former minister to get as excited as Paul does here?

How well has the memory of your first encounter with Christ survived?

How would you describe "the good news" to a friend?

Do you have a story of God's wonderful kindness?

How fast is the good news spreading today?

How fast is it spreading in your neighbourhood?

Father God, keep me mindful of the truth of the Gospel message – that You came to earth in Jesus and died and rose for me. That act of love and kindness gives me new life and the hope of riches in heaven. Amen.

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Tuesday

Colossians 1:7-10

...from our good friend Epaphras. He works together with us for Christ and is a faithful worker for you. He is also the one who told us about the love that God's Spirit has given you. We have not stopped praying for you since the first day we heard about you. In fact, we always pray that God will show you everything he wants you to do and that you may have all the wisdom and understanding that his Spirit gives. Then you will live a life that honours the Lord, and you will always please him by doing good deeds. You will come to know God even better.

Epaphras appears to have been a leader at the church in Colossae. He may have heard Paul when he was in Ephesus, and may have started this church here. There's not much more information about him, but globe-trotting Paul counts this local chap as a fellow-worker.

Paul and his journeying companions had set up a large number of churches. Paul is effusive as he shares his joy in praying for them. His prayer does not appear to be specific to the individual needs of the church in Colossae, but he prays a two-part prayer – firstly, that this church would receive from God the revelation of His plan for them; secondly, that they would gain from God's Holy Spirit all the wisdom and understanding he has to give.

A life that honours God is a life that is set apart for God, a life that is holy. We may look up to holy people ("men/women of God", "living saints", etc.) but let's realise that we all are holy people.

The result of Paul's prayer will be that this church will, through the unity of its members, honour God and reveal Him to the world. We may honour God in a church building on a Sunday but how is he honoured during the rest of the week?

Do you consider yourself a fellow-worker alongside the leaders or elders of your church?

What or whom do you continually pray for?

If God showed you everything he wants you to do, would you do it?

Has God imparted or revealed gifts to you that you have not used?

How does your church honour God in the world?

Father God, I want to live a life that honours you continually. Be present in my life in such a way that my thoughts are your thoughts and my actions yours. In this way allow me to know you better. Be present, too, in my church so that together we honour You. Amen.

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Wednesday

Colossians 1:11-13

His glorious power will make you patient and strong enough to endure anything, and you will be truly happy. I pray that you will be grateful to God for letting you have part in what he has promised his people in the kingdom of light.

I am not a fan of the close juxtaposition of "endurance" with "happy". I'd like to think that once I became a Christian the Good Shepherd would hold me tightly in his arms and keep me safe from trouble, strife, oppression and the like, and I would be eternally happy as a result of that. However, there are simply too many occasions when Jesus made it clear that being a Christian is not an easy life. He talked of betrayal, punishment and hardship as things we might have to endure at some stage, most certainly if we are around when the End of the Age approaches (See Mark 13) -Jesus' one crumb of comfort in all this is that we could pray that it doesn't happen in the ravages of winter. Jesus warns us that living the Christian life will be tough (Mark 10:21-end).

I suppose that I have to trust Jesus at his word, as Paul did. Despite beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks, hunger and that thorn of his Paul would not have chosen an easier way, because he knew that where God was leading him was the only way, and he was grateful for that, and so should we be in our lives.

So, do we pretend Jesus never said what he said, or do we trust him implicitly just as Paul did?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzBqexX1GLE>

Is patience a virtue, or a gift from God?

Is God's strength visible in my life?

What did I leave behind when I became a Christian?

Father God, I call to mind the song, "Lord, make me a mountain standing strong for you", and I wonder if I am ready for the blizzard, the storm, the cold. Perhaps "a candle, shining with your light", but am I ready to be snuffed out? I want to be strong in you, so that after I have withstood all the schemes of the evil one I will still be standing. Amen.

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Thursday

Colossians 1:14

God rescued us from the dark power of Satan and brought us into the kingdom of his dear Son, who forgives our sins and sets us free.

The statement above can so easily flow over our heads and not sink in, especially when we are in autopilot mode in a service, or scanning words rather than concentrating on them and their true meaning. Paul puts it in a nutshell. Read the words out loud, and again, making it personal to you ("God rescued me...").

The fairy-tale prince ventured forth bravely, against perils and dangers, to rescue the imprisoned princess in the tower. Father God sent His son in human form (think of what that really means, too) to rescue us. Jesus came and rescued us from the dark power of Satan. Some people may deny that Satan exists and that there is no dark power, but Jesus makes it quite clear in his teaching and we at our baptism. This Prince of Life rescued us from the power of the wicked prince of this world, but it cost him his life.

Jesus rescued us by dying on a cross in our place as a sacrifice for our sin. Our sin is paid for, forgiven and forgotten. As we grow into Christ we unearth sins we'd never realised before – these, too, are forgiven and forgotten. That takes some believing. We are truly set free, and should Satan attempt to accuse us of anything from the past he has no authority and his pleading is ignored by Father God.

Fairy tales involving princes and princesses (unless the grim Grimm brothers are involved) end happily - they'll get married and live happily ever after. That's what Jesus has done, and this is no children's fairy tale. He's the Bridegroom, and we, the Church, are His Bride. We're not the bridesmaids, nor the ushers – the top table at the wedding banquet is reserved, the seat next to the Bridegroom is ours.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKXaviWVxNc> (start 30 seconds in)

What has Jesus Christ rescued you from?

Are there past or current sins in your life that you feel you cannot confess?

Father God, it's not easy to believe that before I put my trust in You my life was subject to the dark powers of this world. Such notions do not seem to be consistent with modern science or philosophies. But a world without Satan would not need Jesus to come. By Your Holy Spirit lead me to the truth, I pray. Amen.

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Friday

Colossians 1:15-20

Christ is exactly like God, who cannot be seen. He is the first-born Son, superior to all creation.

Everything was created by him, everything in heaven and on earth, everything seen and unseen, including all forces and powers, and all rulers and authorities. All things were created by God's Son, and everything was made for him.

God's Son was before all else, and by him everything is held together.

He is the head of his body, which is the church.

He is the very beginning, the first to be raised from death, so that he would be above all others.

God himself was pleased to live fully in his Son. And God was pleased for him to make peace by sacrificing his blood on the cross, so that all beings in heaven and on earth would be brought back to God.

This came up as part of our reflections last year. It is a beautiful passage and one that demands to be committed to memory, using whichever translation you prefer. We will take parts of this over the next few days, but for the present, please read it out loud, comparing it with the opening of John's gospel.

It is likely that Paul himself did not write these words. They are poetic: look at the way words are paired (seen and unseen, forces and powers, rulers and authorities) the pairing of ideas, the way in which something is repeated using different wording to emphasize a point all make it suitable for reading out loud or singing together.

Does the passage above essentially describe Christ? Is there anything to add?

Lord Jesus, you are exactly like God, the unseen. You are the first-born Son, you are superior to all creation. By your Holy Spirit, let these words be a brand upon my heart. Amen.

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Saturday

Colossians 1:15

Christ is exactly like God, who cannot be seen. He is the first-born Son, superior to all creation.

The above is rendered in the NIV translation thus: He is the image of the invisible God. This is a closer translation of the Greek. The Greek word eikon (icon) is used for image. We have a picture that may have persisted from childhood and was influenced by films, TV and popular imagery, of a God in white robes, full of figure, rather old and sporting a long white beard that matches the long white hair.

The hymn above suggests that God is not to be seen. I give you Exodus 33:20 in support of that, lest anyone attempt to look at God. There is only one view of God that we can have, and that is Jesus, Son of God incarnate. This is what God looks like – behold the man, Jesus.

Jesus was not born superior – his incarnation could not allow that if he was to become like us.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZEItZXQpuM

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVrEAvzDqoE>

What picture do you have of Jesus?

What picture do you have of Christ?

Father God, I can only know your father love in Jesus, for it was Jesus who, in loving obedience to you, displayed your love to us. Draw me closer to you as I draw closer to Jesus.

Amen.

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Sunday

Colossians 1:16

Everything was created by him, everything in heaven and on earth, everything seen and unseen, including all forces and powers, and all rulers and authorities. All things were created by God's Son, and everything was made for him.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. So begins the most amazing book ever written. Genesis 1:1, Creation 101.

Who is it you envisage creating these incomprehensibly vast expanses of space, the galaxies, the myriad of suns and their planets from his throne in heaven? Father God? Be careful. Everything was created from the will of God the Father but God the Word spoke it into being. Yes, Jesus has prior form, literally.

Think about the passage in Paul's letter to the Ephesian church, where he encourages them to put on the full armour of God: *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (from Ephesians 6). Even these entities were created, though nothing was created evil.*

And what was it all created for? For Jesus. This creation was put into place for Jesus.

Can you learn yesterday's and today's words?

Christ is exactly like God, who cannot be seen. He is the first-born Son, superior to all creation. Everything was created by him, everything in heaven and on earth, everything seen and unseen, including all forces and powers, and all rulers and authorities. All things were created by God's Son, and everything was made for him.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xc9sWYKvs4>

Where do we come in this? Look at Psalm 8.

How might you look again at the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness when you consider who Satan was attempting to tempt?

Father God, You made my world and me in order to demonstrate your love that you revealed in Jesus. Your love is bigger than the galaxies and all creation. I am the beneficiary of the proof of your love because of what Jesus did for me. I love you. Amen.

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Monday

Colossians 1:17-18

God's Son was before all else, and by him everything is held together.

He is the very beginning, the first to be raised from death, so that he would be above all others.

The hymn-writer makes it clear that God's Son was there at the beginning, resident in the Godhead. His role in creation was not only to speak it into being but to establish it as a dynamic entity in which the powerful arms of the Son of God hold things in place.

We know that the world, the little bit of creation that we know, is pulled and twisted in all sorts of ways under the influence of forces of evil, forces rebellious to the will of God, yet despite the scarring, the fighting, the destruction that we see, it is still held together by the One we have experienced as Jesus Christ.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofk2UM724TA>

Is creation complete?

Has he got the whole world in his hands?

Who sits on the throne of heaven?

Father God, when I look at this world, I wonder, when people are suffering, and nations struggle against each other, and there is famine and disaster, whether I can believe and trust that Jesus the Word actually could hold it and all creation together. Help my unbelief and my mistrust. Amen.

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Tuesday

Colossians 1:19-20

God himself was pleased to live fully in his Son. And God was pleased for him to make peace by sacrificing his blood on the cross, so that all beings in heaven and on earth would be brought back to God.

The One came to earth as one of us, the Son became a son of a woman. He had no special powers. The Son of God lived fully in this man, as a man, through gestation, birth, childhood and into adulthood. Sharp stones would cut his feet; falls would cause bruises; he smelt like any other person who laboured in the heat. There were no special passes – he grew like us and he learnt like us, slowly. In Father God's time it must have seemed so slow, but He would have gazed upon the formation of the human being, watched as the baby was nursed and cared for, trained, educated and released.

As the boy began to understand just who he was, he would have developed his relationship with the One who sent him. It probably did not take long for the boy to realise that he'd been sent for a reason, and that his mission involved the shedding of his blood.

Jesus' first mission was to obey Father God's will, and enter onto the stage of the work he had created. There was no other way for Father God to show his love except by sacrificing the One he loved for us.

(We can sometimes get a little confused when people talk about God but actually mean Father God. In the text above could any references to God be better understood as Father God?)

Did God create life anywhere else?

What would it mean if He did?

Why did Father God not come down to earth to show us his love, but sent his Son instead?

Why did it have to be so messy, with nails and blood?

How much of this hymn can you remember (Christ is exactly like God, ... See below for NIV)?

Father God, I will not achieve a full understanding in this life of Jesus as God in Man. Each day would you reveal to me a little more of your love that resides in the man Jesus. Amen.

Colossians 1:15-20

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church.

He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Above Scripture NIV

Wednesday

Colossians 1:21-23

You used to be far from God. Your thoughts made you his enemies, and you did evil things. But his Son became a human and died. So God made peace with you, and now he lets you stand in his presence as people who are holy and faultless and innocent.

But you must stay deeply rooted and firm in your faith. You must not give up the hope you received when you heard the good news. It was preached to everyone on earth, and I myself have become a servant of this message.

Back to the flow of the letter. Paul reminds his readers that they have come a long way, in fact right up to the throne room of heaven, and with all the accrued benefits of faith and trust in Christ Jesus on earth.

You are holy, faultless and innocent. You were unholy, fault-ridden and damned guilty. You are not holy-ish, faultless-ish or innocent-ish. You do not have to pretend that you are anything but that which the spilt blood of Jesus won for you. If you pretend to be less than what you actually are in Christ, because you think it's impolite to boast, then you are acting in a sinful way. You do not have to act piously or deny or punish yourself or limit the gift by pretending unworthiness. Christ gave it all to you, all of it. To accept anything less than the gift He gave you is to reject the redeeming work of Christ Jesus. Jesus' blood was spilt for you. There is no counter-argument. So don't argue and stop pretending.

You are holy, faultless and innocent. You may not feel it, but you are. If you think it's about you then deal with your foolish pride, because it's about Jesus and what He has done for you. Just as when you take a shower you'll get wet, when you stand in the glory of God revealed in Jesus and stay in his presence you will become drenched in his love and glory.

You and I are holy, and we are still growing in holiness. Paul reminds us that we do need to cultivate deep roots in Jesus – this takes time.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=typ7cueKdT4>

How as Christ's Body can we walk together in holiness, faultlessness and free from condemnation?

Can we stand in God's presence today, or do we have to die first?

With whom do you share the trials you face in living in faith and hope?

Father God, there is nothing more difficult for me to face up to than the simple statement that Jesus did it all for me. There is nothing I can offer by way of my own righteousness. Jesus has done it all for me. Burn this truth into me as a brand upon my heart. Amen.

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Thursday

Colossians 1:25-29

I am glad that I can suffer for you. I am pleased also that in my own body I can continue the suffering of Christ for his body, the church.

God's plan was to make me a servant of his church and to send me to preach his complete message to you. For ages and ages this message was kept secret from everyone, but now it has been explained to God's people. God did this because he wanted you Gentiles to understand his wonderful and glorious mystery. And the mystery is that Christ lives in you, and he is your hope of sharing in God's glory.

We announce the message about Christ, and we use all our wisdom to warn and teach everyone, so that all of Christ's followers will grow and become mature. That's why I work so hard and use the mighty power he gives me.

Paul came along at the right time. His call was to the work that God was now ready to carry out. It was not a coincidence that this learned Pharisee with a zeal for the Jewish faith happened to be there. Paul's placing and preparation was part of God's plan. Many questions can be asked about why God allowed Christians to suffer at the hands of Saul. Would he have been as effective for God had he not been a forceful guardian of the Jewish faith?

Paul knows the importance and weight of the task God has given him. He knows that joy and suffering seem to have equal parts in this ministry, but joy will always overcome. Paul is not being weird when he says he is pleased to continue in his own body the suffering of Christ for the church. We all have to undergo in some way the suffering and death of Christ in order to know his risen life. And this is indeed the wonderful and glorious mystery (not a mystery as in vague and nebulous, but a mystery insofar as we cannot use words to explain it), that Christ is alive in me! He is the proof of God's promises, he is the evidence of God's love, he is the hope of glory.

Oh, to know the power of your risen life, and to know you in your sufferings:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oxpPIa-BskY>

Are you doing what God has planned for you?

If not, then could it be that you are avoiding it, or avoiding finding out what it is?

What are the consequences of allowing Christ to live in you 24/7?

Are you still growing in faith and life in Christ or have you become stunted or shallow-rooted?

Father God, I would shy away when you call, because I know that with your call comes the prospect both joy and suffering, and as I don't fancy the suffering the joy doesn't come to much. I dare to pray that you fill me with your Holy Spirit that I can, like Paul, rejoice in all aspects of your perfect call on my life. Amen.

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Friday

Colossians 2:1-5

I want you to know what a struggle I am going through for you, for God's people at Laodicea, and for all of those followers who have never met me. I do it to encourage them. Then as their hearts are joined together in love, they will be wonderfully blessed with complete understanding.

And they will truly know Christ. Not only is he the key to God's mystery, but all wisdom and knowledge are hidden away in him. I tell you these things to keep you from being fooled by fancy talk.

Even though I am not with you, I keep thinking about you. I am glad to know that you are living as you should and that your faith in Christ is strong.

Although this is the start of chapter 2, and it forms a nice break from the previous chapter Paul's letter had no chapters. He now turns to aspects of personal lives of faith in Christ. He continues to talk about suffering, if struggling entails suffering, as he describes his concern for another church, in Laodicea. This town is close to Colossae, and Epaphras may have been an evangelist there as well as at Colossae. Paul did not go there, either, but may well have heard all about their development and growth from Epaphras.

There's a small undertone of correction going on here – it may be that some people in Laodicea were being fooled by false teachings – we may have forgotten how hungry these new Christians were for teaching, and there were charlatans about who could spin a yarn, enjoy a free meal on it and perhaps even gain power for themselves through what they were peddling. This still happens in the church today – people are still being duped by promises of prosperity (some TV evangelists are doing very well out of it) or all manner of false gospels from Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and other sects.

The line in the sand is the Bible. The Bible is our only source of reference. We have to trust the people who decided which books and letters should be included in the Bible. Tradition may have some influence but tradition is difficult to substantiate and is often held on to by specific denominations. Even when sects talk of the centrality of the Bible they may manipulate its message to their own ends.

For Paul the centrality of Christ's work is the reference point. Anything that detracts from this is to be avoided.

What traditions do you hold to? Do they point to the centrality of Christ?

Churches can have different approaches to baptism, the Lord's Supper, marriage, etc. Might any of these point away from the centrality of Christ?

How do I know if I am living as I should?

Father God, in Jesus you have provided us with The Way, The Truth and The Life. Support me as I follow him, speak and hear nothing but his truth and place my life in his hands. Amen.

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Saturday

Colossians 2:6-11

You have accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord. Now keep on following him. Plant your roots in Christ and let him be the foundation for your life. Be strong in your faith, just as you were taught. And be grateful.

Don't let anyone fool you by using senseless arguments. These arguments may sound wise, but they are only human teachings. They come from the powers of this world and not from Christ.

God lives fully in Christ. And you are fully grown because you belong to Christ, who is over every power and authority. Christ has also taken away your selfish desires, just as circumcision removes flesh from the body.

Paul now reiterates the basics of Christian faith. What he says is a good primer for all of us. From time to time in our journey of faith we may slip and lose position or direction, but Father God is always looking out for the lost child, and heaven rejoices each time over the lost sinner who repents. You and I are that lost sinner at least once in our life.

Paul encourages us to soldier on. Our human nature is to give up, to see it all as pointless and to opt for a quiet life. Carrying on is tough – our faith may take a serious knock; we may lose friends; we may suffer ostracism or persecution; our prayers may seem unanswered; I may feel completely alone; I may seriously question what I'm doing. All I can say is this: God's worst plan is infinitely better than any plan of mankind. God's foolishness (though God is, of course, not foolish [1 Cor. 1:25]) is wiser than any wisdom of man. God's promises never fail, even if we do not see them fulfilled in our own lifetime.

I can also say this: there have been times in my life when nothing other than the power, the grace, the providence, the love of God could explain the miracles, the provision, the protection, the grace that I have received as I continue to follow Jesus.

Falling into sin – did I trip, was I pulled, or did I dive in?

Are there roots in your life that are set into anything that is not Christ?

Has God done something special for you in response to a specific need?

Can he do it again?

Father God, if I have ever chosen to listen to a teaching that presents you as created in my image, or calls me to follow practices that are not of you I cast them now at the foot of the Cross. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast save in the Cross of Christ. Amen.

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Sunday

Colossians 2:12-15

And when you were baptized, it was the same as being buried with Christ. Then you were raised to life because you had faith in the power of God, who raised Christ from death. You were dead, because you were sinful and were not God's people. But God let Christ make you alive, when he forgave all our sins. God wiped out the charges that were against us for disobeying the Law of Moses. He took them away and nailed them to the cross. There Christ defeated all powers and forces. He let the whole world see them being led away as prisoners when he celebrated his victory.

The symbolic splashing with font water does not do justice to symbolise what happens at baptism, but it does not matter, for baptism itself is symbolic. Whether you were sprinkled or ducked, or even if you don't remember, your point of entry into Christian life in Christ is marked by your death. It is the death of what you were, the life you led before, it is about your dying to sin in Christ.

Knowing what sin is is an integral part of Christian life. It's not something you can manage on your own, nor should you think that sin does not apply to you. It's not simply about being naughty or listing things we've done wrong. It is the state in which we were born. This is so fundamental to our faith that to ignore or diminish it leaves us with a pale shadow.

The only way out of a state of sin is to die to it. The wages of sin. In Christ we have One who died to sin for us, in our place. In baptism we die with him and the hold of sin over us is broken. In his resurrection we rise with him to new life. This I acknowledge in my baptism. If I was baptised before I understood its meaning then I acknowledge it now.

What would Church be like without baptism?

What do you understand by new life?

When will Christ's victory over all powers and forces become a visible reality?

Father God, you created this universe in order to show your love for me. As the psalmist says, "such knowledge is too wonderful and excellent for me." You sent your Son to this earth to demonstrate just how much you love me. Let that truth fill my uttermost being so that I may begin to love you back. Amen.

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Monday

Colossians 2:16-19

Don't let anyone tell you what you must eat or drink. Don't let them say that you must celebrate the New Moon festival, the Sabbath, or any other festival. These things are only a shadow of what was to come. But Christ is real! Don't be cheated by people who make a show of acting humble and who worship angels. They brag about seeing visions. But it is all nonsense, because their minds are filled with selfish desires. They are no longer part of Christ, who is the head of the whole body. Christ gives the body its strength, and he uses its joints and muscles to hold it together, as it grows by the power of God.

It's at this point (and only now) that Paul gets round to what might be the reason for writing this letter. There appear to have been false teachers in the church or, more likely, in the area, who had been preaching off-message, with teaching that contained remnants of Jewish practice or that placed restrictions on people or simply subverted the gospel message. False teachers feed on the power they gain through subjugating others into ways that may seem religious but which have nothing to do with the true faith. When the online shop order is delivered we might accept a substitution when our chosen item is not available. In our Christian life we may actually *prefer* substitutes to the real thing.

Paul mentions rules about diet, nature-related observances or practices that are no longer valid. False practices may be introduced, like the worship of angels – angels are servants of God who neither demand nor deserve praise or worship from us. There may be some teaching that is only revealed in stages to the initiated (as in Freemasonry). This reeks of privilege and exclusivity – Christ died once and for all.

Paul's brothers and sisters in Colossae did not have the full teaching of the Bible to guide them.

After 2000 years of existence could the Church even now be affected or infiltrated by false teachers?

Do we get annoyed at fellow-Christians who don't do the gestures in worship we do?

Is it required that we face east for the Creed? If so, why?

Would it be sinful to hold a party on a day like Good Friday?

If someone claims to receive a vision from God, how do we know if it's true or not?

Father God, again I come to you to ask if there is any wrongdoing within me. Search my heart, Lord, and root out anything that is not based on the truth of the Gospel message. Challenge what I think, what I say, what I do. Amen.

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Tuesday

Colossians 2:20-23

You died with Christ. Now the forces of the universe don't have any power over you. Why do you live as if you had to obey such rules as, "Don't handle this. Don't taste that. Don't touch this."? After these things are used, they are no longer good for anything. So why be bothered with the rules that humans have made up? Obeying these rules may seem to be the smart thing to do. They appear to make you love God more and to be very humble and to have control over your body. But they don't really have any power over our desires.

Why do I crucify my Lord again and again? It's in our nature to want to do faith the hard way, by creating rules and practices that show how hard we're working at it and by which we can justify ourselves. We work at religion because we can then say we've earned God's favour.

I don't think for a moment that you would want to beat yourself with a whip (some do – don't look it up) in order to demonstrate that you have died to the fleshly life, but each time we follow a practice that is based on mortifying ourselves (e.g. fasting) as an act for its own sake we deny the death of Jesus for our sins. Jesus' death is the supreme gift that Father God has given us. Man-made practices in themselves neither reveal God to us nor take us closer into him. In some forms they can replace and therefore deny what Jesus has already done for us. The experience of the practice fails and all that we are left with is a sense of emptiness.

However, this is not to say that we can't respond to Father God's love in ways that show and reflect that love back to him. God expects holiness of living from us, but when we live in Christ Jesus it is he who makes us holy people, not what we do.

God is not impressed by us. Never in the mansions of heaven has God exclaimed "that was impressive" about anything anyone has done. The relationship he offers in Jesus requires no more on our part than to believe and trust in him. Father God will look on Jesus alone. If I am not to be found in him then I am truly lost forever.

Are there rules or practices you follow in church or daily life that you do for the sake of it or for fear of the outcome if you stopped doing them (e.g. that something terrible may happen)?

Why do so many 19th and 20th century church buildings have pointy windows?

How much store do we set by the traditional practices of our particular church or fellowship?

Father God, touch my heart with your love, and let me respond not by wailing and expressions of self-mortification but with joy and the outflowing of love. Show me that in Christ I am a new creation and this body of mine is therefore to be cherished, for it is a temple of your Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Wednesday

Colossians 3:1-3

You have been raised to life with Christ. Now set your heart on what is in heaven, where Christ rules at God's right side. Think about what is up there, not about what is here on earth. You died, which means that your life is hidden with Christ, who sits beside God.

Paul continues to make clear the fundamentals of our faith, reminding us that it is all about Jesus. Not only did we die with Christ, we rose to new life with him.

At the crucifixion we tend to imagine a picture of desolate bleakness, the Son forsaken by Father God and left to die. Remember, however, that if we died with him then it wasn't a death that happened in a separate place. We died with him on the cross. We were carried on that cross by Jesus. We weighed him down.

We died with him. Paul tells us that our life is hidden with Christ. Paul does not mean that we are no longer in this world - we most certainly are! Perhaps we could say that our prospects in Christ are bright.

In the resurrection we came, too, into new life. We were not resuscitated. We were given a new life. I, Paul (me, not the Apostle), am Paul Mk 2. Paul Mk 1 is dead. Satan attempts to raise Paul Mk 1 and when Paul slips into sin there's something of the old man that resides in him until Paul Mk 2 is re-established following repentance and forgiveness.

Paul tells us to look even beyond this daily struggle we have. Our new life is eternal, though there is a fleshly death at the end of this earthly life. The new body will then be revealed in its fulness. Paul urges us to think ahead, to heaven, to the conclusion of earthly struggles.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRaFdFkOVyY> – if you can't answer yes then re-read the previous two Bible passages again.

Were those who mocked Jesus on the cross also carried on it?

What are we requesting when we pray, "Your kingdom come"?

Where is my new body?

Father God, I'm struggling with the visceral images of being in Christ. Take me to the truth and beauty of what it means to be in Christ, and how this is revealed in my daily life. Amen.

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Thursday

Colossians 3:4-9

Christ gives meaning to your life, and when he appears, you will also appear with him in glory.

Don't be controlled by your body. Kill every desire for the wrong kind of sex. Don't be immoral or indecent or have evil thoughts. Don't be greedy, which is the same as worshipping idols. God is angry with people who disobey him by doing these things. And that is exactly what you did, when you lived among people who behaved in this way.

But now you must stop doing such things. You must quit being angry, hateful, and evil. You must no longer say insulting or cruel things about others. And stop lying to each other. You have given up your old way of life with its habits.

The call boy taps on the door of the green room and announces curtain-call in two minutes. All cast to the stage to welcome the principal player. We and all those who died in him will see the glorious Son of God, in the same body that the disciples saw after Jesus' resurrection. We will see someone we recognise instantly, for we have been hidden in him, and he has been the shepherd who knows his sheep. We will be standing in the throne room, bathed in his glory, or it may be that we have seen Christ's return.

Paul reminds his listeners of the major change that has taken place in their lives since knowing Jesus. He lists the sorts of things they had got up to in the past, things they would have considered normal or acceptable. Not everyone in our world who does not know Jesus Christ is necessarily a bad person in his or her reckoning, and may follow strict rules of life that are similar to what Paul is reminding his listeners to follow, but anyone who does not know Christ as Lord is lost to eternity, for their old life does not live beyond the grave.

Are there things you consider normal or acceptable in your life that God might not?

How do you justify them before God?

Are there any that you find hard to break?

How do you feel about the statement that anyone who does not know Christ as Lord is lost to eternity? Is it harsh? Is it unreasonable or unfair?

Is there punishment for those who die outside of Christ?

Father God, there is no place in you where my sins can reside. For the sins that I cling to I seek such a hatred of them that I would let them go. Purify my heart, Lord. Amen.

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Friday

Colossians 3:18-4:1

A wife must put her husband first. This is her duty as a follower of the Lord. A husband must love his wife and not abuse her. Children must always obey their parents. This pleases the Lord. Parents, don't be hard on your children. If you are, they might give up.

Slaves, you must always obey your earthly masters. Try to please them at all times, and not just when you think they are watching. Honour the Lord and serve your masters with your whole heart. Do your work willingly, as though you were serving the Lord himself, and not just your earthly master. In fact, the Lord Christ is the one you are really serving, and you know that he will reward you. But Christ has no favourites! He will punish evil people, just as they deserve.

Slave owners, be fair and honest with your slaves. Don't forget that you have a Master in heaven.

Paul may have been a man of his time, and for this he should be handed some slack. However, he spoke deep truths regarding relationships, and these are not to be reviewed or re-interpreted according to the spirit of this age. We all have duties within relationships though today we may agree to share them in different ways. Paul speaks to the roles and duties as they were in his time, and adds to them. He talks about love, and places on the husband a duty to respect his wife in love rather than treat her as a possession – that's quite radical. Attitudes to children are based on Paul's understanding of God's fatherhood. Radical stuff, too.

Jesus and Paul talked about slaves as a matter of fact, and they did not blow the abolitionist trumpet. It was rightly eventually blown by others. The words about slaves may be obsolete, but what about the relationship of employers to paid workers, of authorities to their citizens? Do we serve Christ in our work and in our public life?

We have a duty before God to honour and reflect in marriage "the mystical union betwixt Christ and His Church" and in our parental roles to demonstrate the love of Father God to our children. God knows that the world needs to see this.

An ugly topic that is only now being seriously addressed is abuse. Abuse is a misuse of power. We have read of child abuse in our churches (naming denominations is pointless– we can't go blaming others as we all have a duty of care). In the CofE all ministers must undertake safeguarding training. An area that is somewhat particular to churches is spiritual abuse. This may take the form of a church leader using the Bible or Christian traditions to bully or coerce members. It may also be evident in marriage relationships where the husband does the same thing against his wife. In some churches where there is physical abuse the church leader or elders may choose not to intervene, and a wife's plight may be dismissed and handed back to her as something she must bear lest she break the solemn vows of marriage. Frightening.

Do I reflect the Father love of God in my marriage, family, work, leisure and church relationships?

Father God, in this age of fluidity of relationships and identity I pray that your patterns for the best life are revealed in the life I lead, and in the Church. Embolden me to speak truth and wisdom into relationships that are under stress or drifting. Amen.

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Saturday

Colossians 4:2-6

Never give up praying. And when you pray, keep alert and be thankful. Be sure to pray that God will make a way for us to spread his message and explain the mystery about Christ, even though I am in jail for doing this. Please pray that I will make the message as clear as possible. When you are with unbelievers, always make good use of the time. Be pleasant and hold their interest when you speak the message. Choose your words carefully and be ready to give answers to anyone who asks questions.

How do you see prayer? Is it a chore, or a list to work through and be ticked off when done? That would be a narrow view of prayer. Are you a fixed appointment time prayer person, or do you pray into all situations as they arise? Could you be both?!

Paul writes in the white heat and blazing light of the Gospel message's expansion. Since that time God's call on people to bring the world to its knees in prayer has not diminished and we too are called to pray for barriers to be smashed and doors to be broken from their hinges (though the CofE may word it more gently). We are held to the same zeal and commitment that Paul displayed. Each life is precious to God, and if we let opportunities go because we can't be bothered or don't want to know then there's something unhealthy in our spiritual life. Paul is in jail and he's still going at full speed.

Paul offers a simple plan for communicating the gospel message. He does not see faith as something you gain and then keep to yourself. Closet Christians are not much good. For those who are not good with words there is plenty that can be done through action, but do not shy away from sharing good news because of fear. God is gracious.

Do people ask you about your faith? Why, or why not?

What story can you give to anyone who asks?

What do you say to those who ask hard questions?

Father God, if I stand in the shadows then shine your light on me, for though I will be seen I will also be bathed in your glory. If I am afraid to speak, fill me with your wisdom, for though my knees may tremble your wisdom will overflow to heart and mouth. Place me where you can use me. Amen.

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Sunday

Colossians 4:7-18

Tychicus is the dear friend, who faithfully works and serves the Lord with us, and he will give you the news about me. I am sending him to cheer you up by telling you how we are getting along. Onesimus, that dear and faithful follower from your own group, is coming with him. The two of them will tell you everything that has happened here. Aristarchus is in jail with me. He sends greetings to you, and so does Mark, the cousin of Barnabas. You have already been told to welcome Mark, if he visits you. Jesus, who is known as Justus, sends his greetings. These three men are the only Jewish followers who have worked with me for the kingdom of God. They have given me much comfort.

Your own Epaphras, who serves Christ Jesus, sends his greetings. He always prays hard that you may fully know what the Lord wants you to do and that you may do it completely. I have seen how much trouble he has gone through for you and for the followers in Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Our dear doctor Luke sends you his greetings, and so does Demas.

Give my greetings to the followers at Laodicea, especially to Nympha and the church that meets in her home.

After this letter has been read to your people, be sure to have it read in the church at Laodicea. And you should read the letter that I have sent to them. Remind Archippus to do the work that the Lord has given him to do. I am signing this letter myself: PAUL. Don't forget that I am in jail. I pray that God will be kind to you.

Paul comes to an end with some personal greetings and encouragements. He starts by telling his listeners about the folk who are with him or who visit him in prison. We know little about Tychicus, but what a great person he'd be to have on your team. He's going to journey from Rome to Colossae to bring news of Paul. Onesimus is a fascinating character – read all about him in that very long letter, [Philemon](#).

Paul has companions in jail with him, and I am sure they are up to speed on everything Paul is involved with.

I am encouraged by the constant prayer of Epaphras, the one who'd set up the fellowship at Colossae. He has also been at work in two other places. Read the text and look up the places to get an idea of how near or far apart these places are:

<https://holylandphotos.wordpress.com/2014/04/04/colossae-in-turkey/>

The letter ends with an encouragement to read his letter to the Laodiceans. It has been lost. One wonders what Paul may have written in it.

At the conclusion of the letter we have covered some very important teachings. It's good to reflect on what Jesus said and what Paul said, noting how Paul, who did not know Christ on earth, puts together in his letters, in a way that none of the eleven disciples could, a set of teachings about Christ Jesus that still guides us today.

Who encourages you in your Christian walk?

Would you prefer to spend time in jail with Paul or live freely in a godless town?

What made Paul special?

Did you learn the passage in chapter 1?

Father God, I thank you for the gospels and letters that have come down to us. In them I have all I need for salvation. Build a fire in me that burns with a desire to read, study and reflect on the Bible. Amen.

Father God, tomorrow is the day the Church chose to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Take our hearts and visions beyond the stable to marvel not on shepherds and wise men but to the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, a love-gift from you to mankind. Amen.

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