

Sunday 30th January 2022
Colossians 1:24-2:5
Rev.Scott Burton
Brightons Parish Church

Let us come to God in prayer. Let us pray:

Holy Spirit, be amongst us and open our minds to the word of God.

Come Holy Spirit and open our hearts that we might hear the voice of Father God to us.

Come Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name.
Amen.

So, 2022 is upon us and nearly a whole month has passed, one twelfth of the year has nearly gone and, for me at least, it's flying past. Maybe that's the newborn baby thing of sleep deprivation and the days blurring together; maybe it's been out of the manse for about half of January because of a beetle infestation; who knows. One or two things, you know, to juggle and deal with. That means my month has just flown by. I wonder how yours has gone? But what is 2022 going to be the year of, do you think? What will 2022 be the year of? The year of getting back to normal? I thought I'd get a bit more of a 'Yeah' than that 'Amen brother!' And getting rid of these masks, eh? Or is it the year we see the end of the reign of Boris Johnson? I won't ask you to vote in favor against that one! Is it the year that Russia does invade Ukraine? And what about for the church, us locally, the Church of Scotland nationally? Is this the year when it becomes a bit clearer what the shape of church will be? What buildings are going in the years to come, to be open or closed? Is that going to become a bit clearer?

All of these issues are important and they all have the potential to impact us one way or another but, as I've prepared for this week, there's part of me has wondered - Are some of these, or maybe all of these are, something that can distract us? just consumes us so much that we fail to keep *the main thing the main thing*? Partly. I'm led to wonder about that because, if you read on in Colossians, and we'll get to that there in the weeks to come, but in Colossians chapter 4 Paul says he's a prisoner, he's in chains. And so, he is in prison, he's in chains because of his faith and being in prison in those days carried with it the threat of the death penalty. He is facing those circumstances and yet he will not be diverted, he will not be consumed by his circumstances and he will keep *the main thing the main thing* because he says in verse 25 that he's become a 'servant of the church by the commission God gave him', he has a commission from God and he has real clarity about that commission. He knows he's to present the word of God in all its fullness; he knows he's to share the good news, the 'mystery the gospel' as he calls it, about Jesus, and by sharing that he hopes to build up the church, so that it remains firm in faith and encouraged in heart. he hopes, by sharing the gospel, that more people, the nations, will come to faith in Jesus and so he is clear about this, he is compelled towards it, and he will not be diverted.

It makes me wonder about us brothers and sisters. Makes me wonder about us, because, we too have a commission, don't we? This is the beginning of my fourth year with you now and I think every year I think I've started with these same verses so we probably should be quite familiar with them by now Jesus says 'Therefore go and make

disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.' We have been given a commission, a commission by God, and it's a commission that carries eternal significance for the people we know, the people in our lives, the people in this area. We have to go and call them to follow Jesus and, when they respond in faith, to help them grow in faith and become mature followers. Paul would not be diverted from his commission - I wonder are we do we put it off? Or 'I'll get to it Scott when things are normal? You know, when I can get rid of the mask, finally I'll be able to do x, y and z; finally, I'll be able to give myself to them commission from God.' Or 'When (fill in the blank).' Could be so many other things that we just allow to so consume us, so divert us that we never get round to this commission. I wonder, could this be the year when we learn that little bit more to keep *the main thing the main thing*?

And it's a challenge that I will have to face all over again, as I learned to be a dad of two children, and one of them particularly young. It's a commission, that I feel like I'm still learning to know what it means to be a minister and that keeps changing on me because we have a congregation of about 500 on the roll and that's going to nearly double in size when, in the years to come, we go into a union with the other churches. What does it even mean to be a minister to that size of congregation? I'm not sure I don't know, I'm going to have to learn, might have to stop things, might have to start things. I'm having to learn how to keep *the main thing the main thing* too but, if we commit together in this, then maybe we can encourage and spur one another on, maybe we can learn together to keep *the main thing the main thing* and I hope there's a part of you that is rising up and saying 'Yes, I want to this year!' It's a month into the year maybe this is your new year's resolution, if you didn't make one, that you want to keep *the main thing the main thing* but, in all likelihood, I wouldn't be surprised, if there's a part of you that's fighting that, just wants to keep it at a distance, that maybe there's not even a part of you that wants to say 'Yes' because you just feel weighed down, weighed down by weariness, weighed down by disillusionment or fear even, and so there's this war in you that knows that you should maybe say yes but you just you can't because of all that the last two years have brought, but maybe because of all that you are facing personally, in work, or in life, or in faith, that it's sapping your reserves, it's sapping your hope, and so we just don't feel able to say yes and it's so easy to become diverted and you know what is more, on top of all of that, we know that, don't we, that our commission is costly to follow and put into practice. What Jesus says, it's going to be costly, we're going to have to give up time and energy, we're going to have to give up maybe comfort or money, or maybe even popularity, we might have to stop doing things that we have been doing for a long time, and so, in the face of all, that it's been natural and understandable for us to not feel able to say yes and to want to just put off that that bit more of 2022.

You know, Paul knew hardship and yet he still pursued his commission. He writes in verse 24 'Now I rejoice in what I am suffering for you and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body which is the church.' Paul knew hardship, he knew affliction he knew suffering, and yet, somehow, Paul kept

persevering. How was it that this man was able to keep saying yes to God's commission despite his chains, despite the threat of execution for his faith?

Before we get on to answer that I just want to pause and unpick this verse a little bit because, as we read it we might it might raise questions for us, and we might wonder is Paul saying that the cross is insufficient, that it is lacking something. Is that what Paul means by Christ's afflictions? And well, the answer is a very clear 'No!' No, the cross is not lacking, because Paul, in his letters, never refers to the cross as an affliction. Christ endured and if you look at even just the book of Colossians in chapter 1 verses 21 and 22 and in chapter 2 verses 13 and 14, Paul makes it very clear that what Jesus was to achieve on the cross he did achieve, that you can now be forgiven through Jesus' death, that on the cross He died so that you could be forgiven and fully reconciled to God, so that you can stand before Almighty God without blemish, free of accusation, and reconciled to your Heavenly Father. That offer is there for every one of us. The cross is not lacking in any way, but what Paul knows is that to be a Christian is more than to attend church. To be a Christian is to do more than simply pray or read the Bible. To be a Christian is to be more than just a good person. A Christian is someone who is united with Jesus, not in an abstract way, but in a very deep spiritual way. When you are a Christian, you are part of the body of Christ, and so Paul knows that as he suffers, Jesus suffers alongside him; as he suffers to fulfill his commission, Jesus suffers with him; and this is what helps Paul persevere, because he goes on to say in verses 27 and 29 that the mystery the gospel, the good news, he seeks to share with the nations, is that you can know Christ, you can know Jesus in you, not Christ with , not Christ around you, or near you, or above you, but Christ in you, in you, and it's when Christ becomes that real to you, you then have the hope of glory, the hope that this life with its afflictions, with its hardships, with its suffering, this life isn't all there is, that there is a spiritual dynamic to life, that there is a hope of a new heaven and a new earth, that there will one day be God's kingdom in all its fullness. That's the hope of glory.

but that hope is not as real and tangible if you don't know Christ in you, if Jesus is just a nice story to you, if Jesus is just a figure from history, or a wise teacher to learn from, you won't have that glory, that hope of glory, and what is more Paul knows that, as he contends, strenuously contends, Jesus is in him working powerfully. There's power to help him persevere, there's power to help him labor, there's power to help him keep going. I wonder, friends, do you know that power by knowing Jesus, that power that helps you overcome sin, that power that helps you keep going, and keep laboring, in his name, tired though you may be? Friends, to be a Christian is not to know loads of stuff in the Bible, to be a Christian is not to be busy with religion, to be a Christian is not even to come to church, or keep a building open, or keep the organization running, principally, to be a Christian, is to know Jesus personally.

And so, let me ask - Do you know Jesus that way? Is Jesus a reality to you? And, if he's not, or if Jesus seems distant, maybe this is the year you press into that, maybe this is the year you pursue Jesus in a fresh way? There are so many ways to get to know and journey with Jesus and maybe His invitation for you this year is to get to know Him in a different way. To engage with the scriptures or to engage with prayer in a different way.

But to meet with Him. to know Him personally. And so, I'm really excited that this year we're doing Huddle again and you would have seen that notice in the news sheet that Huddle is a way for us to grow in faith. And do you know that the key question in Huddle is? What is Jesus saying to you? The second key question is - What are you going to do about that? But that is the key question - What is Jesus saying to you? And so, if you want to grow in faith, if you want to be able to answer that question, then why not get involved in Huddle come, and speak to me, I probably again need to know today if that's something you want to do. because we need to get dates in the diary. So, if you want to grow in faith maybe think about Huddle. Maybe think about getting into the word of God differently this year, somehow. There are so many ways. Or engaging with prayer and praise maybe in a different way. That you might have the hope of glory.

So Paul, he had clarity of commission and he knew Jesus personally and that gave him hope and power for his life and his circumstances but, you know, I think there was one other thing his life, his writings teach us today, one other thing that, if it wasn't there, his commission still wouldn't have been fulfilled because I think it's possible, friends, I think it's possible to be clear about the commission and you might be able to recite Matthew 28 to me and you might be able to say to me 'Well Scott, I know Jesus and I have the hope of glory.' it's possible to have both of those things and still not fulfill your commission, because there's something else that Paul had. Paul knew that to fulfill our commission, his commission, our commission, we must invest in the eternal, we must invest in the eternal, the eternal, the spiritual, that relationship with God, that faith which is so intangible, isn't it, faith is just so intangible and infuriating at times, it's less concrete than the rest of life and so we give ourselves to work, we give ourselves to whatever it may be, that a new hobby, or another issue, or another, which is so much more concrete than God, and the things of God's kingdom. I was reminded of this just quite recently I met up with some friends from school 20 years on and there's a real group of these guy friends that we just keep meeting with and I love seeing them, they're real brothers to me, and some of them, quite a few of them, are in engineering of one form or another and I get talking to them and they they're able to tell me all the different ways that they are developing technology and I just sit there amazed and slightly envious that they they're so concrete in what they're able to see their job brings about, and then there's another friend and he's in education, he's a high school teacher and he's able to say the difference he's making in the lives of young people and he also has some quite funny stories about what goes on at high school at times and we have a good chuckle and again there's a bit of me that's like 'I'm really envious of you that you're able to see that, and know that it's much more concrete' because, when they come to me and say 'Well, how's your job going, Scott?' I haven't quite found the right answer to that yet because I tell them a little bit of what I'm doing and it's just blank look, move on, because my job is about the intangibles in life, often it's about faith and about the kingdom of God, and there are times when it hits the really hard times of life as well, and we don't know what to say in those times and so we kind of skip quickly on about what Scott does. Investing in the eternal, is hard, it's intangible, it's less concrete and so, because of that again, we're often like 'Well, I'll get around to it when I feel like. I'll get around to it when I don't have to wear a mask. I'll get around to it when I've got a wee bit more time' But that wee bit more time never seems to come, because all those

more concrete things just seem to press in upon us, and in Paul's life and in his ministry he displayed loads of ways that he invested in the eternal. He pursued God in prayer and he writes about what he's praying for the Colossians as he does for all the churches and he invests in the eternal by cherishing the church and you can read how he cherishes the church and he invests in the people of the church but you can see how he invests in eternal by sharing the good news with others that they might come to faith in Jesus as well.

So, friends, what would it look like for us to invest in the eternal in 2022? What would that look like for you to not just invest in what is concrete but to invest in the eternal and invest in faith and then the kingdom of God?

I'll give you some ideas just from Paul's own example.

So, I mentioned that he prays. Are we praying for your day, are you praying for this church, in our ministry? You know, we have a Thursday prayer time and it's online just now because of Covid and, hopefully, that will change one day, but if you have a telephone and I won't ask you to put up your hand if you've got a telephone, because everybody's probably got a telephone, if you have a telephone, you can join that time of prayer, you don't need a computer, you don't need a smartphone or tablet you can simply phone up and listen in and you don't have to say a word other than maybe 'Hi' just to say hi but after that you can be silent the rest of the time, but by listening in, you are praying and you are praying and investing in the eternal. Might this be the year when we see our Thursday time of prayer grow in size again? Because the churches that are thriving across denominations generally are those churches that are coming together for prayer. Might we invest in prayer this year?

Paul's example also shows that he invests in relationships, he invests both in people outside the church and he invests in people inside the church. So, what would that look like for you? Are you investing in relationships? Are you building relationships with the local community? And how are you building relationships amongst one another? Most of us, if not all of us, are in a Pastoral Grouping. You know, you don't have to leave it just to your Pastoral Grouping Leader to care for your pastoral grouping. You can work alongside them. You can say to them 'Hey, I'd be willing to maybe give someone a call or pay someone a visit or send someone a card.' You can get involved certainly, speak to your Pastoral Grouping leader and we'll help make it happen, because it doesn't have to just rest on a small group of people, in fact it can't, it needs every one of us.

Or what about using your gifts? Rachel prayed for it this morning particularly amongst our work and volunteering with young people. Paul labors and uses his gifts to help others to serve the church. You know, our Junior Boys Brigade section might not run after the summer because we don't have enough volunteers. Do we want that to stop? Do we want that to have to stop because we don't have enough volunteers? And so, we have to stop investing in the eternal of those young boys? The only way it's going to be able to keep running is if people step forward and volunteer and there's probably any number of other areas of ministry where that's the case. Could you step forward and

volunteer with the Junior Boys Brigade? You don't have to be the main leader because we have a very able main leader but she cannot do it on her own, we need others to help. Could that be you?

Because we have a commission, a commission from God, a commission that transcends our current pressures and insecurities, the concerns of our day, because it's a commission to invest in the eternal, to invest in the eternal welfare of others. We have a commission to go make disciples, to call people to follow Jesus, and if we want to see that commission fulfilled in greater measure this year, then we must learn to keep *the main thing the main thing* and we must do that by having clarity of commission, knowing Christ is in us, and then investing in the eternal. I pray it may be so. Amen.