

COLOSSIANS 2:16-23

Freedom

Sunshine Beach & Peregian 17-7-22

Who loves to swim? I love to swim. Obviously I can't fly, but to me swimming is the next best thing. There's something freeing about the way we can swim in every direction. On land we can only move in two dimensions, forward, back, left and right. And on land, the up and down dimension is mostly dictated to us by the landscape. If there's a hill we can go up and down but, otherwise we're very limited. But when you swim you're free to move in all three physical dimensions.

Where swimming is not so freeing is when you need to breathe! Or if you're caught in a rip or a current that is taking you somewhere you don't want to go.

You can get into real trouble at a beach where a riptide drags you out further into the ocean than you feel safe. If that happens you're far from free, you're trapped in a right mess. What you need is someone from beyond yourself to rescue you. You need a lifesaver who can jump into your mess with you and lift you out to safety.

If you've ever been in a big mess in life, whether it was being caught in a riptide, being stuck in a burning building, being overwhelmed by debt or work, health concerns or anything else, today we'll see that Jesus is the lifesaver we need. He didn't stand off at a distance beckoning to us to fly up to him, to climb up to his heavenly glory in our own strength. No. He descended to join us in our mess. He jumped into the ocean where we were struggling. He entered the burning building, he took on our debts and burdens because that was the only way to rescue us.

Our passage begins with Therefore. And when there's a "therefore" you have to ask what it's there for. In general we could say that the "therefore" simply points us back to the rest of the letter that comes before this. But more specifically it means, from chapter 2 ... "Because, v8, Paul doesn't want Christians to be taken captive through hollow and deceptive philosophies. Rather he shows, v10, Christ is the head over every power and authority. And because, v13, we were dead in our sin and God has made us alive together with Christ. And because, he has forgiven our sins, cancelled the legal debt that held us back by nailing it to the cross, disarming the powers and authorities and laughing publicly at them through the triumph of the cross.

Because of all these things, don't let anyone judge you by your observances or not of religious festivals, New Moon celebrations or Sabbath days. Jesus wrestled with the pharisees plenty of times about these types of observances. And we know that Jesus didn't come to make us externally obedient to the law, to give us the appearance of holiness. No, Jesus came to deal with the root causes. He didn't want us to be like whitewashed tombs, shining and beautiful on the outside but dead on the inside. He came to give us new life from the inside out.

There are two arguments here. The Colossians, just like the whole world, had a mixture of customs and beliefs combined from their history and the mix of their families, friends, leaders, rulers, and authorities. Paul wants to address the Jewish influence where the people who lean in the direction of the Pharisees still want to impose the Old Testament rules on others. And he wants to address the sort of gnostic ideas that were in the mixture of Greek and Roman culture.

With respect to the Jewish laws and festivals Paul says, "Don't let others judge you. Don't feel condemned, guilty by Jews or anyone else into observing these customs that don't even deal with your hearts." The external observances of these laws were a shadow of the reality to come. But now, the reality has arrived in Jesus.

This also relates to the Pluralistic world they lived in. The Greek and Roman gods, the early gnostic spiritual powers, emanations from the gods, angelic powers and so forth .. they don't even compare to the real thing, Jesus.

When I read this I hear Paul using the language of his time, and addressing the cultural, philosophical and religious mixture of his world. He confronts the lies that the people encounter in the daily lives.

One particular influence that had come to the Colossians was through the Philosophers: Plato, Aristotle and Socrates. Plato had a philosophy about the True thing being up there in the Realm of Forms. Whereas the people and objects we now encounter are a shadow or image of the real thing. To Plato the physical realm is just a shadow, or an image of the true reality of the Realm of Forms (the realm of truth).

So Plato told a story to illustrate this. It's kind of a fun story, a little bit like the Matrix. It's known as Plato's cave. Imagine if there were a bunch of prisoners tied up in a cave so they can only see in front of them. All they can see is the back wall of the cave. Behind them is a fire that casts light onto the back wall of the cave. Their whole reality is what they see on the back wall of this cave. In between the fire and the prisoners some people move about carrying shadow puppets. They cast shadows onto the back wall. These are shadows of horses, people, and different objects. The prisoners who only ever see these shadows assume that what they see is reality.

Now Plato asks us to imagine that one of the prisoners is set free, he turns around and sees the puppets that cast the shadows, he sees the fire that casts the light and he climbs up out of the cave. When he gets into the real world he sees the actual forms of the horses, people, and objects that he had previously only see as shadows. He becomes the enlightened one who can look down on, or pity the other prisoners tied up and only experiencing a shadow of the real thing.

For Plato and other philosophers like him the point is to transcend the shadow illusion of reality and enter the real world. The physical, evil world is to be rejected and the realm of the Forms is what they're trying to ascend to.

Paul counters ideas like these in many times and places in Colossians. He flips these philosophies on their head and shows the Supremacy of Christ. Where the other philosophies say that physical matter is evil, Jesus physically entered into this world giving God's approval to it again. All the fullness of God lives in bodily form: Jesus. He is not a perfect idea or Form just wearing a skin suit. He fully became one of us so that we can be included in His life.

So, if Jesus were to enter the story of Plato's cave then instead of one of the prisoners being set free and climbing and ascending to understand the true Forms, Jesus actually descended from true reality and entered our mess to free the prisoners and draw us into His family.

Paul says, I understand enough about the philosophies and heresies you're facing that I can show Jesus is superior to them all. Jesus is so much better that he's not even on the same scale! People are trying to convince you to go to God through another sort of mediator. They're saying you should worship angelic beings. They've been concocting fanciful stories of wonderful spiritual experiences but these are nothing but pride and foolishness.

Instead, remember who you are. Remember whose you are. Remember that the reality is found in Christ. Remember that He came to you and adopted you into his body. He is now your head. He is the one who grounds you, draws you together as his body, the church, and causes it to grow.

If you want true freedom. Keep connected with the Head, Jesus.

The true reality is that you died with Jesus on the cross. And now you're a new being, you're a new creation in him so don't live according to the old rules. Don't let others put their rules on you, rather, submit to Jesus your head.

There is the appearance of wisdom out there in the world, but don't get sucked in. True wisdom is Jesus himself.

The Bible speaks many times of our deep connection with Jesus. We have a deep connection with Jesus. The Bible uses many images to communicate the truth of our deep relationship with Jesus. He is the head, we are the body. He is the Groom and we are the Bride. He is the foundation and we are the temple.

He is the vine, we are the branches. Think about it for a moment. What kind of deep relationship does this image show that we have with Jesus? He is the vine, we are the branches. Where does the vine stop and the branch begin? The branch begins at the "V", but the vine doesn't stop there. The vine is the whole thing. When we are plugged into Jesus by faith, our life is not our own. We are filled with His life. His life is the source of our life, through Jesus we are fed, watered, nourished and sustained. We are a new creation in him.

The false teachers at Colossae were trying to get the believers to do this, and don't do that. To worship in this way and not in that way. They were trying to put the believers under some old laws or some new laws, but these things cannot give life and cannot transform your old life.

The teaching, rules and regulations of the world have an appearance of wisdom and goodness but the lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence. If we truly want to be transformed to be like our beautiful Jesus, we need a better way than simply imposing rules upon others and ourselves. We know that these rules don't work but what do we put in their place? Love. Or more accurately, the God who is love. If we see Jesus as He is, in all of his splendour, and worship and delight ourselves in him, then the outflow of his work in us will be the goodness he causes to grow within us. If a branch is disconnected from the vine it has no life in itself. It may look healthy for a little while. It may have the appearance of goodness for a little longer while it sucks the remaining moisture from the air and photosynthesises with it's last remaining living cells. But really there is no life and no future in that kind of life. We don't need to try to dress ourselves up in things that look good on the surface. We need to be transplanted / grafted into the Christ vine where we can accept his fullness of life flowing through us. What does that look like today?

It looks like people who are countercultural to the less than Christian parts of our world.

So, in a world that says you have to have a beautiful image on social media. That you need to have glossy, lovely photos of yourself doing good things, perhaps we steer clear of social media. Or better still, when we engage with it, we present ourselves honestly - not in a 'woe is me', attention grabbing way, but in a way that says, "Here I am. In my own strength I'm not living the perfect or shiny life, but hey everyone, I know the perfect, shining light of the world Jesus. Do you want to know him too?"

I feel somewhat hesitant to bring this up this week after an EPIC state of origin decider match, but our Aussie culture of sports idolatry is pretty extreme. So, in a culture that says you must worship at the idol of sport, we can show different priorities. We can put people before winning, and prioritise God over sport. That doesn't mean avoiding sport altogether, but working hard to make sure that at the very least we sing, shout and cheer more enthusiastically for God than we do for our team. It means that we don't make sport our central identity. It means keeping perspective - more important than winning, is our character. Our self-centredness and sin breaks the way we play and follow sport but through God's forgiveness and indwelling Spirit we are able to engage with sport as His New Creation. And so as remade people, we won't give in to the idolatry of sports but enjoy them as a good gift from God.

Another way Christians are called to be countercultural is with respect to work. Why do we work? Is it to make a name for ourselves? Is it to keep up with the Joneses? Is it in pursuit of a lovely house, holidays, recreational equipment? Do we work to get the extra-curricular activities for the kids, the best education? Is it building up the best portfolio so you can retire more comfortably? All these things can lead to having our identity too caught up in who we are as a worker. A Christian's primary identity is as a child of God, a prince or princess in God's kingdom, one who through no righteousness or effort of our own inherit the blessings of God. If we let our primary identity be through our work it can lead to overworking, not taking sabbath rests, not having a balance with serving God, our family and neighbours in other ways. Let's be countercultural by having healthy boundaries when it comes to work.

Let me close with this verse from earlier in Chapter 2. V6, “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.”