

## Colossians

Jesus bursts onto the pages of Jewish history like a storm. He is active, and dynamic, and on the move. He speaks in parables, leaves people puzzled, disappears to the next town. He gathers a band of followers, he teaches, he heals, he marches on Jerusalem. Even today, for many, he is a lovable character. Too bad he got crucified. Still – he is risen from the dead, and there would be others who would continue his ministry. Good news eh. Until we read in the New Testament, that those other people are Paul.

Jesus didn't seem to do religion. But Paul pitches up, with his religion and his rules and his regulations and his rebukes and his moral instructions and worst of all, his theology. Jesus was all about grace, and peace, and action. Paul was all about legalism, and dogma, and religion.

At least, this is the caricature we seem to have lived with. Jesus is lively, dynamic, and free – Paul is dry, boring, and Victorian. And I suspect that this is partly down to the medieval practices of attributing to the pages of Scripture, chapters and verses. For more than half of the time in which the New Testament has been in existence, there were no chapters and no verses. There were Gospels, there was historic book, and there were practical letters. But with the advent of chapters and verses, Scripture could be divided up, quoted out of context, and used to back up our arguments in order to prove that God is on our side.

And who is it that gets quoted out of context more than anyone! It is nasty evil horrible saint Paul. That poor guy! Can you imagine if people got hold of your emails and letters, and spent a thousand years quoting single sentences out of context from them to back up their arguments! You'd probably think there was something wrong with them. And part of me thinks you'd be right.

And when the bible becomes this magical spellbook, this timeless record of eternal verities, it ceases to be the Word of God. The Word that became flesh. Instead, you have a free-floating collection of holy writings that never touches the ground. It has been taken completely out of context, over and over and over again – until, at least in the case of Paul's letters, context doesn't mean anything for those who read it today. Okay – it means that for you, but it means this for me. That's your truth, this is mine. Never mind what Paul actually meant.

So, part of hearing Paul properly, we discovered at Xchange this week, is to read the words of Paul within the context of the letter in which they come. The Paul that we then encounter is rather different. Not some dry theologian wanting to make sure that all his churches have their facts right and their moral compasses set! Instead, you hear someone who is writing with passion for people he loves, who gets slightly carried away with himself, who loses himself in his love for God and his love for people. He goes off at random, glorious tangents all the time – instead of being methodical, and logical and systematic. Not that he isn't capable of that – but he seems to have discovered what John Lennon would later articulate – that life is what happens while you're busy doing other stuff...

So, over the next few weeks, rather than do the traditional – well, not I think, Bloomsbury tradition, but an evangelical one. Not that Bloomsbury isn't evangelical. I think we are more evangelical than we or other evangelical churches might notice... But before I go the kind of random tangent that Paul might be proud of... Yes, often a preacher will take a section of Paul at a time and explore the depth of that section in enormous – de-contextualised detail,

and the more evangelical the preacher, the smaller the section of Paul that you're able to preach on. Well, over the next few weeks, we will listen to the whole of the letter, and try to hear it well.

And the first part of hearing well, is to get to grips with the kind of kind of empire that dominated Paul's world. Recent moves in the world of New Testament Studies have focussed very largely upon this question, and regarded Paul as someone who was deliberately defying this great evil. And I can't help thinking back to the life of Brian. The People's Front of Judea are having a committee meeting, at which the chair – played by Basil Fawlty – asks “What have the Romans ever done for us?” And if you know the film, you'll know how the conversation ends:

*All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?*

When we talk about the Empire, it's easy to talk in purely negative terms, without realising some of the benefits. I heard a parallel made with modern London today – which is now annexed into the soft-imperialism of the United States. And this was a paper given by a North American, in the presence of other North Americans. And he pointed out that at some levels, the American Empire in London is good. And the prime example that he used, was toilets! If we are being invaded by Starbucks and McDonalds, we can all complain. Until we want the toilet: where are you going to find public toilets in London nowadays?

But despite the benefits that an empire can bring – there is a very ugly side. I've noticed, for instance, that in the historic novels that focus on battles and warfare for instance, the story usually always told from the side of the Romans. “*Centurion : Rebellion threatens the Empire.*” Assumption – from authors who have benefited enormously from the abuses of the British Empire and its legacies, naturally side with the Romans. The Word ‘barbarian’ is usually used as a derogatory word – because it was these mindless, barbarian Visigoths who destroyed the beauty and order and peace of Rome and ushered in the so called, Dark Ages. We are used to hearing the story told from the side of Rome, and not from the side of those who suffered at the hands of the Roman Empire. I wonder if it is for this reason that we miss the fact that most of Paul's letters are constantly addressing the difficulties of what it means to be a Christian living under the shadow of an Empire that does not have room for any Gospel but the Gospel of Caesar, any peace but the *Pax Romana*, any salvation but that offered by the Emperor.

The ways of reading the New Testament that we take for granted, emerged from a time when we had an Empire, and when you're on the successful side of an Empire, as we were and still are today, part of how that Empire is sustained, is to hide those who benefit from it, from the human cost of the benefits we enjoy. This is something that we are starting to see with the process of making an apology for the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: if you enjoy touring the Stately Homes in beautiful Britain with gorgeous gardens – does the National Trust handbook tell you about the countless slaves who suffered to produce such beauty? Or of the villages that were cleared to make room for these beautiful estates, and about what happened to those who tried to protect their homes and families. Those things don't fit nicely onto tea-towels or cake tins.

But the New Testament is not a National Trust history. It is gritty and honest – and like many who read from the perspective of a privileged beneficiaries of an empire, for us – the poor have been airbrushed from history, the evils perpetuated to maintain our luxurious economies,

are hidden from us. And so we don't hear Paul's challenges to the Roman empire, which would have hit the first listeners of this letter like a bombshell. Instead, we hear Paul using religious words like Gospel and Salvation and Peace; and we miss the fact that when Paul used these words, he was issuing a direct challenge to the unquestionable, universal, unassailable authority of Rome.

Over the next few weeks, we'll be reading the whole of this letter from various angles – but reading it in context, trying to hear it as early Christians might have heard it. And that means, hearing it as a whole.