

14 July 2019

Psalm 92

Colossians 1.1-14

Keep on growing

Paul is writing to the church at Colossae. It is a church that Paul did not plant, and one that he did not know personally. His main connection with the church is through one of his fellow-workers Epaphras, who seems to have been instrumental in planting the Christian community in the city.

But clearly Paul has heard a good deal about the church from Epaphras ... and perhaps from others as well. And what he has heard has impressed him.

As often he begins his letter by telling the church how much he gives thanks to God for them.

He speaks warmly of their faith and their love:

- their faith in Christ
- their love for all the saints, which has been inspired and enabled by the Spirit of God.

And then Paul goes on to pray for them.

And part of his prayer for these Christians is that they will keep on growing. Specifically, he prays that they will keep on 'growing in the knowledge of God.' (v10)

I want to explore this morning what it might mean for us to keep on growing as Christians.

1. The importance of growing as Christians

Someone has said of life: "If we don't change, we don't grow. If we don't grow, we aren't really living."

Growing is part and parcel of what it means to be alive. And if we want life to be at its best it will mean that we are always growing.

It is true of life in general, and it is certainly true of the Christian life.

‘If we don’t grow, we aren’t really living.’

The Christian life at its best, is a constant adventure, a constant discovery, a constant opening up of new avenues of service, of new ways of experiencing God’s presence in our lives.

And yet it is so easy to stagnate. To stop growing. To come to a point in life where we think that we have ‘arrived’. No more growing to do. No more change and development to take on. No new things to learn.

The problem, of course, is that ‘growing old is compulsory, growing up is optional.’

All that goes with growing old will continue to happen to us, whether we like it or not. But just because we look more mature, or show the signs of experience and the signs of wear and tear, does not mean that we have grown in any meaningful way.

We have to choose whether through life’s experience we will allow ourselves to keep on developing and learning and growing ... or whether we think we have reached our peak.

It is very easy to live with the idea that growing is only for the young. And certainly growth happens more rapidly for the young.

Children and young people grow physically, mentally and emotionally at a rapid pace ... and it’s sometime difficult to keep up with them.

And it is very easy to get the idea that growing is really only for the young and adulthood is the time when growth has stopped and we can now settle down to a kind of equilibrium.

But while growth may be more rapid when we are young, in all sorts of ways it is important that we keep on growing and developing as people.

And Christian growth is always rapid when we take our first steps in the Christian faith. We soak in a huge amount about what the gospel means to our lives. We learn a great deal about God, about trust, about the way of love and inevitably that rate of growth cannot be sustained. We settle down.

But what’s important is that we don’t stop growing. Growth might be different, but it should always be a part of the Christian experience.

But - beware

- Some Christians stop growing soon after they make their Christian commitment – as if being baptised or becoming a church member is a kind of graduation when you can put all of your learning and growing behind you. You have made it!
- Some Christians keep on learning and growing beyond that point ... but they come to a point when life becomes comfortable, they become set in their ways. It's as if there is no more to learn. As if there is no more growing to do. That's all in the past.

2. We grow, because there is always more for us to learn of God

Paul's prayer is that these Christians will grow in their knowledge of God.

If we have stopped growing, and being stretched in our Christian faith, what does that say about God and our relationship with God?

A lot of fun is sometimes made of academics in universities who end up studying the most obscure things. I came across a list of obscure academic papers. Some of the things that have been studied by academics include the following:

- Researchers at the Ecole National Veterinaire de Toulouse carried out a study to discover whether dog fleas or cat fleas are able to jump the highest. You'll be interested to know that the dog flea jumps both higher and further than the cat flea!
- A philosopher at the University of California wrote a paper on the question 'Do ethicists steal more books?' after his research showed that more books on advanced ethics go missing from the university library than on any other comparable subject. You would have thought that people studying ethics would have been more trustworthy ...
- Again from the University of California, an ophthalmologist studied the woodpecker to try to work out how it avoids getting a headache, with all of that banging of its beak into tree trunks.

And some researchers spend a lifetime's work getting to know one tiny aspect of this world – We have been watching Judi Dench's Wild Borneo Adventure. In

one episode Judi Dench met a scientist who spent her time studying the dung beetle. Her fascination in this creature was infectious.

If the life of the dung beetle is full of fascination, how much more the life of God ... who warrants our constant desire to learn more and more about him. If ever we think that we have got God summed up and sorted out, then we are doing God the greatest disservice.

To stop growing is to admit that we have become disinterested in God, because to be interested in this God who is full of mystery, who will always be beyond our understanding - will always draw us beyond where we are now ... will always stretch us. We will want to discover more and more about his love, about his intent for our lives, about how our lives fit with his life.

And when we talk about growing in our knowledge of God we are talking about so much more than intellectual learning.

We should certainly bring our minds to this game of growing in knowledge of God, but this is not first and foremost an intellectual exercise.

On this point, I think Christians are in danger of getting things wrong on two fronts.

Either we make growing in the Christian faith primarily an intellectual affair – and overemphasise the intellectual element of our relationship with God. This immediately means that those who are good with words and with ideas are given a special privilege in the church and those who are not so good with words and ideas are made to feel like second class citizens ... always catching up ...

This approach to Christianity ignores the comment by Jesus when he says, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.'

(Matthew 11.25)

The other mistake that we can make is to leave our brains at home when we come to church. Over the years I have known people who are extremely sophisticated about the way in which they are able to think about things in their daily lives, but when it comes to their Christian faith they seem not to engage their minds. All common sense, all critical thinking goes out of the window.

But I do want to emphasise that this growing in knowledge is not a purely intellectual thing. We don't grow simply by reading more, or studying God or the bible or the Christian faith more.

Paul uses other important word here to stand alongside knowledge:

v 9 – Paul prays that God would fill them 'with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.'

Let's begin with 'wisdom and understanding'.

We know that wisdom is a very different thing to knowledge. Knowing all sorts of things is one thing – being clever, having a high IQ, having a quick mind.

But having wisdom is something totally different. Wisdom is much more intuitive; it is about how we live life in the real world.

There are a number of quotes that try to illustrate the difference between wisdom and knowledge.

'Knowledge comes from learning; wisdom comes from living.' (Anthony Douglas Williams)

'Never mistake knowledge for wisdom. One helps you make a living. The other helps you make a life.' (Sandra Carey)

'Knowledge is knowing what to say. Wisdom is knowing when to say it.'

Here is a very practical one:

'Knowledge is realizing the street is one way. Wisdom is looking in both directions anyway.'

The kind of knowledge that helps us to grow is the kind of knowing that brings with it deeper wisdom and understanding. It's not about facts and ideas about God ... it is really about getting to know God better.

And in the end it is earthed, because it gives to us the wisdom to live our lives more meaningfully, because we grow in the knowledge of his will.

This is a growing that has practical consequences for how we conduct our lives. Paul prays this for the Colossians not so that they will become cleverer people when it comes to thinking about God, but so that they will live lives worthy of Lord, bearing fruit in every good work.

This is the kind of growing that is meant to bear fruit.

Before ever our growing in knowledge of God is about an intellectual exercise it is about personal encounter with God ... it is about getting to know God ... spending time with God ... listening to God ... contemplating God's presence ... allowing ourselves and our way of thinking to be shaped and moulded by God.

Which is why Paul talks about this being 'spiritual wisdom and understanding.'

This is wisdom that comes through the movement of the Holy Spirit as we open ourselves to the presence of God. This is wisdom that is given more than it is gained.

This is the kind of knowledge that comes through personal encounter.

You can get to know someone by reading about them – perhaps reading their biography or their autobiography. In this way you will get to know a huge amount about them. You might even be able to build up a sense of the kind of person they are.

But you wouldn't really be able to say that you 'know them', unless you've spent time with them, entered into conversation with them. And someone who has never read their biography, who knows far fewer facts about them, might know them far better than you, simply because they know them as a person.

Spiritual wisdom and understanding is this kind of knowing of God ... spending time in his presence, being with him and being open to him.

All of the bible study in the world will not help us grow if we do not spend time in company with God and make ourselves vulnerable to his presence and influence on our lives.

This kind of growing is open to each and every one of us – and it is open to us throughout our lives.

I chose Psalm 92 to accompany this reading this morning because of how it ends.

'The righteous will flourish like a palm tree,
they will grow like the cedar of Lebanon;
planted in the house of the Lord,
they will flourish in the courts of God.
They will still bear fruit in old age,
they will stay fresh and green,

proclaiming, “The Lord is upright;
he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him.””

They will still bear fruit in old age,
they will stay fresh and green.

The flourishing and growing of the people of God does not does not stop at 18,
or 21

- or when you hit middle age
- or when you come to retirement
- or when your body is giving up on you ...

This growing into a deeper appreciation of who God is and who he calls us to be,
a deeper trust, a deeper love, a deeper sense of awe and wonder ... this follows
us throughout the course of our lives.

It will take different dimensions at different times.

To keep on going in the Christian faith is to keep on growing in the Christian
faith.

And it doesn't always mean that things get more straightforward for us.

When I first made a Christian commitment I think things were pretty black and
white for me.

Part of growing in my knowledge of God has been growing in my recognition of
the mystery of God ...

It's not just that I have had to recognise that there are shades of grey as well.
It's to recognise that God doesn't work in black and white at all – God's world is
a multi-coloured world, and the spectrum of colours that God works in is wider
than the spectrum that we work in.

I am as convinced now as I have ever been that God's heart is a heart of love ...
but I trust that my heart has been expanded by my exposure to the mystery of
God's love so that I now have a richer appreciation of how he calls us to live in
partnership with him in the world.

Keep on going with God. Keep on growing in God.

