

“FORWARDS TO GROWTH AND MATURITY”

Colossians 1:1-14

When a new child is presented to his or her grandparents – or, indeed, aunts and other interested parties – any time between the ages of nought and eighteen, one of the first exclamations will surely be, “Hasn’t he grown!”. I always thought this was a rather daft thing to say as, if there’s one thing a child is expected to do, it’s grow. (Strangely, when it gets to other end of the age spectrum people don’t exclaim to aging grannies, “Haven’t you shrunk!”) You’d be fairly disappointed if there was no sign of growth – and I have known people whose children have suffered from growth problems, which cause a great deal of anxiety and pain for all concerned. But by and large, we humans share with most members of the animal kingdom and a fair bit of the rest of creation the capacity for growth and development.

Just as it’s expected of children, pets and garden shrubs, growth is pretty well taken for granted in most other spheres of life as well. The economy is expected to grow month by month otherwise we are told we’ve fallen into recession and everyone goes about with long faces (except the bankers whose bonuses still seem to plot graphs of unparalleled growth). We assume our knowledge base will increase, both personally and collectively, as the years go by and we learn more and more about our world and our universe. We expect our standard of living to rise, our exam results to climb, our sporting achievements to improve (the Olympic motto is “*Citius, altius, fortius – Faster, higher, stronger*”), the quality of our television pictures and our musical recordings to get better. We really can’t stay still as human beings; we need to be making progress, to be moving forward.

Of course, there is a school of thought – exemplified by such people as H G Wells and the Huxleys, among others – that this progress will eventually lead to a utopian world where everything is pretty well perfect, where humanity is about as civilised as it’s possible to be and everyone lives on equal terms. Economists like Milton Friedman and others of his slightly deranged Chicago School, think that if you just leave the markets to get on with it, then everything will develop towards a world that is just as we’d like it to be. Despite the clear evidence of two world wars and decades of unparalleled greed and violence, there are still a few innocent souls who cling to such fairytale theories of perfectionism.

But, although we know that we will never reach that perfectionist nirvana, we still feel that things should be developing and moving forward and it’s a key element in our Christian lives. We need to keep moving on, to be trying to make progress in our relationship with God and with our fellow human beings. We cannot be content simply to sit back and make do with what we are and what we’ve got here and now. That’s why it is an element in our mission statement, which we’re working our way through clause by clause on Sunday mornings this month. Last week we saw how we are striving to “*look upwards in worship*” and this week we are thinking about “*looking forwards to growth and maturity*”. Just about anywhere you choose to open your New Testament, you will find something about growing and developing in the Christian life. Many of Jesus’ parables are about growth – growing faith, bearing fruit, developing knowledge. Paul peppers his letters with it. Just a couple of examples, one from Corinthians and one from Thessalonians:

“Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our sphere of activity among you will greatly expand.” (2 Corinthians 10:15)

“We ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love all of you have for one another is increasing.” (2 Thessalonians 1:3)

And Peter has similar expectations when he writes to the Christian communities for which he has responsibility:

“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.” (1 Peter 2:2)

“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 3:18)

You'll find such things in all Paul's letters, as I say, and we have an example here in the words we've just read from his letter to the Christians in Colosse. He wants the Colossians – like the Corinthians and the Thessalonians and the Ephesians and all the rest – to grow and develop as followers of Jesus, to deepen their relationships with God and with each other, to grow in their enthusiasm for the gospel and their desire to tell others about it. They cannot simply sit still and vegetate, spiritually speaking. So in these words he tells them – and us – **From What, To What** and **For What** he wants them to grow.

1. FROM WHAT?

Obviously there is some kind of base line from which we are to grow. A plant grows from a seed, a child from a little baby, a theory from the germ of an idea. Where does he see these Christians at the moment? What's their starting point? Well, what Paul says here is applicable to every Christian, to every follower of Jesus the Messiah, because these are the basic non-negotiables of the Christian life. If you're truly a Christian, this is where you'll start from.

Clearly they have somehow heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the case of the Colossians, they've heard it from Epaphras, one of Paul's close colleagues and "*a faithful minister of Christ*". Epaphras is an evangelist and he has been to Colosse to tell the people there about the good news of Jesus and the Kingdom of God. You may have heard about Jesus from a preacher or a friend or an evangelist, or you may have heard about him from a book or a recording or a film or something similar, but you've heard the gospel in some way or other.

And because of that these Christians have a faith in Jesus, they have, in some way, expressed their belief in him. There's an element of faith in their response to the gospel. That then leads on to what Paul calls here "*the love you have for all the saints*". That may well start off very small, but there is nonetheless a feeling of identification with and sympathy for other people who have expressed some belief in Jesus. Even though most of us have come across other Christians whom we heartily despise (let's be honest about that) and who may even have put us off Christianity at some point, we still have a sense of a bond with other followers of Jesus, there is still an acknowledgment that we should love them – and, by and large, we do.

And then because of all that, the Colossians have a hope for eternity. Paul writes of "*the hope that is stored up for you in heaven*". There's something beyond the here and now that we look forward to. We don't understand it. We're not really sure what form it will take. We cannot know exactly what it entails. But we know it's going to be somehow better than what we've got now and that it will go on for ever. It's clear from what Jesus says about it and from the ways in which Paul and John and Peter and the other New Testament writers go on about it that this is something that is really worth looking forward to, as God's kingly rule finally comes to fruition.

And those things mean that the Colossians are "*qualified to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light*" (v12), which sounds pretty good to me. It means that they have been rescued from darkness, from the prospect of an eternity spent not in the kingdom of light but in the everlasting gloom of God's absence, and that they have been forgiven for all the ways in which they have failed to live up to God's standards for their lives. And what Paul writes to those Colossians is also true of those of us who call ourselves Christians, followers of Jesus, today. We are people whose lives have been radically transformed by the implications of the gospel, who have some amazing things for which to thank God. But we cannot just accept that and stay in that position. We do need to move on and develop those transformed lives into lives that can touch others, lives which grow ever deeper into the things we've learned. We need to look forwards to what comes next.

2. TO WHAT?

So what does Paul want the Colossian Christians to grow towards? Well, in *v11* he writes that they are to grow in the knowledge of God. And in *v9* he writes that they will be filled with the knowledge of his will. In other words, I would suggest, the main thing is to have an increasing awareness of God in their lives. They are to discover what it is that God wants them to do, how it is that God wants them to live their lives. Obviously, as we hear the gospel and start to express our belief, our faith in Jesus we start to see that there is an alternative way of looking at life, a worldview that says “There is another way. This is not all there is.” But we don’t get it all at once, any more than a student setting out on a degree course in physics or French suddenly is filled with all he or she needs to get a PhD. We need to read the Bible, to pray, to discuss, to observe, to be open constantly to finding out more and more about God and his ways. We need to become more and more adapted to living as God wants, to putting what we are finding out about him into practice, to applying what God has told us in the Bible to the ways in which we order our life together as a church, to the ways in which we carry out our daily work, to the ways in which we help our children, to the ways in which we make decisions about where our lives are going.

That’s not an easy ask, though. Life doesn’t suddenly become all sweetness and light as soon as we decide to act on the gospel that we’ve heard. So Paul tells the Colossians that they are to expect to be “*strengthened with all power according to the glorious might*” (*v11*). We know from the rest of the New Testament that the power of which Paul writes here is power from God’s Holy Spirit. There are all kinds of images employed by Paul and others to try and describe how this happens, but the most common is that of being filled with the Holy Spirit. As we acknowledge the ways in which God is involved in our lives and as we allow ourselves to be led forward by him, so the spaces that are vacated by our own selfish motives and ambitions can be filled with that Holy Spirit. That’s the energising force, if you like, that then enables us to keep making progress in our relationship with God and in our knowledge of what he expects of us.

And the spin-off from that is that the Colossian Christians will find that they are given endurance, patience and a sense of joyful gratitude to God (*v11*). Just as a growing tree, for example, gains in strength to withstand the elements, or as an experienced teacher develops patience in dealing with pupils, so we, as followers of Jesus, find that we become more able to deal with the vicissitudes and vagaries of life in a fallen world. And for that we are thankful to God, grateful for his activity in our lives, filled with a sense of joy, of serenity that we are able to leave it to him. In short, we gradually find ourselves living lives that are, as Paul puts it in *v10*, “*worthy of the Lord and pleasing to him in every way.*” Which is what our final point is all about.

3. FOR WHAT?

This isn’t simply growth for growth’s sake. In his seminal book *Small Is Beautiful*, E F Schumacher questions whether, for example, economic growth is always desirable and wonders what the point of trying to get everything bigger all the time really is. Usually, though, there is some reason for growth – humans grow so that they can achieve their full potential, plants grow so that they can bloom or produce fruit, our reserves of knowledge grow so that we can more effectively manage the world around us, and so on. Paul tells the Colossians why they need to grow in their knowledge of God and his ways and, again, what he says to them also applies to us.

Firstly, he says that he prays for their growth “*in order that they may ... please God in every way*” (*v9*). Going back to our original example, it’s a bit like a child, whose growth (usually) pleases his or her parents. They are glad to see the child growing and developing in every way – not just physically, but also in terms of skills and intelligence. God wants to see us making the most of the transformed life that he has given us. He delights in the ways in which we grow into his purposes, in which we grow in our understanding of him and his ways. And just as we, humanly speaking, like to know that we are pleasing people, so spiritually speaking, it does us good to know that we are pleasing God.

And, secondly, we please God by “*bearing fruit in every good work*”. In other words, there is something positive to show for our growth and development. We find our lives are becoming more rounded and we are becoming more aware of God and his purposes, but that needn’t always be obvious to those looking on. What does need to be happening, therefore, is that we are making a positive difference to our immediate world. The ways in which we show that we are growing deeper in our relationship with God should be observable to the people amongst whom we live and work and we should be having an effect on the lives of others and on the life of our community.

“*Bearing fruit*” is obviously an image linked to growth, but what does it actually mean? If we look at the way Jesus uses it in some of his parables, it could mean bringing other people into the Kingdom of God. But it can also simply mean that we are helping, through the power of his Holy Spirit, to transform the world around us, offering glimpses of the Kingdom of God in the way we relate to others and reach out to the people we encounter day by day.

As we grow and mature as followers of Jesus, we have an increasing impact and influence – both as individual disciples living our lives where God has called us to be, and as a church here at the heart of the city. I suppose you could say that the collection of growing disciples that we call the church should be having the impact, because it is a large enough entity to be seen in the community. And as individual followers of Jesus, working away at subverting the culture in which we live and move – a bit like yeast, as Jesus points out – we have an influence, an influence which is not always appreciated, but is nevertheless having an effect.

As we grow and mature we can help and encourage other disciples, fellow followers of Jesus the Messiah. Those who have the experience and wisdom that they have accumulated, sometimes simply through having been around a bit longer to grow, can share it with those who are still young in the faith. And those who may have the energy and enthusiasm but have yet to temper that with experience and wisdom can use that help others as well.

In all of it, though, as we have said many times recently, the ways in which our lives are changing, the ways in which it is obvious that we are growing and maturing, can help to point others towards Jesus. Just as, no doubt, Epaphras modelled in his own life the things about which he was speaking to the Colossians, so we should be demonstrating in all that we do our faith in Jesus, our love for the saints and the amazing hope that we have for eternity. If we are to do that effectively, then we really do need to “*grow in the knowledge of God*”, to “*look forwards to growth and maturity*”.

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As followers of Jesus we need to keep moving on, to be trying to make progress in our relationship with God and with our fellow human beings. Look at *2 Corinthians 10:15*; *2 Thessalonians 1:3*; *1 Peter 2:2*; *2 Peter 3:18*, for example. Paul wants the Colossians to grow and develop as followers of Jesus, to deepen their relationships with God and with each other, to grow in their enthusiasm for the gospel and their desire to tell others about it. He explains **From What**, **To What** and **For What** he wants them (and us) to grow.

1. FROM WHAT?

If you're truly a Christian, this is where you'll start from. In the case of the Colossians, they've **heard it** from Epaphras, *"a faithful minister of Christ"*. And because of that these Christians have a faith in Jesus, they have, in some way, expressed their belief in him. There's an element of faith in their response to the gospel. That then leads on to what Paul calls here *"the love you have for all the saints"*, a feeling of identification with and sympathy for other people who have expressed some belief in Jesus. And then the Colossians have a hope for eternity. Paul writes of *"the hope that is stored up for you in heaven"*. There's something beyond the here and now that we look forward to. Those things mean that the Colossians are *"qualified to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light"* (v12), they have been rescued from darkness, from the prospect of an eternity spent not in the kingdom of light but in the everlasting gloom of God's absence, and that they have been forgiven for all the ways in which they have failed to live up to God's standards for their lives.

2. TO WHAT?

In v11 Paul writes that they are to grow in the knowledge of God. And in v9 he writes that they will be filled with the knowledge of his will. In other words, I would suggest, the main thing is to have an increasing awareness of God in their lives. They are to discover what it is that God wants them to do, how it is that God wants them to live their lives. We need to read the Bible, to pray, to discuss, to observe, to be open constantly to finding out more and more about God and his ways. We need to become more and more adapted to living as God wants, to putting what we are finding out about him into practice, to applying what God has told us in the Bible to the ways in which we order our life. Paul tells the Colossians that they are to expect to be *"strengthened with all power according to the glorious might"* (v11), that is, power from God's Holy Spirit. Then they will find that they are given endurance, patience and a sense of joyful gratitude to God (v11). Christians eventually find themselves living lives that are, as Paul puts it in v10, *"worthy of the Lord and pleasing to him in every way."*

3. FOR WHAT?

This isn't simply growth for growth's sake. Firstly, Paul says that he prays for their growth *"in order that they may ... please God in every way"* (v9). Secondly, we please God by *"bearing fruit in every good work"*. *"Bearing fruit"* is obviously an image linked to growth, and could mean bringing other people into the Kingdom of God and mean that we are helping, through the power of his Holy Spirit, to transform the world around us. As we grow and mature as followers of Jesus, we have an increasing impact and influence on our community and on our fellow Christians.

Questions for discussion

1. Why is growth a good thing/ If you don't think it is, why not?
2. What does growth mean for the Christian? How can we measure it? Should we even try?
3. What do you understand by *"growing in the knowledge of God"*? What happens if you don't?
4. How could the church help Christians to grow more effectively?

5. What would be the effects of a church full of growing Christians? Is any of that happening in our church?