

Text: Colossians 2:1-7

Theme: Receiving Christ is Only the Beginning

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi at the Evening Service on 31st July 2011 at 6:00pm.

1. The depth of Paul's conflict for the Colossians and others (v. 1).

Here Paul opens up his heart to the Colossians and also the believers in Laodicea, to whom his letter would be read (see 4:16). "For all who have not met me..." Apparently, Paul had never visited Colosse himself. Most of them had never seen his "face in the flesh". Even as Paul's authority extended to those he had never met – to those who had never seen his face – so it also extends to us.

He speaks of his great concern for them: "I want you to know how I am struggling for you..." It wasn't that Paul fought with others about the Colossian Christians. Paul engaged in spiritual warfare and heartfelt care for the Colossians and describes it as a "great conflict" (KJV).

This concern grew, no doubt when he heard the news brought to him by Epaphras that a serious error was circulating among them. Paul longs that they may be 'encouraged in heart and united in love'.

2. Paul's specific concerns and goals in the spiritual conflict (vv. 2-3).

That they may be encouraged

Paul wanted this because he was concerned about their *enthusiasm*. He knew that discouraged, downcast Christians are easy prey for the world, the flesh, and the devil.

"The word he uses for encouraged is *paraklein*. Sometimes that word means to *comfort*, sometimes to *exhort*, but always at the back of it there is the idea of enabling a person to meet some difficult situation with confidence and gallantry" (Barclay). Paul wanted them to be fit for heroic action.

Being united (knit together) in love

How encouraging it is for believers when their hearts are united in love. However, the opposite is also true: discouragement is the consequence of believers realising their hearts are not united in love. But love is not enough. Paul was concerned about their *understanding*. He knew that their unity and steadfastness was not just a matter of love, but also of growing together in God's truth.

Illustration

"Discovery Channel showed film of a wildebeest giving birth on the Serengeti. Her baby barely had time to get used to breathing when the mother nudged it to get it standing. Picture the newborn on wobbly hind legs with its forelegs still bent underneath its bobbing head. Between the mother's nudging and the baby's inexperience, the newborn is worn out after five minutes of repeated attempts to stand.

Then the camera picks up a hyena approaching stiff-legged with lowered head and slightly bared teeth. The mother wildebeest bravely steps between the hyena and the baby, but another hyena appears, followed closely by a third. The mother lunges at the newcomer. Although it backs away, another skulks in closer to the helpless infant. Before long a circle of hyenas occupies the mother wildebeest while other hyenas eat the baby.

Meanwhile, spread out nearby, literally thousands of other wildebeest graze, now and then lifting their heads to watch the desperate mother attempt to fight off the hyenas. Any of them could easily help save the newborn, but not a single one does.

Satan, like the hyena, is on the prowl. He also has lots of help. If you try to stand up to him alone, you're almost guaranteed defeat - just like that mother wildebeest.

You can't survive spiritually without other Christians who support you, encourage you, pray for you, and help you grow into a strong follower of Jesus Christ. That's why, when you become a Christian, you are adopted into the family of God (Romans 8:15). That's why God created the church.

Our habit in today's world is to live our lives alone: To stay out of each other's affairs; To keep our distance. That's not God's way. He asks us to love each other and to care for each other, as brothers and sisters in Christ. We weren't made to be like all those wildebeest in the herd that stood off to the side watching one of their own get eaten alive by hyenas."

The false teachers in Colosse believed that revelation could be received outside of the Saviour, but here Paul lays down the thought that all essential truth is found in Christ, and they need not look any further than Him for spiritual understanding. The true wisdom Paul wanted them to know in Jesus would bring them together – indeed, 'knit' them 'together in love' – instead of dividing them the way that false wisdom did.

For Paul, real riches were found in the believer's "full assurance". Many lack full assurance about the character of God and are unconvinced that He is really good and loving. Others lack full assurance of their salvation and wonder if their Christian life is for real. Great freedom and confidence comes when we come to this full assurance.

And having this full assurance, we are able to know the mystery of God, namely Christ. The term "mystery of God" is used in a few different ways in the New Testament. Here, Paul uses the term regarding the character and person of God - something we could not know unless it was revealed by Him.

"Others might lead them astray with specious talk of mysteries; but there was one mystery above all others – the mystery of God's loving purpose, disclosed in Christ alone – and Paul's concern was that they should come to know this all-surpassing mystery, and know it as an indwelling presence." (Bruce)

Three mysteries are described in Colossians 1:24 through 2:3:

- The Church as the Body of Christ, for which Paul suffered and served (1:24-26).
- The Indwelling Christ, the hope of glory in each individual believer (1:27).

- The Revealed Jesus, the treasury of all wisdom and knowledge (2:2-3).

Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge

This is an important idea in Paul's letter to the Colossians. With this, Paul refuted some of the bad teaching troubling the Colossian Christians. They were influenced by teachers who told them to seek the 'treasures of wisdom and knowledge', but *not* to seek them in Jesus. Paul wrote, "You will only find all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge in Jesus. He has them all." It's not wrong to seek after wisdom and knowledge, but we must seek it all in Jesus.

When Paul said this wisdom is 'hidden' in Christ, he used the ancient Greek word *apokruphos*. "His very use of that word is a blow aimed at the Gnostics.... Gnostics believed that a great mass of elaborate knowledge was necessary for salvation. That knowledge they set down in their books which they called *apokruphos* because they were barred to the ordinary man." (Barclay) Paul wanted all to know that real wisdom was not hidden in secret books, but deposited in Jesus Christ so that all can access it.

"'Hidden' does not, however, mean that they are concealed but rather that they are laid up or stored away as a treasure." (Vaughn)

"Everything we might want to ask about God and his purposes can and must now be answered – this is the force of the verse – with reference to the crucified and risen Jesus, the Messiah." (Wright)

"He is indeed the Mystery of God, profound in the wonder of His being, and yet so real that the tiniest child talks of Him with sweet familiarity." (Morgan)

But it is also true that our Lord conceals as well as reveals. For me, this perpetual discovery has been the most thrilling in my life. The feeling that every day there is some new surprise to be found has kept me on my toes. Christians who go from week to week without ever opening up their Bibles and focusing on some aspect of God's message to them must live dull lives. And when Paul describes the truth of God with words like 'riches' and 'treasures', he reminds us that God's truth is precious and worthy of sacrificial seeking.

3. Paul's earnest warning (v. 4).

The reason why Paul told the believers at Colosse and Laodicea that all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ and nowhere else is because, as Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*, he didn't 'want anyone leading (them) off on some wild-goose chase, after other so-called mysteries, or "the Secret". They must not allow themselves to be deceived.

Sin entered into the world after Eve allowed herself to be deceived (see Gen. 3). Had she checked Satan's words against the word given by God (Gen. 2:16-17) and held to that, then she would not have succumbed to temptation. If all Christians were to examine carefully what they read in books or hear – even from pulpits – and check it against the infallible Scriptures, then error would have little freedom to circulate.

Those who taught these dangerous things among the Colossian Christians were very persuasive. The lure of “hidden” and “deep” wisdom and knowledge can be both strong and deceptive. Paul did not say that they had *already* been deceived, but he clearly saw the danger and warned them about it. It might sound simple, but deceivers are deceivers. They won’t announce their false doctrine as false doctrine, and it will often be similar enough to the truth to be dangerous.

4. Paul’s confidence in their present standing (v. 5).

I am absent in body, yet I am present with you in spirit

Through prayer – the core of his *conflict* mentioned in Colossians 2:1 – Paul genuinely felt he was among the Colossian Christians “in spirit”, even though he was “absent in the flesh”. Though error was threatening the churches at Colosse and Laodicea, it is obvious from Paul’s next words that not everything was bad. “I...delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.” These two go together – orderliness and a firm faith in Christ. It works the other way also: where there is no firmness of faith in Christ there is no order. Instead there is disorder. Firmness of faith in Christ and good order are root and fruit. Loss of faith in Christ and disorder are also root and fruit. In Him we are in good order; out of Him we are in disorder.

According to Vaughn, the words ‘order’ and ‘steadfastness’ are both military words. “He [Paul] sees the situation of the Colossians as being like that of an army under attack and affirms that their lines were unbroken, their discipline intact, and their ‘faith in Christ’ unshaken.”

5. The highlight of the Epistle (vv. 6-7).

There is no doubt that these two verses sum up the teaching of the entire letter. No better definition of the essentials of the Christian life could be given than this: ‘as you received Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him.’ These two requirements – receiving and continuing – should be made clear to every new Christian. And those who have been on the Way some time need to be reminded of them also. Some think receiving Christ is the end, but it is only the beginning. The foundation is there to be built upon.

How did we receive Christ? By surrender and receptivity. We give to Him and take from Him. Our giving involves giving the one and only thing we own – ourselves. When He has that, He has all.

This is a wonderful rule for Christian living. We cannot perfect in the flesh what was begun in the Spirit therefore, just as you ‘received’ Jesus, ‘walk in Him’ in the same way. The simple things of the Christian life provide continual and reliable spiritual fuel for growth. We always have to be reminded of the things we have been taught.

So continue to live (walk) in Him, rooted and built up

Paul used a curious combination of metaphors. As Christians, we ‘walk’, but we are also ‘rooted’, and we are also ‘built up’. The metaphors are somewhat mixed, but the message is clear: be established and keep growing. When we continue to depend on Christ and make Him the centre of our lives then we are rooted in Him, built up in Him, and we overflow with thankfulness.

“It is not usual with the apostle to employ this double metaphor, taken partly from the *growth of a tree* and the *increase of a building*. They are to be *rooted*; as the good *seed* had been already *sown*, it is to take root, and the roots are to spread far, wide, and deep. They are to be *grounded*; as the *foundation* has already been *laid*, they are to *build* thereon. In the one case, they are to bear much fruit; in the other, they are to grow up to be a habitation of God through the Spirit.” (Clarke)