

Sunday 6th March 2022
Colossians 4:2-15
Rev.Scott Burton
Brightons Parish Church

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's word:

Holy Spirit, come among us and soften our hearts to what You might say today through Your word.

Holy Spirit, help us to hear the call of God.

Holy Spirit, come with power and deep conviction to change us and shape us, to make us your ambassadors. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

I would like to read you a modern-day parable that someone has written and it is called The Life-saving station.

'On a dangerous sea coast, notorious for shipwrecks, there was a crude little life-saving station. Actually, it was merely a hut, with only one boat but the few members kept a constant watch over the turbulent sea. With little thought for themselves, they would go out day and night, tirelessly searching for those in danger. Many lives were saved by this brave band who faithfully worked as a team in and out of the life-saving station. By and by it became a famous place. Some of those who had been saved, as well as others along the seacoast, wanted to become associated with this little station. They were willing to give their time energy and money in support of its objectives. New boats were purchased, new crews were trained. The station once obscure, crude and virtually insignificant, began to grow. Some of its members were unhappy. The hut was so unattractive and poorly equipped. They felt a more comfortable place should be provided. Emergency cots were replaced with lovely furniture. Rough handmade equipment was discarded and sophisticated systems were installed. The hut, of course, had to be torn down to make room for all this new equipment, furniture and systems. By the time of its completion the life-saving station had become a popular gathering place and its objectives had begun to shift. It was now used as a sort of clubhouse being an attractive building for the public to gather in. Saving lives, feeding the hungry, strengthening the fearful, calming the disturbed these rarely occurred now. Fewer members were interested in braving the sea on life-saving missions so they hired professional lifeboat crews to do this work. The original goal of the station wasn't all together forgotten however, life-saving motifs still prevailed in the club's decorations and there was a liturgical lifeboat preserved in the room of sweet memories with soft indirect lighting which helped hide the layer of dust upon the once used vessel. Shipwrecks still occur in those waters but now most of the victims are not saved, every day they drown at sea and so few, so very few, seem to care.'

I'm sure you can see where I'm going with that.

Are we the people in the parable? Are we simply content with our clubhouse and our place in the clubhouse. As we come to share in Communion today and gather around the Lord's table, do we take just simple comfort from the fact that we're okay, we are part of His family, we have our place, we have our faith but we maybe have forgotten the wider world Jesus came for.

These are questions we each need to ask of ourselves and of us as a congregation. Have we forgotten or neglected our calling?

I feel quite certain it's a question Paul would ask of the church in our day given our reading today. Up to this point Paul has been directing the attention of the Colossians upwards to Jesus and inwards to care for one another and to grow in faith, to strengthen that faith. But now he turns outward and he calls the Colossians to turn outward as well and so he writes 'Pray for us too, that God may open a door for our message so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly as I should.' As he begins to turn outward, his instinct is to ask for prayer, and as Paul often does, he leads by example because in the very next verse he goes on to call them to be similarly outward focused 'Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders. Make the most of every opportunity. When you read the words be wise.' I wonder what it conjures in your mind 'Be wise to how you behave towards outsiders.'? We, I think, believe it means to be nice and polite, which I don't think it does actually mean because in the New Testament wisdom is not about how to live a successful life, it's not about how to have the good life, it's not about knowing the answers, it's not about just being nice and kind or something like that. Having wisdom in the New Testament is about understanding who Jesus is and what God has done and is doing through Jesus. And so, to be wise towards the outside world is to understand the outside world in relation to Jesus and to who Jesus is and what Jesus came to do.

And so, what has Paul already said about Jesus and his letter that would be of importance for the outside world? Well, in chapter one of Colossians he says that if you don't have faith in Jesus you are alienated from God and an enemy of God and your mind and the only way to be reconciled to God is through Jesus. Or go into chapter 3 and Paul says there that because of sin in the world and in our lives the wrath of God is coming there will be judgment upon our actions.

That is the wider context. And so, although Paul doesn't talk about an outward focus until chapter four and it's only a couple of verses and we might be tempted to think 'Oh, it's just a wee tag on here' it's really not, it's not an optional extra that slipped Paul's mind, because he was writing for another purpose. He was writing to ground their faith and strengthen their faith but he can't help himself in turning outward and remembering that everything he's written so far has relevance for the outside world and so sharing Jesus is not an optional extra for us, it's of eternal significance and really he's just echoing Jesus who said in those verses we quote so often 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.' The stakes are high because he goes on to say 'Whoever believes in him that is in Jesus is not condemned but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only son.'

That is the context of scripture that drives home Paul's argument that we are to be wise, we have to understand the outside world in relation to Jesus, to who he is and what God has done in and through him, and it's why Paul goes on to say 'make the most of every opportunity' make the most of every opportunity.

I wonder if we are like Archipelago who needed a reminder from Paul, 'complete the ministry you have received' he's told do. We need to be reminded to complete our calling. Our calling to invite people to follow Jesus that they might be saved.

Sharing Jesus with the outside world is not an optional extra. It has eternal significance and if we don't take that on board, if we don't try to grow in this some way, somehow, we're just going to end up like that self-indulgent clubhouse and we're no longer a life-saving station.

As we come around the Communion table today, let us remember why Jesus actually died, not to make us comfortable, not even to make us nice people, but to save us and to bring salvation for the world, including the world that is outside our doors right now.

Now, let me be honest friends, I'm as poor at this as anybody. I shy away from this as much as the next person, and so, I'm not standing up here as the finished product and not standing up here as an expert in this. I'm simply trying to open up God's word for us Sunday by Sunday and let him speak. So, it's not hypocritical for me to say this. I'm preaching as much to me as I am to you, but one of the things I love about God's word is how He equips us through His word, by the example and the writings of His church. He equips us and so Paul, in his writing, actually gives us building blocks to help us share our faith and I want to briefly touch on four.

He writes 'devote yourselves to prayer being watchful and thankful and pray for us too.'

Building block number one is **prayer**. Because, if you're not praying, you won't be sharing. Paul's probably got in mind prayer beyond simple evangelism and mission. I'm sure of that because of what he writes in chapter one. So I'm taking a particular focus here, let's admit that. But he quickly goes on to talk about evangelism and I think for him evangelism and prayer will be intimately tied because, think this through, as you thank God for what you have received, the grace and mercy you have received, for the love He has shown you, and as you express that thankfulness to God, a passion, a zeal, an excitement arises in you and you're like 'I want to share this with others.' And so, if you're not in prayer, thanking God for this, you're probably not very excited and you're not really want to share it with people. We need to be praying in the place of thankfulness but as we thank God for that we might be like 'Well, I want to share this.' and so, we ask him for open doors, as Paul does, and then as we begin to ask for that, when we're out and about in the community, or we're talking with people, we're more mindful of those opportunities. 'Oh, I could have said something there. Oh, this is where Jesus might be relevant. Oh, I could pray for that person, I could say and pray for that person, because well, there's a God that I can pray to you. Become more aware of those opportunities, but then we're going to mess up, aren't we, we're going to not take the opportunities at times, we'll take some and we'll miss out on others, and so, we go back into prayer and we were saying to God 'God I didn't take that opportunity you gave me and I'm sorry I allowed my fear, I allowed my discomfort to hold me back and I didn't love my neighbor as I loved myself. I was more in love with my comfort and my image and reputation than I was in that person's welfare.' And we'll start to repent of that and

as you repent of that it gives you resolve that the next time the opportunity comes you'll take it.

In a place of prayer we are prepared for evangelism. And so, if you're not, you won't be prepared. If you're not praying for people to come to faith, you won't be prepared either. So that little card that I've left down on the table there, that's person number one to be thinking of, but maybe add to that one or maybe two others, especially if that person on your card is not a local person. We are called to evangelism, to mission, to sharing the good news with this community, in this place. So, who is that to you. In my own life I have my phone, I have an electronic calendar and I have little reminders that pop up every day. One stream of reminders is around people, family, friends, situations that I want to pray for. And I have family members I'm praying for to come to faith. I've got friends that I'm praying to come to faith. I'm going to just about, I'm going to add dads that I'm meeting at the playground that I want to come to faith. I then have a second stream of reminders that I break up my pastoral grouping - so Elders, wee idea for you pastoral grouping leaders - each day pray for a different couple of members from your pastor grouping, and there are members of my pastoral grouping who have spouses that don't believe and I'm praying for those spouses to come to faith. I'm not saying you have to go to that extreme but who are the two people you're praying for that are locally not believing in Jesus. The reason I probably rabbit on about this so much is because I am praying for this, it's there in my consciousness, and you won't give a jot about this if you're not praying for this. So, we need to be in the place of prayer.

Building block number two is **relationships**. Paul says 'Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders and let your conversation be always full of' and it goes on. You can't have a conversation, you can't name two people, you can't act towards people you don't have a relationship with. So, who outside of the church locally do you have relationships with who are you building that relationship with? Maybe a neighbor, maybe a friend, maybe a colleague. But we need to be in relationship. We can't just be a wee holy huddle and we're looking who are you building relationships with. Hopefully you are and you can name two people.

Building block number three is when you've got those relationships we hopefully have some **conversation** and he says 'let your conversation be always full of grace seasoned with salt so that you may know how to answer everyone.' And I think we get a whole list of wild ideas about what this could mean. I think we interpret it through our nice, comfortable, kind of middle class, lens at times. And so, when we read 'let your conversation be always full of grace' again we read that as well, be nice, be polite, that kind of ilk of interpretation. But I don't think that's what Paul means because let's remember the context of Paul's day, he's writing to a group of people who are ostracized, ridiculed, mocked, even persecuted for their faith. To be a Christian then was in a hostile environment, not necessarily our environment, although it's getting more hostile, and so, in the context of that time, to be full of grace can mean two things I think. To be forgiving and forbearing when people ridicule you and mock you for following Jesus. They were mocked because they believed in a crucified Messiah. 'Your

God can't be powerful, he was killed!' was how it went, and they would have to show grace in their conversation as they forgave and as they bore with that.

But God's grace also upholds us, upholds our faith so that we believe until the very end. We cling on even in the hard times. That is a work of God's grace and so I think also that being full of grace in our conversation can be that when you are ridiculed and when people malign your faith and when they say it's rubbish and nonsense that when you stand there and you kind of take it on the chin but you say 'I still believe in this Jesus' and you're not going to dissuade me and you're not aggressive about it but you're just firm and you're resolved that is you walking in grace and that is powerful in our day.

Paul also goes on to say that conversation should be seasoned with salt and again there's two dynamics here I think at play. One is that Jesus said that we are 'to be salt and light' and in the message translation of that passage in Matthew the author there draws out that we have to bring out the God flavors, the flavors of God's kingdom. So, that might be at play. But also, in the day, salty conversation was a conversation that was earthed in reality, it was earth in the everyday of living, and to combine those two thoughts together I think what Paul might be getting at is when you get to talk about faith, don't talk about some highfaluting theology, and don't talk about the organization of church, talk about how Jesus is real to you, of what He's done in your life and is doing in your life talk, about your testimony. Bring out God's flavor from your own life that they might see it, that they might know it. And I think combining all that together helps us to know how to answer everyone because, with this part of the verse, we often think we'll have to have an answer for every possible question under the sun, every question about science, every question about morality, every question about the Bible, every question about theology. None of us, not even the minister, can answer everyone with all those questions.

But I wonder, as you hold on in faith to Jesus, in that conversation, as you share what Jesus means to you and has done in your life, that is a powerful answer. Because we can debate matters of theology and morality and philosophy, and everybody can come up with their answer but when you share your story, it's a little bit more difficult to ignore that and to explain it away because your story of faith has power in it. And maybe, that's what we need to focus more on. What is your story of faith that you can share. And it might not be a whoop-dee-doo story of faith, you might not be in the greatest place of faith right now, you maybe are not in a place of rejoicing, but you know,, in our day in our world, being able to say how you hold on in faith amidst the dark times and the times of suffering and the times when Jesus doesn't seem as close, that's powerful. Over lockdown we had multiple testimonies shared on Tuesday, Testimony Tuesday, and so many of them included times of faith in the hard times and they were powerful.

So, what's the story that you can share in conversation with people?

And the fourth one builds on all this too in the latter bit of Paul's letter, as he closes off, he lists a whole lot of people. People he ministers and serves with, people that he labors with, and digging into some of their stories there's two in particular, Mark and

Demas that jumped off the page for me, because they're kind of two sides of the one coin of **perseverance with grace**.

Mark was a colleague of Paul's and in Acts chapter 13 we read that we can read there that he deserted Paul he left for some reason, we don't know why, maybe it was fear, maybe the opposition was too much, we just don't know, and it hurt Paul, it betrayed his trust and he wouldn't serve with Mark for a time. But now Colossians is a little later on in the story and Mark is back involved with Paul. Mark is persevering in ministry again and there's been grace and forgiveness.

Demas is the other side of that in the time of Colossians. He's serving alongside Paul but by the time of second Timothy Demas is said to have deserted Paul then, he's went the opposite way, he's not persevering any longer, he's not relying on God's grace.

And in these two examples we see that to be effective in sharing our faith and sharing Jesus with the outside world, we do need to persevere. That might not come easy, it might be the scariest thing about our faith, but we're called to persevere and when you don't feel able, when you don't feel good at this, when you feel weak at this, as I do, then that's probably the best place to be in, because what does God say to the church in Corinth 'When you are weak then you are strong' that 'his power is made perfect in weakness'. You don't need to be the finished article, you don't need to be an expert, but you do need to be committed to this, to make some form of commitment to persevere because, if we don't if, we don't complete the calling we have received, we're just going to become, if we're not already, and I'm not saying we are, but we could very well easily become, just a self-indulgent clubhouse and forget our call to be a life-saving station. Because, as we gather around this Communion table, it reminds us there are eternal things at play. We often focus on the love of God and forget the other side of that coin - Jesus came to die to save us.

Let us remember the full gospel and give ourselves to being that life-saving station.

I pray it may be so. Amen.