Colossians C **Colossians 1:1-14** **Scott MALCOLM**

People who know a lot about wine, people who have studied it, learnt it, tasted and tested it, can upon smelling and swirling it in their mouths, say what sort of grape it is. The country it was grown in, the region of that country, the vineyard it came from, the year it was produced and the name of the wine marker. If they are really good.

People who know a lot about the scriptures can do the same. People who have studied the gospels, the prophets, the letters of Paul, Peter and John, know their writers like wine connoisseurs know their pinot or sauvignon blanc. There are stylistic clues to each one, theological nuances to how they express themselves, the kinds of language they use, their phases and ideas. In some cases, even the quality of their Greek.

So, these New and First testament scholars are pretty good at assigning who has written what and to whom. And interestingly enough authorship of some of the books of the bible are very straightforward, like a lot of the letters of Paul … and some are not. Also, like some of the letters of Paul, some of which seem to have been written by Paul’s followers, in his name.

We are going to be having a look at Colossians which happens to be one of those letters which isn’t as straightforward as it might be. There are lots of reasons why; some seem very important, and others not so. The judgement about this is not conclusive, but seems reasonable, so as in wine appreciation, where I recognise that I don’t know as much as the experts, I am going to defer to them in this, and simply refer when speaking about Colossians … to the writer of Colossians, you of course, may do as you feel right.

This uncertainty is also true when asking questions about why this letter was written, it seems that the church in Colossae has been in trouble for a while, and for a lot of reasons. Most are to do with religious ideas that take away from the place of Jesus. But who the people are, who have these ideas, is not known!

These Jesus limiting thoughts aren’t like nice, neat, clear segments of a pie. They aren’t anywhere near so tidy. They are much more like a bowl of spaghetti, all tangled together, inter twined and overlapping. Hard to know where they start and even harder, where they end.

The writer of Colossians seeks to deal with this spaghetti thinking, not by singling out one opponent at a time, but by addressing the problem’s as they arise.

The church at Colossae had been founded by one of Paul’s fellow workers in the gospel, Epaphras. At the time the letter was written the fellowship can’t have been more than 10-15 years old. So, Colossae is a new church, probably with some established and some new believers, Jewish Christians and Gentile converts.

We need to remember, that at this time, while there were Ministers; elders and deacons, systemised training wasn’t available. There weren’t any Bibles, commentaries or Christian handbooks to refer too. Hebrew scrolls were hard to come by and the letters that came through had to be painstakingly hand copied and then passed on. Those chosen, simply did the best they could, relying on the Holy Spirit and the travelling Apostles and Prophets that wandered by.

Some of whom, may well have caused the trouble that the letter seeks to address.

When the church was founded and the letter written, Colossae was a small town in what is now modern Turkey. But it had been a significant place, an important trading centre in the Roman Empire. This may be why there is so much spaghetti thinking here, as people from many places passed through or settled over the years, all with their different ideas and beliefs.

Colossae is a new Christian church which is having a few problems. Help has been sought by the leaders of this congregation from the Pauline group of their founding father, Epaphras. They are asked for guidance, teaching and help. For instruction in dealing with the mixed up and unedifying thinking that plagues the congregation.

And so, the letter arrives.

It begins with an introduction and greeting. It continues with the writer praising the church for their faith and great love for Christ and one another, in the Spirit. It continues with praise for their believing the gospel, and the gospels work in them and the whole world around them.

Then, the writer prays …

“… asking that we may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that we may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as we bear fruit in every good work and as we grow in the knowledge of God.

That we may be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and that we be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.

He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us in to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

…

Anyone who prays for us with such love and care, such faith and hope … I think we need to listen too.

…

Any God, who does for his people, as this prayer suggests … needs following.

…

And any religious ideas that take away from the beloved son, Jesus, in whom this wonderous work has been done …

Needs, like a bad wine … to be spat in to the bucket, and tipped down the drain.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.