

COLOSSIANS

**The Letter of Paul
to the Church in
Colossae**

Introduction

Though prior to the nineteenth century no one doubted that Paul was the author of Colossians, today many seem to take it for granted that the Colossians speaks to a situation from a later period and was composed not by Paul but by a disciple some time after Paul's death. The personal details, so they argue, were included to capture the feeling of Paul's letters and to remind the readers not only of Paul's teaching but also of the fact that even after his death he was still with them 'in spirit' guiding them and encouraging them in their Christian lives. It is not easy for us to envisage such a practice, but, as we saw in the Introduction (see pages 6-8), it was quite widespread and quite accepted in the first century of our era, and does not therefore in itself pose a problem in the acceptance of Colossians as an inspired work of the New Testament. However, as for Second Thesalonians, so here, I find their arguments unconvincing and will be treating Colossians as a letter composed by Paul himself.

When we compare Colossians with any of the letters which we have studied to this point we find that there are differences in the ideas expressed and so in the vocabulary. However, these differences can be adequately explained by the different situation which Paul was addressing. More significant are differences in style. As regards style, however, we need to keep in mind the role of the scribes whom Paul used in composing his letter. If Paul told a scribe what he wanted to say and left the composition to him, the letter would obviously reflect the scribe's style while faithfully expressing Paul's ideas. However, without having recourse to such a suggestion, and on the supposition that Paul dictated the letter word for word, the differences in style still do not argue against Paul being the author. We need to recognise that any author, including Paul, can use different styles for different purposes. This was an even more relevant factor in Paul's day than it is today, as one of the elements of education was training in the copying of various styles.

In any case, the main arguments advanced against accepting Paul as the author are based not on style but on the content of the letter. There is a new stress on the lordship of Christ resulting from the fullness of divinity that he enjoys. The focus is rarely on God and the Spirit is hardly mentioned. The gospel is spoken of in terms of 'mystery' in a way that is new. In a way of speaking that is not found in earlier letters, baptised Christians are said to have *already been raised* with Christ and to share in the fullness which he has as *head* of the church. It is argued that these ideas are new and demonstrate a later development of thought. Other scholars, however, see these ideas as perfectly consistent with Paul's thought and adequately explained by the special situation in Colossae which Paul is addressing.

After examining the issue, Jean-Noël Aletti in his commentary on Colossians writes:

All things considered, our understanding of authenticity having happily evolved in these last years, one is able to declare not only that the letter is Pauline, but that it is very probably written by Paul.

– *Saint Paul: Epître aux Colossiens* (1993) page 280

Likewise, in the Anchor Bible commentary published in 1994, the authors, Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, after seventy pages of exhaustive investigation of vocabulary, style, and content, including a comparison with Ephesians, and having examined the arguments on both sides of the question, come to the following conclusion (page 125):

The most solid and safest working hypothesis for the reading and exposition of Colossians is still the assumption that it was Paul who wrote, or rather dictated, the whole letter himself.

One of Paul's constant concerns was for the unity of the church. He is continually exhorting his readers to open themselves to the grace that is drawing them to an ever fuller sharing in the communion of love with God that is being offered them by Christ. Paul is continually confronting tendencies for one group to consider itself superior to another: whether it be Jews thinking themselves better than Gentiles (Galatians); or charismatics thinking themselves better than their non-charismatic brothers and sisters (1 Corinthians); or Gentiles thinking themselves better than Jews (Romans). We find the same concern here as Paul writes to a community that is being tempted, through contact with surrounding pagan cult, to adopt certain ascetical practices. There is a danger that the ascetics will think of themselves as better than the non-ascetics. It is this that accounts for the intensity of Paul's focus on Christ. Nothing must be allowed to distract them from 'devotion to Christ' (2Cor. 11:3), who is inviting *all* believers to share the intimacy of his risen life.

Place and Date of composition

The letter itself tells us only that Paul is writing from prison (4:3,10,18). Two of our earliest manuscripts, the fourth century Codex Vaticanus and the fifth century Codex Alexandrinus include a note that Colossians was written by Paul during his imprisonment in Rome. Luke describes Paul during his Roman imprisonment as enjoying the kind of freedom required for such writing:

Paul lived there [in Rome] two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

– Acts 28:30-31

According to the chronology which we are following, Paul was living under house arrest in Rome, awaiting trial, from 60-62AD. Colossae was devastated by earthquake in 62AD and it is impossible to imagine that this was not public knowledge in Rome. If the tradition contained in the early manuscripts is correct, Paul must have written Colossians in the first year of his imprisonment, as he gives no indication of having heard of the earthquake.

Another possibility is that Colossians was composed during an earlier imprisonment in Asia. This fits with the statement in the Marcionite Prologue, written about 200AD, which states in regard to this letter: 'The apostle already in fetters writes to them from Ephesus'. At the close of the letter Paul sends greetings from the same people as are mentioned in his Letter to Philemon. It seems clear that Philemon and Colossians were composed at the same place and time. While it makes no difference to our understanding of the content of the letter whether Paul wrote it in Rome or in Ephesus, it seems to me that the argument favouring Ephesus over Rome is stronger.

Introduction

Colossae was situated in the upper Lycus valley, about 180 kilometres east of Ephesus. Under the dominion of Phrygia, then Persia, then Greece, it came under Roman control in 132BC, and in 49AD it was included in the Roman province of Asia. It was an old city and had been of considerable importance as it was on the main east-west route through the centre of Anatolia (modern Turkey). It also connected Troas with the port of Attalia, some 200 kilometres south-east of Colossae. In Paul's day it was being overshadowed by the neighbouring cities of Laodicea (mentioned in 2:1 and 4:13-16), where the local assizes took place, and Hierapolis (mentioned in 4:13), which was renowned for its healing springs.

It appears that Paul himself had never visited the Christian community there (see 1:4,9; 2:1), though he does know some of its members (see 4:9,12,17). The apostle of the region was a native of Colossae, a disciple of Paul called Epaphras (see 1:7; 4:12). He may have been among Paul's students at the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus (see Acts 19:9-10), or he may have brought the gospel to Colossae from Antioch in eastern Phrygia, from the period of the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas (4:10; see Acts 13:49).

The faith of the Colossian community was being endangered by teaching which gave to super-terrestrial beings a decisive role in recording human behaviour and in carrying out divine punishment. It was important, according to this teaching, that people commit themselves to various ascetical practices which would ensure that they avoided punishment. They were promised the experience of visions and a participation in the worship of God offered by the angels. Paul does not give a full description of the 'philosophy' which he is opposing and commentators offer various suggestions. It is quite possible that the teaching drew on a mixture of influences.

Certain ideas from Judaism were part of the mix, perhaps indirectly. The Syrian king Antiochus III had moved two thousand Jewish families into Phrygia and Lydia in 187BC and had granted them a number of economic privileges as well as freedom to practise their faith. They influenced the religious thinking of the area and were themselves influenced by their neighbours.

Whatever other elements were involved, this erroneous religious teaching was threatening the integrity of the faith of the Colossians, and it is Paul's opposition to this teaching which gives this letter its special character. He does not set out to define the teaching. He himself may not have had a clear understanding of it. Furthermore, it is possible that the teaching may have lacked consistency. His focus is on the central place of Christ and on the fullness of salvation offered to all who live in communion with him. Whatever distracts us from Christ is to be rejected. This is especially clear when it leads to behaviour which contradicts love and divides the community.

As we would expect, Paul's way of supporting the Christian faith of the Colossians is to present Christ as the one in whom all their hopes rest. He does so by quoting and then commenting upon a Christian hymn which presents Christ as the source of all human perfection. The vocabulary of the religion which Paul is opposing, as well as of the hymn upon which he is commenting, amply explain the differences in vocabulary between Colossians and the letters which we have studied to this point.

Map 3. Colossae



Introduction

The complete text of Colossians has been preserved in a papyrus codex (P⁴⁶) from c. 200AD, as well as in two fourth century parchment codexes, Vaticanus and Sinaiticus. It is contained also in the fifth century parchment codex, Alexandrinus.

The Structure of Colossians

Introduction

- a. Paul greets the Christians of Colossae
and thanks God for their faith, hope and love 1:1-8
- b. He prays that they will be faithful to the gospel 1:9-14
- c. A hymn to the glorified Christ 1:15-20
- d. Announcing the main themes of the letter 1:21-23

Part One: Paul's apostolic office commits him to spend himself
for their fidelity to the gospel 1:24 - 2:5

Part Two : A call to fidelity to the gospel

- a. Initial appeal 2:6-7
- b. A warning about a religious cult 2:8
- c. The dominion of Christ is universal, and God
has made them alive in Christ 2:9-15
- d. There is no place for angelic cult 2:16-19
- e. A further appeal 2:20-23

Part Three: The holiness expected of believers

- a. Introductory principles 3:1-4
- b. Exhortation to mortification 3:5-9a
- c. Motivation 3:9b-11
- d. Exhortation to live a new life in Christ 3:12-17
- e. Morality in family and domestic life 3:18 - 4:1

Conclusion

- a. Final appeal 4:2-6
- b. Concluding greetings, messages and blessing 4:7-18

Lectionary

The liturgical readings

	1:1-8	22nd Wednesday of Ordinary Time Year I
	1:9-14	22nd Thursday of Ordinary Time Year I
1:12-20		Christ the King Year C
1:15-20		15th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C and 22nd Friday Year I
	1:21-23	22nd Saturday of Ordinary Time Year I
1:24-28		16th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
	1:24 - 2:3	23rd Monday of Ordinary Time Year I
	2:4-5	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
	2:6-15	23rd Tuesday of Ordinary Time Year I
2:12-14		17th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
	2:16-23	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
3:1-4		Easter Sunday
3:1-5, 9-11		18th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
	3:1-11	23rd Wednesday of Ordinary Time Year I
3:12-21		Feast of the Holy Family Year A
	3:12-17	23rd Thursday of Ordinary Time Year I
	3:22-25	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
	4:1-18	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary

Paul introduces himself by his Roman family name (see page 11). Following his customary practice, the way in which he describes himself in the address depends on his relationship with those to whom he is writing and on the content of the letter. Here, he is writing to a community for which he has a special responsibility, since it was founded by one of his disciples. At the same time, Paul has not personally worked among them, hence his description has a more formal tone than we are used to. He refers to himself as an ‘apostle’, because he is writing an official letter by virtue of the commission given him by Christ himself and by the will of God. For a further reflection on the meaning of ‘apostle’, see the commentaries on Galatians 1:1 and 1Corinthians 12:28. He refers to himself as an apostle ‘of Christ Jesus’, because he is writing out of the communion which he has with Christ. Paul includes his co-missionary, Timothy, because he writes as a member of a community and is conscious of the fact that his missionary commission is a shared one. His letters are part of that apostolate.

The way in which Paul addresses those to whom he is writing is also significant. It gives us an indication of the kind of relationship which he wants to establish with them, and prepares the way for the letter’s main themes. Though he frequently uses the expression ‘brothers and sisters’, this is the only time that he uses it in this way in the opening address. He is focusing on the family life that is special to them as Christians, and which he shares with them. It is a family life which they have ‘in Christ’ – an expression which is found eighty-four times in Paul’s letters. It expresses the essence of the Christian life in which Christ lives in us and we live in him. God has set the Christians in Colossae apart from the other religious groups among whom they live – hence the word ‘saints’ (see 1Corinthians 1:2; though ‘holy’ may be better here as *hagioi* functions rather as an adjective). They are a family because of their shared faith to which Paul is encouraging them to be faithful in the midst of the surrounding temptations and pressures.

We have already reflected at some length on most of the terms used in this address. Paul employs the same terminology in the opening address to the churches of Galatia. An unusual feature here is the fact that Paul mentions only the Father as he prays that they receive grace and peace. The effect of this is to sharpen the focus on their union with Christ. The grace and peace which is offered to us as Christians is an overflowing of the grace and peace with which the Father has filled the heart of his Son. Throughout this letter Paul stresses the fact that fullness of life is found only in Christ, and it is to him, and to him alone, that we must look for life.

¹Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

²To the holy [NRSV ‘saints’] and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

³In our prayers
for you we al-
ways thank God,
the Father of
our Lord Jesus
Christ,
⁴for we have
heard of your
faith in Christ
Jesus
and of the love
that you have for
all the saints,
⁵because of the
hope laid up for
you in heaven.

As is customary, the opening address is followed by a statement of thanksgiving which is also constructed in such a way as to direct us towards the letter's main themes. Paul assures the Colossians that they are with him when he is in prayer-communion with God, and that he continues to thank God for them. The letter itself will explain what Paul intends by speaking of Jesus as 'Lord', for it is its central theme. It is important, however, to pause here to establish an introductory awareness of the rich significance of the term 'Lord' as applied to Jesus. For this we refer the reader to the commentary on Galatians 1:3. It recalls God's saving action in the Exodus, and expresses the belief that is through Jesus that God exercises his 'power for salvation' (Romans 1:16).

Paul speaks of their 'faith', 'love' and 'hope': three qualities of the life of a Christian which regularly appear together in Paul's writing (see the commentary on Galatians 5:5-6). In the opening address he referred to the Colossians as 'brothers and sisters *in Christ*'. He now thanks God for the faith which they have 'in Christ Jesus', faith which they have as belonging to the Christian community, living in the love-communion which Jesus himself has with his Father.

He thanks God also for the love which they have for *all* their brothers and sisters in the faith. It will soon emerge why Paul stresses 'all'. It is this love which defines their community, and which sets them apart from those among whom they live. Being special, however, does not mean that they are to live as a sect, putting a barrier up between themselves and the world. On the contrary, Paul goes on to speak with joy of the growth of the community and the success of its mission in and to the world. When he highlights the love that exists inside the Christian community it is not in order to imply that their love should be selective (see 4:5). Rather, he is continuing his focus on the special grace which they have received as Christians: a grace given them, of course, for mission.

Thirdly, he thanks God for their 'hope'. Through believing in what they have heard through the proclamation of the gospel, they have come to experience the love-communion of which Paul is speaking. They believe, too, that their communion will, one day, be complete when they are taken up into the fullness of God's glory (see 1:27; 3:1-4). Knowing this in faith, they can live the virtue of Christian hope by leaving the future confidently in God's hands and focusing now on the 'obedience of faith' (Romans 1:5), that is to say, on love.

We have heard Paul speak of the gospel as the ‘word of God’ (see 1Thessalonians 2:13). He has spoken of it also as the ‘word of the Lord’ (see 1Thessalonians 1:8), and the ‘word of reconciliation’ (see 2Corinthians 5:19). In describing the gospel here as ‘the word of the truth’ (compare Ephesians 1:13; 2Timothy 2:15), he is preparing his readers for the contrast which he is about to make between the truth concerning the real God and what God has revealed in Jesus, and the untruths perpetrated by the religious movements which threaten the faith of the Christian community in Colossae. He makes the same point when he speaks in verse six of the ‘true grace of God’. His focus is not so much on the accuracy of their comprehension as on the fact that what they have comprehended is the true grace which God is offering. This is in contrast with the false promises made by the religious cults that are attempting to attract them away from the gospel. He will go on to declare that these have only an ‘appearance of wisdom’ (2:23).

Notice in verse five how Paul stresses the initiative of God. It is not we who discover the gospel; it comes to us as a grace. In verse six Paul highlights further dimensions of the gospel; it is for everyone, and it bears fruit (see 1:10). In highlighting the fact that the gospel is ‘bearing fruit and growing in the whole world’ (compare 1Corinthians 1:2), Paul is reminding the Colossians of the communion which they have with other faith-communities. Besides being an encouragement, this helps provide a powerful safeguard against self-deception. Paul is aware of the danger of a local community going its own way, without reference to other communities. The ‘fruit’ which the Colossians have experienced in their lives (compare Galatians 5:22) is further proof of the authenticity of the gospel they have received.

^{5b}**You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you.**

⁶**Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and comprehended the true grace of God [NRSV ‘truly comprehended the grace of God’].**

⁷This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow slave [NRSV 'servant'].

He is a faithful minister of Christ on our [NRSV 'your'] behalf,

⁸and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

Epaphras (see also 4:12-13), the missionary who brought the gospel to them, is a 'fellow slave' (Greek: *sundoulos*), for, like Paul (see Galatians 1:10; Romans 1:1), he has followed the example of the suffering servant, Christ himself, in giving his whole life over to the service of God. In his letter to Philemon, Paul says that Epaphras was sharing imprisonment with him (see Philemon verse twenty-three).

Epaphras is also a 'minister (Greek: *diakonos*) of Christ', faithfully carry out his commission (see the commentary on 1 Corinthians 3:5). By assuring the Colossians that he does so 'on *our* behalf' (this seems the better reading), Paul is asserting that the gospel proclaimed to them by Epaphras is the same gospel that is proclaimed by Paul and Timothy. The Colossians can be confident of its authenticity. Fidelity to the tradition which they have learned through Epaphras will be a good safeguard against the untruths of the religious movements which are tempting them away from Christ.

In verse eight we discover that it is this same Epaphras who has brought Paul the news about their love – not any kind of love, but the love which they have 'in the Spirit'. The love which they reflect in their lives is the love of Christ himself for God and for the world with all the power to save that comes from the Spirit.

Besides his constant prayer of thanks for the life of grace lived by the community in Colossae (1:3-8), Paul continues to pray that they will grow in this grace and attain to the fullness of life which God is offering them. They are experiencing the attractions of a pagan cult which promises them profound 'knowledge' and enlightenment concerning how they are to live. It promises them esoteric 'wisdom', the experience of visions and understanding of 'mysteries'.

It is Christ, however, who is the only true mediator of these gifts. It is through the gospel, through the life of communion which we share with the risen Christ, that we will 'be filled with the knowledge of God's will'. The book of Deuteronomy insists that God wants people to know his will (see Deuteronomy 30:11-14). Paul's prayer is encouraged by the words of Jesus who said: 'everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened'(Luke 11:10). This is especially true when we are asking for the gift of God's Spirit: 'how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!'(Luke 11:13). Paul is speaking of knowledge that flows from 'spiritual wisdom' and leads to decision and to a life that is worthy of Christ and pleasing to God. We are reminded of his appeal to the community in Thessalonica:

Brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more.

– 1Thessalonians 4:1

Paul is obviously not one to allow himself or others to settle for mediocrity. Notice how he speaks of being *filled* with the knowledge of God's will, of being *fully* pleasing to God, and of living a life worthy of the Lord by bearing fruit in *every* good work. He is not suggesting that this fruit comes as a result of what *we* do from our own energy or determination. We must cooperate by welcoming God's grace, but the fruit is the fruit of grace which reveals the power of God that is at work in those who believe. We are also to grow in knowledge of God, knowing God as God knows us, through the intimate communion of mutual love.

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you

and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will

in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,

¹⁰so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him,

as you bear fruit in every good work,

as you grow in the knowledge of God

¹¹and as you are made strong [NRSV 'May you be made strong'] with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, being prepared [NRSV 'and may you be prepared'] to endure everything with patience,
while joyfully,
¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

Paul is not expressing a wish in verse eleven. He has already mentioned two ways in which we are to 'lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him'(1:10): we are to 'bear fruit in every good work', and we are to 'grow in the knowledge of God'. This is the third: we are to be made strong in endurance by welcoming the grace of 'God who gives power and strength to his people'(Psalm 68:35). Paul does not want us to be distracted from Christ who alone mediates to us the power of God the Father. Receiving this power does not mean that we will be free from suffering or the adversities that are part of the human condition. We will, however, like Christ the suffering servant (see commentary on 1Thessalonians 1:6), have the power to be able to continue to radiate the glory of God by being faithful to love in the midst of our sufferings. Paul speaks of 'endurance'(Greek: *hupomonē*), for we need God's strength to endure against external pressure and temptation. He speaks also of 'patience'(*makrothumia*), for we also need to continue loving in a magnanimous way while we endure (see the commentary on 1Corinthians 13:4).

Verse twelve speaks of a fourth way of pleasing God: the way of joy-filled gratitude in whatever situation we find ourselves.

The various religious cults that surround them in Colossae promise them many things. Paul reminds them in verse twelve of the amazing grace from God for which they should be grateful. This amazing grace is that through the gospel in which we have believed, God has promised us a 'share in the inheritance of the saints in the light'. We are children of God our Father, because we already share the life of 'his Beloved Son'(1:13). However, as Paul has already said, there is a hope laid up for us in heaven (1:5), and if we are children, then we are heirs 'heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him'(Romans 8:17). We can look forward to sharing with all those who throughout history have responded in faith to God's invitation to share his glory.

Here we have a further reason for gratitude. Paul seems to be quoting from a baptismal formula. We are reminded of Christ's words to Paul on the road to Damascus:

I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.

– Acts 26:17-18

He speaks of what we have been saved *from* by Jesus 'who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father' (Galatians 1:4). We have been rescued 'from the wrath that is coming' (1Thessalonians 1:10), and 'from wicked and evil people' (2Thessalonians 3:2).

He also speaks of what we have been rescued *for*: a new life of communion with God in love in the 'kingdom of God's beloved Son'. When Paul speaks of the 'kingdom of *God*' he is referring to the goal of history, when all forms of evil have been finally and definitively conquered by love. In the meantime, we are part of the kingdom of God's Son, for the real power that is working in our world is the power of the risen Christ, the power of his love. When all evil has been conquered 'then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father ... so that God may be all in all' (1Corinthians 15:24,28).

Christ is our 'redemption' (1Corinthians 1:30), for he 'died for our sins' (1Corinthians 15:3). We have 'all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God', but we are now 'justified by God's grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus' (Romans 3:23-24). We recall Peter's words to the high priest: 'God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins' (Acts 5:31).

Paul is reminding the Colossians of the gospel which they have received (see 1:6-7), and of the hope to which they are looking forward (see 1:5). He is reminding them of their present growth and of the fruit that is already in their lives (see 1:6). He is reminding them of the fullness of forgiveness, power, life, wisdom, knowledge and understanding that they are now experiencing because of the reign of God's beloved Son (1:13). In this way he hopes to encourage them to resist the enticements of pagan cult.

¹³He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son,

¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

A hymn about God's Beloved Son

[Stanza 1 - God's Beloved Son and Creation]

**He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;
for in him were created all things
in heaven and on earth,
things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions
or rulers or powers—
all things have been created through him and for him.
He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.**

[Stanza 2 - God's Beloved Son and Redemption]

**He is the head of the body, the church;
he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,
so that he might come to have first place in everything.
For he [God] was pleased for all the fullness to dwell in him,
and through him [God was pleased] to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
by making peace through the blood of his cross.**

It is notoriously difficult to define the meaning of hymns, because as poetry they use the language of the heart, which transcends the defined clarity which satisfies the inquiring mind. If the poetry is good, the richness of evocative suggestion more than compensates for the lack in logical definition. The Hebrew scriptures constantly speak of God as Creator and Redeemer. This hymn stands in this tradition, except that the focus is on 'God's beloved Son'(1:13).

Through reflection on the unique intimacy that exists between Jesus and God, Christians came to think of the one and only God, not as existing in isolated individuality, but as one because of perfect love-communion. While retaining strict monotheism, and while upholding the obvious truth of the distinction between Jesus and the God whom he addressed as 'my Father', they came to speak of Jesus as 'God'. It is this insight that finds expression in this hymn, which contrasts God's beloved Son with all created things and states that 'he himself is before all things'. This hymn speaks of a Son who is eternal, not created, and who was manifested in time in the man Jesus. It is an early example of what Pliny, the governor of Bithynia-Pontus, wrote c.112AD to the Emperor Trajan informing him that Christians sang hymns to Christ 'as to a god'(Epistles 10.96).

We are all the richer for the penetrating insights that have come from the contemplation of Christian theologians whose love and prayer has taken them beyond the paths that we are accustomed to walk. While we learn from them and are grateful for the grace to share their faith and their insights, theological reflection on the divinity of Christ is perhaps best pursued by theologians who are mystics. It seems to me that the hymn can be appreciated at a level which, if not as profound as that just mentioned, nevertheless draws us close to the heart of Jesus, ‘God’s beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins’(1:14). Leaving the peaks to your own contemplation, this commentary will attempt to describe only the lower slopes of the mountain.

It is a hymn about Jesus, ‘God’s beloved Son’(1:13), of whom Paul wrote: ‘when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman’(Galatians 4:4). It is a hymn about Jesus ‘the image of God’(2Corinthians 4:4), through whom God brought about a new creation: ‘if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!’(2Corinthians 5:17). It is a hymn about Jesus through whom God revealed his redeeming love to the whole world, when Jesus gave himself in love even to pouring out his life’s blood on the cross. Through him God chose to draw to himself the whole of creation and all people, ‘reconciling us to himself’(2Corinthians 5:18-20); ‘and if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life’(Romans 5:10).

It is a hymn about the risen, exalted and glorified Christ, the ‘first fruits of those who have died’(1Corinthians 15:20). It celebrates the new creation, the final great eschatological event in which God grants the gift of his life-giving Spirit in its fullness. Paul wants the Colossians to know that the full outpouring of God’s grace is not to be found in strange, occult, pagan cults with their esoteric taboos and rituals. God’s loving action is for the liberation of all and is to be found in Jesus and in the communion of love that is to be found in the Christian church. As he writes to the Romans:

The whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now... It will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

– Romans 8:22 and 21

The labour pains reached their climax in the death of Jesus on the cross, and found their resolution when God raised his beloved Son from death to life. Sin has lost its power to deceive, and death has given way to life. This is what God is offering to the whole human race and to the whole of the created universe. It is now possible for peace to reign everywhere. There is no need to fear death. There is no need to fear the effects of sin. There is no need to live in fear of the mysterious cosmic powers that are said to hold sway over people’s minds and hearts. Everything that is true (real) is offered to us in Christ and can be enjoyed in the divine communion of love that comes through faith in him.

Let us examine the text of the hymn more closely.

[Stanza 1 - God's Beloved Son and Creation]

**¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;
¹⁶for in him were created all things
in heaven and on earth,
things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions
or rulers or powers—
all things have been created through him and for him.
¹⁷He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.**

The hymn makes two basic assertions concerning God's beloved Son. The first is that 'he is the image of the invisible God'. The second is that he is 'the firstborn of all creation'. The rest of the stanza draws out the implications of these two affirmations. Greek philosophers spoke of the cosmos, and especially of mankind, as being the image of the unseen God. The Genesis account of creation tells us that 'God created humankind in his image' (Genesis 1:27). By contrast, the focus of our hymn is on Jesus, and not on his being the image of God *along with* creation or with humankind. He stands out in contrast with the whole of the cosmos, with special accent on the invisible angelic world. *He* is the image of God and everything else is created 'in him', 'through him' and 'for him'. *He* is the one in whom 'all things hold together'. If we want to find literature that points in the direction of our hymn, we must look, not to the philosophers or to the Book of Genesis, but rather to the personification of Wisdom as, for example, in the following texts:

She is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an *image* of his goodness .

– Wisdom 7:25-26

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.
Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth ...
then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always.

– Proverbs 8:22-23, 30

Wisdom was created before all other things, and prudent understanding from eternity.

– Sirach 1:4

Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me, and for all the ages I shall not cease to be.

– Sirach 24:9

With you is wisdom, she who knows your works
and was present when you made the world.

– Wisdom 9:9

The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;
by understanding he established the heavens.

– Proverbs 3:19

If riches are a desirable possession in life,
what is richer than wisdom, the active cause of all things?
And if understanding is effective,
who more than she is fashioner of what exists?

– Wisdom 8:5-6

The hymn goes on to draw out the implications of the unique position of Christ. All things were created ‘in him’, and ‘in him all things hold together’. Just as wisdom was poured out on all God’s works (Sirach 1:9), and just as ‘by his word all things hold together’ (Sirach 43:26; see Wisdom 1:7), so the life and glory of the exalted Christ is poured out through his Spirit renewing creation (see Galatians 6:15; 2Corinthians 5:17). His Spirit fills all creation and binds everything together. It is here that the hymn echoes Stoic imagery. They thought of the divine as a living fire, immanent in the cosmos, and they identified the divine with ‘Nature’, for which, through which and in which everything exists. While the conceptual content of the hymn is very different from this, the language is similar.

In saying that all things were created ‘for him’, the hymn is pointing to Christ as the goal of creation, the one towards whom everything is directed. In saying that all things were created ‘through him’, it is speaking of his mediatory role. As Paul wrote elsewhere: ‘for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist’ (1Corinthians 8:6, see the commentary). The language of hymns is the language of the heart. It resists the limits imposed by prose definitions. We could suggest that one aspect of the mediatory role in creation is that the exalted Christ existed in the mind of God as the one in whom creation would reach its perfection. As an architect’s plan exists before the building is begun, so the exalted Christ can be said to be ‘before all things’. However, the ‘before’ in this context, speaks of an ontological rather than a temporal priority, for there is no time in God and to introduce temporal imagery into the divine can lead only to confusion.

The Stoics thought of the whole cosmos as a ‘body’. The religion that was in danger of seducing the Christians in Colossae seems to have thought of super-terrestrial spirits as the head of this body, powerfully coordinating and organising the cosmos. They also thought that the fullness which is the divinity could permeate humans only if they experienced visions and shared in the worship offered to God by the angels. To achieve this perfection we must follow certain ascetic practices. Against all such thinking, the hymn fixes our eyes on Jesus. Whatever powers, whether terrestrial or super-terrestrial, exercise influence over our lives, they are all subject to Christ (compare 1Corinthians 15:24; Romans 8:38). As the second stanza goes on to affirm, it is through our communion in the love which he is offering in the community of the church that we experience the fullness of divine life, and the peace that comes with this divine communion.

[Stanza 2 - God's Beloved Son and Redemption]

- ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church;
he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,
so that he might come to have first place in everything.**
- ¹⁹For he [God] was pleased for all the fullness to dwell in him,
²⁰and through him [God was pleased] to reconcile to himself
all things, whether on earth or in heaven,
by making peace through the blood of his cross.**

After singing of the unique role of Christ in creation, we are invited now to sing of his role in the community of love in which the new creation is being realised. This is not the first time that the church has been called a 'body'; it is, however, the first time that Christ has been described as its 'head'. In earlier texts the focus was on our communion with Christ as members of his body, and on our consequent communion with each other:

The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

– 1Corinthians 10:16-17

Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body ... and we were all made to drink of one Spirit ... You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

– 1Corinthians 12:12-13,27

As in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

– Romans 12:4-5

Here, in keeping with the focus of the hymn, our attention stays on Christ. It is Christ (and not any other power) who is the head (Greek: *kephalē*) of this body. In other words, it is he who is the source of the church's life, and it is he alone who is guiding and directing it. It is he who is the 'beginning' (Greek: *archē*), the first to be raised from the dead. From him, and from him alone, comes the fullness of the new life that is offered to all. The hymn reaches its most lyrical heights in verse nineteen: 'for he (the word 'God' is supplied in the NRSV translation; it is not in the Greek) was pleased for all the fullness to dwell in him'. As frequently throughout this letter, the word 'God' is understood, but not explicitly expressed. We have an example already in verse fifteen: 'created [by God]'. This is a way of keeping an intense focus on Christ. At Jesus' baptism, we are told that a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' (Luke 3:22). Here we sing of how it pleased God to raise Jesus from death into his eternal embrace, to fill him with divine glory, and through him, to pour out the fullness of this glory - the fullness of loving communion - upon the church.

It is by living in him – by belonging to his body the church (not to some esoteric cult) – that we participate in the fullness of divinity which he embodies:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

– Romans 8:29-30

The first stanza was all-embracing. We sang of ‘all creation’, and the expression ‘all things’ occurs three times in verses sixteen and seventeen. Now as the hymn reaches its climax we dare to sing that God was pleased: ‘through him to reconcile to himself *all things*’. Though the translation here and in the previous verse mentions ‘God’, God is implied, not explicitly mentioned in the text. The focus is on ‘God’s beloved Son’(1:13). In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes:

All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit ... For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

– 2Corinthians 3:18 and 4:6

Contemplating the fullness of God’s radiant glory on the face of Jesus, we are astonished at God’s love and at what it pleases God to do in creation through the mediation of his beloved Son. How can anyone resist such love? How can anyone seek fulfilment in any other way? We dare to hope that this broken, sin-prone, world will be reconciled to God. We dare to express in song our hope that everyone, indeed, the whole universe, will know the peace that comes only through communion with God in Jesus.

It is a Christian hymn, grounded in the real world and grounded in the real history of Jesus. If Paul is not its author, he chooses to quote it because it beautifully expresses his central insights. It is typical of Paul that it comes to its conclusion in a contemplation of the self-giving, love-giving, life-giving act of Jesus on Calvary. It is in contemplating Jesus on the cross that we see the glory of God revealed. It is in the love poured out there that we see what it means to be created in God’s image, and it is from the pierced heart of Jesus on the cross that the church is born and that God’s love radiates out for the healing and life of the world.

²¹**And you,
who were once es-
tranged and hostile
in mind, doing evil
deeds,**

²²**he has now recon-
ciled**

**in his fleshly body
through death,**

**so as to present you
holy and blameless
and irreproachable
before him —**

²³**provided that you
continue securely
established and
steadfast in the faith,
without shifting from
the hope promised
by the gospel that
you heard, which has
been proclaimed to
every creature under
heaven.**

**I, Paul, became a serv-
ant of this gospel.**

With these three verses, Paul concludes his introduction and announces the three main sections of his letter. Verses twenty-one and twenty-two prepare us for the final section on the holiness of believers (3:1 - 4:1). By choosing the verb which is translated here as ‘estranged’, Paul goes to the heart of their previous situation: they were worshipping strange gods. This statement implies that the Christian community is, on the whole, made up of Gentiles. The result of their being at enmity with God is that their deeds were evil, living as they were under ‘the power of darkness’(1:13). In Romans 1:19-32 Paul gives an extended treatment of the same theme. He will go into greater detail later when he lists ‘the ways you once followed’(see 3:5-9).

Paul’s focus is on the change that has happened in their lives: they have *now* been reconciled [by God]. Note that, as in the hymn, God’s presence and action is understood, but not explicitly stated. Paul continues to keep our attention fixed on Christ through whom God has brought about the reconciliation. It is this change in their condition that Paul spoke of earlier: ‘He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son’(1:13).

We are reconciled ‘in his fleshly body through death’ – in the words of the hymn: ‘through the blood of his cross’(1:20). We are reminded of Paul’s words to the Romans: ‘while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son’(Romans 5:10). The goal of the reconciliation is that Christ may save us from condemnation when we ‘stand before the judgment seat of God’(Romans 14:10): ‘that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ’(1Corinthians 1:8). To this end, we are called to be holy, blameless, and irreproachable now.

In verse twenty-three, Paul warns the Colossians of the danger of their falling away from grace (compare Galatians 5:4; 1Corinthians 11:27-32), and being unfaithful to the gospel, which, with poetic licence, he declares to have been ‘proclaimed to every creature under heaven’(see 1:6). He is preparing us for the middle section on fidelity to the gospel (2:6-23).

It is of this gospel that Paul became a servant (Greek: *diakonos*), and it is to the central content of the gospel that Paul now turns (1:24 - 2:5).

With this statement Paul begins the first section of the main body of his letter (1:24 - 2:5). He speaks of his sufferings and his striving in order to accentuate the importance which the proclamation of the gospel has for him, and he asserts that it is 'for your sake'. He will go on to say that God gave him his commission 'for you' (1:25): a commission to proclaim 'Christ in you' (1:27). He is struggling 'for you' (2:1). The re-translation of this verse is important. Everything in this letter insists on the perfection of Christ and of what Christ has done to reconcile everything to God. Paul is not adding anything to the sufferings which Christ has undergone, as though these were imperfect. What is not yet complete are the sufferings which *Paul* has yet to undergo. He is not speaking of any kind of suffering, but on what he calls 'the afflictions of Christ': the tribulations, persecution and suffering that he is experiencing because of his communion with Christ, and because of his fidelity to the commission given him by Christ.

Paul sees his suffering as a privilege. He rejoices in the knowledge that he is walking the way of the cross (see commentaries on 1Thessalonians 1:6 and 2Corinthians 2:14-16). Through the special grace he has received of sharing in Jesus' Spirit, Paul, like Jesus, is giving himself in love for those to whom he has been sent. He rejoices to be able to contribute to the building up of the church, the community of those who are united to Christ as his body, living with his Spirit. We recall his words: 'If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation' (2Corinthians 1:6).

We need to welcome in faith what God is offering us in Christ. To do this we need to hear the gospel and we need to see it being lived. We need to witness the life-giving of Christ in the lives of his disciples: 'How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?' (Romans 10:14).

What Paul is going through in his imprisonment is a living witness of the self-giving of Christ. It draws us to wonder and to contemplate in Paul the Christ whose life he is living. Paul's fidelity and love in his sufferings draws us to contemplate the fidelity and love of Christ. This helps us see the revelation of God powerfully transforming our own lives, enabling us to escape the dominion of sin, and to live a life of faith and love, with a secure hope of salvation. In this way we need each other, and Christ needs us to minister his life to each other, as Paul offers himself in his sufferings for the Colossians.

²⁴I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake,

and I am completing what is lacking in my flesh of the afflictions of Christ

[NRSV 'and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions']

for the sake of his body, that is, the church.

²⁵I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known,

²⁶the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been shown [NRSV 'revealed'] to his saints.

²⁷To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

²⁸It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect [NRSV 'mature'] in Christ.

²⁹For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.

Paul is the servant (Greek: *diakonos*, see the commentary on 1Corinthians 3:5) of Christ for the church, for he has received from God a 'commission' (*oikonomia*) to proclaim the gospel and so build up the church. Once again, we have the language of 'making full' (*pleroō*, see 1:9): literally 'to bring to fullness the word of God' (1:25). Paul is speaking of geographical growth (as in 1:23). He is speaking also of the growth in 'perfection' of all who believe in the one who is proclaimed.

In verse twenty-six, Paul is not speaking of a revelation that the Christians of Colossae have received from God. He is speaking, rather, of what they have been privileged to come to know because of what they have been shown (*phaneroō*) by those who have proclaimed to them the gospel. The pagan cults with which the Colossians have to contend put great store on 'revelation', which, along with 'visions', were special experiences reserved to the initiated few. Paul, on the contrary, is speaking of something which everyone can know who heeds the message proclaimed in the gospel.

The gospel is about Christ in glory sharing his life with us and inviting us to share in the fullness of love-union which he has with God. Paul refers to the gospel as a 'mystery' because what God has done in Jesus and what is being proclaimed in the gospel is something which was previously unknown. In his letter to the Romans he speaks of the gospel as 'the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages' (Romans 16:25). Formerly, the Gentiles did not know of such a grace, and the Jews did not expect God to offer salvation to all peoples of the world 'apart from the law'. In other letters, written to mixed communities in which many of the Gentile members have had connections with the synagogue, Paul endeavours to show how the gospel is consistent with God's self-revelation to Israel. It is perhaps because fewer of the Christians of Colossae have had previous connection with Judaism that Paul stresses the aspect of 'mystery'. This may also account for the lack of scriptural argument in this letter.

The 'mystery' is that Christ is living in Gentile communities, precisely as Gentiles. It is that 'Christ is in *you* [Gentiles], your hope of glory'.

‘Christ in you, your hope of glory’. Reading these words we find ourselves at the heart of Paul’s personal religious experience, expressed so beautifully in his letter to the Galatians; ‘It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God loving me and giving himself for me’(Galatians 2:19-20). Paul understood that the grace which he had received was one intended for everyone. With Christ living in us, ‘there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus’(Galatians 3:28). Paul saw that it is God’s will to be ‘all in all’(1Corinthians 15:28), by uniting everyone to himself ‘in Christ’.

It is here in this universal (‘catholic’) vision of God’s plan for humankind that we find Paul’s master insight and the core of his gospel. In his letters to the Galatians and Romans, Paul moves from this central insight to explain the place of the Jewish law in God’s providence, and the communion of love in Christ that God wills to exist between Jews and Gentiles. It is this same conviction that leads him to defend his mission to the Gentiles against attempts made to confine God’s saving action within the boundaries of Judaism. It is this conviction that lies behind the collection which he organised for the poor in Jerusalem, and it is this conviction that leads him to pursue unity in the churches, and to argue the necessity of forgiveness, forbearance and love.

There is only one God. There is only one Spirit. There is only one Lord, Jesus Christ. The whole of humanity, indeed the whole of the created universe, is to become what it was always meant to be – a single organism receiving its life from the divine love in the heart of Christ. It is the Christian who has been shown this and who has been invited to make it known to the whole world by the life of love evident in the Christian community. This divine design is now being realised in the church and through the church is now being revealed to the world, so that all humankind will be drawn by the Spirit of the risen Christ into his body. We will reflect on this aspect again at the end of this letter.

The universal dimension of God’s saving action in Christ is summed up in verse twenty-eight. It is Christ who is being proclaimed, and the word ‘everyone’ occurs three times in the one sentence. The proclamation is not something that is done once and is then considered finished. It is ongoing and involves instruction and moral exhortation. Its goal is to make everyone ‘perfect’ with the kind of perfection that belongs to God. Jesus summed up his own exhortations with the words; ‘Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect’(Matthew 5:48). The perfection of the Father is the perfection of love, and it is to this perfection that we are called. We are able to respond to this call because ‘Christ is in you, your hope of glory’.

¹For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face.

²I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery,

that is, Christ himself, ³in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

⁴I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments.

⁵For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

Paul picks up the point he has just made in the previous verse, and, using an expression that is typical of Paul's style ('I want you to know'), he assures the Colossians that his striving is not just for the churches which he has personally founded, but for those, like Colossae and neighbouring Laodicea, 'who have not seen me face to face'. Paul seems to assume that this letter will be shared with the neighbouring community.

The word translated 'encouraged' in verse two is the Greek *parakaleō* (see the commentary on 1 Thessalonians 2:12 for its different nuances). Paul does not want them to feel alone in their struggles. He also wants their hearts to be brought together in love, for it is love that will sustain them and it is love that will open them to understanding and insight of what Paul refers to again as a 'mystery': God's mystery, which he clearly identifies here with Christ.

God's eternal design for humankind which has been revealed and which is to be proclaimed to the world is a 'mystery', not only because it transcends human comprehension, but also because, as we have just observed, it has about it an element of the unexpected. It is not explicitly revealed in the Law or the Prophets, but has been revealed first in Christ. In his first letter to the Corinthians the 'mystery' was the fact that God reveals his wisdom and power in the apparent folly and weakness of the cross. Here it is the fact that God's saving action in Christ is for everyone, and that it reaches out to Gentiles as Gentiles.

The stress on understanding (Greek: *sunesis*), knowledge (*epignōsis* and *gnōsis*) and wisdom (*sophia*) is because it is precisely in these areas that the Christians of Colossae are under threat from the errors to which they are being exposed. Paul makes this point in verse four. Those who are enticing the Christians to take up certain practices are using arguments that are plausible in that they have the appearance of truth, but they are not centred on Christ in whom are 'all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge'. Paul does not want them to be 'led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ' (2 Corinthians 11:3). He finishes this section where he began, by speaking of his joy. We are also given an insight into how Paul sees his letters as a way of reassuring a community that he is present to them in spirit though he is unable to be with them in body.

Through faith, the Colossians welcomed the gospel, and in so doing they ‘received Christ Jesus the Lord’. The word ‘Lord’ picks up the central thrust of the hymn. Paul’s plea is that, having welcomed Christ, they will continue to live their lives in communion with him and in obedience to his inspiration. They have put down their roots in him and they are drawing their life from the spring of his love-communion with the Father.

Paul changes the metaphor, reminding them that their lives are constructed on the solid foundation of Jesus’ love and of what Jesus offers them through communion in his life. Their ‘foundation is Jesus Christ’ (1Corinthians 3:11). Once again (see 1:7-8), he reminds them of the sound teaching which they have received and invites them to thank God for the way they have been blessed. We reflected on the importance of tradition when reflecting on 2Thessalonians 2:15.

Paul has already stated the importance of their remaining ‘securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard’ (1:23). He has already indicated his concern ‘that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments’ (2:4). In verse eight he issues an explicit warning, pointing out where the danger to their life in Christ lies. There are ideas going around which, if they take notice of them, will take away from them everything which they have received: their faith, their freedom, their life in Christ and the salvation for which they hope. They must not allow themselves to be captivated by these erroneous ideas which he describes as ‘empty’ in that they lack substance, and as ‘deceitful’ in that they lack ‘the word of the truth’ (1:5). Paul gives no details here of what these empty deceitful ideas are. He says only that they are ‘according to human tradition’: their origin is not in God. Paul is alluding to Isaiah where God complains: ‘These people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote’ (Isaiah 29:13). Jesus, having quoted this text, adds: ‘you abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition’ (Mark 7:8).

These empty and deceitful ideas are based on ‘principles’ (Greek: *stoicheia*) that do not go beyond this present world. Here, as in Galatians 4:3,9 where the same expression is used, the reference seems to be to the elements of earth, air, fire and water, treated as gods. They are not ‘according to Christ’.

6As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him,

7rooted and built up in him

and established in the faith,

just as you were taught,

abounding in thanksgiving.

8See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit,

according to human tradition,

according to the principles of this world,

[NRSV ‘elemental spirits of the universe’]

and not according to Christ.

‘Fullness in him’

9For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,

10and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.

Having referred to the false ideas without yet naming them, Paul uses the words of the hymn to speak of Christ: ‘in him all the fullness of deity dwells bodily’ (compare 1:19). The present tense indicates that he is speaking of the risen Christ. The word ‘bodily’ could therefore be referring to the ‘spiritual body’ (1 Corinthians 15:44) of the exalted Jesus from whom radiates the fullness of God’s glory. However, the word *sōmatikos* was also used to stress what is *real* rather than what exists only in the realm of thought or imagination. The emphatic ‘in him’ is Paul’s way of stressing that we must look to Christ, and only to Christ, and that in him we will find all that we need to enjoy the fullness of divine life. ‘In him’ they are already experiencing this fullness. They must not allow themselves to be distracted from Christ or persuaded that they have to go elsewhere to find the life and the security which they are seeking.

The words with which Paul concludes verse ten give us an important clue as to the nature of the erroneous teaching that has occasioned this letter. It also explains why Paul chose to begin his letter with a hymn which stresses the supremacy of Christ in regard to ‘things invisible, whether thrones or dominations or rulers or powers’ (1:16). As will become clearer later, the Colossians were being told that these super-terrestrial beings exercised power in the world. To be certain of salvation the Colossians needed to follow the esoteric rituals of the cult which enabled them to join in the worship being offered *by* (or perhaps *to*) the heavenly beings.

For the moment Paul is content to make his main point, which is that if these beings have any power, it is subject to Christ who is their head: the source of their being and of their power. They are subject to Christ, so the Colossians have no need to distract themselves from Christ or to think that they need to perform other rituals or practices to ensure their security. We are reminded of his words to the Corinthians:

Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

– 1 Corinthians 8:5-6

The fact that Paul uses the image of circumcision to speak of Christian baptism does not, of itself, indicate that those responsible for the erroneous teaching are Jews. However, when we add to this Paul's reference in verse sixteen to laws concerning food, and especially to 'sabbaths', it is clear that the errors are influenced by Judaism. We noted this in the introduction to this letter. Through circumcision a person was initiated into the Jewish community which claimed a special belonging to God. Paul is asserting that baptism is 'the circumcision of Christ', that is to say, the circumcision that welcomes a person into the communion with God that comes with union with Christ. In circumcision, flesh was removed. In baptism we cut away all that has its source in our sin-prone nature to 'live our lives in him' (2:6).

We have been 'buried with him in baptism' (confer the commentaries on 1Corinthians 1:13-16 and Romans 6:3). We have also been 'raised with him'. In earlier letters when Paul speaks of our rising with Christ, he is referring to the future when, at the coming of Christ, the dead will be raised to life, and with transformed bodies will enter into eternal life (see 1Corinthians 15). He will speak in this way also in his letter to the Romans (see Romans 6:1-14; 8). Here, and for the first time, he speaks of our present life in terms of resurrection. He speaks in similar terms to the Romans:

We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

– Romans 6:4

We are sharing now in the life of the risen Christ:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me.

– Galatians 2:19-20

We are already with him who has been raised, sharing in the fullness of divine communion which Christ, and he alone, has to offer us. We have fallen (Greek: *paraptōma*) through our failure to follow God's will, but we have been forgiven through God's grace (Greek: *charizomai*). Once again, the word 'God' is understood but not written. Paul is continuing to keep the focus on Jesus.

¹¹In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ;

¹²when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

¹³And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, he [God] made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses,

¹⁴erasing the record that stood against us with its legal decrees [NRSV 'demands'].

He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.

¹⁵He displayed-to-public-view* [NRSV 'disarmed'] the rulers and authorities,

and in his triumphant victory procession he showed* them as they truly are, in him.

[NRSV 'and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it'].

These two verses have given rise to many different interpretations. Paul refers to a 'record' (Greek: *cheirographon* a manuscript). The simplest and most straightforward interpretation is that he is referring to a record of human sin, made, according to Jewish tradition, by recording angels. The Greek *dogmata* is better translated 'decrees'. The record shows that we have sinned and the task of the recording angels is to declare that we are guilty and deserve the stipulated punishment.

It is this that seems to be behind the fears that have been raised among the Colossians who are being persuaded to carry out certain ascetic practices that will wipe the slate clean, and avoid the condemning voices of the super-terrestrial powers whom God has appointed to govern the world. Paul dismisses all such suggestions with the powerful statement that 'he' (the risen Christ) nailed these records to the cross. They are dead and buried, finished, irrelevant, wiped out by his gracious love.

Verse fifteen is more difficult. A contributing factor is that two of the verbs (marked with a *) do not occur elsewhere in Paul, and the first of them is found nowhere else in the New Testament. This makes it difficult to determine the nuance intended by Paul. One thing is clear: Paul is using the image of a triumphal victory procession (compare 2Corinthians 2:14). Where opinions differ is in the place of the 'rulers and authorities' in this procession. Some, for example the editors of the NRSV, see these powers as enemies of Christ whom he has 'disarmed', 'triumphed over', and who are being led in procession as vanquished and so no longer to be feared. Others see them as sharing in the triumph, but clearly under the headship of Christ, the victorious general.

Perhaps Paul is unclear because the only point that interests him is that it is Christ who has triumphed. The procession is in his honour and our eyes are to be fixed on him. If the super-terrestrial powers are on the side of God, the procession demonstrates that they are under the command of Christ. If they are against God, the procession demonstrates that they have been disarmed and conquered. Either way, 'he is the head of every ruler and authority' (2:10), and he has made 'peace through the blood of his cross' (1:20).

Paul is not especially critical of the practices which he mentions in verse sixteen. It is sufficient for him to state that they are only a 'shadow' (Greek: *skia*); 'the substance (*sōma*, 'reality', compare *sōmatikos*, 2:9) belongs to Christ'.

Verse eighteen takes us to the heart of the problem. They are striving for humility; they are desirous of having visions; and they want the experience of joining in the adoration offered to God by angels. However, what is actually happening is that they are being 'puffed up' with pride. The problem, says Paul, repeating an earlier statement, is that they are caught up in 'a human way of thinking' (see 2:8). By turning aside from Christ the head and the source of coordination and growth in his body, the church, they are undermining communion.

In baptism we died to our past way of life in which we followed principles that belong to this world only. Now we are living Christ's life. Why submit again to regulations that are based on principles that have their origin in worldly thinking but are unrelated to Christ? These are no more than 'human commands and teachings' (see 2:8). Self-motivated asceticism is unable to check self-centred behaviour. We must look to Christ. If we truly live his life what is not of him will be crucified. We are to have 'faith in the power of God' (2:12). Only activity inspired by the risen Christ and flowing from our 'being made alive together with him' (2:13) can 'make peace' (1:20).

Christianity is about ordinary, real, human experience. It is about the pain and fidelity of Jesus' love, and about our struggle, personally and as a community, against the sin that clings to us and distracts us. It is about being instruments of God's love in this world. Paul is reminding us of this and drawing us back to Christ, lest our lives be spent in social, political, theological, and personal distraction, and our contribution to the world be empty, because unredeemed by his love, and vitiated by pride.

16Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths.

17These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

18Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on humility [NRSV 'self-abasement'] and worship of angels, dwelling on visions puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking,

19and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

20If with Christ you died to the principles of the world [NRSV 'elemental spirits of the universe'], why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations,

21'Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch'?

22All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings.

23These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.

¹So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth,

³for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

⁴When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Paul has already written, earlier in the letter:

As you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him ... For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him ... when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him.

– Colossians 2:6-7, 9-10,12

Since God has raised us from the dead, and since the life we are living is a sharing in the risen life of Christ, we should look to him and seek from him the graces which he offers us from his position as Lord, ‘seated at the right hand of God’(see Psalm 110:1). God now exercises his power (the redeeming power of God’s love) through his anointed Messiah.

If we are truly to live a life of communion with the risen Christ, we must not set our hearts and fix our thoughts on the things of earth. Rather, we must look to him, be attentive to his word and be ready to carry out his will.

Things were once different, but ‘he has rescued us from the power of darkness’(1:13), and in him ‘we have received redemption, the forgiveness of our sins’(1:14). We who were once ‘estranged and hostile in mind ... he has now reconciled’(1:21-22). The record of our guilt has been ‘set aside, nailed to the cross’(2:14). Our sinful past was buried with him when we were welcomed into the community of believers in baptism and began a new life:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.

– Galatians 2:19-20

How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ... But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

- Romans 6:2,8

You have died ... so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God.

– Romans 7:4

This is matter of faith. Christ has not yet appeared in glory, and it is not yet fully apparent that we are living his life. In this sense we are ‘hidden with Christ in God’. But it will be made apparent (Greek: *phaneroō*, see 1:26), and, in this hope we are to live the new life with which we have been graced.

In the previous passage Paul laid down general principles that should guide the Colossians in living a life that is possible and fitting for them as baptised Christians. He now describes the kind of life they were living (see 1:21), the kind of life which died and was buried in baptism and to which they must not return. Similar lists of immoral behaviour can be found in his earlier letters (see especially Galatians 5:19-21; 1Thessalonians 4:3-6). Though parallels can be found in Stoic moral manuals of the day, Paul is mainly reproducing the kind of list we find in descriptions of behaviour judged by Jews to be typical of Gentiles. He is, in effect, saying to the Gentile Christians of Colossae: ‘Don’t return to the kind of life you lived before your conversion to Christ’.

In the commentaries on Galatians 5:19 and 1Thessalonians 4:3-8 we reflected on why it is that Paul begins with sexual sins. They cut at the heart of who we are as persons and on the way in which we express or do not express love. When Paul condemns ‘passion’ (Greek: *pathos*) he is thinking of inordinate passion. The sin translated here as ‘greed’ (Greek: *pleonexia*) refers to an aggressive ruthlessness which also finds expression in the area of sexuality.

Our behaviour has effects upon others and upon ourselves. We cannot pretend that we can behave sinfully and not be affected. Nor can God pretend that things are other than they really are. For this reason, Paul speaks of ‘the wrath of God’ (see the commentary on 1Thessalonians 1:10).

In verses eight and nine, Paul speaks of other vices which harden us against love and which can hurt or destroy communion. There is an inconsistency in the use of ‘anger’ and ‘wrath’ in the NRSV. Verse six speaks of the ‘wrath of God’, translating the traditional Greek *orgē* theou. Verse eight, however, translates *orgē* as ‘anger’, and *thumos* as ‘wrath’. The distinction seems to be that *thumos* denotes more the violent, but passing, boiling over of angry feelings.

⁵Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).

⁶On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient.

⁷These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life.

⁸But now you must get rid of all such things — wrath [NRSV ‘anger’], explosions of anger [NRSV ‘wrath’], malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.

⁹Do not lie to one another

Christ is all in all

^{9b}seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.

¹¹In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Paul explains not only why we should not go back to previous sinful behaviour, but, more importantly, why we are able to live a different kind of life. As he writes elsewhere:

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

– 2Corinthians 5:17

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul explains what this new clothing is that we put on when we were baptised: it is Christ. ‘As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ’ (Galatians 3:27). He tells the Roman community to ‘put on the Lord Jesus Christ’ (Romans 13:14). This is not a once for all change. The newly baptised Christian (the ‘neophyte’, 1Timothy 3:6) is setting out on a life of constant renewal: ‘our inner nature is being renewed day by day’ (2Corinthians 4:16).

In keeping with the thrust of this letter, the purpose of this constant renewal is said to be ‘knowledge’ (see 1:6,9,10). The more we come to *know about* the true God, the God revealed in Jesus, the more we will desire to *know* God with the knowledge that comes only from communion in love. It is this knowledge that bears fruit in a life that is lived in God and according to God’s will. This is the human being whom God intended to create, one in God’s own image (see Genesis 1:26):

And all of us ... seeing the glory of the Lord ... are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

– 2Corinthians 3:18

Paul’s statement in verse eleven echoes something he wrote earlier to the Galatians (see the commentary):

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

– Galatians 3:28

When we read Paul’s words to the Corinthians about God being ‘all in all’ (1Corinthians 15:28), and then hear him say: ‘Christ is all in all’, we become aware of the depths of his contemplation of the intimate communion that exists between the risen Christ and God: their love is complete. To speak of the Father is to speak of the Son. They are one in love.

It is the fact that God has chosen us and loved us so much that makes it possible for us to ‘put on Christ’ in the way described here by Paul. Indirectly he is giving us a portrait of Jesus himself who is our ‘life’(3:4). ‘Compassion’(Greek: *splanchna oiktirmou* speaks of compassionate feelings that find expression in actions of mercy. We recall Jesus’ plea: ‘Be merciful (*oiktirmōn*), just as your Father is merciful’(Luke 6:36). Three of the other qualities: ‘kindness’ (*chrēstotēs*), ‘meekness’(*praiūtēs*) and ‘patience’ (*makrothumia*) are listed in Galatians 5:22-23 as fruits of the Spirit (see the commentary; compare 1Corinthians 13:4).

¹²As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

This is the third time Paul has spoken of humility (*tapeinophrosunē*). On both previous occasions (2:18,23), the way in which the Colossians were being encouraged to aspire to this virtue was leading them only to pride. The only way to grow in this virtue, as in the others, is to receive it from the one who said: ‘learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart’(Matthew 11:29). Let us pause here to reflect on what is special about this characteristically Christian virtue.

The Greek *tapeinophrosunē* denotes ‘thinking of oneself as being low [*tapeinos*]’. In ordinary Greek usage outside the Bible ‘being in a low state’ is considered undesirable. To be reduced to such a state by people or by the gods is to suffer an evil fate. At the same time, since in relation to the gods one is necessarily ‘low’, to refuse to accept our lowly condition is to fall into the vice of pride. To accept one’s low position in relation to the gods, and even in relation to other people when fate has so willed it, is considered sensible and virtuous.

The Greek Old Testament mirrors non-Biblical Greek, with one important qualification which reflects Israel’s understanding of itself as a religious people born out of the Exodus event. Central to Israel’s self-understanding is that God has redeemed them from their ‘low’ condition in Egypt. Being ‘low’ has no value in itself, but it does attract God’s compassionate love, and it does hold out hope for redemption. The following text from Isaiah is typical:

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his lowly ones [*tapeinos*].

– Isaiah 49:13

Humility

Sirach recommends lowering oneself before God:

They who fear the Lord keep their hearts prepared and *bow down their souls in his presence*.

– Sirach 2:17 (see also 7:17; 18:21)

Greek moral philosophy, outside the Bible, has no place for ‘*thinking*’ of oneself as low’. The word translated ‘humility’ in our text (Greek: *tapeinophrosunē*) does not occur prior to Paul. Shortly after him we find it being used by Plutarch, Epictetus and Josephus, but always as a vice, never as a virtue. As they use *tapeinophrosunē*, it is best translated ‘small-minded’ or ‘mean-spirited’. It is the equivalent of having a low self-esteem.

In the Greek Old Testament the related adjective [*tapeinophronos*] occurs once:

A person’s pride will bring humiliation, but one who is *lowly in spirit* will obtain honour.

– Proverbs 29:23

The related verb (*tapeinophroneō*) also occurs only once in the Greek Old Testament, in a text which prepares us for its use in the New Testament:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. But I have calmed [The Greek reads: ‘*I think of myself humbly*’] and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time on and for evermore.

– Psalm 131

The New Testament, like Sirach, calls upon people to ‘lower themselves’ before God. Recall the statement of Jesus:

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble [*tapeinoō*] themselves will be exalted.

– Matthew 23:12 (compare James 4: 10; 1Peter 5:5-6)

The following scene from the Gospel recalls Psalm 131:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, ‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

– Matthew 18:1-4

The little child is offered as a symbol of humility for it beautifully captures Jesus’ own childlike trust in the God whom he calls ‘Abba! Father!’ He wants his disciples to have a heart that is humble like his (Matthew 11:29). Because Jesus looked up to God in loving trust, he was able to look up to everyone, delighting in people with the delight that belongs to the innocence of childhood and experiencing it as a privilege to serve them.

All this provides the background to the virtue which appears for the first time in Greek in Paul. 'Thinking of oneself as low' (or 'humility') is an attitude of mind and heart that recognises oneself as God's child, sharing the life of his Son, and therefore as living in total dependence on God. The humble person delights in this dependence, knowing that God is a Father and can be absolutely counted on as a source of life, love and hope.

In the Greek and Roman world it was considered a virtue to recognise one's low position in regard to the gods; it was right not to exaggerate one's own importance or to strive beyond one's fate. But the self held a central place in their ethics, for they thought of their individual nature as sharing in the divinity. The divine in each person was thought of as identified with the self. It was important, therefore, to recognise and respect one's self, and not to think of oneself in a servile way.

For the Christian the divine Spirit which sanctifies the self is not identical with it but is the Spirit of Christ: 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). To know how to obey the divine will, Christians do not look to their own nature and strive to act accordingly. Rather, they listen attentively to the call of the Lord, and strive to be obedient to one in whose wisdom and love they trust.

The highest freedom experienced by disciples of Christ is to be his slave, to allow him to live in them and to find in the freedom given by Christ an opportunity to be 'through love, slaves of one another' (Galatians 5:13). Christians experience a radical and liberating change of perspective: 'If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17).

In this new creature, humility is a basic virtue. Everything now is possible, not to the one who is most self-sufficient, but 'for one who believes' (Mark 9:24). The self is no less important, but perfection for the self is a flowering of the gifts of the Spirit, and the way to this perfection is in self-giving, after the example of Jesus, and by the power of his Spirit. 'Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it' (Luke 17:33). Humility as a Christian virtue is a sharing in the life of Jesus, the child of God, and in the intimacy of his trust in his Father.

Paul believes that it is Christ who is living in him and in the Christians of Colossae. He wants them to let this special trusting dependence of Christ on his Father find expression in their lives too. Then they would have no difficulty in looking up to others, delighting in their gifts, looking after their interests. Humility for a disciple of Christ has nothing to do with belittling self. It is the recognition of oneself as a child of God and a trust that one's self will be created by God's love.

¹³bearing [NRSV 'Bear'] with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgiving [NRSV 'forgive'] each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body.

And be thankful.

¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teaching [NRSV 'teach'] and admonishing [NRSV 'admonish'] one another in all wisdom;

and with gratitude in your hearts singing [NRSV 'sing'] psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.

¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus,

giving thanks to God the Father through him.

The words translated 'bear' and 'forgive' in the NRSV are participles in Greek expressing aspects of what it means to clothe oneself in Christ (3:12). Paul is not suggesting that we model ourselves on Christ 'from the outside'. It is not a matter of our becoming *like* Christ – certainly not by virtue of our own striving. Rather, we are to allow the life of Christ to bear fruit in our lives. Verse fourteen speaks of 'love' and verse fifteen of 'peace'. Both of these are listed as fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22. We reflected on 'peace' in commenting on Galatians 1:3, and on 'love' when commenting on Galatians 5:6.

It is in love that 'we have come to fullness in him' (2:10). It is love that informs all the other virtues, giving them that special quality that identifies them as Christian. It is in experiencing our love (the final garment that people first see) that others come to experience, through us, the love of Christ. Through the gift of peace, we experience the 'fullness' of the risen Christ and the harmony of all the various energies of our mind, heart and body. Furthermore, this personal 'peace' is not something individual. It comes through belonging to his body, the church (see 1:18). It is a gift mediated through the community and which, in turn, builds the community.

Paul's list comes to a climax with the virtue of 'thanksgiving' which permeates verses fifteen to seventeen. He knows that our mutual love must flow from our prayer and be an expression of our communion with God. In verse sixteen, the words 'teach', 'admonish' and 'sing' are participles in Greek, not separate imperatives. They indicate different ways in which Christ speaks to us through each other. Our teaching and admonishing will be 'wise' only if it is the teaching and admonishing of Christ that we mediate to each other (see 1:9).

Notice how Paul concludes this portrait of the Christian life by referring to communal prayer (see 1:12), to doing 'everything in the name of the Lord Jesus', and, once again, to gratitude. There is nothing individualistic about this portrait, nor is Paul exhorting us to Stoic virtue acquired by self-motivated discipline. He is exhorting us to welcome and be faithful to the life given us in the community of the church by the risen Christ.

Paul is not speaking here of the relationship between men and women. For a reflection on his ideas on this subject we refer the reader to the commentary on 1Corinthians 11:3. His focus is on the kind of conduct which is fitting for a Christian within the home. While he addresses his words to people who were living in the domestic structures that were taken for granted in the Jewish, Greek and Roman societies of his day, we would miss the point of his exhortations if we thought that he was simply repeating traditional teaching. If his readers followed Paul's exhortations given here, the domestic institutions within which they were living would undergo a revolutionary transformation. Perhaps it is because Paul has not personally evangelised Colossae that he includes these basic exhortations which are not found in his earlier letters.

In addressing himself to wives, his concern is not that they take their proper place in relation to their husband in an order which, along with all his contemporaries, Paul understood to be part of God's design. This he takes for granted. His concern is in the *way* they conduct themselves within this order. They are to be subject 'as is fitting in the Lord'. As a Christian, her lord is Christ. Her submission to her husband, therefore, is to be exercised in a manner that is consistent with all that this letter has said about the lordship of Christ and about how we should relate to each other as members of his body. This includes what he wrote to the Galatians: 'there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28).

The position of the husband gave him greater scope for abuse of power. Paul, therefore, explicitly exhorts him to love, and therefore to live the virtues of which he has just been speaking.

Paul then speaks of the relationships between children and parents. What he says to the 'fathers' could be said to mothers as well. Once again, by focusing on 'the Lord', he provides a Christian dimension for advice that could otherwise be found in any Stoic manual. We are reminded of 1Thessalonians 2:7-12, where Paul speaks of his ministry in terms of the care given by a mother and a father to their children.

¹⁸Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

¹⁹Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly.

²⁰Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord.

²¹Fathers do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.

²²Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord.

²³Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, ²⁴since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward;

It is the lord Christ whom you serve [NRSV 'you serve the Lord Christ'].

²⁵For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality.

^{4:1}Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

Domestic slavery was so much part of daily life in Paul's world that he can exhort us to be like him in being a slave of God (1Thessalonians 1:9), of Christ (Galatians 1:10; Romans 1:1; Colossians 1:7; Philippians 1:1), and of one another (Galatians 5:13). Important insights into Paul's attitude towards institutional slavery can be found in his letter to Philemon (see also the commentary on Galatians 3:28 and 1Corinthians 7:21).

Though Paul does not question the existence of slavery in this passage, baptism into the Christian community has introduced into this institution, too, a principle that transcends it, and that would necessarily transform it – the principle already stated by Paul earlier in this letter: 'there is no longer slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!' (3:11).

Paul exhorts slaves to have only one thing in mind: pleasing their real Lord, Christ (compare Galatians 1:10; 1Thessalonians 2:4). At the same time, the freedom they experience by following Jesus is not to be used as a licence for disobedience to their masters. Paul reminds them of the justice of God and that they will be judged, impartially, according to their behaviour, as will their masters.

The exhortation to the masters to 'treat your slaves justly and fairly' could be found in any Stoic manual. The transforming Christian principle is found in the final phrase: 'knowing that you also have a Master in heaven'. Acknowledging this introduces into the relationship between master and slave the qualities of the heart of Christ that Paul listed earlier in the chapter. Such attitudes could not but affect the institution itself.

In these concluding exhortations, Paul picks up key elements of his letter. He begins with prayer, for everything we are and everything we do is to flow from our communion with Jesus. Prayer happens when we attend to this communion and make space for our mind and heart to respond to the invitation of Christ to enter ever more deeply into his own communion with God. We are to keep our eyes fixed on Christ (see 3:1-3), and with thanksgiving (see 1:12; 2:7; 3:15-17).

Paul asks the Colossians to pray for him. Throughout this letter he has spoken of the gospel as ‘the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints’(1:16). God has chosen Paul as his instrument in making this mystery known. It is because of this commission that he is in prison and he asks them to pray that an opportunity will open up for him to continue his mission and to carry it out faithfully.

When, earlier in the letter, Paul exhorted them not to live ‘as if you still belonged to the world’ (2:20), he was referring to the behaviour in which they indulged before they came to know Jesus. He was not asking them to be out of touch with the society of which they were part. They, too, have a mission to preach the gospel by word and example, and so Paul exhorts them to take every opportunity to reach out to those who do not belong to the Christian community. They are to do so with the ‘wisdom’ that only Christ can give (see 2:3) and with his graciousness.

²Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving.

³At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison,

⁴so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should.

⁵Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time.

⁶Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.

⁷Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts;

⁹he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here.

¹⁰Aristarchus 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.

¹¹And 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.

Tychicus is the bearer of the letter. Paul wishes to establish his credentials, and, in so doing, to assure the Colossians that they can put their trust in the oral reports which he will give them. Luke tells us that he was from Asia and that he was among those who accompanied Paul to Jerusalem with the collection (see Acts 20:4). With him is Onesimus, the slave who is the central figure in Paul's letter to Philemon.

Paul sends greetings first from the only three Jewish Christians who have stayed with him and worked with him in his mission to the Gentiles. In his letter to Philemon Paul named Epaphras as being in prison with him. This time he names Aristarchus (mentioned also in Philemon 24). Luke tells us that Aristarchus was from Thessalonica (Acts 20:4). He was with Paul in Ephesus (Acts 19:29), and, like Tychicus, he was one of the delegates who accompanied Paul to Jerusalem with the collection (Acts 20:4). He was with Paul on the ship that took Paul as a prisoner to Rome (Acts 27:2).

Mark is mentioned with Aristarchus also in Philemon 24. He is identified here as a cousin of Barnabas, which points to him being the John Mark mentioned in *Acts* as being a native of Jerusalem (Acts 12:12). He accompanied Paul and Barnabas from Jerusalem to Antioch, and was with them for the first part of Paul's first missionary Journey (Acts 12:24; 13:5,13). When Paul set out on his second journey he refused to take Mark, who accompanied Barnabas instead to Cyprus (Acts 15:37-39). He is called 'my son Mark' in the first letter of Peter (1Peter 5:13) and is the author of one of our four Gospels. We have no further information on Jesus Justus, Paul's third Jewish co-worker.

Paul's comment in verse eleven gives us a glimpse of the pain he suffered at the failure of his people to accept Christ and to take up the challenge of the mission given them to take this faith to the nations.

Paul spoke of Epaphras in introducing the letter, for it was he who proclaimed the gospel in Colossae and in the other cities of the Lycus valley (see 1:7-8). Paul speaks highly of what Epaphras has done for them and assures them of the prayers which Epaphras is constantly offering to God on their behalf. Epaphras, Luke and Demas, are mentioned together also in Paul's letter to Philemon (verse 23).

It is interesting to note the presence of two of the gospel-writers with Paul. We know of the careful research that went into Luke's writing (see Luke 1:1-4). The similarities that exist between his gospel and that of Mark may go back, in part, to this time of shared ministry.

The only member of the community of Colossae whom Paul names in his greetings is Nympha. Some early manuscripts use the masculine form, Nymphas. We know from the letter Paul sent to Philemon that a community met in Philemon's house. The fact that Tychicus is carrying a personal letter to Philemon may account for Paul's not mentioning him here by name.

His mentioning of Laodicea gives us a glimpse into the way Paul expected his letters to be passed around from one community to another.

Paul has a message for Archippus (also mentioned in Philemon 2). We can presume that he also gave Tychicus other messages to pass on orally to the Colossians. He signs the letter, reminds them that he is in prison and concludes with a prayer.

¹²Epaphras, 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.

¹³For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis.

¹⁴Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you.

¹⁵Give my greetings to the brothers and sisters in Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

¹⁶And 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.

¹⁷And say to Archippus, 'See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord.'

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

The church

A reflection on the role of the church in the letter to the Colossians

The central focus of this letter from the beginning to the end is Christ. In the reflected light of his glory, Paul offers us also an inspiring portrait of the church, the community which shares in Christ's communion with God and so in his 'fullness' and in his glory.

As in his earlier letters, he speaks of the church as the 'body' of Christ (1:18; 1:24; 2:19; 3:15). Here, however, for the first time, he speaks of Christ as its 'head'(1:18; 2:19), highlighting his role as the source of the life experienced in the community and as the one who directs and governs it.

It is in the church that the 'gospel', the 'word of truth' which is 'bearing fruit in the whole world' is proclaimed and welcomed (1:5-6). The members of the church (the 'saints') are promised the inheritance that awaits them in heaven (1:12). The church is the 'kingdom of God's beloved Son' into which we are transferred (1:13), and it is in the church that we experience God's forgiveness (1:14; 2:13; 3:13).

The gospel is to be preached to 'every creature under heaven'(1:23; compare Matthew 28:19), for God's love reaches out to everyone. This is the 'mystery' only now revealed and made known 'to his saints'(1:26-27).

Christ lives in his church (1:27), and so it is in the church that we 'come to fullness in him' (2:10). Through baptism into the church we are initiated into his risen life (2:12). Paul can say to those who form the body which is the church: 'When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory'(3:4).

Throughout Colossians, Paul's reflections on the church are by way of contrast with the false wisdom and the false salvation that is offered by the surrounding cults whose teaching is threatening the faith of the community.

God in his mercy draws to himself those who have not heard of Christ in ways which are wrapped in mystery. But Christians cannot be true to their calling unless we long that everyone come to know what God has revealed of his love in Christ, and unless we long to draw everyone into the church which is called to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Until everyone belongs, the church's unity is incomplete and the body suffers from its fractures. One motivation for Paul's writing is to counter factional elements in Colossae. While there is sin in the members of the church, the church's holiness is stained and the church's witness obscured. Hence Paul's plea that 'God's chosen ones, holy and beloved' will clothe themselves in Christ (3:1-17). In the church everyone is invited to experience the life of Christ and everyone is invited to contribute his or her love and other gifts to the community. Until everyone accepts this invitation, the catholicity of the Christian community will remain incomplete. Finally, while 'empty' and 'deceitful' teaching (2:8) distracts from and undermines the 'word of truth, the gospel'(1:5) that has been handed on through tradition from those commissioned by Christ to take his word to the ends of the earth, the apostolic dimension of the church will also suffer. Paul's challenge to us all is simple: we are to set our mind and heart on Christ, and allow him to change all our thoughts, desires and actions till they are 'according to Christ'(2:8).