

COLOSSIANS 2:6-15
COMPLETE IN CHRIST

There are lots of voices around in our society today. Who do we listen to? There is the voice of atheists like Richard Dawkins who will tell us that God is just a delusion, that there is no such thing as God and religious faith is dead. In fact, he will tell you that he has already won that battle; most people in the UK are now persuaded; they have listened to his voice, probably the most persuasive and loudest voice in the UK in last 20 years. There are other voices too: some will tell us that we can be masters of our own destiny and that technology has set us free to choose: at the Heriot-Watt lecture on Monday, we learned that there are websites in the USA that will allow you to build your own baby, or that DNA screening can now allow people to make sure that the baby they will have is free from any kind of disease or disability. You choose! In other ways too, we are being persuaded that we can be masters of our own destiny, with the notion of autonomy, freedom! Which voice will we listen to?

It is hard for us to know, sometimes, which is right and which is not. It seems so attractive to some to be able to choose and that technology has made so many advances; but we don't always see the consequences! It is hard to choose and it is even more difficult when the person telling you something is persuasive. How do we choose what to believe? The thing is, this is just such an important part of our lives: what we believe shapes our life in so many ways. If, for example, we believe that 'me' is the centre of our own particular world and there is no-one as important as 'me' then our attitudes to other people, even to family, or to work, to the community, to money, to almost everything will be centred on 'me' and what I want and what I need and everything else and everyone else will be excluded. Our motives for action, even for caring for another person, will be me-centred. What we believe shapes attitudes to all kinds of things.

In Colossians 2, Paul is writing to a church that has literally been hearing a different voice. Colossae was in Turkey and the church there had been founded by a man called Epaphras, who had come from there. Paul had never met these Christians, but now he writes to them because he has heard that there are a few problems. The whole of his letter is centred on Jesus and he is reminding the Christians that their faith and life and their church is to be centred on Jesus. It is so important that they "*continue to...*" (*Colossians 2:6f*) and he will tell them why it is so important! I can understand why Paul wants to help them, because we see the same pressures in our world today on Christians, on our faith, on church life; it is so easy to lose sight of Jesus because other things get in way, and other voices persuade us away from that faith.

The Church in the first century was learning to cross cultures. It grew up in a Jewish culture; the gospel story took place in Israel and is the fulfilment of Old Testament, but the gospel quickly moved into other cultures, into Greek society, and Roman culture and people from other places were becoming Christians. Here was a big issue for the Church: how much of the old Jewish culture did these other Christians need to embrace and how much did they not need any more? The Church decided that we did not need much of it at all, but there were still Christians who grew up in that Jewish culture who thought otherwise and these were the voices that the Colossians Christians were hearing. "You need to be circumcised; you need to keep the whole Law to be Christian; you can't be a Christian without fulfilling these rites and rituals and obligations". Believing in Jesus was not enough: they had to believe in Jesus *and* take on all these other things

as well. The maths here is strange: as soon as you say you need Jesus plus something else, you take away something important from the Christian faith. Paul saw that; he recognises that Jesus is enough; so he says “don’t listen to these other voices!” “*Continue...*” (Col 2:6f) and here’s why!

There’s a word here that is used twice in short order: “Fullness”. Now this is a big word and it means something big here. It describes something that is complete, full; there is nothing lacking and more than that, what is on offer is super-abundant. There are no short measures with this word. Some of us might be people who see the bottle as half-full or half-empty; this bottle is full to overflowing! Paul uses it twice in short order to persuade the Christians that faith is not a small thing, not a doubtful thing, but is based on big ideas and is based on the blessing of God which is not only full, but full to overflowing!

First of all, fullness is about Jesus Himself: “*For in...*” (Colossians 2:9) Everything of God lives in Jesus! What a huge thing to say. Here were people who had never seen Jesus, but they had heard stories about Him; perhaps they read some of them as they had been written down. They admired Jesus, the man from Nazareth, they listened to His teaching and embraced the values that He taught for life and faith; they heard about His miracles and thought that He must have great power to be able to do these things, a special kind of man. They believed all of that, but this went a stage further to accept and believe that He was God in human flesh, that this Jesus who walked the earth was the living embodiment of the eternal God. Not only that, but the whole of God lived in Jesus; He was not just a small piece of God, not just something resembling God; He was the human being who embodied God in all His glory.

Jesus is supreme. Jesus is Lord. There is no-one greater than Jesus. He is the King and head of His Church; He is the centre of all creation. This matters because His is the voice to which we should listen. There is no greater voice in all the universe, in all history; there is no greater person than the person of Jesus. He is supreme. Because of who He is, He is the One to whom we should listen; He is the One who should stand at the centre of faith and life. There is a deep need in the church to rediscover the place and importance of Jesus, to recapture the notion that Jesus is supreme; seeing Jesus in this way, we will be persuaded that He is worthy of our faith in a way that no-one else is; that He has something of great value to offer us in a way that no-one else has. It really is quite simple: Jesus is the centre of Christian faith; we believe and follow Him.

But Paul has more to say about “Fullness”: “*You have...*” (Colossians 2:10) There is nothing lacking or missing from the blessing God has given to us in Jesus and for Christian faith. It is not a small thing to know Christ and to believe because faith opens up the whole blessing of God for us. There was an episode of *The Antiques Roadshow* before Christmas and they had an old chest, which I think belonged to a sailor and no-one had been able to open this chest for generations; they had lost the key. The programme-makers were determined to find out what was inside, because there was something rattling! So they employed a locksmith on the programme to work on this chest to open it and find the treasure that was inside. They made a huge fuss about it and we watched as the locksmith did things to the locks, building up a sense of expectation, until finally it was opened and we could see what was inside – nothing! It was empty; the rattle was caused by a bit of the box; what an anti-climax, how disappointing. I tell you that in contrast to the gospel: for faith, Jesus gives us the whole

fullness of God's blessing; the box is never empty; we are never disappointed. Paul goes on to explain something of this "fullness" that Jesus gives.

The Jewish voice that the Colossians Christians were hearing had two themes: first of all, "be circumcised"; then secondly, "keep the Old Testament law in all its parts"; otherwise there is no salvation. Paul answers both. First of all, he says that we are already new people in Christ: *"In him..." (Col 2:11)* Circumcision was the mark of belonging to the people of God in the Old Testament; Paul says there is a much better mark on the Christian which shows that we belong to Jesus and that is the new kind of life we live. Something of that is symbolised in baptism, putting off the old way and embracing the new life that Jesus brings, new blessings, forgiveness etc. This new kind of life, living as new people, is a much more important mark on the Christian and shows the world that we belong to Jesus. Secondly, *"He forgave..." (Col 2:13f)* Keeping the written code that was the Old Testament law is not a way of salvation; it has been nailed to the cross alongside Jesus; it is dead as a way of salvation; the way of salvation is not by our own goodness, or our achievements, but is through faith in Jesus and so we are free, forgiven, blessed.

"Just as..." (Colossians 2:6) Here's why! There are two reasons: first of all, there is no one greater than Jesus; He is Supreme. Some of the things that are said of Jesus are huge; some of things that Jesus said about Himself are huge. Jesus is worth believing in a way that none of the other voices that we hear in our culture are! He is greater. Our faith is in Jesus; it is not faith in the Church, nor faith in ourselves, but faith in Jesus. Here's the second reason: Jesus gives us everything we need; the whole blessing of God is given to us in Jesus: forgiveness, peace, hope, grace, love etc; these gifts are ours, all for faith in Jesus. We are free to love God with all our hearts; free to love other people well; free to be ourselves, being the kind of people that Jesus wants. Throwing that away for something else is always settling for second best, is always giving up the best for something less. People would try to persuade us that Christianity is dead, irrelevant; that the Church has nothing to offer our post-modern, technological world and that we should listen to these new voices. Yet, the reality is: the Church has the best blessing in the world to offer; we have Jesus to offer and He is supreme and the blessing of God that He gives is complete and we are complete in Him.

There was a man who was profoundly deaf and could hardly speak; he was a prisoner in his own little world. His friends were concerned for him and wanted to help him, so they brought him to Jesus. "Touch him! He will be healed." Jesus touched the man's ears, and his tongue and said "Be opened" and from that day on, this man's life was transformed. He was given a new life, hearing, speaking; everything he needed, Jesus gave him. He went away rejoicing. Whatever it is that bothers us, whatever the issue is that we deal with, whatever sense of need we have, there is something in Jesus and something in the gospel to meet it. For people who are bowed down with a sense of failure and not being good enough and guilt – Jesus forgives, He lifts our head and loves us. For people who are tired and weary with the stresses of life, caring for someone, on the treadmill that is work – Jesus is full of compassion, care, strength and power. For people who are lost and looking for direction in life – Jesus is the light of the world, He shows us what God is like and how to live. I could go on and point is this: Jesus is supreme; there is none better; the blessing that Jesus gives us is complete, full, with nothing lacking. *"Continue to..." (Colossians 2:6)* There is no better way!