

The Fourth Sunday after Trinity (Proper 10)
St Mary the Virgin, St Briavels, and St Mary Magdalene,
Hewelsfield, 2022.

Colossians 1:1-14
Luke 10:25-37

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

A retired bishop recently wrote an article in which he laid out bits of the communion service that he thinks people pay attention to the least! You might just want to think briefly in your head about which bits of the service so far you can actually remember clearly, and whether there are any bits that actually were dominated by you thinking about your breakfast, or what is coming up later in the day. This bishop reckons that of all the bits of service, the bit that run the risk of being least paid attention to is the first reading. I stress that these are not my views, but the views of this retired bishop! The reason he thinks that people don't pay very much attention to the first reading are that by and large these days most preachers preach on the gospel passage. And so we have sort of got into the habit of thinking that the first reading isn't going to be very important to anything comes later in the service. I actually found that quite challenging, and if I think about it, yes, I do mostly preach on the gospel reading. And I suppose that's natural in a way, because it is in the gospel that we find words of our Lord. But there are riches in the whole of Scripture, and so I just want to spend a few minutes on our first reading this morning, partly to prove this retired bishop wrong, but partly also because we actually begin reading one of Paul's letters this morning, and we will read it through over the next four weeks, so I encourage you maybe to make a discipline of spending a bit of time with the letter to the Colossians yourself in your private Bible reading through the month of July.

Forgive me if this is teaching my grandmother to suck eggs, but just to remind ourselves, Paul is described as the author of 13 letters in the New Testament, so he is the author of the majority of the New Testament by book at least. And each of these is a letter to a particular Christian community, in the very earliest years of the development of the church. Some of the letters are like pep talks, some of them are a bit more like a first written warning! We're talking here about the letters to the Romans, two letters to the Corinthians, letters to the Galatians, the Philippians, the Thessalonians, two of them, the Ephesians, one personal letter to a chap called Philemon, and the letter that we heard the beginning of today: the letter to the church in Colossae. And then there are three other letters attributed to Paul but which most scholars think probably weren't written actually by Paul himself: two letters to Timothy, and one to Titus. We can debate the authorship at the door if you like!

Paul has a very distinctive style. He begins all of his letters with a greeting, and if you read through his letters you find that there is a whole bunch of doctrine, a whole bunch of Christian teaching, in the opening verses of each of the letters. He normally starts by describing himself, and describing the community to whom he is writing. So in this case, "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy a brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ Jesus, who are at Colossae, Grace be to you, and peace". He starts off by saying that he is ministering in God's strength, not his own, and that he describes the people he is writing to as Saints and faithful brethren. It's a description of what a Christian community should be like. Imagine if David/Mandy suddenly discovered a letter from St Paul to the church in St Briavels/Hewelsfield: "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ Jesus who are at St Briavels/Hewelsfield, grace be to you and peace."

Each little Christian community are supposed to be ‘saints and faithful brethren’, brothers and sisters. That should encourage us. That should be like a mission statement, or a strap-line. Who are we supposed to be? Saints and faithful brothers and sisters.

Then in most of his letters he then goes on to describe the local community, and to remind them of the character, the nature of being a Christian in a particular place. Often he does this with thanksgiving. And actually the letter to the church in Galatia is notable because he doesn’t do that. He’s so angry with the Galatians that he doesn’t bother with any thanksgiving, he just starts shouting. It’s well worth re-reading that one as well! The Colossians are luckier however. I just want to read you again what Paul is thankful for, and what he thinks the character of that church should be, and we might just think about whether we, here in this place, are striving for that as well:

Paul is thankful because the little church has **faith** in Christ Jesus, **love** towards the saints, and **hope** laid up in heaven. Faith, hope and love of course are the three things that Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 13 is well, in that famous passage about the more excellent way. We are called to be people of faith, our faith results in us loving those around us, and those two things, believing faith and loving action mean we have hope in heaven. And then Paul goes on to describe the character of a church like that: the character of a church of faith, hope and love.

And those characters are that we would be filled with his knowledge, be fruitful in good works, and be strengthened with his might. In other words all of our ministry, our fellowship, our evangelism, our pastoral care flows from faith, hope, and love. Which means it is rooted firmly in God. And that stops us simply being a club, or a society, or a sort of gently affirming social services department. All of our identity, all of the gifts that might bubble up in any community, have the character of

Christ, the character of God, because they are rooted in faith, hope, and love. Because we are saints and faithful brethren.

Do read Colossians this month, and keep your ears pricked for more of Paul’s words to this community over the next three or four weeks, even if your preachers don’t preach directly on the epistle. Don’t prove that retired Bishop right! Pay attention to the epistle.

It is worth noting that of course everything that Paul is writing about in our first reading this morning, all of that character of the people of faith, hope, and love is right there in the parable of the Good Samaritan. This gospel reading was chosen back at the millennium by Churches Together as the passage that would be read on the first day of the new millennium, because it is the ultimate description of what mercy is like. And you’ve heard a thousand sermons on the Good Samaritan. So just a couple of words of connection this morning: if you look in the Greek, the question that Jesus asks the lawyer is actually, “which one of these three *became* a neighbour to the man who fell into the hand of robbers,” and the lawyer replies, “the one *doing the* mercy to him.”

Mercy is the hallmark of a neighbour. Mercy is the character of a Christian. And it is active. We *do* mercy. And each of us can *become* a neighbour. That is active too. As we pray for our nation in this time of transition, as we pray for our world in its instability and turmoil, as we pray for the little communities of Saints and faithful brothers and sisters in St Briavels and Hewelsfield, let us check each day that we are grounded in faith, hope, and love, and that those characteristics are leading us to *become* better neighbours, to *do* more mercy, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.