

A gathering of friends at an English estate nearly turned to tragedy when one of the children strayed into deep water. The gardener heard the cries for help, plunged in, and rescued the drowning child. That child's name was Winston Churchill. His grateful parents asked the gardener what they could do to reward him. He hesitated, then said, "I wish my son could go to college someday and become a doctor." "We'll see to it," Churchill's parents promised.

Years later, while Sir Winston was prime minister of England, he was stricken with pneumonia. The country's best physician was summoned. His name was Dr. Alexander Fleming, the man who discovered and developed penicillin. He was also the son of that gardener who had saved young Winston from drowning. Later Churchill remarked, "Rarely has one man owed his life twice to the same person."

It is to the subject of our redemption that we come to in our reading from St. Paul's letter to the Colossians this morning. For the Apostle to the Gentiles proclaims with breathless joy that they themselves have been dragged from deep waters onto the shore of salvation. They like Churchill had been drowning, they had contracted a death

dealing disease and were coughing out their life's breath. But now they have been saved from their desperate condition by the Son of God, Jesus the Messiah. This is Paul's theme all throughout his letters to his Gentile audience. They who had been far off have now been brought near. The promises to the Jews have been made good in the coming of the Messiah and now the goodness of the one true God pours down like a fountain upon the whole world. For the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. Grace is our theme and so is mercy. For God has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. In his son Jesus, and by his death, we have been reconciled to the Father. But not only reconciled. No, we are being sanctified – fitted out to be citizens of the kingdom of God.

So, Paul wrote to the Colossians in such bright lines to encourage them in the Faith, for he had never met them. In his many and wide-ranging journeys by foot and by ship, Paul had established churches in Galatia, Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica and Ephesus. He had visited the churches in Antioch and Rome. We have his letters as testimony to his ministry. Colossae is unique among his letters in that he had never met them face to face. Unlike the great cities of Antioch,

Corinth or Rome, Colossae was a small, run down town in the center of what we call Turkey today. But it is likely that while Paul was in jail in Ephesus he met a man named Epaphras from Colossae. Epaphras had preached the good news of Jesus to them, and they had believed. So Paul begins his letter to them rejoicing at the news that they have believed the Gospel, that they have begun to bear fruit in their lives. He has not ceased to pray for them, that they would grow in all wisdom and understanding which is pleasing to the Lord. He praised God in the sure confidence that they who once were slaves in the dominion of darkness have been ransomed by the beloved Son of God, and were now citizens with the saints in light. So he calls them to join in praising the Son: he is the image of the invisible God; he rules over all authorities; he holds all things together; he is the head of the church; he has defeated death and hell; he, being truly God, has reconciled all things and has made peace. The Colossians were living witnesses to the truth of Paul's Gospel.

What had Jesus done for them? What has Jesus done for you? For we must come to these verses seeking wisdom and understanding. And if we see clearly, and the foolishness of pride is removed only just a little we may see ourselves staring back as though in a mirror. For Paul

writes to them that the Colossians were estranged and aliens. From whom? From the God who had made them and had providentially preserved them until that very moment. Yet they did not know him, love him, worship him or give him thanks for all his benefits that he had shown them. Instead they were darkened in their minds. They worshipped the created order: suns and moons, stars in their courses, animals and birds and creeping things. They worshipped false gods and demons. They worshipped the products of their own hands and gave thanks to themselves for their own successes. They rejoiced in their own good luck and congratulated themselves for all their kind fortunes. They were God's enemies. He had made them, and like all craftsmen, he had left his mark upon their minds and hearts. Yet they, with the rest of creation, had fallen in Adam and were now hostile to the God of Heaven. Their minds were dark, their wills bent, their bodies enslaved to the passions of the flesh.

But now their condition has changed! Their state has been redeemed! They are no longer under the dominion of the powers of darkness, but now citizens of light. They are no longer dim of mind and hostile of will. They are no longer enemies of God but friends, children of the most high. What could have made this change? It must have been a

momentous action, for no small effort could have accomplished this. It was no small thing and no small time. For Paul told the Galatians, “In the fullness of time God sent his son, born of a woman.” When all the world was firmly settled in its alienation from the Father and swords were drawn to fight against the God who had made them, God sent his son in our flesh to die upon the cross. He came to reconcile us in his “body of flesh”. This isn’t a phrase that comes easily to our minds. But Paul’s meaning is this. Jesus, as the Messiah, was the representative of his people. To fulfill his role he took upon himself the flesh that had been in rebellion toward God. He took upon himself the sins of the people, though he himself had no sin. But not only was Jesus fully man, he was fully God as well. For Paul reminded the Colossians, “In the Messiah all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell”, and again, “In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily”. So we must see then that in Jesus’ body of flesh that God meets the sin of humanity head on, identifies with it, and puts our sin to death on the cross. What is the result of this mystery? That those who believe in Jesus are in Jesus. He is their representative. What is true of him is true of them. And they find that their sins have been

condemned in him as he hung upon the tree and that they have been redeemed from death, and have been reconciled to God.

When the A.J. Gordon was pastor of a church in Boston, he met a young boy in front of the sanctuary carrying a rusty cage in which several birds fluttered nervously. Gordon inquired, "Son, where did you get those birds?" The boy replied, "I trapped them out in the field." "What are you going to do with them?" "I'm going to play with them, and then I guess I'll just feed them to an old cat we have at home." When Gordon offered to buy them, the lad exclaimed, "Mister, you don't want them, they're just little old wild birds and can't sing very well." Gordon replied, "I'll give you \$2 for the cage and the birds." "Okay, it's a deal, but you're making a bad bargain." The exchange was made and the boy went away whistling, happy with his shiny coins. Gordon walked around to the back of the church property, opened the door of the small wire coop, and let the struggling creatures soar into the blue. The next Sunday he took the empty cage into the pulpit and used it to illustrate his sermon about Christ's coming to seek and to save the lost -- paying for them with His own precious blood. "That boy told me the birds were not songsters," said Gordon, "but when I released them and they winged

their way heavenward, it seemed to me they were singing, 'Redeemed, redeemed, redeemed!'"

Oh, dear friends, this is indeed good news! Does it not cheer the heart to see the Son of God in his glory calling to us, not as slaves, but as friends? Does not our song, seem to little a thing in response to such a great gift of salvation? Yes, we must redouble our song and shout for praise. But Paul encourages the Colossians and us as well that our redemption from sin leads on to holiness and finally to the throne of Almighty God. For we have been reconciled to the end that Jesus might present us as a sparkling gift to the Father: holy, blameless and free from accusation. No, we have not achieved perfection yet, nor shall we this side of the grave. But it is the Father's business to make for himself a royal priesthood, a holy nation. It is his desire that by the power of the Holy Spirit we be remade in the very image of his Son. To that goal then let us hold fast to the unshakeable gospel. Let us shake off from us the works of darkness and let us bring forth a harvest of good fruit, works pleasing to God. AMEN.