

Theology in Lockdown

Colossians 1:15-20, Proverbs 8:1, 22-31; John 1:1-14

Bishop's Sermon, 7.2.21

It was the spring of 56 AD, and two men were making a 5-day journey inland from the city of Ephesus. They were an unlikely pairing. One was a respectable citizen of Ephesus itself, the other a runaway slave, who – astonishingly – was about to return to his master quite voluntarily. And in their possession was a remarkable postbag they were due to deliver on reaching their destination. It included a letter to the church in Colossae, and a letter to the church in Laodicea, which has since been lost. It probably included a circular letter too, written to all the churches in the area - what we now call 'Ephesians'. And to round it off, there was a short personal letter, written to the owner of the returning slave, urging him not to punish the slave for his desertion, but rather to welcome him back as a 'beloved brother' – the so-called letter to Philemon.

I myself have made that journey inland from Ephesus, though by coach, not on foot. And as I did so, how moving to reflect on that historic postal run nearly two thousand years' before, in which Paul's companion Tychichus joined the runaway slave Onesimus in delivering letters from the great man himself. The Book of Acts doesn't tell us this, but a bit of detective work among Paul's writings reveals that the Apostle was almost certainly imprisoned in Ephesus, and that that was the somewhat dismal setting in which he took up his pen to write. And while Ephesus was clearly a magnificent place, and remains so today, boasting some of the most impressive Roman ruins anywhere in the world, Colossae and Laodicea were much more modest affairs, with Christian congregations of maybe 12 or 15 people each, meeting in the homes of wealthy Philemon and a woman called Nympha. Even today, Laodicea is a rather scruffy little village, and Colossae lies under a hill which no-one has yet bothered to excavate.

So a man incarcerated in a Roman prison (following riots in which his teaching has been implicated), reflects on that little house church in Colossae - a church founded by his convert and fellow prisoner Epaphras - and begins to write; and after some warm words of greeting and an encouragement to his readers to 'lead lives worthy of the Lord', he pauses a little, and then proceeds to compose one of the most astonishing of all Christian hymns, comparable in every way to his other great hymn in Philippians chapter 2, and to the stirring Prologue to John's Gospel.

Just one of these inspiring writings would be enough to nourish us for weeks. But in our lectionary today, we are presented with not one but two of these great passages, along with a powerful hymn to wisdom from the Book of Proverbs. And while I firmly believe that the Prologue to John's Gospel is 'for life and not just for Christmas', it's the reading from Colossians that has really caught my eye this week, and perhaps for this reason: that this is truly 'Theology in Lockdown', and a fabulous example of why – for all the undoubted benefits of mindfulness and other therapies – it is Christian Theology, the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, that is most fundamental to our truest and deepest wellbeing.

Paul had been in prison before, of course – and he would be in prison again. But there was something about his imprisonment in Ephesus that was particularly dark and oppressive, as the Apostle himself reflected at the beginning of 2 Corinthians, where he wrote this:

‘We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia: for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself.’

‘Utterly, unbearably crushed’: it could hardly be a more devastating choice of words, not least from the pen of a man whose courage was legendary. So what caused that sense of utter abandonment? What were the fears and doubts and trials with which the Apostle was wrestling during this darkest of all his lockdown experiences? A little detective work again comes up with four of them, which we might summarise like this: ‘Is everything out of control? Am I going to die? What’s going to happen to the church? Does God care? And this magnificent Christian hymn in our epistle reading today sets out to counter just those doubts and fears.

Is everything out of control? I guess that’s been one of the big questions during our experience of lockdown: a sense that the landscape is constantly shifting, that we don’t know what the pandemic is going to do next, that every twist and turn of this Coronacoaster ride seems to present new and ever greater challenges, that the very idea that we are in control of our lives has been holed beneath the waterline. And how much more would the Apostle have felt that, sitting in his Ephesian prison cell with no idea of what would happen next, no talk of vaccines or a roadmap out of his current predicament.

And here’s where that life-giving Christian theology first kicks in, as - against all outward appearances - St. Paul shares with us an extraordinary vision: the vision of a Christ in whom *‘all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers’*: a Christ who is *‘before all things, and in him all things hold together’*; a Christ who is completely in control.

Some of these ideas are found in our Old Testament reading from Proverbs 8, whose author used the metaphor of Lady Wisdom to describe the process that lay behind the story of Creation. But now Lady Wisdom is revealed as Christ himself, as Paul composes this set of variations around the theme of his sovereignty. He is the ‘first’, the ‘firstborn’, the ‘beginning’, the ‘head’: the synonyms come thick and fast as the variations progress. And while that doesn’t mean that everything in the Creation Garden is lovely – while we don’t quite have a ‘Perfect Planet’ – it does mean, ultimately, that we may not be in control of our lives, but that *He is*.

Am I going to die? Again that’s been a big question over the past ten months, as mortality rates have risen inexorably, with one grim milestone succeeding another. For those of us who are relatively young and healthy, it may not have been so personal or pressing a concern. But for the older and more vulnerable, and for those who care for them, the question has never quite gone away. And the same was true of the Apostle in his prison cell: *‘we were so utterly, unbearably crushed’*, as he put it, *‘that we despaired of life itself’*.

And here's where Paul comes up with an astonishing pairing: that Christ is both the *'firstborn of all creation'* and the *'firstborn from the dead'* – or, as he might have put it, the *'firstborn of the old creation and the firstborn of the new'*. Again the metaphors of Proverbs chapter 8 are part of the background here, and we don't need to get too hung up on the theological debates surrounding a Christ who was *'begotten not created'*. But here's the thing – that if Christ through his Resurrection was the *'firstborn from the dead'* – and if we as Christians are his little brothers and sisters – then it follows that his Resurrection will be ours: that as he put it in another of his prison letters, *'for me to live is Christ, to die is gain'* (Philippians 1:21).

What's going to happen to the Church? For those of us involved in church leadership, whether lay or ordained, that's been a real concern over lockdown. True, we old dogs have learnt new tricks: even the simple process of recording this sermon would have been beyond my capabilities a year ago. But so much has changed, so much is uncertain, so many worries still remain. How will people return to church in the post-Covid era? How will our finances look? Will this prove to have been a time of growth or a time of significant decline? They're questions the Apostle asked too from his Ephesian prison cell, later reflecting that more troubling than all his imprisonments and floggings and hunger put together, was his *'anxiety for all the churches'* (2 Corinthians 11:23); and I know how he feels, and perhaps you do too.

And here's where Paul reminds us that Christ is *'the head of the Body, the Church'*. Not the Pope, not the Archbishop of Canterbury, not the Bishop (thankfully), not the Vicar, not the leadership team, but Christ. And again, what sheer relief, what balm to the soul to hear it! Of course, that doesn't absolve us of our responsibility, as those whom Paul elsewhere describes as *'fellow workers with God'* (1 Corinthians 3:9). Of course, we are called to continue in our prayer and work for the coming of God's Kingdom, charting as wise and fruitful a path we can find through the days that lie ahead. But ultimately Christ loves His Church far more than we do, and the *ultimate* responsibility for its wellbeing lies with Him.

And so to the final, and most foundational of all the questions: **Does God care?:** a question which many will have been asking during this time of lockdown, especially those who've spent months and months alone, those who've lost loved ones, and those whose family circumstances are such that *'Home, sour Home'* describes the situation far more accurately than its sweeter alternative. And again, doesn't Paul's sense of having been *'utterly, unbearably crushed'* suggest that even the mighty Apostle himself lost sight of the goodness and love of his Saviour?

And here's his response: that this Christ is the *'image [the Greek word is 'icon'] of the invisible God,'* one in whom *'all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell; and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross'*.

The God whom Jesus embodies, in other words, is not some distant deity oblivious to all the sufferings of this sad little planet right now. He is rather a God who in Christ lived and died and rose again, so as to reconcile us to Himself. It's a rather overused quotation, which was

stuck on the wall of many a Christian's room during my student days, but I still find it moving: 'I asked him how much he loved me. He said, 'This much', and died'.

So back to Tychichus and Onesimus, carrying their precious postbag to the churches of Asia Minor: two of Paul's converts, true, but otherwise with very little obviously in common. Yet in that very pairing - a proud and upright citizen of Ephesus and a runaway slave - the Christian revolution was beautifully portrayed, a revolution that continues to make waves across the world of today. For if we believe that '*Jesus Christ is Lord*', that '*Death has lost its sting*', that Christ will build his church '*and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*', and that '*God shows his love for us in this: that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*'; then even the toughest of lockdown experiences - those that leave us '*so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despair of life itself*' - will not ultimately defeat us. To leave the last word to the great Apostle himself, '*If God is for us, who can stand against us?*'