

Christ - the visible image of God

I was reading, as I sometimes do, through some articles on-line and came across one which referred to an old news item which appeared in the Washington Post, in October 2001 about a new 'church' in the state of Maryland

It would seem that, using market research and focus groups, this denomination had designed weekly services that deliberately de-emphasized Jesus Christ. One of the founders of the church said, "The sad fact is the name of Jesus Christ has become for many people exclusionary." So using Hindu and Zen, intermingled with a few verses from the Bible and recorded music by Willie Nelson, the leader of this group is quoted as saying, "We're enabling people to discover God themselves, maybe through Jesus, maybe through Buddha, maybe through any number of ways."

Now I'm sure we are all appalled by this, and we should be. But before we judge them too harshly, I think we need to consider a very dangerous and deadly disease which has been present in the church down the ages, and can be found, in pockets, in the evangelical church today. At first glance it seems pretty harmless but it can infect an entire community. I am talking about, what we could call, the virus of practicality, and I've been guilty of spreading it sometimes.

We do that every time we minimise the power of Jesus. If instead of calling people to faith, repentance and submission to the supremacy of Christ, we tell people that Jesus wants to give them a happy marriage or a stress-free life, or anything else that they are looking for or needing at that moment in their lives. While Jesus will certainly change our lives, our marriages, and our stress levels when we bow before His pre-eminence, we must move away from "What Jesus can do for me" to the "Am I living in light of His lordship?" We can't simply "add" Jesus to our lives; we need to adore Him with our lives through our obedience.

For many of my generation, the assassination of John F Kennedy was a land mark moment, like 9/11 was in 2001. Because John Kennedy, whatever his faults and mistakes, and there were many, had brought a freshness to an institution and a country that had been in a slow decline into mediocrity. One of his key statements which caught my attention, and the attention of many, came in his inaugural speech when he said, 'ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country'. It strikes me that in the church we sometimes spend too much time asking what God can do for us, rather than what we can do

for God. so we are going to look at today's reading from the Book of Colossians. in the light of that.

To set the scene it is important to note that much of the false teaching taking place in Colossae, at the time, had to do with the minimizing of Jesus. Many people thought He was important but not essential. They had given Him a place in their lives, without recognizing that He demands first place. Jesus was prominent to them, but certainly not preeminent.

In the first chapter of the letter to the Colossians Paul refutes at least three false teachings which were going around at the time. The first false teaching that was going around taught that God did not create the world, because in their view matter was evil and God cannot create evil. The second, believing that matter was evil, argued that God would not have come to earth as a human in bodily form. The third teaching did not believe that Christ was the unique Son of God, but rather one of many intermediaries between God and people.

Paul in this passage, specifically in verses 15-23 refutes all these teachings. Let's read it again, "Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see— such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together. Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So he is first in everything. For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross. This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault. But you must continue to believe this truth and stand firmly in it. Don't drift away from the assurance you received when you heard the Good News. The Good News has been preached all over the world, and I, Paul, have been appointed as God's servant to proclaim it." (Col 1:15-23 NLT)

This is the pinnacle of Christianity. In Jesus, God's complete and perfect revelation is fully revealed. The passage breaks into two natural sections with the last part of verse 18 providing the overriding theme, "So he is first in everything." (Col 1:18 NLT)

In verses 15-17 Paul addresses the issue of Jesus' supremacy over Creation "Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see—such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together." (Col 1:15-17 NLT)

In verses 18-23 Paul addresses the supremacy of Jesus over His New Creation "Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So he is first in everything. For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross. This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault. But you must continue to believe this truth and stand firmly in it. Don't drift away from the assurance you received when you heard the Good News. The Good News has been preached all over the world, and I, Paul, have been appointed as God's servant to proclaim it." (Col 1:18-23 NLT)

In verses 15-17 Jesus is paramount over everything that He has created and in verses 18-23 He is preeminent over all that He has redeemed. Another way to say it is that He has first place over both the universe and the church. He is Lord of everything He has made and He is Lord over everyone He has saved.

A couple of weeks ago Yvonne shared with us a video sermon called indescribable, if you missed it, you missed out on a blessing. And the preacher, having taken us through all the wonders and the glory of the universe then takes us to the very the centre of the universe we can see, and there, at the centre, revealed by the Hubble telescope is a cluster of stars in the unmistakable shape of cross. The cross of

Jesus is at the centre of our universe, proclaiming the Supremacy of Jesus over creation.

This passage is one of the strongest in Scripture as it relates to the superiority of our Saviour. Let's read verses 15-17 "Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see— such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together."

Paul doesn't mince any words here. He says "Christ is the visible image of the invisible God." Images convey meaning way beyond what words can describe. My wedding ring represents the fact that Sheila said, "yes" to me. There are many images which remind us of many things. But as powerful as some of these are they are mere symbols, they are simply representations of far deeper realities. My ring doesn't make me married. Rather, it's a symbol that I am married.

But listen carefully to what Paul says. Jesus is not just a symbol of God; He is God Himself. The word "image" in Greek, I am told, is "eikon" and refers to "likeness, manifestation, or replica." It also referred to "distinguishing marks," which described something about the person that set him apart from everyone else. Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God. He is the precise copy because He is God Himself. He both represents and manifests God to the world.

Someone has said that Jesus is God with skin on. That's a pretty good word picture.

Then Paul says He is the unique Son of God. Jesus is not only God; He is the "firstborn over all creation." Jehovah's Witnesses believe that this verse teaches that Jesus was a created being and therefore not God. Actually, the phrase "firstborn" is most frequently translated as "heir or owner." In ancient time it meant the "ranking one, or supreme one." Jacob was not born first but he was the heir. This is strongly supported in Psalm 89:27 where we read that God appointed King David as his "firstborn," even though he was the youngest of eight brothers. This verse concludes by saying that David will be the "most exalted of the kings of the earth." "Firstborn" therefore is a title of honour or position, not chronological order.

Then Paul says He is the creator of all things (16). Jesus is the image of God and the exalted one over all creation because He is the Creator. So, just in case anyone misunderstand what “firstborn” means, in verse 16 Paul explains that all things were created in, through, and for Christ: “For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him.” Jesus is not a mere man. He is the creator of all things, those things we can see and those things we cannot see. The context of Colossians 1 declares that Jesus is the Sovereign creator, not one who was himself created.

Because the false teachers taught that the physical world was evil, they thought that God Himself could not have created it. They reasoned that if Christ were God, He would be in charge of only the spiritual world. But Paul explained that all the thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers on heaven and earth, of both the visible and invisible world, are under the authority of Christ because He created them.

And then Paul says, not only is Jesus God, the first born one, the creator of all things, He also sustains of all things, look at verse 17 “He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together.” (Col 1:17 NLT)

To “hold together” means to prevent something from falling into complete chaos. Christ is before all things, both in time and rank. He is not only the Creator of the world; He is the cohesion that binds it all together. By Him everything came into being, and by Him everything continues to be.

Jesus is supreme over creation but Paul does not stop there, he continues to remind us that he is also preeminent over His new creation. The focus changes dramatically from the old natural creation to the new spiritual creation. Because the creating God is revealed as the reconciling God.

In verses 18-19 we see first that He is head of the church “Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So he is first in everything. For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ,” (Col 1:18-19 NLT)

Paul is very emphatic. He writes literally “He Himself is the head.” Only Jesus qualifies to be the head of the church. The word “head” here means that Jesus is the authority, or source of the church. And we can relate to that. The head gives the body the ability to produce growth,

and without it, the body would die. If we forget this, if Jesus Christ is not supreme in a church, then there is no church. That was part of the trouble at Colossae. They had lost the connection to Christ and as a result they were experimenting with all sorts of false doctrine and sinful behaviour. Jesus is the head of this church, not me, not the church council or leadership team, not the even the Methodist conference. Either Jesus Christ is supreme over this church and we bow before His authority, or we are wasting our time.

Paul says Jesus is the “beginning,” which means that He is the source. The word actually has two meanings, “to rule” and “to begin.” The church is the creation of Christ and as such we must follow His lead. He is the “firstborn from among the dead,” signifying that as the supreme one, His resurrection is the guarantee that we too will rise again.

and then in verse 19 Paul writes “For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ,” (Col 1:19 NLT) Paul is saying it gives God the Father great joy and pleasure to have all of “His fullness dwell in Jesus.” It greatly pleased the Father for the Son to have pre-eminence over creation and the church.

And we are going to consider three significant truths about Jesus in this verse.

First the fullness of God dwells “in Him.” It was not around, upon, or under Him; rather it was in Him. Complete

Then consider that the word “dwell” means to “take up residence” and points to the incarnation. It is used in the sense of a permanent dwelling and would remind believers of God’s desire to choose a place for His name to dwell in the Old Testament. In Colossians 2:9 Paul writes, “For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body.” (Col 2:9 NLT)

Then, we are told, the phrase “all His fullness” is a technical term in the vocabulary of the Gnostic false teachers. It meant the “sum total of all the divine power and attributes.” Paul uses this term eight different times in Colossians to show the believers that Jesus is the fullness of God, and no one else. The fact that it pleased the Father to have all His fullness dwell in Christ is proof that Jesus Christ is God.

So having established who Jesus is and what He has done, Paul now goes on to tell us what He has done for the believer and in verses 20-23, Paul describes the work of Jesus in reconciling lost people to Himself. As people come to saving faith in Christ and are reconciled to

Christ through His blood, they become members of His church, of which He is the head. Verse 20 begins with a general statement about reconciliation: “and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ’s blood on the cross.” (Col 1:20 NLT)

The false teachers at Colossae were teaching people that they could get closer to God through the worship of angels and by observing certain rules and regulations, but they couldn’t promise total and complete reconciliation.

Paul says God, through Jesus, is reconciling the world to Himself. The focus is always to reconcile to God. The initiative and action must come from Him.

Jesus is reconciling “all things.” Reconciliation involves the whole universe.

The Result is “peace.” Through Jesus, our hostility with God can end. The Means of this reconciliation is “through His blood, shed on the cross.” Salvation is only through the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross as our sin payment.

in Verse 21 Paul moves from the general to the specific. He reminds us what we were like before we experienced peace with God: “This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions.” (Col 1:21 NLT)

We were far away, we were “enemies.” The Bible says that we were actively hostile to God. Our behaviour was “evil.” Bad thoughts often lead to bad behaviour.

But Paul’s intention is not to dwell on what they were apart from Christ, despite these negative traits, but rather to show that God took the initiative. In verse 22 and extended grace: “Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault.” (Col 1:22 NLT)

The false teachers in Colossae denied that Jesus had a real human body. Paul says it was “Christ’s physical body” that reconciled us. And because of this reconciliation we are “Holy in His sight.” We are “set apart” and declared holy by God. We are “blameless.” When God looks at you, He sees no blemishes! We are “without a single fault.” This is a legal term, which literally means, that there is no charge of

condemnation or sentence of eternal death that can ever be brought against believers in the court of divine justice. Romans 8:33-34: “Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honour at God’s right hand, pleading for us.” (Ro 8:33-34 NLT)

Paul’s emphasis on our holy standing before God was a direct attack on the false teachers. They promised a kind of “perfection” for those who had secret and mystical knowledge. In essence, Paul is saying, “You already have a perfect standing in Christ, you are holy in His sight, without any blemish, and free from any accusation. Why look for it anywhere else?”

Let’s finish by looking at the last part of our passage, verse 23: “But you must continue to believe this truth and stand firmly in it. Don’t drift away from the assurance you received when you heard the Good News. The Good News has been preached all over the world, and I, Paul, have been appointed as God’s servant to proclaim it.” (Col 1:23 NLT)

Paul says, stand firm, don’t drift, don’t be moved.

Contrary to what the leaders of that organization in Maryland, I mentioned at the beginning, have said, Jesus Christ is exclusionary and must remain so! Because of His supremacy over all things, each of us must face a question today and every day. Is Jesus supreme in your life? Is He supreme in my life?

we are sometimes guilty, in our enthusiasm, of using wrong language. We encourage people to “make” Jesus Lord in their lives but in Acts 2:36: Peter told the crowd, ““God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, to be both Lord and Messiah!”” (Ac 2:36 NLT)

Whether we make him Lord of our lives or not He is Lord of all. John MacArthur in his book *The Gospel According to Jesus* says this, “The biblical mandate for both sinners and saints is not to ‘make’ Christ Lord, but rather to bow to His lordship. He is ever and always Lord, whether or not anyone acknowledges His lordship or surrenders to His authority.” (The Gospel According to Jesus, 1988, page 203).

So tonight, as many time in life we are faced with a decision, the decision tonight is simple and far reaching. Are we going to simply try to “add” Jesus to our lives; or are we prepared to adore Him with our lives through our obedience.

Let's stand as we prepare to gather around the table, and as we stand together to symbolize our submission to the supremacy of Jesus I am going to ask you to repeat this together: Jesus Christ is Lord! He's Lord of Creation. He's Lord of His Church and He's Lord of me!