

Pentecost 7
7/7/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Colossians 1:1-12, 2:1-3, 4:7-18

Psalm 133

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

(Off RCL)

What should the preacher say on his first day? With the prospect of at least a few hundred sermons ahead of us in our time together, I hope that it will suffice to reflect on who the community is who gathers in this way, and how it is that it comes to do so. That is, let us reflect on what the church is.

Today's selections from Paul's letter to the Colossians have been chosen to emphasise that here we have a *letter*, from one to another. Jumping through the text in this way enables us to hear more clearly the humanity of those involved, and their share in a particular community: "*we* have heard of *your* faith", Paul writes; the "we" and the "you" are the reason for the letter. We hear of the apostle himself (1.1), of the brothers and sisters in Colossae (1.1.f) and of beloved friends (1.7). We hear that they struggle for each other in order to bring encouragement and union in love (2.1f). And, perhaps most humanising of all, there are the names: Paul, Timothy, Tychicus, Onesimus, Epaphras, Mark, Barnabas, Justus, Luke, Demas, Aristarchus, Nympha, Archippus. Overhearing this exchange is a bit like looking at an old photograph, especially one of people unknown to us – the kind of thing you see in a historical display in a small country town. With charity we can see that, though they are different, the fading faces in those photographs are like ours: ways into storied creatures of God, loving, desiring, achieving, failing, healing and hurting – each one of them one of us.

Yet what we overhear in Colossians is no "mere" communal exchange. The point of our reading the letter nearly 2000 years after the fact is not that we might learn such a lesson in common humanity as any modern liberal mind might be able to tell. This is a particular community, sprung from a particular history, telling a particular story. This community and its story are tested and tempted by particular invitations, particular options for its future. It is this dynamic which creates the occasion for the letter and is also the basis of our interest in it, for we too are tested and tempted like them.

We will hear more detail about these temptations over the next few weeks but the problem at Colossae was basically a question of human freedom springing from the deeper question of God's own freedom. The crisis took the particular form of what we can know and how that knowledge secures a future for us – how it frees us (or not) from the things which seem to threaten us.

The Colossians are a community whose freedom is under threat because a range of qualifications and extensions are being made locally to the gospel message that in Christ is found the true knowledge and wisdom of God. Our concern in reading and reflection on the Colossian epistle will be: in what sense is Christ the wisdom of God today and, with that, what kinds of things threaten to creep into our existence as "the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Melbourne" and so cut into the freedoms that wisdom in Christ should bring?

It is as church that we ask these questions, which matters also for what we will be doing. For the Apostle and the congregation in Colossae, and we ourselves, together already begin to constitute answer to the question about Christ as God's wisdom. Together they and we are the kind of "fruit" (1.6,10) which the gospel should bear. Together they constitute an act of creation on God's part.

And this leads us back to my opening question: what is the church? To answer this, let us hear two things from what Paul says to the Colossians (one of which is not from the selections we've heard this morning).

First, if we are concerned with knowledge and wisdom in relation to God, it is Paul's desire that we have

^{2.2} ...an assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, ³ *in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*

Second, as we will hear each week as part of the liturgy, "^{3.3} *you* [plural] have died, and *your* [plural] life is hidden with Christ in God."

And now, the sermon clincher – a logical trick which might, on closer examination, hide a fallacy but which I'll employ anyway, on the principle that it is more important that a preacher be interesting than that he or she be right. There is a mathematical principle known as the law of transitivity, which runs like this: if A=B and B=C then A=C. What has this to do with Paul on the Christ and the church? In the two passages I've just quoted Paul says, first, that in Christ is hidden all the wisdom and knowledge of God and, second, that in Christ *we* are hidden. Here is the extraordinary, terrifying and dangerous conclusion to be drawn from this: that *we* who are hidden in Christ are the wisdom and knowledge of God which is hidden in Christ. And this is not to say that we "have" wisdom and knowledge – that we simply know something that others do not. Rather, *we are* the wisdom and knowledge of God.

Now, piety will rush in here with all sorts of qualifications – and this is, in part, quite appropriate. If we are such divine wisdom and knowledge, we are so very imperfectly. The very existence of the Colossian epistle is evidence that Christ's sovereignty over us is ever being challenged, and so is poorly manifest amongst his people.

Yet we are more likely being timid than being humble in our objections to the conclusion. The church *matters*. It matters in same kind of the way that Christ himself matters, for where Christ is, there is the church. The church is the new creation which God is working, and so the space within which God is coming to be acknowledged as free creator. And this is not merely the abstract "church universal" – the "invisible" church – but the community of saints in North Melbourne, Kew, Rochester. To pray for the world – if by this we mean praying for "all creation" – we must pray for the church, and for the church first: pray for all those clunky human communities which gather like this week after week, loving, serving, arguing, grieving.

Hear the extraordinary declaration of the gospel: that God makes of *you* (plural) – of all peoples! – his wisdom and knowledge. Imagine: the "body of Christ" – the church – is not simply "a" body affected by Christ but is *Christ's* body – the re-embodiment of the greatest of all things in the most contemptible of all things: Christ on the cross, God in the god-forsaken, wisdom through fools.

This is not a matter of arrogance, although the danger is very real that it might become so. Rather, it ought to cause in us not a little fear and trembling because it is a thought which will not bear thinking, and yet we must think it if the confession that *Jesus* is Lord is to make any sense. It seems to demand too much of us, although with the term “demand” we indicate that we have not yet heard the force of Paul’s “hidden” and “in Christ”: this is not our work yet to be achieved but God’s sure promise.

But if such fear and trembling, so also wonder should be part of our response here. For if even we could matter in such a way in the re-creative work of God, what in the world would be beyond such use, such redemption? This, church of God, is surely good news for all who have not yet heard it.

Listen again to the last part of our Colossians passages this morning, and marvel at what a remarkable thing God invests in otherwise ordinary people:

¹⁰ *Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, welcome him.* ¹¹ *And Jesus who is called Justus greets you. These are the only ones of the circumcision among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me.* ¹² *Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills.* ¹³ *For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.* ¹⁴ *Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you.* ¹⁵ *Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.* ¹⁶ *And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea.* ¹⁷ *And say to [those who gather at Elm Street], “See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord.”*

¹⁸ *I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.*
