

Called to suffer and serve *

*Colossians 1:24-2:5

Sermon delivered by Reverend Leo Douma.

This morning I want to take the second bite of the cherry. You will recall that two weeks ago we had our first look at this passage. We said that here Paul gets personal about his ministry. He writes about two main points. He writes about what is involved in his ministry. And also what the gospel is all about, which he describes as a "mystery." Now, this morning as we vote for a second full time person to minister in our church it seems providential to pick up the first point and speak about how Paul goes about ministry.

Characteristics of a Christian leader. Now to focus our thinking, consider what it is you look for when you have to vote for a minister? What are the characteristics you think important for a Christian leader? I will put two lists before you. Which is the more appropriate: charisma, power, influence, orator, achiever, mover & shaker. Or: sufferer, servant, humble, gentle, teacher. It is interesting to consider what Paul was like. In 2 Corinthians 10 we get a glimpse when we look at verse 1 & 10: "*By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you- I, Paul, who am 'timid' when face to face with you, but 'bold' when away.... Some say 'His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.*" It seems, despite his enormous intellect, which comes through so clearly in his letters, Paul was not much to look at and not all that much of a speaker. So what then are the key elements to good ministry? We find out in this text, where Paul does something quite unusual; he speaks about himself. Mostly all he wants to talk about is Christ. But in the circumstances in Colosse he needed to make clear his authority as an apostle of Christ. It is clear that those advocating the folk religion in the Colossian church, those pushing the line of syncretism, were very convincing speakers. In 2:4 Paul says "*I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.*" Epaphras who had brought the gospel to the Colossians, it seems, was not a strong speaker. So it was easy for the gifted speakers to rubbish him and this Paul they had never met. I'm glad Paul gets personal about his ministry. It gives us a gem of an outline of what gospel ministry is about.

"fill up what is lacking." The first thing Paul tells us is that ministry involves struggle. Note 1:24: "*Now, I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regards to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.*" Paul begins here "*I rejoice in what was suffered for you*". What is he referring to here? Well he is thinking back to what he wrote in verse 22 about God reconciling the believers "*by Christ's physical body through death*". So the suffering is what Jesus went through on the cross. Paul gets personal with the Colossians. Jesus suffered for them. He rejoices because through it they are reconciled to God. But then he says something that is phrased awkwardly. "*I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions.*" Now what does he mean? Isn't the suffering of Jesus for sin finished? Didn't Jesus say that on the cross- "It is finished"? Didn't the Father raise Jesus from the dead as the sign, as the receipt, that all was done? How could any human being possibly add to what Jesus suffered in hell? Obviously Paul is meaning something else. There is much debate in what Paul meant, but I think the clue is in what Jesus Himself said: (John 15:20) "*No*

servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching they will obey yours also." So, if we are faithful to Jesus we too will suffer. And how we deal with the suffering is important. In that suffering we do not add to the worth of what Jesus did on the cross. But what we do is display Jesus as the one who suffered for us. What is lacking in regards to Christ's afflictions is that His sufferings are not known throughout the entire world. They are still a mystery to so many people. God's intention is that the "*mystery be revealed*" to all the "*Gentiles*" (1:26,27). The message needs to be carried by all of us and especially the ministers of the word. But the message is made clear not just by speaking about it. It's made clear through suffering. Note again how Paul writes here that it is in his sufferings in his flesh, that he does his share in filling up the afflictions of Christ. What this means is that God intends for the afflictions of Christ to be presented to the world through the afflictions of his people. Think of it this way. When has the church's witness been most powerful for Jesus? When the church had its time of being grand, rich, and culturally dominant? Or when the Christians were persecuted, thrown to the lions, burned at the stake? The story is told of an African evangelist who went to a village to talk of Jesus. The villagers refused to listen and beat him up. A second time he went back and they beat him up severely. A third time he went back, and as they were about to beat him to death, he kept talking about the love of Jesus. It was then that the women villagers broke down and cried. They nursed the evangelist back to health and begged to hear of the suffering Christ. The whole village was converted. We don't suffer much in Australia for being Christian. Christianity is culturally acceptable. But is it also because we don't speak for Jesus. Is it because we are unwilling to suffer and be persecuted as Jesus was? There is a cost for ministry. There is a price for taking a stand for Christ. To minister, you need to be prepared to pay that price, to "*...fill up the afflictions of Christ.*"

"I have become its servant." The second thing Paul tells us about ministry is that it involves being a servant. (:25) "*I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness.*" Jesus Himself gave the example of being the servant. Remember the disciples in the upper room gathered to celebrate the Passover meal. The disciples were in a power struggle. None wanted to wash the feet of the others. But Jesus took of his robe and bowed at their feet and took on the task of the lowly slave. He told them he was giving a model of the kind of leadership he wanted: servant leadership. Paul understands this. He recognises that he is a servant of God. He says He is a servant by the "*commission*" of God. Paul is not serving himself. It was not his idea to be in ministry. The Lord Jesus Himself called him. In ministry you don't push yourself forward. You respond to the call of God as it comes through the church. Paul also sees himself as a servant of the church. Everything he does is for their benefit. It's something he really wants to do because he recognises the church as the "*body*" of Jesus (:24- "*...for the sake of his body, which is the church*"). So it's not just a group of people he has to put up with (and leaves if he doesn't like it) or an institution that he politically contends with (and plays the power games to get his way). No, Paul has a very high regard for the church. It is the new humanity, the bride of Christ, the Lord's own body that Jesus died for. Yes, even this little group of farmers in Colosse is the wonderful bride of Christ. There is no degrading or belittling this group. He says in 2:1 "*I want you to know how much I am struggling for you...*" The Greek refers to an agonised effort. He gives them his everything for they are the body of Christ. Any minister that fails to see the church that way has lost sight of who they are.

"present the word of God." Paul is also a servant of the Word. His task was to "*present... the word of God in its fullness*". In fact in this way of putting it we see in

a nutshell what the ministry is about. We serve God and the church by faithfully teaching the Bible, all of it, the whole counsel of God, the word in its fullness. It is through the word that we come to know about Jesus. It is through the word that the church is formed, it is sustained, and it is equipped. The word of God is primary above everything else. Without it, our worship, the sacraments, our teaching, pastoral care, become nothing more than nice sentimental words. Now if we ask what the bible is all about, what is its message in all fullness? Paul says quite simply- its all about Jesus. Note 1: 25 "to present to you the word of God in all its fullness- the mystery...which is Christ in you". 1:28 "We proclaim him..." 2:2 "My purpose is that ... they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely Christ, in whom, are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." A minister can never dispense with the message of Jesus. A sermon that fails to mention Jesus as Saviour and Lord, not only becomes just a moralism, but deprives the congregation of the very one who brings the forgiveness and hope we so rely on for our lives. Jesus is the one who commenced the wonder of being reconciled to God, by His death and resurrection. And He is the one who completes our hope when he comes to judge the world. There are not various levels amongst Christians- the basic Christian who relies on Jesus and the super spiritual who have moved to a higher plane. To preach Christ is to preach the full gospel. But to fully preach Christ we need to know more and more of what the bible says. So a good minister has an expository ministry going through the entire bible, showing Jesus on every page. Preaching is not just getting topics we like to hear according to what we think is relevant. It's about letting God set the agenda as we go through His Word.

"present everyone perfect in Christ." Now the point of a good minister preaching and teaching the bible is so that he might lead the entire congregation to maturity. Note 1:28 "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching every one with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ." As one wit put it: the task of the minister is to help the congregation grow up not just show up. A person who remains childish and never matures is a tragedy. Same thing with Christians stuck in a rut, never maturing and growing in Christ. In Ephesians Paul makes clear that maturing is to become more like Christ (4:13). That is our church motto "**Like Christ, in all of life**". It will not be till Christ returns that we will be completely perfect and Christlike. But in the mean time we strive for a maturity that is a wholehearted trust in Christ. That's Paul's big concern in our text, that the Colossians trusted completely and only in Jesus, that they were not blown off course by the fine sounding ideas of the false teachers. Will we mature enough to remain faithful to Jesus, always in all circumstances? Or are we drifting away, as we are stuck in a bored rut, starting to look around for other things?

"teaching and admonishing everyone." Paul says that in this most important task he uses "all wisdom". He uses all his wisdom and skills to get each person to grow. What he does depends on the needs and maturity of each person. He is willing to "admonish" those going off the rails. He is willing to challenge, to call for repentance. Most of us don't like to do that, or to receive it. But if we have a heart and love for each other, we will take on the challenge, for lives are at stake, eternal lives. Where there is lack of knowledge Paul says he "teaches". Note his repetition of the word "everyone". Paul doesn't just see an institution or a group. His heart goes out to each and every individual person, and he develops a special approach to each one. They are all dear to him. Such is ministry- a strong word to the young and silly, a gentle touch to the frail and fearful. We struggle with all our energy to save and grow every one. There are no elites, no special groups. All who come in repentance

and faith belong to Jesus. Now, don't think this is just the work of the ministers or elders of the church. In chapter 3:16 Paul writes "*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish each other with all wisdom*". You note they are the same words he uses in our text about His own work. So Paul is saying that we should all be deeply caring for each other and minister to each other. We don't just talk about work, or cricket. We speak to each other of the word, of Jesus and teach and challenge. If we have any love for one another we will not stand back and remain silent. Visit each other, talk of Jesus, encourage, teach, and help each other grow up.

"struggling with all His energy." Paul takes this task of ministry very seriously. He writes in 1:29 "*To this end I labour, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.*" The word "*struggling*" has about it the sense of an athlete straining till he bursts, giving it everything he has got to get to the finish line. Paul is such a servant of Christ, His Lord he adores, he is such a servant for the church, God's people he loves, that he labours and struggles with all he has. Note something very important here. He says, "*I labour, struggling with all his energy...*" Whose energy? Not Paul's- but Christ's (:28). Any minister who works day and night on his own strength will soon burnout. Not only that, but he insults his Lord. No human being can convert people and bring spiritual growth in God's people by sheer effort. These are acts of God, the powerful work of the Spirit. All those who minister need to be constantly reading the word for themselves to gain insight and strength, to grow for themselves. They need to be constantly in prayer, praying for their own needs. But also pounding on heavens door for the needs of the congregation and the world. The young blokes drifting from the church will not just come back by good visiting. They need the Spirit to work mightily in them. The marriage that is crumbling doesn't just need skilled counselling. It needs the Spirit to soften stubborn hearts and bring repentance and humility. It's not just a well-written sermon, highly polished that brings change and growth in the congregation. It requires the Spirit to touch the hearts of the people, to burn in them like a fire at the wonder of God and His grace in Christ. Therein lies the power and the joy of the ministry. Doing God's work in His power, so that all those entrusted to you grow in love for God, serving Jesus with all they are and have.

DISCUSSION.

Preparation. Read the sermon notes.

Readings. Ephesians 4:7-16 Colossians 1:24- 2:5

Questions.

1. What characteristics do you look for when the church is looking for a new leader eg. A new minister or elder? What are the priority items as far as skills; personal spirituality and character traits are concerned?

2. What does Paul mean (and what does he not mean) when he says "*I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regards to Christ's afflictions.*"? How might we suffer as Christians in Australia if we were more "**Like Christ, in all of life**"? Are we willing to suffer for Christ? Why or why not?

3. Explain the implications of Paul being a servant of God. How important is it for those in ministry to know that they are called by God?

4. Explain the implications of Paul being a servant of the church. Explain the statement "Any minister that fails to see the church that way has lost sight of who they are". How do we often see each other? What is the result of that?

5. Explain the importance of a minister being the servant of the word. What do the following mean:
 - "The word of God is primary above everything else"
 - "To preach Christ is to preach the full gospel"

6. Why is it important for Christians to "grow up"? What does it look like to mature as a Christian, to be "*perfect in Christ*"?

7. Do you accept that each Christian has the task to "*teach and admonish each other with all wisdom*", that it applies to all of us, not just the elders and minister? How do we go about doing that and why?

8. Paul says he "*struggles with all His energy*". What does that mean? How would we go about doing that? What are the implications if we in ministry, if we as Christians, failed to do that?