

THEFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

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Colossians 2:6-23 The Country of the Blind

Three hundred miles and more from Chimborazo, one hundred from the snows of Cotopaxi, in the wildest wastes of Ecuador's Andes, there lies that mysterious mountain valley, cut off from all the world of men, the Country of the Blind.

So opens H. G. Wells' short story about a place where for many generations everyone was blind, and knew nothing of the outside world or of the very concept of sight. Nunez, a young adventurer, is leading a party of climbers on a long expedition. One night he disappears, falling down steep slopes into an unknown valley – the Country of the Blind.

Recalling the old proverb, Nunez expects that his power of sight will make him King in this land, but it turns out that instead they deem him mad and ill. His attempts to persuade them of the concept and power of sight fall on deaf ears, if you pardon the pun. With no prospect of escape from the steep valley, he resigns himself to live amongst them as a second class citizen. In due course his attention is drawn to Medina-sarote, a young woman considered unattractive by the blind, but whose visual features pleased Nunez – and predictably they fall in love. However, he cannot marry her unless he truly becomes one of them. The blind have realised that the root of his “problem” is the bulging protrusions from his eye sockets, and such is his love for Medina-sarote that he agrees to them removing his eyes so that he may marry.

On the eve of the operation, he goes off one last time on his own:

He had fully meant to go to a lonely place where the meadows were beautiful with white narcissus, and there remain until the hour of his sacrifice should come, but as he walked he lifted up his eyes and saw the morning, the morning like an angel in golden armour, marching down the steeps It seemed to him that before this splendour he and this blind world in the valley, and his love and all, were no more than a pit of sin.

He did not turn aside as he had meant to do, but went on and passed through the wall of the circumference and out upon the rocks, and his eyes were always upon the sunlit ice and snow.

We too live as strangers in the country of the blind. Do we love it enough to give up our sight in order to be more at ease amongst those who cannot see?

In the valley this story depicts, the blind do not realise that they are lacking a sense, for they have never experienced it and have organised their world around what they do know and can do. Far from appealing to them as an improvement, the concept of sight seems to them a madness which must be eradicated.

Isn't that the way the world around us views Christianity with its promise of eternal life? If we stand up in the street and preach the need to be born again, we will be scorned and laughed at. Hold out the offer of life to those who don't realise their need of it, and it will be despised. Cast your pearls before swine, and the result is predictable!

This separation between those who have Christ and those who do not is so profound that even the analogy of the sighted and the blind does not go far enough. We have to push it to the extreme in order to get a better sense of this gulf; and the extreme that we can imagine is that of Life and Death. Without Christ, people are Dead. With Him, they live. I suspect even this analogy does not fully express the magnitude of the difference which Christ makes. Perhaps Lewis comes close in his imaginative portrayal of the difference between Heaven and Hell in *The Great Divorce*... but that is another story.

Now of course without Christ people have Life in the biological sense; but there is such a fundamental element missing that they are as good as dead. That missing element is a relationship with their Creator, with the God who made everything there is, and is the source of all life – whether biological or spiritual. Biological life alone is not what we were created for.

Next week we will be looking at Colossians 3, which describes the contrast between the way of life which we will follow if we are alive merely biologically - sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed – with the way of life which comes from a relationship with Christ - compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Quite a contrast... but I will leave that to Andrew C to develop.

This chapter probes deeper than that into the great gulf, and it is no accident that it comes before Chapter 3. It fairly well stands to reason, even to those without Christ, that those who claim to know Christ ought to live to a different standard of morality compared with those who don't. And for those who have come to Christ and received life in him, it also makes sense that our biological lives will no longer rule our behaviour, but instead God's Spirit will.

The message of this chapter though is that it is not just immoral behaviour which belongs in the country of blind, but religion too!

Yes, religion is for the dead and Christless. It is part of the fallen and blind world, not part of the redeemed and sighted.

This is an explosive point of view which is increasingly likely to get you locked up in our "totalitarian" society, where any behaviour or views except intolerance is tolerated.

Let me explain... by looking at what Paul says in this chapter.

⁸ See to it that no-one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

Now there is some debate about what Paul means by "basic principles of this world", the two main contenders being some sort of fallen spirit beings (demons if you like), or the philosophical equivalent of the laws of nature, that is ways of thinking which seem sensible to human logic.

Either way, the implication is clear: there are ideas and philosophies out there which do not stem from Christ, but from the country of the blind. These ideas seem good to those without Christ, but in reality they are hollow – they have no real content or substance – and deceptive – far from bringing enlightenment, they keep people from the truth.

In reality, the difference between such ideas and ideas which come from Christ are like chalk and cheese, death and life. However, today everything is bundled together until inoffensive banners like “faith” and “the spiritual”. To those on the outside, there is no material difference between Christianity and, for example, Hinduism. Both provide a spiritual input into life which is to be welcomed in our increasingly meaningless world.

That is the deception. The truth is that even the most spiritual of faiths is dead compared with Christ, and even the most inoffensive and helpful faith leads to death without Him.

¹⁶ Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.

Now when Paul was writing this, Christianity was shiny and new, unencumbered by its own traditions - unlike the Jewish faith from which many of the believers came. Those who had been brought up with the do's and don'ts of Judaism found it difficult to see beyond them, and so were prone to judge Christians by the same standards. After all, it was God himself who had given the people of Israel laws about the Sabbath day, about what food was fit to be eaten, and a host of other ceremonies they had to observe.

These things were not the invention of the human mind – they came by revelation from God Himself, not from the principles of the world, whatever they might be. They are, in that sense, better than the other philosophies and religions which were around in Colossae 2000 years ago, or are around in the world today. But in comparison with the reality which is found in Christ, they are merely a shadow – a projection of the truth, but with no life in itself.

Shadows cease to exist when the subject that makes them stands directly under the light; and so the shadow of Christ – the law – disappears when Christ himself is in full view.

²⁰ Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: ²¹ “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? ²² These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. ²³ Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

The rules Paul refers to here are most probably the Jewish rules about ceremonial cleanliness, food laws and the likes – perhaps embellished by their traditions which tended to go one step better. If the regulation was not to *handle* something, they would go further and not even *touch* it.

Anyway, Paul says these rules belong in the country of the blind, not in the Kingdom of Christ. Even such religion as that of the Jews is for the dead and the Christ-less, not for those born into Christ's kingdom.

Now this is serious and sobering stuff, and we have to think about it carefully, in case we write off all that Old Testament revelation as irrelevant. Remember that Jesus said “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.” [Matthew 5:17].

The very fact that he had to state this indicates that there was something fundamentally different about the way that Jesus related to the law compared with the religious leaders. And indeed there was: he came to fulfil it, whereas the most the religious leaders could do was make it known to the people – and in so doing make it clear that no-one kept the law perfectly!

When Paul speaks of God “cancelling the written code” in verse 14, the word he uses is not the word for Law, but a word which means “a note of hand or writing in which one acknowledges that money has either been deposited with him or lent to him by another, to be returned at the appointed time.”. In other words, it is a record of our debt to God.

Because we cannot keep it, the Law is God’s statement of our debt to Him. It is that statement of debt which has been cancelled; the principles of the Law as a reflection of God’s character and standards remain, but the power of the law over us as our accuser and thus our enemy has been removed.

The Law has served its purpose. Christ did indeed fulfill it, both by being the only one ever to have lived who kept it perfectly, and perhaps more fundamentally by revealing the character of God, which the Law hinted at, in an everlasting and permanent way – “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (2:9).

Furthermore, when he died on the cross that note of our debt to God was nailed to the cross too: Christ paid that debt, and the note has been destroyed.

Why then would anyone want to return to vain attempts at following a shadow of the image of God, once they have known the fullness of God in Christ?

Yet that is exactly what some people did do. Imagine people in H G Wells’ Country of the Blind, if some had miraculously been given the gift of sight so they knew it was real and true and valuable. Would they then blindfold themselves in order to fit back into their old society? Ridiculous as it sounds, the answer is probably yes, some of them would.

Now in Paul’s day the established religion was Judaism. Christianity was new and fresh, with no traditions of its own to get in the way of true relationship with Christ. However, the last 2000 years have changed all of that, and many Christian traditions have been developed and followed with every bit as much fervour as the Jews had. We are in danger of relying on those traditions instead of Christ himself. Perhaps shockingly, *Christianity as a religion* belongs in the country of the blind too.

It is no surprise that people reject Christianity when all they see of it is the dead rules and regulations of a dead religion. Of course we can take shelter from blame by saying that unless Christ opens their eyes, no-one will realise that they were blind and know to come to the truth. But equally if we are not living out his truth in our lives, how much more difficult must it be for God to show someone what the truth is?

It is possible to come along to church regularly, to listen to the scriptures and the preaching, and not to really get it. Some, like those who were attracted to the old Jewish system, might get a feeling of benefit from a Sunday service. But unless they truly know Christ, they are still wandering about in the wretched valley of the Blind. Sadly, it is possible to go through life without ever realising that you have missed the point; like the valley-dwellers, thinking their little world was all there is when the magnificent reality was all around them – if only they had eyes to see.

Others who will only be able to see the “religious” side of things risk discounting Christianity as worthless because they never come to realise that it is really about knowing our wonderful creator, lord and saviour – and not about things like going to church regularly or giving thanks for food.

The difference which knowing Christ makes in our lives is radical indeed. Paul reminds us of this in verses 11-14:

¹¹In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, ¹²having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

¹³When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴having cancelled the written code

Christianity is not about attending church, praying and reading books that are thousands of years old. That isn't the heart of the matter, that doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to the Zoo makes you a Zebra.

The heart of the matter is coming to know Christ personally, confessing that you have a long list of debts to him which you cannot pay, asking him into your life to clean up the mess you are making and to set you on a different course. Only once we have done this can we experience the new life he wants to give us. That is why it is often called being born again – because we become alive to a whole new world that was hidden to us before.

The tragic irony is that so many think that life as a Christian is so dull, that they want to “live life to the full” without being encumbered by stuffy religious views. But in reality it is they who are dead in their sins and in their nature – cut off from the God who made them, blind without ever realising what sight is.

Clearly it takes a miracle to bring someone from that rebellious and moribund state into new life in Christ – fortunately, God is the God of miracles!

Having been born again, the struggle is not over – indeed it is just beginning. We might wish it otherwise, but once we come to Christ we still have to live in this world, surrounded by the unknowing blind who will constantly try to undermine this new life they do not understand, and make us join them in their way of life without sight.

How can we survive in such a hostile environment?

Paul answers this right at the beginning of the passage:

⁶So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

It is quite obvious really. Christ is the source of our new life, so we must remain close to him. If we do so, we will grow – grow in our knowledge of him, grow in our confidence and faith in him, and significantly to grow in our *thankfulness* to him. It is shamefully easy for me to take for granted my salvation after so many years, but of course the reality is that I have more to thank him for now than I did when I first believed. If we have lost that sense of thankfulness to God, then it is likely that other areas of our lives will lose out too. Whereas if we remain truly thankful, appreciating the wonder of the salvation he has given us, the gift of sight which we have received, then Christ is likely to remain the focus of our attention not just for an hour on a Sunday, but throughout the week and throughout our lives.

There is no situation we can be in where remembering Christ's presence with us is inappropriate – if we feel it is, then we shouldn't be in that situation in the first place!

Funnily enough, when we live our lives like this the things we are drawn to will include attending church, praying and reading books that are thousands of years old! But now it will not be a chore or a duty of our religion, but a pleasure and a benefit of our relationship with God.

Everything, even Christianity, is transformed by coming to Christ.

One of the most difficult aspects of this is how we relate to the world that we still inhabit. It might seem like a marvellous idea if God were to whisk us away to heaven as soon as we place our faith in him, so that we can grow in our knowledge of him without any distractions. But that is not how he has set things up. Quite apart from anything else, God has chosen to work through his people in this world, and that would be rather difficult if he snatched us away!

Just as this new birth marks the start of life with Christ, so it marks the end of life without him. We have, Paul says, died to the world without Christ; and so the appeals of that world should fade for us. We will be looking at that in more detail next week. Suffice for now to say that, having tasted the waters of life, we will never find satisfaction in the world without him.

There are only two worlds that we can be alive to: the world of sin, and world with God. We have to die to one or the other; we cannot be alive to both. If we want to live in the world of sin, then that is actually a dead end. Jesus Christ himself summed this up well in Matthew 16:24:

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"