

The Mystery of God - namely Christ*

*Colossians 1:24-2:5

Sermon delivered by Reverend Leo Douma.

This morning I want to take the first of two bites at the cherry. I want to tackle this passage twice. In dealing with the Bible it's important to look at a chunk that has one big idea to it. The verses of our text focus on Paul getting personal about his ministry. In the last section we saw how Paul urges the Colossians to "*continue in [their] faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out for you in the gospel.*" He finishes that section by saying, "*of which I, Paul, have become a servant.*" Now in our text he picks up that thought and writes about his ministry. He talks of two main points. Firstly, what is involved in being a servant of the gospel? He writes about how he suffers for the church and how he goes about his teaching ministry. And secondly what the gospel is. The first point I want to deal with in two weeks. It seems appropriate on that Sunday, when we vote for a second full time worker to see how Paul describes ministry in the church. This morning, with the Lord's Supper, I want to focus on how Paul describes the gospel here, which is actually very interesting. I'm not sure if we often think about the gospel in this way. Note 1:25-27 "*I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness- the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of the mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*" And also 2:2 b "*... in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*"

"the mystery of God..." It is said that when interpreting a bible passage you look for repeated ideas or words. What key word did you notice in that reading? "*Mystery,*" the gospel is "*...the mystery of God.*" My dictionary tells me that a mystery is something 'that is not or cannot be known, understood or explained'. I love the intrigue of a murder mystery. It's a favourite pastime of mine to read a murder mystery or spend Friday night watching a 'whodunit' and working out before the end who did it. But what Paul is dealing with here is a mystery that cannot be fathomed. It is something that comes to light only by God revealing it. This is way beyond a good novel. It is way beyond anything I could figure out.

Initiation rites. Coming back to my dictionary, it tells me that the word mystery comes from the Greek 'mysterion' which meant 'secret rites; secret doctrines and practices, religious cults in ancient times.' You see mystery religions were popular in the ancient world. These pagan mystery cults kept secrets they did not want others to know. They initiated people through private ceremonies into a fellowship of hidden rituals and secret teachings. So with a sense of "ahh" you see what Paul is doing here. He is using one of the terms or ideas used by those he is writing against. Now you might think Paul would avoid using any ideas or terms that were leading the Christians the wrong way. Instead he picks up their idea and throws a whole different meaning into it. You will remember that the Colossians were guilty of syncretism. They were combining their faith in Christ with belief in angels and magical rites to conjure up protect for them. The teachers of this folk religion expressed the idea that just having Jesus wasn't enough. You needed something extra. It seems it was something secret that you could only know about if you were

initiated into the group, that is, via the 'mysterion', the secret rites. Paul, being the astute evangelist, he takes up that very concept that has them intrigued and pours the gospel into it. It's like Paul says, "That's not a mystery. I'll show you a mystery!"

"kept hidden... now disclosed." Paul writes that he has been commissioned by God to make known the "mystery". And the way he describes it, it's the complete opposite of the cult mystery. Paul admits this (:26) "*mystery... has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints.*" Now it is made known to all God's people. The remarkable point of this mystery is not its exclusiveness, belonging only to a few, but its inclusiveness. It's open for anyone. It is intended for all the nations. "*God has chosen to make known among the gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery...*" This mystery is nothing more and nothing less than the gospel of Christ. The mystery is not an initiation rite or even a teaching. It is about a person. It's about Jesus. 2:2 "*...the mystery of God, namely Christ.*" This gospel is not brought about by involvement in secret rituals. It is expressed by public proclamation. It is to be preached from the rooftops for everyone to hear and respond.

"the mystery of God's will." Why does Paul call the gospel a mystery? Well, we get a clue in Ephesians where Paul writes about many similar things that he also wrote in Colossians. In Ephesians 1:9 he says "*God made known the mystery of His will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment- to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ*". In Ephesians 1 Paul describes how Christians were already blessed in Christ before the creation of the world. In the mind and will of God our salvation was already completely determined through what Jesus would do. This is a truth so stunning we would not have worked it out for ourselves. Only by God revealing it to us can we know about it. In fact even through the whole Old Testament, as the prophets gave more and more clues about the coming Messiah, it still was not completely clear that God would bring salvation through the death and resurrection of His Son. If the Jews had really understood who Jesus is, they would never have crucified Him. Not only was it a revelation to realise that Jesus brought salvation, but that what he did was for all the nations of the world, the gentiles. It was very difficult for the early church to realise that salvation was not just for the Jews. We now take it for granted, but for the likes of the Apostle Peter it was mind blowing.

The mystery revealed in & around us. In times when people have been segregated by race, sex, age, or wealth, when there have been organizations with exclusive or secret membership, the gospel cuts through all of that stuff and says Christ is for all peoples. The church is the one organization that does not exist for its members. The church is constantly composed of outsiders who become insiders, because the only qualification for entry is nothing other than faith- faith in Jesus. I heard the story this week at the MTS training day, of a bloke who loved fishing. He liked it so much he decided to set up a "bait and tackle shop" instead of doing other work so he could be in the field he loved. His shop was very successful. In fact it kept him flat out from 5am till 9pm. With the result he had no time for fishing. It bothers me immensely that you and I can be so involved with church stuff that we no longer have time to form relationships and share the gospel, a gospel that everyone needs to hear. It is a mystery to your neighbours. They won't figure it out by being smart. It can only be known by being revealed, by our witness about Jesus.

And as we speak and others believe, an awesome thing is happening. That which God determined before the creation even began is now happening. We in our culture have become so stuff and technology centred, we are so driven for the moment, experiencing the now, that we have lost site of the mystery of life, of the Kingdom of God being active around us. As we witness God's awesome will is at work, people are saved, or damned, depending on how they respond. We are bringing in the new heavens and new earth. We need to think beyond the moment and the dollar to be earned and see the mystery of God revealed.

"Christ in you..." Now it's interesting how Paul describes the gospel, this mystery of God. Note :27 " *God has chosen to make known among the gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*" To say "Christ in you" is a little unusual. We are used to hearing of the Holy Spirit being in us who believe. I think Paul puts it as "Christ in you", because the Colossians were creating a tension between Jesus and the Spirit. The usual Christian life, which is a walk by faith, was disparaged. The false teachers were implying you needed something extra to Jesus, an extra experience of the spiritual. But that is a false distinction. The Holy Spirit's task is nothing less and nothing more than to make Christ known and us living in Him. If we know Jesus as saviour and Lord, then we have everything. Our faith is the proof of that because we can only admit to Jesus as Lord and God by the work of the Spirit in us. But there is the wonder, the mystery of the gospel. When we accept Jesus by faith God Himself resides in us. It may not look that way, it certainly does not always feel that way. That's the "*glorious riches*" of the gospel. God is not just some awesome being far and away, unknowable. He has stooped to our level in Christ. And by His Spirit He has become very intimate with us, so intimate He resides within and knows the deepest recesses of our hearts. He is closer than our most intimate loved ones.

"the hope of glory..." Paul goes on to say that "Christ in you" is "*the hope of glory*". There is a wonderful message of comfort and reassurance in that. Christ's presence in us is the hope of things to come. As Paul puts it in Ephesians 1:13(b) "*Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession...*" So you get the picture. The Spirit within, "Christ in you", is the guarantee of the wonderful things to come, that we will live on the new earth as part of God's people. So the gospel is also good news of a great future, as well as experiencing grace now. And in the way that is put, Paul is giving a caution here. It seems the false teachers at Colosse were saying they could have it all the blessings of God now. They didn't need to be resurrected on the final day. They had already spiritually risen.

Wanting it all now. There has been teaching of that sort throughout the life of the church. I remember preaching once to a charismatic group where I said "God has never promised us health or wealth, that everything would be wonderful this side of heaven. We can only claim what God has promised." Some of the folk came up to me and said, "We disagree with you. If we believe, God will grant us good health, we will never be sick and we will be well off and have no problems." Today's generation is looking for this. We are a now generation. We want it all now. We don't save for an item we want, we buy it now and pay later. We want the good experiences now. We think we have a right to be happy. We want worship that gives us wonderful feelings. You will have noticed reading the "Sydney Morning Herald" a couple of Saturdays

ago that the Hillsong church at Castlehill teaches a prosperity theology. Love God and be rich. But all of that is a distortion of the gospel.

The perspective of eternity. We must look at life not from the perspective of feeling good now, but from the perspective of eternity. What does God need to do with us to ensure that we remain in the faith and reach eternity? What does God need to do with us so we grow in the faith, that we become more like Jesus? For that to happen we may need to suffer. We may need to go through long struggles learning to cling to God as our only hope. We must be true to what God has promised. In Jesus is forgiveness and therefore "*Christ[is] in you*". We know and experience His wonderful presence and reassurance. And God has promised that in time Jesus will come again and restore all things. Then everything will be perfect. Then all sin and tears and heartache will be gone. In the meantime we live by faith. In the meantime we know that we do not have to achieve everything and be successful. Even if sickness or poverty or suffering deprives us of opportunities now, when Christ comes we will be completely fulfilled, able to be what God has made us. We must stop living as if "This time and place is all there is. This is as good as it gets." Life is more than earning the money and getting the house and superfund in place. It's about the mystery of the gospel, that right now, as we speak for Jesus, God is revealing His will for people's lives.

The assurance. I admit it is not always easy to see. That's why Jesus gave us the Lord's Supper. The bread and the wine remind us of the wonder, the mystery, yet the reality of God forgiveness through Jesus. And the Supper reassures us of the time Jesus will come again and will Himself host the wedding feast. The Supper makes clear a mystery "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

DISCUSSION.

Preparation. Read the sermon notes.

Readings. Ephesians 1:3-14; 3:1-6. Colossians 1:24-2:5

Questions.

1. When you think of the word 'mystery' what images does it conjure up in your mind? What to you is the greatest mystery?
2. What was the situation in Colosse that induced Paul to use the concept of a mystery? How was the syncretism of the Colossians involved in a mystery? What are some of the similar sort of things we might find in our day and age?

3. What is the “*mystery of God kept hidden...but now disclosed?*” explain it in terms of:

- the gentiles
- God’s “*will ...which he purposed in Christ?*”

How does the revealing of the mystery bring comfort to you in your life?

4. Explain how the mystery Paul spoke of differed from the mystery by the folk religion at Colosse in terms of being inclusive or exclusive? What are the implications for us in how we relate with others? Explain:

- “The church does not exist for its members”
- The point of the fish shop story. How does it apply to you?
- Why the gospel is a mystery to non Christians
- How we see the Kingdom of God at work around us.

5. Why does Paul use the phrase “*Christ in you*” and what does he mean by it? Explain in terms of:

- The task of the Holy Spirit
- How you know the Spirit is active in your life?

6. What is the reassurance that comes from knowing “*Christ in you is the hope of glory?*” How does (or should) that reassurance affect your life at the moment?

7. Explain what is meant by “We are a now generation”. How has this cultural reality impacted on your life? Why is it more correct to look at life from the “perspective of eternity”?

How do the sacraments, especially the Lord’s Supper, help us in accepting the “mystery”?

