

ALL SAINTS WESTON

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COLOSSIANS 4

WHO NEEDS FRIENDS? PAUL DOES!

I came across a phrase the other day whilst listening to a talk from an ancient preacher who used to be the minister at Westminster Chapel in London. He was talking about the motley crew that makes up a typical church and he quoted this little rhyme.

*To dwell above with saints we love,
Oh, that will be all glory.
But to dwell below with saints we know,
Well, that's another story"*

It's often been said that there is no such thing as a perfect church but if you stumbled across one, then you should not join it, because if you it will cease to be a perfect church. And let me say at the outset that whilst we have many things to be thankful for at All Saints, including the presence of some wonderful saints, we are far from perfect. We are a work in progress and always will be.

Right at the end of this lovely letter that the apostle Paul has written to the band of new believers at Colosse, comes a list of names. When you heard them read a moment ago, did you think what a tedious list or were they names that just meant nothing? Or would you like to know more about them? Then if you did want to know more about them, today is your lucky morning!

After all the teaching in this letter, some of it very profound and is stretching, there is this list of names. So and so sends their greetings; remember us to this and that person. We get little intriguing and tantalizing glimpses of those first century Christians. We want to know more – or at least I do. Who were those first and second generation people who had embraced this new faith? Where did they come from? What was their background? What was their story? How did they come to faith? How did they come to be with Paul?

Paul, as many of you will know writes this letter from Rome – not living in some nice lodgings or a hotel but in a prison, sometimes in actual chains. By now he is probably in his 50's but would look much older because of years and years of hardship, beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks and privations. His eyesight is going and it is a struggle even to write his own signature. He has to dictate his letters. Within a few years of this letter he will be dead, executed in the wave of persecution inaugurated by the infamous Emperor Nero. But Paul is not alone. He has a small number of friends and supporters with him – some of whom have been with him through thick and thin. Everyone, every

One of Paul's companions is called Epaphras. Paul calls him a dear friend and a fellow prisoner. Epaphras had been the leader of the small Christian community in Colosse a place that Paul had never visited although he had been much in that region. Colosse, is in modern-day Turkey, as you see on this map – it's the red dot. Colosse was very special to Epaphras and he probably persuaded Paul, this giant of an apostle to write a letter to this little church. Paul agrees. In fact he writes two letters, one to the church as a whole and a semi-private one to the owner of the house in which the church meets. His name is Philemon and he has a whole letter devoted to him in the new testament.

You know that all the early churches met in people's homes, not grand if faded buildings like this. Actually this church of All Saints has many buildings. There is this one, which is about to have a huge makeover and then there are the twenty or so homes where people meet in small groups to study the bible, pray and generally care for another. We have the best of both worlds.

Philemon lives in the house with his wife, Apphia. Also mentioned is Archippus, who is exhorted to complete the work that he started; he is probably their son. Philemon is clearly a well-to do man because he has a house large enough for people to meet in – we don't know how many, perhaps 20, 40 – maybe more. He also has servants and owns slaves. We know the name of one of his slaves, a man called Onesimus – who may have been more of a

bond servant than what we think of a slave. But we know this much about him that he ran away from Philemon and somehow made his way to Rome, and somehow found himself or took himself to be with Paul, where he became a most trusted person who endeared himself greatly to Paul. But now Paul is sending him back to Philemon for a reconciliation. This is tough love for Onesimus and Philemon.

One of the things that this shows us is that from the outset the Christian church was a very mixed family of believers. It included wealthy and poor and even slave. They sat alongside each other, they shared bread and wine together in the communion service and in the eyes of God, if not the world they were equal. Paul is very clear about this: earlier in the letter he had written and I paraphrase:

When you become a Christian and literally put on Christ, it doesn't matter who you are or what your background is. God sees you as equally valuable. In Christ says Paul, your nationality does not count, whether you are a Greek or a Jew or a barbarian ie someone who did not speak Greek as their first language, or even the lowest of the barbarians, the Scythians. It didn't matter what your religious background was, whether you were circumcised or not. It didn't even count with God if you were a free man or a slave. And your sex did not count either.

This was – and still is - radical thinking: in a world where women counted for very little and slaves for nothing at all apart from their monetary value, Christianity said something entirely different.

So there is Paul a prisoner in Rome and with him two other fellow prisoners Epaphras and another member of Paul's support team called Aristarchus. Also supporting Paul are some people who are not actually in prison. They are dear Dr Luke, the author of the gospel of Luke and Mark, the author of Mark's gospel. As well as these two there is Onesimus, who has become like a son to Paul; then we have Tychichus who is Paul's postman and spokesman. He delivers Paul's letters to the various churches in Greece and Turkey and he is the one who takes this letter to Colossae. Then there is a man called Justus and we know nothing about him other than he was one of the team around Paul and another man called Demas. We'll come back to him. Altogether nine men of varying ages and backgrounds. All of whom were willing to take the risk that came with being known as a friend of Paul. Two of them were prisoners with him and presumably the others could have been arrested at any time on one of their visits to Paul. If you have not knowingly taken risks in being a follower of Jesus, you might have to ask the question 'am I really a follower of Jesus?'

I would love to work through each of these nine names plus more about Philemon, his wife and his son but time only allows me to talk about two of them.

Let's start with Demas. His story is a bit of a warning to us. At some point in his adult life, Demas, probably a Greek from the part of Greece known as Thessalonica, became a Christian. More than likely he did so through the teaching and example of Paul. He must have been full of admiration for Paul and

caught up in enthusiasm for his new faith. So much so that he became part of the support team for Paul, probably travelling with him and carrying out various duties. What they were we do not know. Maybe it was finding accommodation or doing a reconnaissance, or raising funds. Whatever it was, he was in the inner circle and so it was that he is there in Rome with Paul. When and how he got there we do not know but he is described by Paul as a fellow worker. This is one of Paul's favourite phrases to describe someone – a worker, a doer. No organisation and no leader can succeed without a dedicated band of workers. And a church is no exception. A church like ours needs scores of worker-volunteers. Demas was a worker, not a passenger, along for the ride.

But somewhere along the road, Demas veered off the Christian road and took another road. And this happened not so long after Paul wrote this letter because in a letter that Paul wrote to his protégé young Timothy, a couple of years later and whilst still in prison, he said this:

'Only Luke is with me now for Demas, in love with this present world has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.'

Demas was one of those who had begun well - full of faith and hard work - but who left all that off because of his love for what Paul calls 'this present world'. The call of this present world has always exerted a strong pull on Christians – as it does for everyone. It is all too easy to be caught up in the ways of thinking, the materialism, the short-termism, the allure of this world. [One of the things we encouraged Hannah

through her parents was that she might 'fight valiantly against the world'] There is a whole sermon in unpacking this.

Before Paul had ever got to Rome, he had written a letter to the Christians there and one of the things he said in it was: 'Do not be conformed to this world' or as it has been translated 'do not let this world squeeze you into its mould'. **SLIDE** This is always a danger for the church and for individuals Christians. That we end up listening more to the voices of the world than of God. Of following the latest trends and fashions rather than the pathways God has set out for us.

No doubt we can all think of someone who was once a strong follower of Jesus but who for all sorts of reasons is no longer doing so. That is a warning for us. In his letter to the church at Corinth Paul warned them: *'So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!'*

After that reference Demas now disappears from the New Testament and from the pages of history altogether. What happened to him God only knows. Maybe we shall discover one day. And maybe after a while he became disillusioned and sorry for his backsliding and returned like the Prodigal Son, sorer and wiser and more determined this time not to desert either Christians or Jesus Christ himself. And may it be said of us as it is said in the baptism prayers that we continued to be faithful servants and soldiers of Christ to the end of our days.

Now for a happier story but one that could have gone badly wrong. Let's turn our attention to Mark. This story is almost a

mirror image of the Demas story and also involves a desertion from Paul.

So what do we know about Mark, who was probably the author of the shortest of the four gospels. We know that his mother was called Mary and that he had a cousin called Barnabas and his home was in Jerusalem. His father had probably died when he was young because he isn't mentioned but his mother is. But Mary must have been a fairly wealthy widow because she had a house that could accommodate many people and it had a perimeter wall. But more important than the size of her house was that she was a follower of Jesus and she was prepared to use her house and wealth in the service of the church. And when Peter was imprisoned for his faith by the Jewish authorities, it was at Mary's house that a big prayer meeting was held for his safety and release. And that's where Peter headed for after his extraordinarily miraculous escape from prison. To a young man like Mark seeing and hearing the events of these first days of the church must have been very exciting.

Fast forward maybe a year or two and Mark's older cousin or maybe uncle, called Barnabas, is sent by the church in Jerusalem to check out the new church at Antioch in Syria which is thriving with many converts. Barnabas invites Mark to come along with him. This also must have been a thrilling adventure for the young man – maybe his first trip abroad. Down in Antioch they meet up with Saul about to change his name to Paul.

After a while Paul, Barnabas and Mark return to Jerusalem with a gift of money from the church in Antioch to the church

in Jerusalem. The young Mark must have made an impression on Paul because soon all three are off on what we call Paul's first missionary journey. First stop Cyprus. And Mark was the assistant, the intern, the apprentice, perhaps even the one who took dictation from Paul because he was an educated man. Doing some of the basic jobs but also witnessing all sorts of wonderful things and miracles.

But for some reason not so long after they left Cyprus, Luke writes in Acts, *'Mark or Mark John as he was also known left them and returned to Jerusalem'* so they carried on without him. Like Demas we don't know the exact reason why he left Paul. Paul was probably not an easy man to live with. He demanded a lot of himself and of those around him. This was no Mediterranean cruise it was a hard working tour of duty with plenty of dangers, hardships and risks. Maybe Mark got homesick for the comforts of his own large house and the servants there to look after him.

Paul was pretty angry with Mark for leaving them in the lurch. If Paul was the hard cop, Barnabas was the soft cop and after all they were family so Barnabas tried to stick up for Paul. But was having none of it. And when a few months later Paul and Barnabas were about to set out on a second tour of the Med, Paul refused to take John Mark with him. This is what Luke writes in Acts:

Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to

take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus.

Paul did not want to trust John Mark again and instead found other assistants.

It is very easy to fall out with people because they let us down or leave us in the lurch. It is easy to have a disagreement which then festers into a rift which is never healed. Christians are not immune from this. I mentioned at the beginning of this talk listening to an elderly preacher. In fact he was preaching to a church that my next door neighbour goes to when he is working in Houston Texas. The church holds about 5,000 people and is usually full. The sermon I heard was all about forgiveness and at the end of the talk the speaker asked all those who needed to forgive somebody for a hurt or wrong done to stand and pray with him if they wanted to forgive that person. I was partly amazed and partly not surprised to see practically all 5,000 people, churchgoers all of them, standing to pray asking God to help them forgive one or more people. Maybe if I did that at the end of this service or any service, we would find the same thing happening - most of the congregation standing to forgive someone or at least feeling there were people in their lives from whom they are divided and shouldn't be.

Well I am glad to say that in the case of John Mark and Paul, there was a reconciliation. How it happened I don't know. Did John Mark take the first step. Did

Paul? We just don't know. Hopefully John Mark said sorry for his abandoning of Paul and Paul said sorry for his over-hasty judgment of the young man. But they were reconciled. How do we know that?

Because Mark keeps popping up in the names list at the end of Paul's letters. Here in chapter 4 of Colossians, Paul says he is sending Mark to them and he urges the church to welcome him. Maybe they had heard about the rift between Paul and Mark so Paul has to be very clear welcome him. On another occasion Paul writes in a letter asking John Mark to come to him in his imprisonment why 'because he is very useful to me'

There's a big message here both for the church and the world. The man who made a mistake, who walked out on Paul and who was useless has become through the grace of God, through his own character and through the generosity of Paul, a useful man, a trusted man. And ultimately a man who writes the earliest life of Christ. A big mistake in his youth did not dominate his life. In fact he was maybe able to use that and to share his story with many another person who had made mistakes. In the end all things can be made to work together for good, as Paul wrote in Romans 8 – even our mistakes.

And then there is the big man Paul. A towering figure, sometimes a scary figure but not so big or so full of himself that he was unable to stretch out the hand of friendship and reconciliation. And what did he find when he did so. A young man who matured into a good friend and companion, someone who was very useful and who did many services for Paul and not only for Paul for the church of his day and in fact for all Christians who came after. He probably wasn't a great

preacher or teacher but he was a great assistant and he had an education so he could write things down. Early church history has it that he was able to translate for St Peter when Peter came to Rome because Peter did not speak Latin. Oh how I would like to spend more time on these other so-called minor characters not that anyone is a minor character in God's eyes. Everybody is a somebody before God. Nobody is a nobody.

Every church is full of names and people who are only known to a few. Most of us don't know most of the stories and backgrounds of the others in the church. This slide is of former hardworking churchwardens at All Saints. What we do know is that everyone has a catalogue of stories and experiences – some good and some bad but all of which can be turned to good and profit. And we also know that the church cannot survive without faithful workers, servants and soldiers to do the business from cleaning to getting out newsletters, to flowers, to visiting the housebound and sick, to preparing services, cooking meals, preaching sermons, giving generously and so on. Here is a place for those who have rarely messed up and also for those who have messed up. I hope everyone feels they have a place here. I hope everyone feels they are useful in some way here. I hope no one is carrying resentment or unforgiveness for anyone here or outside. You may not be perfect but you are still a saint needed by the other saints. In St Paul's Church Covent Garden, the actor's church, there is a plaque to an actor I suspect none of you have ever heard of. The name on the plaque is Tony Sympson and the plaque simply says: Tony Sympson 'Inspired player of small parts'

May we all be inspired and enthused and committed to playing our small part in the church and the world whatever that part may be.