

EMMANUEL

Loughborough

THE SUNDAY SERVICE

Good morning everyone.

I have the privilege this morning of looking at just 5, quite short, verses in Paul's letter to the Colossian church. We're almost at the end of the letter now, but today, Advent Sunday, I would like to share with you what I think might be a last PR exercise from Paul – public relations!

Over the last months public relations has been a real watchword for many organisations, not least the church, as we have all tried to work out how to be in this strangest of times. Some organisations will have done really well and others almost completely failed and the majority somewhere in between.

I think that this is because public relations relies on one thing – the public's perception: their perception of what has been said, what has been done, and how it has effected them personally, and let's remember perception is not always the same as reality. So, this is no easy road that we have, and still are, travelling. I don't think that it was any easier for Paul in his time either.

For a start, he is writing to people he has never met as far as we know, and he's in prison and therefore not likely to meet them anytime soon either. Also, he is writing with a message that cuts across the prevailing culture of the day, he is writing a potentially dangerous message to people living in the Roman empire – as the whole letter really focusses on – there is someone more important than Caesar and his name is Jesus.

So, what is Paul's PR exercise then? Bearing in mind that to be of any value, exercises have to be repeated on a regular basis, I think it has just two elements:

Prayer

Proclamation

Let's look a little more closely at what he is saying.

V2 Devote yourselves to prayer being watchful and thankful

This looks like a 'how to pray' to me. In fact, it is suggestion to copy Paul and Timothy, *Ch 1.3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ when we pray for you.* Paul is urging the Colossians, and you and me as we read his letter too, to make prayer important – devote yourselves.

Well if your prayer life is anything like mine then this sentence might fill you with dread. Prayer is hard work, takes time, effort and energy and at the moment I seem to be running short of all of these.

We always give time to the things that we are think are most important, don't we? If you want to be a brilliant guitarist you will make sacrifices to practise; if football is your thing then you will get to the matches your team play if it is at all possible; how many of us are being challenged so much at the moment about the lack of being able to spend quality time with our families and friends. The same is true if

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we want to spend time with God, then we must make that decision ourselves. Prayerfulness is motivated by our response to God's grace, is not something that we can take an exam in and either pass or fail. I wonder if we need to take a leaf out of Jesus' book here, prayer was so important to him that he got up early when others were not around to disturb him. I've tried this over the years, having the early morning quiet time as it is often described – at the moment I'm not very good at it, and for a long time felt a complete failure and completely unfaithful. That is until I started to realise that actually my most natural time for prayer now is when I am walking our dog – there are no distractions then, other than the ones that God uses to show me things I think! We all need to find the time that works best for us and not compare our practice to someone else's – the most important thing is to actually pray – that's what Paul says.

Paul explains that prayer needs to have two elements – watchfulness and thankfulness. As we move into the Advent season with its great themes of watching, waiting and preparation perhaps this is a good PR reminder for today especially – more on that later.

But thankfulness, it could almost be seen as an afterthought in Paul's writing, but it is no such thing! Did you know that the words grace and gratitude have the same roots in both English and the words they translate in Paul's original Greek text – but that can't be a surprise surely – how can someone not be grateful to have experienced God's grace?

I wonder how grateful, how thankful, you feel today? It could be a marker of your spiritual health at the moment – perhaps it would be good to talk to someone about this – perhaps in your small group.

V3 – 4 And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.

Having heard how we should pray, with watchfulness and thankfulness and in a devoted way, setting time aside etc, now Paul says: and this is what I want you to pray for. At the beginning of his letter Paul prayed for the Colossians and how they would live *Ch1.10 so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord...* now he is asking them to reciprocate – to pray for him and the ministry he is exercising – even if he is in prison.

We know from the rest of the New Testament that Paul was in prison because of his 'politically-incorrect ministry' as Mark Meynell puts it, and yet this is the first mention of it in the letter. And even when he does mention it, he doesn't ask for prayer to get out of jail, or even for a comfy prison cell and good food, no, he just asks for prayer for how he is going to share the message of the gospel. Paul has seen prison doors open up before – go and read Acts 16.25 – 38 to find out more,

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and it happened to Peter too in Acts 12.5 – 10, so its not as if a precedent hadn't been set for such things; but Paul wants the Colossians Christians to pray for God to open up the way for him to share the gospel – I wonder if that is so that actually all the glory will point back to God and not in any way to Paul. It is the work of the Holy Spirit on a person's heart that enlivens the gospel message to bring new life – that's why praying for evangelism and mission is so important for us all.

But then Paul moves on with his letter to his second PR exercise – proclamation. *V5 Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.* So, having asked the Colossians to pray for him as he proclaims the gospel message Paul now expresses that this is not only his work – but theirs too. And, as we read the letter today – ours as well – maybe? Well I would say yes – but then you would expect me to say that, wouldn't you.

Paul does not seem to give the Colossians or us any options here – this is how to proclaim the gospel – being wise in your actions to others outside the church, small group etc. There are no options: when you... or if you... Paul assumes that this is what you will do. I am sure we can all think of situations where we have seen or heard about someone we have looked up to as a 'model' Christian, who we have then discovered to have behaved in a way we would not have expected; that is shocking enough for us, but think about it for a moment from the point of view of someone who doesn't yet know Jesus, 'well they've got double standards, haven't they'; 'do as I say, not as I do'; 'I thought it said don't do that... in the bible'; 'I thought Christians were supposed to be happy, generous people – what is the matter with them – they're so miserable'; surely our message of hope and joy in Jesus should be portrayed as such – is there any excuse?

The Christians in Colossae are fairly new to faith, but Paul doesn't absolve them from being careful about their behaviour, if they carry a very precious message, then what they carry it in needs to be special too. I don't know about you, but I find this really hard sometimes. Like on Saturday last week when I shouted at my printer so much for messing up my printing that my husband went out and bought a new one! I am really glad no one else heard me as I certainly wasn't making the most of this opportunity to show the difference that knowing Jesus makes to my life!

This leads to the last point Paul makes:

V6 Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so you may know how to answer everyone.

Fortunately for me inanimate objects can't be saved, but imagine if I had shouted at another person...

Paul encourages good conversation, seasoned with salt – what does he mean by this? Well first I don't think this means we all should be out preaching on the

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streets based on this verse alone, the word conversation implies to me talking to family, friends and neighbours – normal everyday interactions in which we are as comfortable speaking about Jesus as we are about our jobs, the meal we enjoyed recently, or even the weather!

Conversation implies talking together with mutual interests which hopefully means saying things that prompt questions in each other. '*Seasoned with salt*' is possibly an old Jewish idiom for 'keeping things interesting'. In other words, don't let your conversation become boring or even banal because let's face it Jesus wasn't either of those – and still isn't! Remember salt is a preservative and a flavour enhancer, Paul seems to be saying use your conversation that way, preserve the true message of the gospel, but help people see it from their point of view too – that's the work of grace in it all. Sometimes a question might catch us out – and actually that's ok (say 'I don't know but I will find out...' and then do just that), but it would be irresponsible to let the same question catch us out a second time, wouldn't it. We must take the questions people ask seriously and do some preparation from time to time too.

This takes me back to being watchful in Advent, the season of preparation for Christmas and beyond.

I wonder if this year, maybe more than ever before, the season of Advent is vital for us, this period for reflecting not only on the familiar Christmas story but also on the fact of Jesus' return.

I wonder how many Christmas trees you have already seen decorated in people's windows, maybe you already have yours decorated. People are preparing, even if we're not exactly sure what things will look like yet; as they long for some comfort and joy in these dark days, it's almost as if they have begun to steal some of the joy of Christmas for now, but of course they are really only stealing the tinsel and glitter of Christmas not the reality of it – the reality of Emmanuel – of God with us in the muck and mess of our everyday lives.

How will we live this Advent – will we be heeding advice from Paul about PR – prayer and proclamation? Will we be watchful and thankful as we prepare not only for Christmas this year, but also for Jesus' return, will we devote ourselves to prayer, and more: will we proclaim the greatest and most gracious message anyone can ever hear – Emmanuel – God with us – for always!

Let's pray:

Lord Jesus, help us to be those who devote themselves to prayer and also to proclaim the good news of God's unfailing love for a world that is weary and hurting. Holy Spirit come and teach us we pray, to live today with hope for tomorrow, lives that are full of grace and truth that we share. Amen.