
Wisdom and Spiritual Understanding

A Sermon at Union Chapel

Readings: Ps. 19
Col. 1:3–20
Mark 4:24–33

18 February 2007

What are we to make of all this? It is a letter: a letter written, by Paul, to a church in what is now Turkey. A church founded, not by him, but by Epaphras, one of his associates: and now he writes, out of concern, out of nervousness, out of pride, trying to instruct the congregation over there (he can't visit them himself, because he is in prison). So, it is a delicate thing: and one of the things that makes it delicate is that Paul is very concerned about other teachers who are teaching this congregation things which he does not quite approve of. One of the things that also makes it confusing for us is that Paul is also doing a lot of quoting, from those misleading teachers: and sometimes he seems to agree, sometimes he might disagree a bit, and sometimes he disagrees a lot. But all of this is hard to get straight: Paul did not use quotation marks (nobody did at the time), and so it is hard to see what is by him and what by the other teachers, especially since his disagreements with them were quite nuanced. So, what are we to make of all this? And are not all of these considerations all too complicated for simple Christian folk, somewhat peripheral to the central requirement of faith? Isn't simple faith enough?

Paul believed that we, in the church, are called to freedom: that we were bound, not to slavish obedience, but to a life of "wisdom and spiritual understanding" – a life even in which we would have "full insight into [God's] will". Paul's quarrels with opponents were largely with those who wanted, as he saw it, to take away the freedom of the congregations that he had founded: who wanted to introduce rituals, or slavish obedience, or to divide Christians into an elite and the others. And Paul never flatly demands mindless obedience: he begs, pleads, cajoles, satirises, makes fun of himself – he was, after all, an educated Roman citizen, and he was

skilled in rhetoric, and he uses it all. Some of it may sound exaggerated, or bad-tempered, to us: some of it may be convoluted, or confusing. But he was treating his readers like grownups, who deserved rational persuasion rather than just an argument from authority.

And what Paul wants from his readers is that they should have a manner of life worthy of the Lord, and that means that they should grow in knowledge, that this knowledge should bear fruit, and that they should have fortitude and patience to meet with whatever comes: these are not the virtues of mindless faith, but the virtues of believers with minds who are prepared to use them and who are trusted to be able to use them.

We can be like this – free Christians who have minds – because of what God has done for us. He has “rescued us from the domain of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of his dear Son”; and Paul describes this in high-flown language. Christ is “the image of the invisible God”, involved in the creation of the world, responsible also for setting it at peace with God, responsible also for setting us free. So this high-flown language in the reading from Paul has a point: Paul is telling us of our justification for behaving as we do. Cosmic, awe-inspiring: probably the middle section of our reading quotes from a hymn about the cosmic Christ, just like our hymn “Of the Father’s love begotten”.

But there is another side to this. As well as all of this cosmic imagery, there is another role for Christ, a more approachable and more nurturing one: Christ is the head of his body, the church, and it is the gospel of Christ which is described as putting on new growth and bearing fruit. And we heard Jesus himself talk of how the Kingdom of Heaven is: growing, like a mustard seed, spreading through the world like leaven in dough. So there are two sides to it, the large, awe-inspiring side and the apparently more modest, nurturing side.

This letter seems, at first, to be split between the two sides: the domestic, almost personal, tone with which it starts – greetings and hopes, Paul’s prayers and wishes – and then suddenly changes into the cosmic hymn to Christ. But it is important for Paul, and for us, to see that these two things are intimately related to each other: they are both aspects of the one process, the process of reconciliation, and Paul is well aware of this. He slips, into the greetings, these little phrases about the gospel growing and bearing fruit the whole world over, and for a moment we are in the sphere of the cosmic Christ; and, similarly, during the hymn he mentions the church – with, as we know, all of its imperfections and obscurities – as part of the cosmic work. The two interpenetrate in such a way that they cannot be separated.

Now Paul’s opponents, as far as we can tell, were probably emphasis-

ing the cosmic side, and probably attempting to attain it by ascetic practices. And, Paul says, they are not exactly wrong, but one-sided and divisive; and he appropriates a lot of their language and phraseology to reply to them. And so we have this letter. It is, of course, now part of the New Testament: it has become, as well as the words of Paul, part of the God's word to us. And we are tempted to regard it as something which we approach, or try to approach, almost entirely from its holy, cosmic side: as something which has set itself free from the particular circumstances of its writing and its destination. Well, I can almost hear Paul saying, up to a point: but we forget the circumstances of its composition at our peril. We transform it from something alive and compassionate into something which is both terrifying and irrelevant, and we forget the gospel of freedom that Paul was trying to communicate with this letter.

It has the look of something which was written in a hurry. It is very improvisatory. It was written by a real person. It is written in at times quite terrible Greek. God works like this: God takes real people, such as you and me, and takes them up into this process of salvation, and they, we, do what we do. We sit through these inconsequential-seeming meetings, or whatever it is we do, and we must learn to see God at work in them. Look, said Jesus, look at the mustard seed: it may seem small to you, but look at the fruit it bears.

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