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# Distance

## A Sermon at Union Chapel

**Readings:** Genesis 15:1–6  
Colossians 2:1–8  
Luke 15:11–31

15 July 2007

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I may be absent in body, but in spirit I am with you **Col. 2:5**

Paul was, it seems, someone who liked to talk. We have a lot of letters from him, of course, but if we look at the account of his life in the Acts of the Apostles (which doesn't say anything about him writing letters) we find him ceaselessly talking to people: preaching, arguing, quarrelling, but also (we would imagine) simply being with his friends. Talk, face to face contact, must have been very important for him: it was where the real action happened, not only personally but also religiously. It was where proclamation, preaching, making Christ known – where all that happened.

And so, when Paul was cut off from people, when he couldn't meet them face to face – either because he was simply somewhere else, or because, as here, he was in prison and couldn't visit anyone – when he was cut off, he wrote letters, but, as well as that, he probably fretted. And so we see him fretting here: fretting about how it was going with this congregation in Colossae (which he'd never actually visited but had heard about). And he was fretting about whether they had been led astray, about their spiritual lives, and so on. And so he writes a letter, full of fretfulness and argumentativeness.

For us, of course, things are different. We cannot visit this congregation at Colossae because they were alive almost two thousand years ago: we cannot have the face to face contact with them that Paul revelled in, we know very little of the things that Paul knew about them and that they knew about Paul, we cannot make contact with the rich network of personal connections that they and Paul had. And so we, like Paul but for rather

different reasons, find ourselves wanting to get closer, to find out what lies behind these words that Paul is writing here.

But back to Paul. He says

Be on your guard; let no one capture your minds with hollow and delusive speculations, based on traditions of human teaching and centred on the elemental spirits of the universe and not on Christ

**Col. 2:8**

and this (I think if we are at all inclined to fret about the state of the world) brings up a horrible spectre of religious groups yelling at each other, trying to prove that one or the other of their traditions is the true one. And you (or I, at any rate) may feel that here is something that we might want to draw back from.

But is that what Paul is really saying here? He is telling the folks in Colossae (and us) to rely on Christ, not on the traditions of human teaching. To start: traditions of human teaching. Well, there are certainly a lot of those: we live in a culturally confusing world, and there are a lot of different traditions around, and they all make claims for themselves (and, in many cases, strange and possibly damaging claims). Strange diets, strange fashions, political and cultural fads: all of these things. These beliefs are all quite familiar to us. And we all, I think, in our heart of hearts, know that they are weird, and strange, and somehow enslaving. It is all part of living in the sort of culturally confusing world that we do, part of being human, part of being separated from God. And the people in Colossae had their counterparts of this sort of thing, too, and these were maybe something to do with “elemental spirits”, but, of course, we don’t know what exactly they believed because Paul doesn’t tell us (and why should he? he was writing to the Colossians, after all).

And what Paul contrasts these human traditions with is not his own tradition, but Christ; Christ who had appeared to Paul, and who, Paul was convinced, was at work in the church. (Another way, I suppose, in which Paul is talking about face to face meetings.) And Christ, says Paul, sets us free from these “elemental spirits”: promises us freedom, promises us, as well, “treasures of wisdom and knowledge”.

This is, you might say, all right for Paul, but not all right for us. Paul, after all, had this wonderful direct encounter with the risen Christ; we didn’t. Paul, you might also object, knew what he was writing about, and we have to guess even the meaning of his strange Greek. So what do we do?

Here is a way of thinking about it. We are human, and we do strange things to each other and to ourselves: we lack wisdom and knowledge, and

we go off and enslave ourselves, whether to good living in foreign parts, or whether to pig farming, or whether to strange fads or to the worship of elemental spirits. This is all part of what we do: another part of what we do is to squabble with each other about whose doctrine, whose tradition, is the correct one. This is all described in the Gospel reading for today: the steady descent from foolishness to foolishness, the personal rivalry, the lack of perspective. But what is important is that, even when we are far off, God can see us: that God comes running to meet us. And it is easy to read Paul and think that we are surely not like the people he is describing: we do not have their piety, we do not have their vivid direct experiences, it is all somehow *there* for them in a way that it not for us. But the Gospel reading shows us that all of that is irrelevant: what is important is God turning towards us.

But, of course, we still (even when God has turned towards us) remain human: the prodigal son, after all, still has to deal with his hostile brother, and make a new life of it, and find out how to make a living when he's squandered his inheritance. And all of this is stuff which will not go away, however much his father still loves him. And so for us: we still remain embedded in this rather awful confusing fad-obsessed culture, and we have to somehow deal with it. But, Paul says, take courage: God has turned to us, we can live a new life (maybe without the spectacular experiences that Paul had, but a new life nevertheless), and we can, maybe slowly and gradually, unpack these treasures of wisdom and knowledge that Christ has in store for us. Paul, too, even when he was in prison, could be patient and could realise that he was still together with these people in spirit: and so must we have his patience and his hope.

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