

## **In Christ, Through Christ, For Christ**

*by Rev. Robert Griffith*

Those three terms have been bouncing around in my head and gripping my heart all week as I pondered what God might want to say to us today. But this is far more than a catchy title for a sermon. I believe an understanding of what these three phrases really mean is essential for each one of us if we are going to make sense of what is happening in our Church and across the body of Christ right now and in the months and years ahead. I'd go even further and say, perhaps with a little nervous caution, that if you want to know why God has called me to Lismore Regional Mission, to the Far North Coast Presbytery and to the Uniting Church, at such a time as this, then listen carefully – by the end of this sermon, I will have answered that question, and perhaps, many others.

I want to begin by sharing some foundational Bible texts which, in and of themselves, paint a very clear picture of what it means to live *in Christ, through Christ and for Christ* and why those three realities are so helpful in defining what this thing called 'the Church' actually is and why does it still exist after all these years. To save time, I won't read the references - just the verses. You will know where many of these come from anyway and I am very happy to supply the list later to anyone. I just want us to listen for the voice of God within these Scriptures.

### **IN CHRIST**

#### **Galatians 2:20**

*"I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me."*

#### **Acts 17:28**

*"For in him we live and move and have our being."*

#### **1 Corinthians 15:21-22**

*"For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive."*

#### **2 Corinthians 5:17**

*"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creature; the old has passed away; behold, all things have become new."*

#### **Ephesians 2:19-22**

*"(You are)members of (God's) household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."*

#### **John 15:4-5**

*Jesus said, "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing."*

**Colossians 3:1-4**

*“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”*

**Romans 6:23**

*“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

**Romans 6:11**

*“... so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”*

**Ephesians 1:3-14**

*“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption as children through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment – to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.*

*In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession – to the praise of his glory.*

**Philippians 3:7-14**

*“...whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.”*

I want to read verses 10-11 of that passage again, but this time from the amplified Bible.

*“... so that I may know Christ experientially, becoming more thoroughly acquainted with Him, understanding the remarkable wonders of His Person more completely and in that same way experience the power of His resurrection which overflows and is active in all true believers, and that I may share the fellowship of His sufferings, by being continually conformed inwardly into His likeness, even to His death, dying as He did; so that I may attain to the resurrection that will raise me from the dead.”*

That is what being *in Christ* looks like, sounds like - and is like to all those who embrace the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. And so, when we truly live and move and have our very being *in Christ*, then we will know that all things are done *through Christ*.

## THROUGH CHRIST

### Philippians 4:13

*"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

### Romans 5:1-2

*"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.."*

### Ephesians 2:18

*"for through (Christ) we have access in one Spirit to the Father."*

### John 14:6

*"Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."*

### Acts 13:38-39

*"Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses."*

### I Corinthians 15:56-58

*"The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain."*

### John 15:5

*"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; for apart from me you can do nothing."*

Ok, strap yourselves in and take a deep breath because this is where the rubber hits the road. Right here is where we put the horse back in front of the cart again, rather than letting the cart roll down the hill in any direction the terrain determines! How do we understand this bold statement by Jesus: *"Apart from me you can do nothing."*

Well, as you heard in the first words I read today from Colossians, Christ is in the very centre of His creation. *"He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."* (v.17) So when Jesus says, *"Apart from me, you can do nothing,"* we can take that literally in that if Christ should ever step back from His creation for even a micro-second, everything would vapourise instantly and cease to exist.

Well, that's the big picture - and a mind-boggling picture indeed. But in terms of our day-to-day lives, there's a more present and confronting reality embodied in these words. When Jesus says, *"Apart from me you can do nothing,"* He is talking to humans who are free to do whatever we like. In fact, billions of people on this planet are living their lives right now without any reference to Christ or any reliance upon His guidance or His Word. These are the people whom we might define as unbelievers.

But friends, it grieves me to say that there are many believers within Christian communities who are also doing lots of great things without any reference to the living Christ in their midst or any reliance upon His direct guidance or power.

We can so easily get caught up in the institution we call 'church' and become so busy running programs and events in the kingdom of this world which achieve little or nothing in the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom where Christ rules and reigns.

So when you and I hear the Lord of all creation say to us again today, here and now, "*Apart from me, you can do nothing,*" we need to understand what that means in our context and this is why I warned you to brace yourself – because this is a hard word. Jesus Christ is saying to us and to all believers across this wonderful planet:

*"Every activity, program, ministry or event which you produce in My name or under the banner of My Church will amount to nothing in My eternal Kingdom – unless I am the One Who initiates it, empowers it, and guides it every step of the way through my Spirit – because this is My mission and there is only one Church – and that is the Church which I am building."*

Brothers and sisters, the purpose of the Church of Jesus Christ is clear and simple: We are called by God *into* Christ and therefore into the mission of the living, present, reigning Christ. We are not called into some historical mission we read about in a dusty history book ... we are called into the current mission of the crucified, risen Christ Who leaps out of that Book every day and into our lives and the life of the Church which HE is building.

Lismore Regional Mission and every gathering of believers across this city and this nation today are called into the same mission: **To advance the Kingdom of God, by His grace, for His glory and through His Spirit.**

The primary mission of the Church is not to feed the hungry, care for the poor, embrace the marginalized or help the oppressed and homeless.

The primary mission of the Church is not to foster harmony and reconciliation with our aboriginal brothers and sisters.

The primary mission of the Church is not social activism or political advocacy.

So what is the primary mission of the Church?

Well, hang on to your seats, because the truth is: **the Church does not have a mission.** Christ has a mission and He calls us to join Him in fulfilling His mission and in so doing He builds His Church. He gathers together men, women and young people into Himself, into His mission and His Church is born and manifests itself in a broken and needy world.

I know it might be hard to believe as you look around forty years later, but let me tell you that this miracle of God we call the Uniting Church in Australia was birthed in this truth and established on this foundation. Let me read you two statements from our foundational charter: *The Basis of Union*.

*"(The Church is called to be) an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to Himself."*

*"(Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, 'calls people to be His disciples (and) in His own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as His Church."*

Friends, the only reason this world is still spinning and we are even here, is because Christ still has a mission to seek and to save the lost – to gather all of the children of God together and take them home for eternity. You and I and all those who claim to be disciples of Christ have been invited to join Him in that amazing mission and that, my friends, is why every last one of us and especially those in leadership, need to be asking those two questions every single day: “What are You doing, Lord?” and “How can I be part of Your mission today?”

If we are not **in** Christ, we will not understand any of this. If all that we do is not done **through** Christ, it will amount to nothing in the eternal Kingdom of Christ. Because everything we do is ultimately **for** Christ and His glory.

## FOR CHRIST

### Romans 11:36

*“For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory for ever! Amen.”*

### Colossians 3:16-17

*“Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”*

So what about all those things I mentioned before? All those wonderful programs and initiatives which have dominated the landscape of the Uniting Church in particular for many years now. Are we not supposed to reach out to the hungry, the homeless, the struggling, the poor, the marginalised, the refugees, the oppressed? Doesn't the mission of Christ involve reaching out to those people? Of course it does!

Jesus modelled that when He was here among us and He still reaches out to those people ... **but** ... in reaching out to the marginalised and needy in our society Jesus' primary focus was and always is to bring them into the Kingdom of Heaven – the Kingdom of God.

Yes, He healed some sick people. Yes, He fed some hungry people. Yes, He defended the defenceless – but all those actions were the *fruit* of His ministry – the *result* of His primary mission being fulfilled - which was to give Himself to the people and in so doing, He gives them everything.

Forty years ago next month, this manifestation of God's kingdom we call the Uniting Church was established on the firmest of all foundations: the mission of Christ – and the Spirit of God is calling us all back to those roots. Let me remind you of those roots again from the Basis of Union:

*“The Uniting Church acknowledges that the Church is able to live and endure through the changes of history only because its Lord comes, addresses, and deals with people in and through the news of His completed work. Christ who is present when He is preached among people is the Word of the God who acquits the guilty, who gives life to the dead and who brings into being what otherwise could not exist.*

*Through human witness in word and action, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ reaches out to command people's attention and awaken faith; He calls people into the fellowship of his sufferings, to be the disciples of a crucified Lord; in his own strange way Christ constitutes, rules and renews them as his Church.”*

When we truly understand and embrace the truth of what we have just read, then, and only then, will we see amazing transformation right across our society. When the mission of Christ once again has a Church and we stop trying to fulfil our mission in Christ's name, then the growth of Christ's Church and the impact of Christ's mission on our dysfunctional, needy world will exceed our wildest expectations!

How then shall we live in light of this truth? How will this reformation happen? The same way it has always happened throughout history - we need to surrender to Jesus Christ.

We need to surrender our own lives, our own dreams and hopes and expectations.

We need to surrender our Church programs and ministries.

We need to surrender our worship services and our prayer meetings.

We need to surrender everything to Jesus – give it all to Him - and whatever He decides to give back to us, we can be confident that it is part of His mission on earth. He will empower those ministries and guarantee they bear fruit, because everything Jesus does, works. So much of what we have done over many years now has not worked. It really is that simple.

We cannot truly ask every day, *“What are you doing, Lord?”* and *“How can I be part of that?”* unless we are surrendered to Christ. In fact, we will not have the slightest desire to know what the Lord is doing anywhere unless we are surrendered to Him and His mission.

I can assure you friends, when that day comes for us as a community of disciples; when we truly believe that Lismore Regional Mission is and must always be Christ's Mission, then everything will change – and Christ Who is in us, the hope of Glory, will once again be lifted up across this city and this nation as the people of God proclaim loudly and boldly, *“I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”*