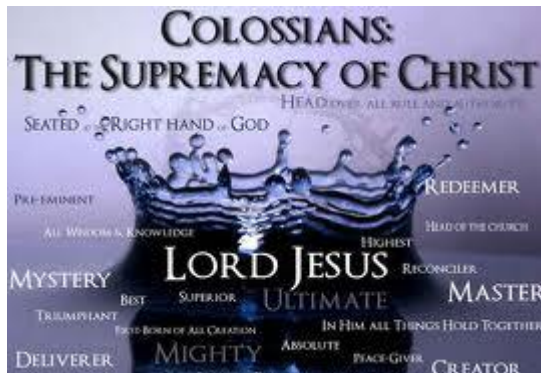


## Sunday Evening Service 5th May 2013 - Kenneth Gray, Colossians 1:15-23 'The Very Highest Place'



The overarching principle of post-Resurrection preaching is that all that Jesus said about himself was true. "I and the Father are one..." "No-one comes to the father except through Me..."

Colosse was a small town not a large metropolis like Corinth or Rome. It is easier to grow a church with large numbers in the congregation where the catchment area has millions of residents. It is predicted that by the 2020s more than half (55%) the UK population will live in cities and large conurbations. That means there will still be 45% living in communities like Colosse or, as we might say, Bridge of Weir. The important thing is not "the Church" but Jesus Christ. When we look at large churches like Times Square in New York with its huge choir, like something out of the movie 'Sister Act', we are amazed and even impressed. But such churches have to be constantly on their guard against allowing the desire to put on a spectacular 'show' impede the act of true worship and distract from the Gospel message. The focus must always be on Jesus - not the preacher, not the choir, not the buildings. The role of any church's ministry must always be to help people find Jesus.

The problem for the early Church was that society was unsympathetic even to the point of persecuting followers of the Way. Thus arose the issue that the Church has had to deal with through the ages - how does the Church relate to the Establishment? The early Christians had grown up as part of the Establishment but, once converted to Christianity, they found themselves under pressure to conform to social mores that ran counter to Jesus' teaching.

In our generation we have not been accustomed to many such pressures and the threat of persecution has not featured significantly in our lives for many generations, no doubt because the Church has hardly been on fire with evangelistic zeal. The more vibrant and alive the Church the greater the opposition from society. We are now finding that the traditional values of the church are increasingly at odds with the views and practices of modern society and, given current trends, we must expect that opposition to become increasingly evident.

What we must never forget is that the 'establishment' and all those authorities that oppose the Church are as much subject to Jesus Christ as any of us who follow Him.

As verse 6 reminds us "...the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world - just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God's grace."

We need to be reminded of the reality of the supremacy of Jesus and believe it, trust in it and rejoice in it.

Verse 18 "And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy."

We are not surprised that society can change its position on traditional beliefs and practices but today we are struggling to come to terms with how easily the church seems to be adapting to social pressure and changing its position on formerly established truths. The Evil One never sits back or goes away when society honours God. Nor does he relax when society turns its back on God.

The two most persistent, destructive threats to the church are

1. Altering the truth of the Gospel by turning it around - preaching that there are many paths to heaven instead of only one way - through Jesus Christ.
2. Admitting people into the Church who do not know Jesus as Lord - they profess with their mouths but they do not believe in their hearts.

What should our response be to such threats? We need to draw closer to each other inside the church and not fall out with one another. The sad thing about the Evangelical Church is that it can be very good at criticising but it's not so good at praying together and studying the Bible together.

So many feel they can 'take on' evangelical churches where what they **claim** is not evident in how they **behave**.

The Bible contains the same unchanging Truth for every generation and Jesus Christ knows the true nature of every branch of his church. In verse 21 Paul is speaking to the elect not to the church as an 'institution'. They are saved people no longer alienated from God. "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour."

If Paul were to preach this in society today people would not recognise themselves as 'alienated from God' or 'evil'. We've forgotten what it was like before redemption was secured for us by Jesus' sacrifice. We need to be vigilant lest our sinful nature leads us to act in ways that threaten to alienate us from God. Scotland was once regarded as a "God-fearing" country. This is no longer the case. You cannot be 'God-fearing' unless you are reconciled to God. Most of us live what society might regard as 'unblemished' lives - we tend not to break society's rules and we observe laws. For most of us, the fear of accusation is something we can all relate to. We dread being picked up by roadside cameras if we've exceeded the speed limit; we are sometimes nervous of something we've said or done coming back to 'bite' us. When we come before God's throne we can stand unblemished and free from accusation because of what Jesus Christ has done for us - **provided we continue firmly in our faith and remain loyal to the Truth of the Gospel**.

Standing firm and remaining loyal are difficult to do - it's so much easier and more comfortable to compromise. This is especially true within our own families. When some members of our family do not follow the same path that we follow, the temptation is to regard blood as thicker than the love of God. It can be difficult, too, when we respond to people enquiring about the Christian faith. We can be tempted to give enquirers the acceptable, easy answers they are looking for instead of the saving but possibly uncomfortable truth. It's one thing to give bad advice inadvertently - it's sinful deliberately to misguide people.

There is unparalleled Hope held out to mankind in the Gospel. We cannot alter, 'refine' or try to redefine its message for 2013 - no matter how tempting that may seem. The Gospel is God's fixed Truth. If we remove the power, the authority or the challenge it contains what's left is useless.