

Colossians 1:15-23 – Christ our Lord

Introduction

Paul's letter to the Christians at Colossae is rather unusual. Most of his letters were written to places where Paul himself had ministered and to churches he had founded – churches for which he felt responsible. But Paul had never been to Colossae, he had not preached there nor had he been responsible for the church that sprang up in that city.

Paul had, however, ministered for more than two years in Ephesus, a coastal city some 100 miles from the inland cities of Colossae and Laodicea. During his time in Ephesus he was joined by a man from Colossae called Epaphras who seems to have joined Paul's ministry team (see Colossians 4:10-15). He took the message of Jesus Christ back to his home town of Colossae and it would seem to be primarily through his ministry that a church was formed at Colossae (1:7) – and probably the church in Laodicea and perhaps also Hierapolis (4:13).

Imagine how the church must have been formed. Epaphras returned to his home town filled with a passion for the Lord Jesus Christ – a passion he had caught from Paul. He wanted all his family, friends and neighbours to learn about Jesus, the one whom God had sent into the world to be its Saviour. Many had responded to the preaching of Epaphras and had turned from their pagan religion to put their faith in the Lord Jesus. They had been baptised (2:12), declaring that they had died with Christ and been raised with him to new life – they were Christians.

But now, some few years later, they were beginning to be distracted away from Christ. Some teachers had come to Colossae pretending to a superior spirituality which involved all sorts of teaching about angels who needed to be offered due reverence and worship. Others, perhaps Jewish believers, were seeking to persuade them that if they really wanted to live as the people of God, they must observe all sorts of ceremonies such as keeping the Sabbath and new moon festivals, being careful to avoid the wrong kinds of food and they may also have been trying to persuade the Christian men to be circumcised.

Paul is horrified that these folk who had received Christ Jesus as Lord seemed now to be turning away from him to follow such distracting and dangerous teaching (see 2:6-8). He writes this letter to them to call them back to a single-hearted and single-minded devotion to Christ.

That is the reason for this letter and it is as relevant to us this morning as it was all those years ago to the Christians at Colossae. We may not be in danger of angel worship or of keeping new moon festivals, but it is just as easy for us to be distracted from simple faith in the Lord Jesus. What are the things we may be seeking to draw the focus of our lives away from the Lord Jesus Christ?

Reading the passage again

This morning I want us to focus particularly on Colossians 1:15-23. Let me read these wonderful verses again slowly, and as I read them, try to get your minds around what Paul is saying and what it means:

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation – if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the

gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

Let's look together at the big vision of God's purposes that this wonderful passage of Scripture brings before us.

1. Jesus Christ is supreme over all creation

Firstly, Paul asserts that Jesus Christ is supreme over all creation.

In the beginning, God created this world in love. He made the whole universe with its vast reaches of space and time, and he made this planet with all its beauty, provision and abundance that it should display his presence and reflect his glory. And he made us, human beings, in his image that we might share in the joy of all that he has made and orchestrate creation's praise of its Creator.

And all of this was made through the power of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ – made by him and for him. Paul echoes here what we read at the beginning of John's Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (John 1:1-3)

And Jesus, says Paul, is the one who sustains all things. Were it not for the active power of the Lord Jesus, exercised right now, the whole universe would crumble into nothingness. He sustains all things – try to get your head around that – he is Lord over all creation.

But someone might object that it does not look as if Jesus Christ is in control of our world – if he is in control of our world, he does not seem to be doing a very good job. The truth of the matter is that something has gone terribly wrong with God's plan and with God's world.

Firstly, there has been rebellion in God's world. We who were made in his image, to delight in him and share in his joy, have rebelled against God. We have declared that we will go our own way and be gods to ourselves – we don't need God to tell us how to live and what to do. A thousand voices declare that we must make a world for ourselves – 'My world must be run by me and for me'; we must be gods to ourselves. The most popular piece of music now chosen to be played at funerals is "I did it my way."

We see this tendency in our children and grandchildren, arguing with each other because 'she/he won't do what I want!' or 'he/she has got what I want' – just as Jesus said of children playing in the market place in his own day, "We played the flute for you and you would not dance; we sang a funeral song and you would not mourn." (Matthew 11:17) And we know that what is so visible and undisguised in children is characteristic of each of us in many different ways, some trivial, others of tragic proportions.

And so, secondly, things fall apart. We live in a world marked by disintegration. The statistics for divorce make sad reading – it's truly difficult to live well with others. And in so many other spheres in society (even in the church) things – particularly relationships – fall apart.

So, thirdly, we end up blaming others and seeking to solve problems by naming and excluding the 'enemy'. Trump wants to make America great again by excluding the Muslims and the Hispanics streaming across the Mexican border. If we can build a wall and keep them out then all will be well for our world. We can make Britain Great again if only we can be free of the suffocating influence of Europe and its stream of immigrants. And even in the church, God forgive us, we think that we could make it just about perfect if only we could get rid of this or that person – those who don't see things our way or do things our way. Our heaven has become a world in which we are at the centre and everything must revolve around us – "Hell is other people".

Fourthly, our efforts to mend things all too often make them worse: Tony Blair promising that he will liberate Iraq from tyranny and free its people; but what is Iraq like now? David Cameron promising to support the Arab Spring and bring liberty to Libya, but what are Libya, North Africa and the Middle East like now?

And we are little better in our own more limited spheres of influence in home and family, work and society.

We continually think that we can make the world anew if only we try a little harder. But in the meantime we ravish and destroy the planet with our hare-brained schemes and flawed plans. 'We can fix it' is the age old lie that promises so much but crushes those who get in the way of its programme and in the end crushes also those who have put their hope in it. This is one of the key lessons of history which we ignore only to repeat.

Look at our world: it was created by God for his glory and our blessing but is ravaged by human greed and selfishness, by conflict, hatred, warfare and destruction. It breaks the Father heart of God.

Who can fix it? Who can bring reconciliation and peace?

2. Jesus Christ came into the world to 'fix it'

God sent his Son into the world: the one who perfectly bears the image of the Father; the one through whom all things were made and for whom all things were made. He came and dwelt among us. He became part of his creation. He became human – a man perfectly embodying the image of God. He came to be with us and to stand where we stand. He came to show us a better way – to show us the beauty and the power of the life that God wants us to live.

But showing and telling are not enough. He came to bear the worst that human selfishness and human thirst-for-power could do – he was despised, rejected, mocked and hung upon a cross to die. Is this another of God's plans gone wrong? Is this the end of God's rescue plan for his world?

No! God raised him from the dead. He restored him to life and gave him the highest place in the universe, the place that rightly belonged to him from the beginning. God showed that he would conquer human greed, selfishness and thirst-for-power not through a greater act of brute power and violent destruction but through sacrificial, self-giving love.

And what God has done for his Son – restoring him to the place that was rightly his – God is doing for us, in and through Christ. Indeed, he is doing this for the whole world,

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. (Colossians 1:19-20)

God plans to restore all creation and to reconcile us to the Lordship of Christ, the suffering Servant – and to reconcile us to one another – to bring all things back together. He has made peace and is making peace through the Jesus' death upon the cross – through the power of his forgiving and reconciling love. And God is now at work in the world, by the power of the risen Saviour and his outpoured Spirit to reconcile the world to himself:

...God exalted him [Jesus] to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)

3. Christians are those who recognise that Jesus Christ is Lord

God's work of reconciliation has begun in us – Christians who recognise *now* that Jesus Christ is Lord.

And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. (1:18)

Have you seen any of those television programs in which people once close to each other have lost touch with one another and are then brought together? Perhaps two siblings, even twins, who were separated in their early years and may now, many years later, be growing up without any contact with one another. But now they are brought back together. What a wonderful and joyful reunion that is!

That is what Christ has done for us. He has reconciled us to God – what a joyful thing it is to know that we are embraced by him as our Father who gladly welcomes us back home and treats us as his beloved children (remember the parable of the Prodigal Son – or Waiting Father).

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation. (1:21-22)

We have been reconciled to God through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ – through his costly saving work. And equally, we have been reconciled with one another; brought into the same family, brought to recognise we are brothers and sisters in Christ. We take delight in one another.

So what do we now think of Christ who gave himself for us that we might be reconciled to God?

A1. Christ is all-in-all to us

Christ has the central and supreme place in the purposes and plans of God, in creation and in redemption – in new-creation. He must therefore have the central and supreme place in our lives. That's how we began our Christian lives – with a passion for Christ – and this is how it must continue:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. (Colossians 2:6-7)

In Christ, God has "hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3), why should we turn from him to seek wisdom and knowledge elsewhere? Who wants the counterfeit and worthless trinkets this world dangles before us when we can have all the treasures God has for us in Christ? "Solid joys and lasting treasures none but Zion's children know." Christ in us is "the hope of glory" (1:27), how could we ever be persuaded to look elsewhere for our hope now and for eternity?

This is the message that Paul had for these Colossian Christians and which he has for us today: You need Christ; you need nothing but Christ; you need more of Christ, for all the fullness of God dwells in him (1:19). Don't be distracted from him, for nothing else can compare with him.

A2. Live then as a reconciled people

God calls us to reflect the reality of who we are as a people reconciled to him and to one another. We are to be a showcase of God's purposes for all creation for he has begun in us to reconcile the world to himself (Ephesians 3:10).

Learn, then, to live well with one another as members of one family. Reflect in your relationships with one another what God has done for you in Christ. As Paul puts it in Colossians 3:12-14:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Show the world the reality of God's kingdom, his rule among you, in the way you love one another and spur one another on in growing up into Christ – and in the way that the joy of the Lord is your strength.

A3. Be agents of God's kingdom in the world

God has begun his work of reconciliation and of fixing his broken world in us – we who acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord – but he will not give up this work until all creation is reconciled to him and brought under the reign of Christ (see Ephesians 1:10).

And he has recruited us to be his agents in this great work of reconciliation and transformation. Listen again to 1:18,

And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

He is at work in us and through us to accomplish his great purpose of bringing all creation – every sphere of life and activity – under the Lordship of Christ. And this he is doing through the power of the gospel. Paul writes,

“do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.” Colossians 1:23b

This good news of God's self-giving love in Christ has begun a work of transformation in our lives. It is a message of hope for the world – the only hope for the world. It is a powerful message for it is accompanied by the powerful working of the Spirit of the risen Lord Jesus Christ – the Spirit who will make all things new.

We who are a reconciled people should also be a reconciling people – those who heal the wounds of a broken society even at costs to ourselves, like our Saviour, the wounded healer. We pray “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven” – and we mean it. So we ensure that Jesus Christ is Lord in every part of our lives – home and family, work and society, in our thinking and in all that we say and do? And we pray for our broken world and seek to tell others of the one whose lordship brings freedom and a hope that will never disappoint, urging them to be reconciled to God through Christ?

May God, through the power of the risen Saviour, enable us to be such a people for the glory of Christ and the healing of our fractured world.

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