

COLOSSIANS 1:1-14  
GRACE, GOSPEL AND PRAYER

Did you make any New Year resolutions? Are they still alive and active resolutions? The turn of the year seems to be the time when we're supposed to reflect on life and what life is all about. It seems we're supposed to consider our priorities and resolve either to change them or to be better at living them out! Most of the time, these resolutions are about diets or about the way we use our time, or the famous phrase that no-one ever seems to get quite right – the work/life balance! I'm not sure that I've ever seriously made a New Year resolution, but if I have, it probably would not last much beyond week one or two! This all comes from the instinctive desire in us to be better at life; we're aware that we're not perfect and there are things about us that need to be sorted and so we resolve to sort ourselves out in one way or another.

Let me offer you a resolution: "be a more mature Christian!" Now, hear carefully! This is something to which we could all sign up. No matter how mature our faith, no matter how long we have been Christians, we can still sign up to the desire to be more mature. In fact, if we object to that suggestion, it would seem to me to be a clear sign of the need! 2013 could be a key year for the Church in Scotland because of decisions that the Church itself will take and because of decisions that might be taken in Parliament; 2013 could be a key year for us as a congregation given some of the items on the agenda for our leadership; we will publish the action plan! But underlying all of that and key to all of the church's future is our desire to follow Jesus and that this is a growing desire and a desire to be better at it!

We're going to spend some time between now and Easter looking at Paul's letter to the Colossians. Colossae was a city in Asia Minor (Turkey), 100 miles from Ephesus; it had been a great city, but now was a market town in the shadow of Ladoicea. The Church had been founded through the ministry of Epaphras, who seems to have been a native of the town and a friend of Paul, a fellow-servant and a minister of the gospel. There were some problems and issues in Colossae as we shall see later in the letter and so Paul writes to the Church to sort these problems out. There are two big themes: 1) Jesus – the letter is totally centred on Christ; the title is mentioned 26 times in 4 chapters and the title 'Lord' 7 times; Jesus is at the centre of not only the faith that Paul proclaims here, but also the Christian life that he is encouraging; 2) maturity – the Christians are to grow in their faith, to be wiser in way they see their faith and live life, to be more willing to follow Jesus in the kind of people they are.

The first note of Colossians is thanksgiving; Paul will tell us later that giving thanks to God for the work that He has done is a sign of mature faith and here he puts that into practice. He gives thanks to God for the Christians in Colossae, even though he may never have met them; he knows them through other people telling him about them. There are three qualities for which he gives thanks: "*we always...*" (Col 1:3-5) "Faith, hope and love" – three qualities that are at the heart of the Christian faith and the heart of Church life. Do you watch *The Antiques Roadshow*? There experts are out with their magnifying glasses to look at some very small things, marks or signatures; if it is silver, for example, the way of knowing whether silver is genuine is by looking for hallmarks; these are the marks put onto silver by the assay office: there is a town mark, a maker's mark, a mark that tells you that the silver is genuine and the year mark; these hallmarks will tell you that the silver is genuine and may be valuable.

Faith, hope and love are the hallmarks of the Christian. We're even told about the process! Epaphras has told people the gospel; they have heard about Jesus and about

the things that God has done in and through Jesus and that gospel has made an impact on their lives; they have believed Epaphras and more than that, they have put their faith in Jesus and their lives have been changed by what they heard. Faith, hope and love are the three key qualities that are the fruit of the gospel: faith which reaches out to take hold of the promises and gifts of God; love which sees the needs of others and cares for others, love that binds a community together; hope that looks forward to the day when God will complete the work that He has begun in Jesus. These are the three building-bricks of Church, all important together, each as important as other. It is important that when we talk about a growing Church, that we begin by talking about values and qualities and none more so that faith, hope and love.

Telling the gospel is so important: where will people in our world find these three qualities of life? Where will people find faith to shape their lives? Where will we find a love that will bind a community together? Where will people find hope when the world seems to be in spiral of despair? The answer: in the gospel of Jesus, the good news that Jesus is come into the world to be the Saviour and Lord and that we should trust Him and follow Him. It also needs to be the right gospel: the Church can so easily lose the right gospel for another that gives a very different message and that had happened in Colossae. The gospel is about grace – grace is all about God's love to us when we don't deserve it; it is all about what God had done for us before we loved Him, it is all about what God has done for us in Jesus, despite our faults and failings – this is the gospel of grace, of the love, forgiveness and acceptance that come to us from God in Jesus. There is no other gospel; there is no other message for the world; only the good news of God's grace in Jesus will give the world faith, love and hope. These are the hallmarks of a faith that is genuine; these are the building blocks of the Church.

Paul prays for the Church. Here is the great Christian balance of Church life: on the one hand remembering to give thanks for what is good, for people of faith, for what God has done for us and in us; on the other, praying that we be more mature! We need to keep that balance. The Church that forgets to give thanks and always grumbles is the Church that has forgotten the grace of God; the Church that looks back to a golden age in the past and revels in another time and forgets to press on into future is the church that runs the risk of forgetting that it needs to keep growing and be more mature. We need to keep these two in balance and Paul has given thanks for the Christians in Colossae and now he prays for them to be more mature. It is hard to get to grips with verses 9-14, partly because in the original it is all one sentence with bits coming off it as we go, but there is a prayer and the rest are qualities that arise from that prayer.

*"For this reason..." (Col 1:9)* This is the burden of Paul's prayer for the Church in Colossae and it is all to do with mature Christian faith and life. What shapes your life? Lots of influences shape our lives. Life, our values, our priorities are shaped by all sorts of things: life is shaped by our upbringing, our peers, by the books and magazines we read, the television programmes we watch, the films we see; by our family. Here's another to add to the list: what does God want? That might sound far too grand and spiritually pompous for our ordinary lives, but that is where mature Christian living begins – knowing what God wants of us as Christians. *"Spiritual wisdom and understanding"* are the ways by which we learn what God wants and we gain these from the Bible; we learn to see what God wants of us as Christians; we grow in our understanding; we become wiser in the choices we make. This wisdom and insight comes from reading the Bible, but first of all there is the desire – we have to want it!

There are three fruit, three results, of doing what God wants and being more mature Christian:

**1. A life worthy of the Lord** – *“We pray...” (Col 1:10)* Here’s a resolution to shape your life. This is more than a diet to shape your body, this will shape the kind of people that we are. The first fruit of the desire to do what God wants is that we live a life that pleases God. We have this notion at times of God as a grumpy old man who is so hard to please that it is impossible to achieve it; but God is pleased with us when we try to live in Jesus’ way, when we even try do what is good in the world.

**2. Endurance and patience** – *“being strengthened...” (Col 1:11)* Stickability is a sign of maturity. When children are faced with difficult things, the instinct is to run away, to avoid it and hide from it. Our adult reaction is sometimes the same, but we are also more ready and willing to face up to hard things, or to keep going with something even when it is hard. Endurance, patience – these are sticking qualities, keep-going qualities, marathon-not-sprint qualities!

**3. Giving thanks** – *“joyfully giving...” (Col 1:12)* “The more I hear the story, the more amazed I am” – this is a line from a Christmas song; the longer that I’m a Christian, the more amazed I am by grace of God to me, the more grateful to God for the blessings of His grace. Paul lists some: we are qualified to share an inheritance; we are rescued from darkness, redeemed, forgiven – the more we know of these blessings and these ideas, the deeper our understanding of these words and these blessings, the more profound should be our sense of gratitude, being full of joy as we worship God.

Being more mature Christians: I’m not suggesting that you are not mature, but that no matter the point from which we begin, we can all be more mature. This is not about coming to more things, more events – we might be wiser in choosing the things we do, the events we do attend, the activities we support. More mature Christians are those with a growing sense of living the right kind of life, with a growing willingness to stick at the faith despite life’s difficulties, having endurance and patience; with a growing sense of gratitude to God for the ways in which He has blessed us. This sense of growing maturity is good for us because it makes our faith stronger; it is good for the Church because it makes the church stronger and gives glory to God. Maturity allows us to discern what is best for the group, even if it is not own view; maturity helps us to see the big picture, and values and priorities rather than live for the moment; maturity helps us appreciate the good things that we have.

We can turn this into our prayer. Paul prayed for the Christians in Colossae because he knew that they could only be the right kind of people by the help God gave them. The Spirit of God was at work in Colossae inspiring faith, hope and love in the first place; God was at work strengthening and helping His people to be the right kind of people. So Paul prayed that God would be at work even more amongst these people. We can turn this into our prayer: make it your prayer for yourself, that you be more and more mature in your Christian faith and life; turn it into your prayer for Juniper Green Church, that as a congregation we become more and more mature and your part in that; turn it into a prayer for the Church in Scotland, that the Church become stronger and more mature in all of our church life, founded on the gospel and grace. It won’t be an easy prayer; it might not be answered quickly; sometimes prayer is hard work and a bit of a battle, but God is at work and will answer our prayers. Moses prayed till it hurt; Jesus taught the parable *“to show...” (Luke 18:1)* Pray for yourself; pray for others, for your family, your friends; pray for the congregation; pray for the Church as whole in Scotland, in the UK – that we will be more mature Christians with faith, hope, love; resolve to be part of that!