

Of today's readings, two are clearly connected and one seems to stand on its own. I'm sure you all remember me standing here almost exactly three years ago and talking about the excerpts from Genesis and Luke – and I'm sure you remember exactly what I said about them. So today we shall concentrate on the other one, but don't worry. We'll get back to Luke and Genesis later on.

When thinking about an Epistle it often helps to have some background. The Epistle to the Colossians is one of four which Paul wrote while in prison, probably in Ephesus, which is on the west coast of what is now Turkey. Colossae is about a hundred miles inland. When Paul was writing, the church there was very new and quite small. His letter, plus one to Philemon, was carried to Colossae by one of his companions, Tychius, who was also escorting the runaway slave Onesimus back to his master's house there.

It wasn't easy being a new Christian in the first-century near east. The entire area was a melting-pot of different religions and cultures – just think of all those nationalities and languages in Jerusalem at Pentecost. It had been part of the Greek sphere of influence and was now within the Roman Empire, but providing that everyone paid their taxes and didn't openly challenge Roman authority they all muddled along pretty well together. Greek and Roman culture had many gods; they would tolerate additional local ones as long as the overall hierarchy (which included the emperor as a god) remained intact. Most cultures accepted this, but the Jews, and later the Christians, were a problem because they insisted that there was only one God, theirs, and refused to worship the emperor. Jews had fought ferociously to defend their beliefs, and the Romans were always worried that they might do so again.

Paul wanted to praise the fledgling church in Colossae for its promising beginnings, and encourage them to carry on learning and growing in the right way. Until recently they had been Gentiles, worshipping various idols and engaging in distinctly non-Christian practices. They were still surrounded by people with the old beliefs. The town had its own gods – and surely no sensible person could believe that a crucified Jew was the one and only God? Paul also knew that the Christians in Galatia, further to the north-east, had been subject to a particular temptation. The Jews there had told the Galatians that simply accepting Jesus as their saviour was not enough. Jesus had been a Jew; his followers would not reap the full rewards of their conversion unless they were also circumcised like the Jews, followed Jewish laws and observed their rituals and festivals.

So Paul set out to do a wholesale demolition job on this argument, and to knock out the claims of the other religions at the same time. He did it masterfully in just ten verses. Don't be deceived by human tradition and clever philosophy, he wrote. If you do, you'll be dragged back where you were before. When you accepted Christ you accepted something infinitely superior. You don't need anything else; you don't need to be circumcised and you certainly aren't bound by Jewish law. Why would you be, when the Jews who are insisting on this don't even recognise that Jesus is their Messiah?

The crux of his message comes in a single sentence: 'In Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily. Let's unpack that. Jesus is not just a completely human being. He is not just a man who is, as you might say, filled up with God. He is God, fully God in human form.

Jesus, as a human, is the embodied, incarnate God. This is the killer argument. It destroys any suggestion that Jesus was merely a holy man, or some sort of demi-god (like some of the pagan gods), or a symbol of a god (like the idols), or that he was a hero who became a god after his death (as in many of the religious or cultural traditions). What is more, because Jews do believe that there is only one God, they cannot then maintain that although Christians have accepted Jesus as the Messiah, they then have to go on and do other things in order to discover the real one God.

So neither the Colossians nor any other Christian needed anything beyond Jesus. He is the supreme head. Above all, no-one had to be circumcised. It didn't matter in the least, if you were a man, that you had got rid of a small piece of skin. It did matter enormously that by accepting Jesus as your saviour you had got rid of an entire previous sinful life, which God had set aside and forgiven you for.

Paul's writing can be difficult to follow, but this is the clearest statement anywhere of what it means to be 'in Christ', one of his favourite and most heavily-loaded phrases. He was encouraging the Colossians to persist in belief, prayer and love – at which point we come straight back to Genesis and Luke, where the theme is so clearly one of persistence. Abraham persisted in pushing God, saying: 'I know you are a just God; you won't destroy fifty righteous people, will you? Or forty-five, or forty, or thirty, or twenty, or ten?' And God agreed. The man who needed three loaves of bread persisted, and got them. We, like the Colossians, are to persist in Christian living, praying fervently for the coming of God's kingdom, for the needs of his world and for our own particular circumstances. And we are to persist in our trust that, day by day, God will give us everything he knows that we need.