

COMMUNION: ONE BODY, PHYSICALLY APART (COLOSSIANS)

Sanctuary, September 2020

If you want a very simple ritual, just do The Table bit then pray. If you want more nourishing, immerse yourself in the full liturgy and let Paul's letter to the Colossians speak into our situation now. Paul was writing to a community of people he couldn't physically be with; when you read 'you' below, it is plural. I've thrown in a few 'youse' as a reminder.

CENTERING

Our individual bodies must be physically apart. Yet through the mysterious power of the Holy Spirit, which unites God's people of every time and place, we remain members of one body, with Christ at the head.

According to the Apostle Paul: The mystery in a nutshell is this: Christ is in youse, so therefore youse can look forward to sharing in God's glory. It's that simple ... I want y'all woven into a tapestry of love, in touch with everything there is to know of God. Then you will have minds confident and at rest, focused on Christ, God's great mystery. (Colossians 1:27b, 2:2-3a, MSG)

Let it be so.

CONFESSION

Your old life is dead. Your new life, which is your *real* life ... is with Christ in God. *He* is your life ... And that means killing off everything connected with the way of death. (Colossians 3:3, 5; MSG)

God of life, we turn to you.

Forgive us our sins.

Pause for reflection. Sin is anything we do which damages or disrupts the shalom, peace and wholeness which are God's desire for the world. Sin can be individual or corporate, involve action or inaction, and be directed against yourself, other people, or the earth. What sin comes to mind? Pray about it. How could you or we as a body move towards making things whole?

Hear the good news: Christ is the head of the body ... and so spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross ... (Colossians 1:18-20, MSG)

*God, forgive us our sins
and lead us into wholeness.*

For in Christ all things are reconciled:

Even us, even today. Amen.

INSTRUCTION

The Apostle Paul writes: As God's chosen people, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, unpretentiousness, gentleness and endurance. Endure one another and forgive each other. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them together in complete harmony.

Let Christ's shalom rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to shalom. And practice gratitude. Let the word of Christ fill you as you teach and direct one another with wisdom, and as you sing your hearts out to God. And whatever youse say or do, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, thanking God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:12-17)

God, as we listen to your word,

make your virtues our virtues,

your peace our peace, your wisdom our wisdom,

that we may bear the Holy Spirit's fruit. Amen.

THE TABLE

Blessed is our God, both guest and host, who unites us across time and space and invites us to share in communion.

Let us hear the story of how it began: On the night that he was betrayed, Jesus sat at the table with his friends. He took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'Take, eat, this is my body.' Later he took a cup of wine and gave it to them, saying, 'This cup is the new relationship with God, made possible through my death. Drink, all of you, to remember me.'

So now we follow Jesus' example and command, taking bread and wine together.

In these, Jesus has promised to be present; through these, we become one with Christ; in Christ, we may be made whole.

Thanks be to God.

The body of Christ is given for the life of the world. Self-giving bread for self-giving people.

Let us receive what we are.

Let us become what we receive:

The body of Christ. >> Eat.

Jesus, the wellspring of life,

invites all who are thirsty to come to him.

May this keep you in full and flourishing life:

Until he comes. >> Drink.

LET US PRAY

We have dined on Christ's own flesh and blood:
and as this bread and wine become one with us,
we become one with Christ:

*bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh,
loving, forgiving, and praying for the world.*

The Apostle Paul writes: We haven't stopped praying for y'all, asking God to give you wise minds and spirits attuned to his will ... We pray that you'll live well for the Master, making him proud of you as you work hard in his orchard ... We pray that you'll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul—not the grim strength of gritting your teeth but the glory-strength God gives. It is strength that endures the unendurable and spills over into joy, thanking the Father who makes us strong enough to take part in everything bright and beautiful that he has for us. (Colossians 1:9-12; MSG)

*We pray for all those who need
wisdom, strength, endurance, and joy.*

*Pray aloud or silently, with words, candles,
teaspoons, doodles or however,
for whoever and whatever!*

BENEDICTION

As this time draws to a close, let us never forget the communion of saints which continues to unite us across time and space; and let us heed once more the Apostle Paul, our brother, whose words speak through the miles and centuries and into our hearts now:

My counsel for y'all is simple and straightforward: Just go ahead with what you've been given. You received Christ Jesus, the Master; now *live* him. You're deeply rooted in him. You're well-constructed upon him. You know your way around the faith. Now do what you've been taught. School's out; quit studying the subject and start *living* it! And let your living spill over into thanksgiving ... If you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, *act* like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ—that's where the action is. See things from *his* perspective ... Pray diligently ... Grace be with YOU. (Colossians 2:6-7; 3:1-2; 4:2a; 4:18b; MSG).

Amen: Let it be so.

Written and arranged by Alison Sampson for Sanctuary © 2020

AFTERWORD

Dear ones:

I drew on Paul's letter to the Colossians because it was written to encourage people he could not physically be with. As he counsels them to love, pray, and endure, his words resonated with our current situation. If the liturgy inspires you to read the full letter (only four chapters!), here's a couple of notes which you may find helpful:

First, remember it was *written to a community*, and should be read in this light. In it, Paul tackles a philosophy or false teaching which was current in Colossae at the time. Its nature must be inferred from his counterarguments.

The *list of virtues* (2:12-15) made a mockery of contemporaneous lists of virtues as Paul taught people, particularly men, to act in ways held in contempt by the wider society. In his world, men did not submit. Full stop. Yet Paul is telling them to ditch their sense of entitlement, swallow their pride, renounce payback, refuse violence, and learn to love, forgive and serve with humility and gentleness. (It's great that everyone gets this now. Right?)

Modern readers can find the *household codes* (3:18-4:1) hard to digest. Know that Paul is turning upside down contemporaneous household codes, which instructed women, children and slaves how to submit to the male head of household—for he had *absolute* power over every other member. And while Paul explicitly counselled reciprocity (in itself radical bordering on illegal since the patriarchal household was the foundation of the Roman state), read alongside his descriptions of Christ as the suffering, serving, self-sacrificial head and the list of virtues earlier in the letter, we see that he's implicitly encouraging men to engage in a form of self-sacrificial love which is nothing short of revolutionary.

Paul's counsel to *wives to 'submit'* to their husbands must be read both in this light and in light of Paul's other descriptions of women as pastors, co-workers, and heads of house churches. Nowhere does he expect women to be meek or submissive, and reading his counsel as such is to misread Paul and misunderstand the extraordinarily radical nature of his teachings (which, contra some conservative scholars, do *not* include Timothy).

We can feel disappointed that Paul did not argue for the *manumission of slaves*. Again, we must be aware of his economic context, in which slaves did the things electricity, plumbing, internal combustion engines and computers do for us now; the political context, in which manumission would threaten the viability not only of the state but of poor peasant farmers; and his letter to Philemon, in which he implicitly *does* make a very strong case for manumission. We could also be honest about current forms of debt bondage and human trafficking which enable us to buy cheap t-shirts, electrical goods and sexual gratification: there are effectively more slaves alive now than at any other time in human history.

If you want to learn more, *Colossians Remixed* (Walsh & Keesmaat) is a very stimulating commentary; it reads Colossians through the lens of globalisation, capitalism, militarism and empire. If you like novels, Christos Tsiolkas' *Damascus* portrays Paul's context in gripping, if extremely violent and visceral, ways. It is difficult for us to imagine the first century world, but Tsiolkas does a magnificent job of taking us there and showing us just how radical following Jesus was—and of making us extremely grateful for just how deeply this faith has already changed and healed the world.