

COLOSSIANS 1:15-23
JESUS AT THE CENTRE

Does your life have a centre? Is there something that is the be-all and end-all of life for you, something that gives every other part of your life its shape and its direction? The part of life that is important above everything else? The answer to that question can be so many different things: for some people, work dominates their life and everything else has to fit around work, not only as a diary thing, but work definitely comes first above everything else in their mind. For others, family is the centre of everything, the centre of their world and everything else has to fit round family; what the children want, the children get! We don't always realise it until someone asks the question, but life usually does have something at the centre; often it is only when we sit down and ponder the question, do we realise what it is! There are times when we see nothing there and then people try to fill the hole with the wrong kinds of things.

Let's ask same the question of Church: what is at the centre of church life, either Church in the big sense, or church as congregation. What dominates the life of a congregation? What is it that gives the congregation its shape and its direction? Some congregations would give one answer (what they see as the 'right' answer), but in reality it is something else. Some congregations are shaped by their history and the answer to every question begins: "We've always done...!" Some are shaped by what they see their neighbours do and because congregation X is doing this, then congregation Y must do it too and do it bigger and better; so churches are driven by a competitive instinct! Some congregations take their shape and direction from the community around them, and are driven by the need to be friendly and relevant to the community and so they tailor their message to the world in which they live in such a way that the message is changed. To some extent every church is the product of its past and has to relate to its community, but are these the most important concerns?

Paul has some huge things to say to the church in Colossae about the centre of church life there. We will see in chapter 2 that other things were coming along and were in danger of leading them astray: "*See to it...*" (*Colossians 2:8*) We'll look at these more closely in a few weeks time, but for now in chapter 1, he sets it out clearly: Jesus is the centre. For Christian faith and for the life we live as Christians, Jesus is the centre; for the life of the Church as a whole, or church as congregation, Jesus is the centre. He's going to say some big things here about Jesus, some mind-blowing things, things that we won't be able to understand fully, but overall his message is simple – Jesus is the centre of everything! That doesn't mean that work or family are unimportant for Christians; it doesn't mean that history and relating to the community are unimportant for congregations; but it does mean that it should be Jesus who gives our life its shape and direction; it should be Jesus that gives the church its shape and direction and nothing else should be allowed to take His place.

Colossians 1:15-23 is unique, fascinating, eye-opening and hugely difficult for the preacher. If I were to do this whole passage justice, we could spend a week on each line, on each theme, almost on each word! It is three long sentences originally, that the NIV has broken up to try to help us understand the sense of it. It may well have been a poem or an early Christian hymn that Paul is quoting here, but either way, you get the feeling that one thing after another just keeps tumbling from the writer's pen when he's thinking about Jesus. So we have to try to understand all of this and whatever we say today will only scratch the surface of this passage; there is far more to say and even

when we think someone has said the last word, there is more treasure to mine from these words. Paul's aim is to make us think better of Jesus and to make sure that He stands at the centre of faith and life and that faith and life and the church are all shaped by Jesus. Let's see how that works.

Tom Wright is a New Testament scholar who has written a series of Bible Study guides under the heading *Paul for Everyone*. In his piece on this passage, he suggests that the best way of beginning to understand it is by the idea of 'head'. The word 'head' can mean so many different things, from the bit of our body above the shoulders, to the person in charge of a school, the side of a coin, the source of a river, the froth on top of your pint of beer, or even the toilet in a ship! Wright goes on to suggest that this piece uses head in 3 different ways to describe Jesus and how central He is to life and faith. Each of these is full of rich insight into Jesus:

1. Firstborn – this comes in two ways: "*He is...*" (*Colossians 1:15*) "*He is...*" (*Colossians 1:18*) Jesus has a special relationship to the universe – it was created by Him and for Him; He stands at the centre of everything that exists, the firstborn over all creation. The firstborn, in Bible times, had all the rights, everything belonged to him; he would inherit the whole estate when his father died. Everything in the universe belongs to Jesus. He is the firstborn in another sense too: He was raised from the dead on Easter Sunday, the first person for whom that is true. He is the first in a new creation; He is the beginning of the new age in the life of the world; He has inaugurated a new era, resurrection-time, salvation-time; the resurrection was true of Jesus in a way that it was true of no-one else before or since and because He is raised He is the king of universe all over again.

2. Supreme - The "Supreme Allied commander Europe" is the soldier in charge of everything that moves in NATO! The word 'supreme' gives the game away; no-one is higher up the chain of command; everyone else is underneath. "*He is...*" (*Colossians 1:17, 18b*) There is no-one more important, or more significant in the history of the world, or in the life of the world today, than Jesus. There are people around who would challenge that statement, but that is the way in which the New Testament sees Jesus; He is supreme; He is the head of everything; there is no-one higher, no-one more powerful, no-one better and bigger than Jesus; He is supreme! For someone to say that "we know better than Jesus" is hugely arrogant and a massive under-estimate of Jesus and, for someone calling themselves Christian to say it, is a enormous betrayal of faith and of the gospel

3. Head of the body, the church "*He is...*" (*Colossians 1:18f*) Headship is about authority: the head of the school is the one who gives the school its direction and whose job it is to shape policy. To say that Jesus is the head of the Church is to give Him supreme authority over the life of His Church in every aspect of church life. The wonder of the gospel and the irony of all of this is that Jesus chose to exercise that headship in a very different way; He gave His life for His Church and saved His people, not by the exercise of authority, but by service, by giving His life on the cross. In that act of service, in giving His life, Jesus reconciled God and the world, us, healed the broken relationship, mended the estrangement and at same time gave us the example by which we are to live our lives. Jesus is the head of His Church, with power and authority to command and direct, but that authority that is cross-shaped, loving and serving; the centre of the gospel to proclaim is the crucified and risen Head of the Church, Jesus Christ.

There is a curious thing happening in our culture. The Church is coming in for a battering from our society; the commentators, the letter-writers, the atheists are taking turns at attacking the church as an institution, for being out-of-date, out-of-step etc, for the church's faults and failings. The Church's popularity ratings, if it has such a thing, have never been so low. But people are still drawn to Jesus; they are intrigued by Him and by His teaching and by the claims made about Him and people are still coming to Christian faith and committing their lives to be His disciples. The woman at the well is a New Testament example of that: she had been talking to Jesus and they had been discussing all sorts of things, including the place of worship, and her own past. She goes off back into town, having left her water-pot behind – she'll come back to fill it later because this is much more important and she goes back to the town and tells the people she knows "Come, see..." (*John 4:29*) She didn't know all the ideas and descriptions of Jesus in Colossians 1, but she'd met a man who'd told her things about herself that no-one knew and she wanted other people to meet this man! "Come, see", she said. They came in their droves because of the woman's testimony and others believed because they heard His words for themselves. This kind of story could be told over and over again in Scotland today.

"Continue in..." (Colossians 1:23) Here's Paul's plan: Christians who are stable in their faith, steadfast, unshifting. Faith can be undermined in so many ways: it can be undermined by what we hear, by other views of the world and of life that seem more attractive, more persuasive and so we drift away from what we've heard of the gospel and gradually what we believe changes. Faith can be undermined by neglect: for some reason we stop coming to Church or stop reading the Bible and give up regular Christian habits and little by little our faith begins to dissolve until the day comes when we're not really sure of anything anymore. Faith can be undermined by bad experiences of life and in our anger we blame God for it all and shout and complain and decide there and then to give it all up. Knowing Jesus and knowing about Jesus is vital for stable, steadfast, immovable faith: we are persuaded that Jesus is Saviour, persuaded that He is Lord. Be confident in the gospel, in what God has done for us in Jesus and be confident that what God has begun, He will complete in us. Continuing faith needs continual support: The Church supports us: our being in worship, our contact with one another. The Bible supports us, showing us what God is like, reminding us of His love. Prayer supports us, as we speak with God, express our concerns, even our misgivings and let His grace bring peace and hope to our hearts. The challenge we face is to continue in faith, no matter what!

Jesus the centre? For the Christian that's as it should be. I'm not saying that the other bits of life are unimportant, but that work, family, our attitudes, our words, our behaviour – all of these things and the way we do them should be shaped and directed by Jesus, by His Lordship, by His teaching, by His example, by His grace. Jesus is at the centre and everything else takes its shape and direction from Him. For the Church, that's as it should be. Our history, our traditions, our style, our priorities, our mission statement, our action list, the message we give out, our attitudes to other people and the community, the letters we write, our budgets and the way we spend our money – all of these should be shaped and directed by Jesus; He is the King and Head of His Church, the One who gives us life, the One who has reconciled us to God by His death, He must be the centre of the Church's life and nothing can take His place. What does Jesus think? What does Jesus want? These are crucial questions and the way by which we show that Jesus is the centre; make Jesus the centre; continue in the faith, as stable, steadfast, immovable people.