

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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DIVING INTO CHRIST

17th July 2016

Luke 10:38-42

Colossians 1:15-20

Christ holds all things together

How are you at diving? Confident? Elegant? A bit scared? Or would you rather go feet first? We are diving deep today, as we are going to plunge head first into the depths of God's revelation and work in Jesus. No small matters, but absolutely wonderful. So take a deep breath and off we go – I will let you come up for air from time to time – this is a sermon in three parts.

Our reading talks about thrones, dominions, rulers and powers, and such references can be very alien to us. It seems that in the church in Colossae there were people who didn't find the Christian faith spiritual enough. It wasn't esoteric. It didn't use hard language or demand exhausting physical practices, like extended fasts or sacrifices. It was practical, and talked of how people used their money, about caring for the poor. Some people said it was earthy, and it seemed that they wanted to take Jesus, his life and his death and his teaching as a gateway into discovering a more spiritual pathway, a path which would lead to unseen thrones, dominions, rulers and powers.

For the past few decades there has been a trend in our society for people to describe themselves as "Spiritual but not Religious." This trend has led to – or perhaps sprang from - what was once called the New Age movement, an interest in finding spiritual qualities in inanimate things, in altering states of consciousness and having experiences, in seeking for hidden ancient truths. Those who have taken this quest, those who reject religion in favour of spirituality, are not unlike the people in Colossae. They are saying that Jesus is not enough, can only be a step on a road to a greater, more mystical goal – usually undefined.

And the Church has one answer to that, and only one. Paul gives it here to the Colossians. It is that Jesus is the head, is the chief, is the pinnacle, is first and only. In the poem which he writes or quotes in verses 15-20 there is a pattern, repeated three times, and each time showing an aspect of the supremacy of Jesus.

He is the image of God, the invisible one, the firstborn of all creation.

For in him all things were created, in the heavens and here on earth.

Things we can see and things we cannot – thrones, lordships, rulers and powers-

All were created both through him and for him.

That is the first verse of the poem. Jesus cannot be a step on the way anywhere because everything is about him and for him and he shows us God himself. He is the image, or reflection, of God. In other words, the more we look at Jesus, the more we

see God, and the delightful thing is that the more we look at Jesus, the more we see that God, the true God, is the God of utter, self-giving love. In our gospel reading Mary is commended because she has given Jesus her undivided attention. The more she looks to him, the better she will see God, and everything. The more she – and we – will see how things really are, as we learn to look with God's eyes.

Jesus cannot be a step on the way to greater powers or truths, because as the image of God he is supreme, and any other power or truth that there is only makes sense in subjection to him. Wow! Paul goes on:

*And he is ahead, prior to all else and in him all things hold together;
And he himself is supreme, the head over the body, the church.*

Jesus holds together all things – the old world and the new, creation and new creation. Some of those who sought a more spiritual way thought that the physical created world was worthless and evil, something to be ignored or to rise above. You can still find that thought out there, even in the church, often manifesting itself in a lack of care for creation. Others, though, who could see the beauty and wonderful order of the created world have tried to say that the evil which there undoubtedly is in the world isn't really that important, and worship is given to the world itself – paganism is a form of this. But Paul says that Jesus Christ is the one through whom and for whom the whole creation was made in the first place. It is beautiful and sweet and wonderful and ordered, it makes you catch your breath at times because he made it that way, and because he is like that.

But we know that there is also ugliness, cruelty, evil and death in the world. This was not God's invention, not how the world was made through Jesus; but through his death he has acted to heal the world of the corruption which has infected it. He is the firstborn in creation and the firstborn from the dead. And then:

*He is the start of it all, firstborn from the realms of the dead; so in all things he might be chief.
For in him all the Fullness was glad to dwell and through him to reconcile all to himself, making peace through the blood of his cross, through him – yes, things on earth, and also the things in heaven.*

He is the start of it all – Jesus is the blueprint for the genuine humanness which is on offer through the gospel. When we become Christians we do not leave our human nature behind, but we find it is being fulfilled and transformed. We so often settle for second best in our human lives, but Jesus invites us to experience the genuine article, and if we do that, then we will not find we need to look beyond him to any putative greater powers or more spiritual experiences.

Colossians 1:21-23 Christ reconciles us to God.

When you go to visit a foreign place it is useful to have a map. I like a nice clear paper street map which I can take out and refer to as I go along. However, when you first get that map the most important thing if it is to be of much use to you, is for you to know where on the map you currently stand. You need a cross or an arrow that indicates "You are here!"

Having taken his readers up into the sublime heights of just who Jesus is, Paul now helps them to locate and root themselves within this grand scheme and plan. “You are here” he is saying. Here, in the plan, on the map, where once, not so long ago you weren’t even mentioned. Once you were off the side of the map, lost in your hostility to God. But Jesus has brought you in, has reconciled you to God.

And so the metaphor of a city plan is not quite right. It is not a city, but a palace that Jesus has brought us into. He has made us holy in God’s eyes, changed us from the lost souls we were when we tried to live life on our own terms into those worthy of being presented in God’s court, as worthy of his notice. You may know that it used to be the custom for certain young women to be presented at court, dressed in white with feathers, and always presented by a woman who had also previously been presented. The idea was that the older woman was vouching for the worth of the younger, saying to the monarch “Here is Miss so-and-so, who is worthy of your notice.” In the same way Jesus leads us into the palace and presents us to God, saying that he will vouch for us, we are worthy of God’s notice.

Where once all communication between us and God had broken down, now we have been reconciled and the whole family is glad to welcome us, to welcome you, into God’s presence. And it is all because of the supremacy of Christ, because only the one who was the embodiment of God’s nature and God’s love could do this. Because of who Jesus is and what he did, we are here!

Colossians 1:24-29 Christ is the glory and the message and the goal

When an ambassador goes to a foreign land to represent a King or a president, they are treated as though the head of state had attended in person. In some societies if someone wrongs or harms a person, it is regarded as though they had committed an offense against the whole family. When the head of a large organisation makes a public statement it is treated as the view of the whole organisation, not just of one person. These are not quite the same as what Paul is talking about, but they point towards the idea of what is behind his teaching about us being “in Christ” and Christ being in us.

If Jesus was the promised Messiah for his people, then when he died and rose again it was not just that he died and rose, but that all his people died and rose with him. When Paul, writing from prison, suffers for his faith in Christ, he feels it as part of Christ’s suffering, part of the necessary suffering for the birth of the new age. In this view, any time a person suffers for being a Christian, they are part of the work of the cross, part of what redeems the world.

But the world is redeemed, and becomes more redeemed as each person, including – Paul says especially – the Gentiles, those who once would have been excluded, realise the truth that Jesus died for us. The world becomes more redeemed as more and more people understand that Jesus did not come to give a new religious system, or to point a pathway, but that he came to live within us, to change us from within. Christ in you, the hope of glory.

It is all a far cry from giving lip service to a religious system – such as the Colossians were doing when they tried to move beyond Jesus and become more spiritual than him. Such as we try to do when we say that Jesus was a great teacher, or when we make religious systems too important, so that they take away from the wonderful truth of him who makes all things new.

I have given you a lot of theology today. That's why I have broken it down into shorter bits., to help you digest it. It is a lot to take in, to hold onto. But the more we think about it and realise it, the more our whole selves will be shaped by the truth that Jesus, who is first in every way, has put us on the map, brought us into the palace and lives within us, giving us hope of glory. Jesus who is first in every way has made us part of his body, so that our lives are caught up into the redemption of the world. Glory be to God, Amen.

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