

SERMON – 22/11/20
'What shall we say?'

Colossians 4:2-18

“Pray, then, that I may speak, as I should, in such a way as to make the message clear.” (Colossians 4:4)

Today is the last Sunday before Advent, although in this strangest of years people have been looking forward to Christmas for some time already. In the church's calendar this Sunday is traditionally known as the feast of Christ the King when we celebrate in the midst of all uncertainty the fact that God is in charge and the Son of God will win the final victory. Good news for our times.

Over these past weeks we have been reading and reflecting on Paul's Letter to the Colossians, one of His most glorious writings and, as we have already seen, one of the most memorable passages in the letter is one in which the apostle lifts up the Lord Jesus Christ and paints a stunning picture of the One who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, the One by whom all things were created, the One who is before all things and in whom all things hold together, the One who is the head of the body, the Church; the One in whom God was pleased to have all His fulness dwell and the One through whom God is reconciling the world to Himself through His blood shed on the cross. This is our God, this is our King and each one of those majestic phrases is worth holding up to the light and examining in detail like a precious jewel.

But while the apostle encourages us to lift Him up, and while he goes on in detail, as we have seen, to explore the significance of the coming of Christ for the individual believer (in terms of the transformation of life that comes to those who put their trust and hope in Him) and for the fellowship of the Church (in terms of the faith, love and hope that are inspired by Christ and draw people together across social, cultural and geographical boundaries into one gloriously diverse people), he does not sign off without turning his attention to the implications of having faith in Christ and belonging to His Church for the ordinary, everyday moments of life. A practical application of the message of the Gospel is always needed and not just in the context of our own personal experience of life but as part of the witness of the Gospel to those who as yet have not experienced the joy of the Lord. And that's what I would like to highlight this morning as we draw to a close of these

studies – what does it mean today and every day that Christ is your King and mine? In particular I would like to look with you at what it means for the way we *speak*, because it strikes me that that is a theme in the verses that Myra read for us earlier.

I have said before and I will say again that the closing sections of the New Testament letters that we too easily skip over in our reading of the Bible are some of the most relevant for us as we live out our faith, not least when we consider them in the context of our own church fellowship, currently scattered and in some ways physically isolated, because they have to do with our connectedness as followers of Jesus..

People often panic when they are asked to read a Bible passage that has names in it (although I always tell readers just to read the names as they see fit because if you read them confidently enough no-one is going to bat an eyelid). Certainly some of these names, like Tychicus and Epaphras, sound very strange to us because they come from a past time and from a different culture, although it's amazing how many of these names are still in use today – Paul, Luke, Mark, Barnabas, Joshua. The point is, though, that these are actual people whom Paul knew even though he hadn't been able to see them face to face for a while and they are just like a Margaret or a Kathy or a Brenda or a John whom we haven't seen in church since March and whom we perhaps haven't spoken to in all that time.

So what does Paul have to say here? Well he speaks about sharing all the news and about cheering them up – doesn't that sound like something quite relevant to our circumstances today? He talks about sending greetings and good wishes – doesn't it do you good when you hear from someone you haven't seen for a while, particularly if they are wishing you well in the specific situation you are dealing with? And he urges the Colossians to pass on the letter to the church in Laodicea and to make sure they get the letter from the Laodiceans as well. You see, it's important that we talk to each other and listen to each other and write to each other not just about things that needs to be sorted but about our lives and how we are getting on.

What shall we say? It's good to talk. Why not just say 'Hello' or 'How are you doing?' to someone in church that you haven't seen for a while. You know what, it may not seem a big deal but if Paul devotes nearly a fifth of

this letter to it, I think we should make more of it in our Christian fellowship just now.

Secondly, Paul addresses the question of how we speak when we are talking to those who do not share our faith in Christ, and although he is speaking in part about preaching the Gospel these words must not be understood (as they so often have) in the narrow context of the role that someone with a clerical collar might fulfil. Sometimes people speak about a person being in full-time Christian service. Well, excuse me, but every single one of us is in full-time Christian service – only a very few may do it for a living, but each and every one of us is commissioned as an ambassador of Christ and each and every one of us opens our mouths to talk to other people every single day in life so even if we don't have the opportunity on a particular day actually to *speak* about Jesus Christ our Saviour, our lives are an open book and all those we come into contact with should be able to see Him and read of Him as we go about our ordinary tasks. “Be wise in the way you *act* towards outsiders making good use of every opportunity you have,” writes Paul. “Your speech should always be pleasant and interesting and you should know how to give the right answer to everyone.”

So what shall *we* say, my friends? It's good to talk and in particular it is good to talk about Jesus. Whatever we say, let us be mindful that our every word of conversation and our every action speaks to others about the King we serve, so let our words and our actions count this coming week and let many people encounter Jesus as they come into contact with us.

But finally, although in fact this is where Paul *began* in today's reading, a really significant part of what we speak about is what we say to God. “Be persistent in prayer, writes Paul. Keep alert as you pray, giving thanks to God.” Paul asks the Colossians to pray that there would be opportunities to share the good news about Jesus and that when those opportunities come the message would be shared as clearly as possible. That is certainly something that we should be doing in these times – the opportunities during these days are as many as the obstacles that stand in our way. People are searching for answers to the many questions that are bubbling up from deep within them, questions about the very deepest issues of human life, and many are very open to the good news that we have to offer – the way that we support one another within the Body of Christ will speak to people; the

way that we live our lives will speak to them as much as the message we share, but undergirding all of that must be our conscious dependence on God in prayer.

We *have* been persistent in prayer during the pandemic. I try to uphold you all by name as regularly as I can in my own prayers and I have been leading corporate prayer times online several times a week over the last nine months but while it is an encouragement to know that others are joining in those times whether live or after the event and praying together in fellowship, there are huge limitations on what we can pray about when it is being broadcast to the worldwide web and I would really love to share with others in something like a Zoom gathering. Can we perhaps find a time each week when we could do that? It would be good to hear from you what you think. It's good to talk and it's especially good to talk to the One who can do far more than we can ever ask or even imagine.

What shall we say? It's time for me to stop talking and for all of us to start – talk to each other within the fellowship of the church, talk to those around you in the community and talk to God. And may Christ be exalted as King.