14th July 2019

Colossians 1.1-14

Faith love and hope.

Paul writes about those qualities in his opening letter to the church in Colossae.

***3****We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,****4****because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God’s people –****5****the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel****6****that has come to you. In the same way, 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.*

Our world often has the opposite: anger, hatred and lies.

The Knife Angel is a National Monument against Violence and Aggression It is made from 100,000 knives that were retrieved from the streets by 43 police forces. It is the opposite of faith love and hope. As you stand beneath it, taking in the terrifying beauty of its shape, your eye then catches the detail: flecks of coloured handles amid the elemental rust. Whose fingers clutched those handles, and why? Whose flesh did the metal pierce? You shudder as you focus on individual blades, each one telling a story of fear. How on earth did we reach a point where carrying that meat cleaver, or that brutally curved blade, seemed like a good idea? And how many more are out there?

The sculpture is bringing to light just how bad knife crime and violence is within the UK and how something needs to change before it's too late.

Beginning its official national tour back in December 2018, the Knife Angel has now been on the road for just over six months! This incredible journey has seen the monument travel from Liverpool to Hull, Coventry, and Birmingham. Gloucester was set to host the Angel outside of their cathedral following its time in Birmingham but made the decision to no longer have it as they felt they weren’t ready to commit to our youth engagement requirement. Every hosting city that uses the Angel is expected to run important educational programmes and workshops for their youth. These programmes must be designed to highlight the national blight of violence and aggression within the UK whilst simultaneously educating school children and youth about the negative effects that knife crime has on families, victims, communities and perpetrators.

Last week Eva Kor died. She survived, not only Auschwitz, but the experiments of Dr Mengele. That he experimented proves he recognised the humanity of the people he and the murderous Nazi systems attempted to objectify. At the age of ten, twins Eva and Miriam Mozes, were taken to Auschwitz where Dr Josef Mengele used them for medical experiments.

Eva Kor chose to overwhelm the memory and experience of evil by faith love and hope. In an extraordinary act of reconciliation, in 1995 she went back to Auschwitz with her family, and with a surviving guard of Auschwitz and his family. She wrote and spoke about forgiveness without ever downplaying or excusing evil and, carefully, without ever requiring anyone else to forgive. She witnessed powerfully, though, to the liberation she experienced and the agency she felt as she transformed from victimhood to dignity.

*Dr Munch signed his document about the operation of the gas chambers while I read my document of forgiveness and signed it. As I did that, I felt a burden of pain was lifted from me. I was no longer in the grip of hate; I was finally free.*

*The day I forgave the Nazis, privately I forgave my parents whom I hated all my life for not having saved me from Auschwitz. Children expect their parents to protect them; mine couldn’t. And then I forgave myself for hating my parents.*

*Forgiveness is really nothing more than an act of self-healing and self-empowerment. I call it a miracle medicine. It is free, it works and has no side effects.*

*I believe with every fibre of my being that every human being has the right to live without the pain of the past.*

*For most people there is a big obstacle to forgiveness because society expects revenge. It seems we need to honour our victims but I always wonder if my dead loved ones would want me to live with pain and anger until the end of my life.*

*Some survivors do not want to let go of the pain. They call me a traitor and accuse me of talking in their name. I have never done this. Forgiveness is as personal as chemotherapy – I do it for myself. I do it not because they deserve it, but because I deserve it.*

Alfie Bradley who made the knife Angel sculpture and Eva Kor, in very different ways, show the kind of irrepressible human hope that asks the right questions, defying the dominant narrative of selfishness and despair.[[1]](#endnote-1) Similarly, Paul rejoices in the defiant love, faith and hope to be found in the small Christian Community in Colossae, and is moved by the wrestling in prayer for them by its founder Epaphras (Colossians 4.12) who, although no longer with them, still cares how they fare.

It is because they have embraced what Paul calls the ‘εὐαγγέλιον’ (evangelion): the gospel. That Greek word would be used of an Imperial announcement of military victory. Using it to proclaim Christ’s pacifist resurrection is defiant. The Empire enslaves whomsoever it wishes. Paul describes apostles as fellow ‘slaves’ serving Christ and therefore inhabiting not the dark Empire, but ‘the kingdom of [God’s] beloved Son’.

This shows itself in faith love and hope. This love doesn’t simply mean they all have good feelings towards each other. They may or may not. What matters is the behaviour which marks out so much of the world – lust, anger, lies and so on, which split up families and communities – is being replaced with kindness, gentleness, forgiveness and an acceptance of one another as members of the same family, even where there were major differences of race, background and culture. This as far as Paul was concerned is the true sign of God at work and he is thrilled and grateful to hear about it.

How did the church at Colossae grow in this way? They have the faith which reaches out to grasp what God offers in Christ; the love which binds the community together; the hope that looks eagerly forward to the time when god completes what he began in Jesus – a total new creation. Paul has heard this is all there in Colossae and thanks God who has done it all.

Why was the letter written? One reason was to discourage the Christians in Colossae from mistaken belief in fasting and festivals, or visions and angels (2.16-18). More importantly, the letter builds faith in Christ as the centre of all things. When Christ’s place at the heart of creation is recognized, everything else makes sense. However, this universalism is balanced by a focus on the faith of the local church as the context where Christians learn to flourish.

Paul is writing to a congregation founded by Epaphras and it is unlikely that he has met them himself (see 2.1). Nevertheless, he is delighted by the good news he hears of their commitment to the Lord, and he emphasizes his own identity as an apostle of Christ Jesus – this is something they have in common. Therefore, he is able to give thanks for them (vv.3,12) because the gospel is bearing fruit among them. The image of fruitfulness is important in the Old Testament as a mark of God’s favour (e.g. Psalm 128.3), and the Roman Empire also used it as a metaphor for the blessing of the gods. Paul is using language that makes sense to both Jewish and Gentile audiences.

Paul moves on to describe the prayers that he offers. Perhaps he has deliberately chosen to give words of encouragement first and then to identify areas where the community needs to grow further. Once again, he borrows language from their context. In praying for ‘knowledge’ and ‘wisdom’ (v.9), he is using concepts that are taken from the mystery religions that flourished around Colossae. The language of ‘strength’ and ‘power’ (v.11) is drawn from the propaganda of the Romans. In both cases, Paul is using words that carry meaning for the Colossians but redefining them in the light of the power and wisdom of God revealed in Christ.

It was tough being a member of a church in that society. Paul knows this from his own experience, and he knows that the Colossians also face a struggle. He backs up his prayer for strength and endurance by reminding the Colossians of what God has already done for them. He uses the language of rescue, which might well remind his audience of their baptism – rescued from death to life – and then emphasizes that they belong to the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (and not the kingdom of the emperor).

Paul seeks to redefine the worldview of this community of Christians. The wisdom of the mystery religions and the brute power of the Empire are insignificant compared with the majesty of Jesus Christ.

Paul longs to see young Christians coming to know for themselves what God’s will is. They need wisdom and spiritual understanding., not just book learning (though that is useful), or human traditions (which may also be of help). Most of all they need a deep inner sense of who they are now, of the newly created human life which they have received from God and of what will nurture it and what will harm it. Christian teachers can talk until they are blue in the face, but unless their hearers have this inner sense of wisdom and understanding, this awareness of the true and loving God loving them and shaping their lives in a new way, it won’t produce genuine disciples.

All of this should lead to lifestyle change - a turning away from hatred and anger and an embracing of the way of faith, love and hope as shown in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When Paul speaks of God rescuing people from one kingdom and giving them another one, and of ‘redemption’ and ‘forgiveness’ as the central theme of that rescue operation, he has the exodus from Egypt in mind. What God has done in Jesus, and is now doing for them, is the new Exodus – setting the slaves free. To become a Christian is to leave the ‘Egypt’ of sin and to travel gratefully towards the promised inheritance.

Why gratefully? Because Paul wants the young Christians in Colossae to learn the art of thanksgiving. It’s a central theme of this letter and a sign of a healthy Christian life on the way to maturity. Paul would say that a life lived in the presence of this God will be a life of thanksgiving. A life of faith hope and love.

1. David Warbrick <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2019/102-july-august-2019-c/proper-10/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)