

Text: Colossians 3:1-10

Theme: Our chief business.

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi at the Evening Service on 21st August 2011 at 6.00pm.

Introduction

Paul's letter to the Colossians divides neatly in two: the first half being doctrinal and the second, practical. Paul's purpose in this letter, as we have repeatedly seen, is to show that Christ is pre-eminent – that He is first and foremost in everything – and that the life of every Christian should reflect that fact. Living for Christ is the theme that Paul embarks upon as he begins this third chapter, and he deals with it in terms of relationships. First, our relationship with Christ, second, relationships in the local church, third, relationships with the family, fourth, relationship to one's daily work, and fifth, relationships with unbelievers.

Verse 1: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above" (Colossians 3:1)

If you have been raised with Christ, put to death in you all things that are unworthy of a child of God. If you have been raised with Christ, clothe yourself, Paul says to the Colossians, in this new self. That is the way he puts it. It is like a new set of clothes. Put it on. Feel how good it is to walk around with a new self. Just try it on, and then get the courage to live that way.

Fred Craddock talks about going home to Tennessee, up in the Smoky Mountains where he was born. He sat in a restaurant in a little town on his way home. The owner of the restaurant was the waiter, the cook, and the greeter. He came around to Fred Craddock's table and introduced himself. He asked, "What is your name? What do you do?" Fred Craddock admitted that he was a preacher. So the man pulled up a chair, turned it around backwards, straddled it, and started to tell his life story. That happens to preachers.

He said he was born just a few miles from here, in a little town up the road in the mountains, to a mother who wasn't married, in the days when that was a terrible scandal. There was a label on a child that they carried like a leper's bell. When he went to school the other children would say that name above all other names that he hated to hear. When he went downtown he could hear the businessmen whisper. His mother wanted him to go to Sunday school. He went once and he was told that he was a bad influence, so he never went back.

One day a new preacher came to that town. The boy decided he would go to hear him, along with everyone else. When the service was over, the preacher was at the door greeting people. The little boy tried to sneak around behind him so that he wouldn't be seen. The preacher saw him and asked, "Who are you? Whose boy are you?" The boy immediately thought, "He's found out about me." Before he could answer, the preacher said, "Wait a minute. I know who you are. I can see the family resemblance. You're a child of God." Then he put his hands on the boy's shoulders, and said, "Son, you have quite an inheritance. Go out and claim it." That statement brought about a turnaround in his life.

"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ..." focuses on practical Christian living, with the clear understanding that practical Christian living is built on the foundation of theological

truth. Because we know that Jesus is really raised from the dead, then our identification with Him becomes real. It is only because we were raised with Christ that we can seek those things which are above.

The idea of being raised with Christ was introduced back in Colossians 2:12, where Paul used baptism to illustrate this spiritual reality. Now, seeing that we are raised with Christ, certain behaviour is appropriate to us. Because we were raised with Christ, we should act just as Jesus did when He was resurrected.

After His resurrection, Jesus left the tomb. So should we – we don't live there any more. After His resurrection, Jesus spent His remaining time being with and ministering to His disciples. So should we – live our lives to be with and to serve one another. After His resurrection, Jesus lived in supernatural power with the ability to do impossible things. So should we – with the power and the enabling of the Holy Spirit. After His resurrection, Jesus looked forward to heaven, knowing He would soon enough ascend there. So should we – recognizing that our citizenship is in heaven.

To emphasize it even more, Paul added the phrase, “where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.” (v.1) This phrase, particularly in its allusion to Psalm 110, focuses attention on the sovereign rule which Christ now exercises. The command to aspire to the things of heaven is a command to meditate and dwell upon Christ's sort of life, and on the fact that he is now enthroned as the Lord of the world.

Our relationship with Christ must shape every other relationship. So important is it to grasp this truth, that Paul continues with his theme in the second verse. “Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ - that's where the action is. See things from his perspective.” (Colossians 3:2, *The Message* translation). Set your minds, Paul says, on the things above. He doesn't mean withdraw from earthly life, but that you must love *heavenly things*; *study* them; let your hearts be entirely *engrossed* by them. Now, that you are converted to God, act in reference to heavenly things as ye did formerly in reference to those of earthly. ‘Earthly things’ are not all evil, but some of them are. Even things harmless in themselves become harmful if permitted to take the place that should be reserved for the things above. Setting our minds on the things that are above also means learning to live on earth in a heavenly manner. Think of the Wright brothers and all their difficulties over years of learning how to sail a self-propelled vehicle upon air. They looked above, committed to rise above the earth. We join in a similar task as we struggle to follow Jesus.

All this is because of the primary Christian conviction that Jesus was dead and is now alive and that changes everything. Jesus is really alive. Jesus shows us what's real. He becomes the lens through which we view life. All of existence must now be compared to and measured by Jesus. All of life is relative to Jesus. He is the prime meridian, connecting all poles of life, and all of life is oriented around him. We even write our calendars as AD —*anno Domini* —“In the year of our Lord.”

His resurrection doesn't make our lives simple. Jesus struggled and suffered. We'll struggle and suffer and make mistakes and fail. But in all things we must devote our attention and dedicate our thinking to our new life in Christ. Paul writes, “Your life is hidden with Christ in God.” (v.3) He says that Christ *is* our life. We don't know exactly how. We don't get all the explanations we'd like, but we change greatly as we contemplate this fundamental mystery

that *is* revealed to us, that we, starting with our conversion, are actually within the living Jesus.

Unlike some other world religions, the Christian faith has no geographical centre. Judaism focuses on Jerusalem and Islam on Mecca. The Christian faith, however, focuses on heaven, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

Verses 3 and 4: “When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory” (v.4)

Here the thought which Paul has been developing through the first verses of this chapter is brought to completion. The day will dawn when the Christ, whom we worship but do not see, will be revealed to the world in all His glory. The promise of the return of Jesus is not only that we will see *His* glory, but so that we also will appear with Him in glory. This is the *revealing of the sons of God* mentioned in Romans 8:19 – “For creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.”

On that day, all will see the saints of God for what they *really are*, not as they merely appear to this world. “Paul, the prisoner, an eccentric Jew to the Romans and a worse-than-Gentile traitor to the Jews, will be seen as Paul the apostle, the servant of the King. The Colossians, insignificant ex-pagans from a third-rate country town, will be seen in a glory which, if it were now to appear, one might be tempted to worship.” (N.T. Wright)

Verses 5-7: “Put to death” the things that are against God and part of this world (v.5)

Having urged his readers to set their hearts on the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, Paul now invites them to search their hearts. The thrust of his argument is irresistible: if Christ is your life then that means putting to death all things connected with the way of death – sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed. The verb in the original text *nekrosate*, meaning literally ‘to make dead,’ is very strong. It suggests that we are not simply to suppress or control evil acts and attitudes. We are to wipe them out, completely exterminate the old way of life.

We ‘put to death’ in the sense of denying these things and considering them dead to us and us dead to them. “To *gratify* any sensual appetite is to give it the very food and nourishment by which it lives, thrives, and is active.” (Adam Clarke)

There is importance in *listing* and *naming* these sins as Paul does in this section. “It is far easier to drift into a sin which one does not know by name than consciously to choose one whose very title should be repugnant to a Christian.” (NT. Wright)

Some Christians, it must be said, are against all forms of self-examination. They believe self-examination to be a negative practice. Concentrate on Christ, they advise, and sinful things will drop away of their own accord. But the phrase ‘put to death’ suggests that something has to be done to rid us of the evils that reside in our hearts. Even though we are Christians and have been saved from the power of sin, it does not mean, as we have already seen, that the roots of sin have been dislodged from our hearts and will never trouble us again. Some believe in the possibility of reaching a state of sinless perfection but I do not share this view. Even after decades of following Christ and being conscious of His Spirit at work in my life, I am aware that my heart has the possibility of becoming an idol factory. That’s why, in addition to setting my affections on things above, I must also search my heart. The one follows from the other.

Verses 6-7: Incentives for a godly walk

It has been said that Paul’s imperatives are always supported by incentives. In other words, Paul not only presents us with the highest of standards but also provides incentives that encourage us to reach up to them. He gave us in verse 4 the incentive of Christ’s appearing, and if that is not enough, he now attaches to his imperative another kind of inducement, namely that ‘the holy anger of God falls upon those who refuse to obey him.’ The apostle is talking here, of course, not about those who sin and then confess their sin, but those who continue in sin. Those who sin and cry out to God in repentance are at once forgiven and restored. Paul says that Christians ‘once walked’ in these sins. It is possible - though tragic - that these sins should *occasionally* mark a Christian’s life, but they must not be a Christian’s walk, their manner of living. What is more, providing they are open to God, they will receive the empowerment they need to go on and not sin in that way again.

Verses 8-10: Removing other traces of worldliness

From these verses, it is clear that Paul is moving to consider Christian’s relationships with one another in the Church. Every one of the six sins mentioned here – anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language and lying – has the potential to destroy relationships. The sins are regarded by many as “little” sins that Christians may overlook with little danger. Paul challenges us to put off the old man in *every* area of our lives. These things may have been part of our way of life before our conversion, says Paul, but they should not be practiced by those who belong to Jesus Christ.

Each of these sins are primarily committed by what we *say*. When Paul calls the believer to a deeper obedience, he tells us to keep *a tight rein on our tongue* (as did James in James 1:26 and 3:1-9). Nevertheless, it is also possible to ‘lie to one another’ without words. “It is easy to distort the truth; an alteration in the tone of voice or an eloquent look will do it; and there are silences which can be as false and misleading as any words.” (Barclay)

The more notorious sins of Colossians 3:5 are easily seen as incompatible with the nature of Jesus. But these “lesser” sins are also incompatible, so put off these sins also.

Put on the new self

The phrase Paul used was commonly used for changing a set of clothes. We can almost picture a person taking off the old and putting on the **new self** in Jesus **who is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator**: Because the new man is **renewed in knowledge**, he is hungry to know what *God says* in His Word. If our lives are under the rule of Christ, then it follows that our decisions will come under His rule as well. So, it is just a question of will power. You have to decide, ‘I will no longer do this’. You supply the willingness, Christ will supply the power, if you really belong to Him. You may wonder why this qualification. It is possible to talk the talk without actually belonging to the risen Christ.

A few years ago, there was a young man who was employed as a doctor and an assistant medical director in a major hospital. Although he performed his duties well and possessed the necessary skills, there was one problem—the twenty-eight-year old man had never gone to college or medical school. He allegedly forged official documents to get the job as a doctor, and knew enough medical gibberish to fool everyone into thinking he was the “real” thing! But with his foolishness came a price. The man was caught and convicted. As a result of his deceiving scheme, he will spend several years—up to seven years or more—in jail as a prisoner (a position for which he is better qualified).

Unfortunately, this man reminds us of a lot of people who call themselves Christians. They go to church. They don’t swear or drink a lot. They pray once in a while. They know just enough “Christianese” to pass as the real thing. But they’re just going through the motions. They’ve never made a personal commitment to Christ. Paul says that, in the last days, “people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Timothy 3:1-5). He also says that many people will have a form of religion while denying God’s power. In other words, they look like Christians on the outside, but they don’t have the power on the inside.

Most of us don’t want a phony doctor removing our appendix. And God doesn’t need any phony Christians. It’s not too hard to go through the motions once-a-week at church, or say the right things amongst Christian friends. Most of us could probably do it well for a while. But rather than playing ‘church’ and being something you really are not, why not rather accept Christ and then you can know the power of genuinely living with him.