

COLOSSIANS 4:2-18  
WE ARE THE CHURCH!

Names are part of our identity; they are part of who we are! My proper name is James, but very few people ever call me that! We had a teacher at school, who went round the class with a number of us called James and she asked what we wanted to be called: Jim, Jimmy, James? One of the boys said “anything” and of course for the rest of the day she called him “anything”! What do people call a minister? Politely, I mean and to my face! There are people old enough to be my granny who insist on calling me ‘Mr Dewar’; for them, to call me by my first name shows a lack of respect. I was in the primary school recently and I’m always careful that the children know what to call me: in church I’m Jim and have a badge that says so but in school it’s different; I was introduced at the assembly as ‘Jim’ and that took me by surprise and it took the teacher who did it by surprise too; true to form, the children said “Good morning, Mr Dewar!” I have to work hard to remember names and sometimes get it wrong. When I was a student, I met a law student whose name, I thought, was ‘John’ and I called him that gladly for months, when we met in the Christian group and when we played in the football team; yet, I had a sense that all was not right every time I called him ‘John’; I discovered 6 months later that his name was Alan! I’ve done that with some of you as well and I apologise! Names are part of our identity; they are something of who we are.

There are some Bible passages that are full of names. There are famous chapters in the Old Testament which are nothing but a whole set of family trees, name after name of people of whom we’ve never heard. So we tend not to read these passages very often. Someone once reminded us, of these lists, that “every name is a footstep in God’s plan” and should be remembered for that. The end of Colossians is about people with names and there are two groups: first of all, there are people who are with Paul and send greetings their with the letter; secondly, there are people in the church in Colossae to whom this letter is written. It is not the easiest passage to read; did we pronounce their names in the right way? It doesn’t really matter. These lists are hugely significant for understanding the Church and the gospel.

Colossians is all about Jesus at the centre. From the beginning of this little series of sermons, we’ve said that the theme of the whole letter is that Jesus is at the centre. Jesus is the centre of the universe and all creation; Jesus is the centre of the Church; Jesus is the centre of God’s plan to save the world; Jesus is the centre of Christian faith; Jesus is the centre of our Christian life and the way we live; last week, we reflected on Jesus at the centre of our communities and our relationships. Now, at the end, we find people for whom Jesus was the centre of their Church, their faith and their life. These are not isolated individuals; these are people who are partners in the gospel, who share the same faith and who stand side by side in that faith and in the service of Jesus, a web of relationships, a network of people. Today we have admitted three people to membership of the congregation; Claire, Emma and Sarah are taking their places in that network of relationships, partners in church life; introduce yourselves to them; you know their names, so let them know yours.

Let’s have a closer look at this list in Colossians 4:

**Tychicus** is the postman; he’s going to be given this letter to deliver, but he’s got more than that to do: “*Tychicus...*” (*Colossians 4:7f*) When he delivers this letter, he will tell the people how Paul is getting on; he’s in prison – how is he coping? What’s new? How is God at work in his ministry? Some of these people had never met Paul, but they loved him for his work!

**Onesimus** is coming with Tychicus; he’s coming home because belongs to Colossae; he’s a slave who has run away from his owner Philemon and had met Paul and become Christian and Paul is sending him home to Philemon so that he can be where he should be, a slave in

his master's house, but now much more than that, now a brother to Philemon, sharing Christian faith together.

**Epaphras** comes from Colossae; he belongs to Colossae, but for now he's with Paul in Ephesus; his home town church is constantly on his mind and the people he knows and how they're getting on and he's praying for them.

**Luke:** a doctor, the man who wrote down the gospel that bears his name; a friend and travelling companion of the apostle and later he was one of the few people who stuck with Paul to the bitter end of his life.

**Demas:** a good friend for now, but elsewhere we discover that later he deserted Paul when the going got tough.

**Mark:** his story is fascinating; Mark is the nephew to Barnabas, the first one-time travelling companion for Paul and the man who introduced Paul to the Church; they had taken Mark with them on their first journey and it didn't work out well at all; Mark gave up. The next time they were going on a journey together, Barnabas wanted to take him again and Paul refused, so they went separate their ways and they each new travelling companions and there was a bit of a falling out; here, and even more elsewhere, Paul sings Mark's praises, grace has prevailed and the falling out is mended.

**Nympha:** the church meets in her house in the neighbouring town of Laodicea.

Every one of these people has a story to tell. We only know such a small piece of that story. Every one of them has a name; every one of them has a family tree; every one of them will also have a story of faith to tell, how it was that they came to be Christians. Every one of them is unique in their story of faith and life and every one of them is a footstep in the plans and purposes of God for the world. It is out of date now, but we have this banner on the wall beside me that has the names of people on it that make up the church family; for me it is a brilliant symbol of what the Church is and who the church is; we have a plan to update it and over the next few weeks we're going to take photos of you all, passport-style and create a mosaic image of these faces to create an image that speaks of the Church in a different way. I hope that you'll take part; don't run and hide; we want to make it as full an image of the Church family as we can!

These pieces of the Bible remind us that the gospel is not about abstract ideas, but is about real people. The gospel does not flourish in the world through ideas and theories of life; the gospel flourishes in the world as people live out our faith and share our faith with other people. Jesus didn't come into the world as an abstract idea; He came into the world as flesh and blood, a real person living in a real village and you can even identify the time in history when He lived. We are real people, with our real-life stories, families, work, leisure, faith and we are church. God is at work in us; the gospel flourishes in the world as we live it and pass it on. We read the story of Peter: he is part of this conversation with Jesus: "*Who...*" (*Matthew 16:15f*) Jesus is pleased with his answer and then He says: "*You are...*" (*16:18*) There is a little play on words here; the same word is used for 'Peter' and for 'rock'; Jesus gives him a new name and a new job; it will be Peter's job to be at the foundation of the new church, to be the leader of the new community of faith that will follow Jesus. So it was: Peter was the first Christian preacher; Peter was first to tell others the stories of Jesus and so the word spread and at the heart of the first Church is this man called Peter; he was not always a rock-like person, he sometimes got it wrong, but this was his job and he did it with all his energy and to best of his abilities; ultimately he gave his life to be the rock on which the Church is built. The gospel is about real people, living out our faith, bringing our unique gifts and abilities to Jesus, giving our time, energy and money to serve Jesus, sharing Jesus with our families and friends. This is the Church; we are the church.

Paul gives us two ways by which to nurture and grow this sense of partnership that is the Church.

**1. Prayer** – “*devote...*” (*Colossians 4:2*) Pray for one another! Pray today for those who have just professed their faith, that God will help them keep their promises; pray for the person sitting beside you in the seat and if you don’t know them, introduce yourself; pray for people you know well. Many of you are part of the e-mail prayer network and we pray for people who are in need, some you may know well, others you may not know at all; if you want to be part of that speak to me later. Paul asks the Christians of Colossae to pray for him; he is as human as they are, he hurts and he bleeds; he invites them to pray for his ministry and for him in prison, so that he might tell people about Jesus properly and well. Pray for leaders of the Church: it is a tough time to be a church leader in Scotland today given all that is going on in the background and the seeming statistical decline of the Church and some of my friends and colleagues are giving up because it is too hard; pray for church leaders, for congregational leaders to be faithful to Jesus and to lead church wisely and well. Prayer nurtures and grows this network of relationships and this sense of partnership. Prayer is the foundation of all that we are and do together, praying for one another, for the work, witness and worship of the Church in our community. This is not about getting the words right, but about praying from the heart, asking God to bless us and others, the people we know and love, others we know by name, some we know nothing about at all, but who live across the world. Pray for one another.

**2. Grace** – “*Let your...*” (*Colossians 4:6*) there are two kinds of conversation that drive a wedge between us: first of all, we can say the wrong things and secondly, we can say the right things in the wrong way. We can be abrupt with one another, impatient, angry; on other hand our conversation can be seasoned with grace. It is a simple picture: salt gives your food its taste, the seasoning to bring out all the flavours in all their glory. It struck me most in meeting I was part of some time ago and in the end we achieved what we set out to achieve, but it struck me then that, not just what we say, but the way in which we say it is so important; we were trying to create an event and looking for suggestions and we can make suggestions in two ways, one of which is grace-filled, a positive contribution to the conversation that is made with a smile; the other is done in a complaining kind of way, that suggests everyone else is getting it wrong and why are we not doing...! It left me feeling flat; there was not much grace in that conversation. We can disagree; we can raise some hard questions of one another and we can challenge one another about the way we behave, but we can do all of these things in grace-filled conversations, conversations that are spoken in a loving way, caring for one another, accepting one another. Grace-filled conversations will build up the church, will nurture our faith, will encourage one another in that faith. For Paul this is the way evangelism works too, that we speak to people outside the church in grace-filled conversations too!

Tychicus, Onesimus, Epaphras, Luke, Nympha, Paul, Claire, Sarah, Emma, Jack, David, Christine, Fiona, Ian – these are the names of the Church. The Church is not an abstract idea in the mind of God; we are the church, real people with real names and addresses; we are the Church of God, people of faith, looking to live life well, to live by faith, to live by the values of Jesus. Every name is a footstep in the plans and purposes of God to bless the world. Every one of us has a part to play in the life of the Church to make the Church stronger. Pray for one another and ask God to bless us with every fibre of His being; have grace-filled conversations – they are more important than we know, words to build up, to encourage, love, support and care. When we speak our names to someone, we give them something of ourselves – pray these names, respect them, treat them with grace.