

## Lord of Creation

19 January 2020

May the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be always pleasing to you, our Lord and Redeemer. Amen

### Introduction

Last week David preached on probably one of the best known passages of the Bible. Today's passage with next week's passage from Philippians make up what one might call the 'big 3'. Together, these three passages represent the pinnacle of what theologians call – in typically difficult terminology – Christological thought. That is thinking about who Jesus Christ is and what he means for us. Arguably, if you were to take a chronological view, the Philippians passage should come first, then today's and then finally John 1 as that would have been written last. But I'm not going to argue with Andrew .... Suffice to say that when John wrote his gospel he would certainly have aware of and knowledgeable about Paul's writing, and this passage in particular which many regard as the high point of Paul's writing about Christ. But before we look at the passage in more detail, it is worth reminding ourselves of the circumstances of the Christian community at Colossae to whom Paul was writing, probably around 64 ad.

### The church at Colossae

Colossae was a bit of an outpost of the Roman province of Asia, under the rule of a governor from the more important city of Ephesus. Earlier

Colossae had been significant, one of the staging points for Xerxes before the invasion of Greece in the fifth century BC, but by the first century AD, the city had declined in population and importance. Worst still, towards the end of the century the city was destroyed by an earthquake. The church, however, lives on through Paul's letter as one of the key pieces of writing from Paul to the infant Christian communities in Asia.

Perhaps because of its history and former glories, the inhabitants took what one might call a fairly relaxed, inclusive approach to religion. They were tolerant of all beliefs, in the sense that they could see that all might have something to offer, whether mystery cults or household gods etc. It was perhaps their safety measure to stay out of trouble, keep their heads down and try to fit in / go along with whatever the latest religious fad might be. In this context, Paul's motive for writing to the Christian community there seems to be to help the nascent church with strong theological concepts to help the church communicate the uniqueness of Christ and not to be swayed by this syncretistic approach.

### The passage

The reading we heard just now is, in many respects, the centre-piece of this theology. It is possible that it was part of an early creed or a hymn, but there is no doubt that it is very carefully constructed. If you read closely you can see clearly that there are effectively two parts to the passage: the first, vv 15-17 proclaim Jesus as Lord of Creation; the second vv 18-20 proclaim Jesus as saviour and lord of the church. Creation and redemption are the central themes. And these concepts

are mirrored in the two parts of the passage: v15 Jesus is the first-born over all creation, and then v18 Jesus is the first-born from among the dead. Or again v16, when talking about creation, Paul writes, 'things in heaven and on earth', then when talking about redemption in v 20, 'things on earth or in heaven.' It really is a beautifully written passage.

Paul is trying to communicate to the church at Colossae that Jesus Christ is unique, the only saviour, the only God. Not only is Jesus the 'word of God', present at creation, Jesus is God incarnate, a real historical figure who died on the cross to save all people. He is not a philosophical concept, a mysterious other-worldly being, he was flesh and blood like us. So the first verses, establish Jesus as creator: "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." The parallels with the story of creation in Genesis are obvious and would have been very clear to Paul's audience. This section is an elegant exposition of what theologians call 'trinitarian' theology, attempting to understand the relationships between the three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, within the one God. Or, as we say in the Nicene creed, 'we believe in one Jesus Christ, only son of the Father ... through him were all things made'.

The second part of the passage emphasises Jesus' historical role, what he has done for us. Not only is Jesus at the right hand of the Father, Jesus is the one who rose from the dead. A real, living person, who took

on our humanity and through his selfless act of love, died on the cross for our sakes in order to reconcile us with our Father. The same Lord of Creation is the Lord of Redemption, the 'first-born from among the dead' as Paul writes. And so the second section makes clear Jesus' role in the second creation, the new creation made possibly by his suffering death and resurrection: "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.<sup>19</sup> For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,<sup>20</sup> 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."

Very clearly, then. Jesus lived, died and rose again. Jesus is unique, Jesus is not like the other religious figures of the time, Jesus cannot be part of some syncretistic melting-pot. Quite the contrary, Jesus is Lord. Jesus is the only Lord, the only way to the Father. You can see how important these phrases are to the life of the church when you read more of the Nicene creed, which also mirrors this twofold Christological perspective: first, the Lord of creation

"We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father.  
Through him all things were made.

Then, the next section describes the Lord of Salvation,  
reconciliation:

“For us and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven:  
by the power of the Holy Spirit  
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,  
and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.”

Just as we remember at Christmas the story of the Incarnation yet have  
in our minds the story of salvation of Easter, so this passage and the  
Creed in their different but related ways attempt to reflect this circle of  
saving life, from creation to the new creation, from disobedience to  
forgiveness, from life through death to new life.

In some way, therefore, every time we say the creed we are re-  
connecting to this forerunner of ours, the Christian community at  
Colossae, recommitting ourselves to our lord of creation and lord of  
redemption. But do we really have the same conviction as Paul? Can  
we speak as confidently, as courageously as he does? Do we share his  
unshakeable, unwavering faith in Jesus Christ our Lord?

In that sense, this passage is very challenging for the contemporary church. Religious syncretism is not the monopoly of the ancient church. Throughout history, different communities have tried, for self-preservation, to accommodate new belief structures with their own, to see good in all things in order to protect themselves, or their identity as a people, or their culture. We've just come back from Peru, and their's is a history fundamentally shaped by such attempts to preserve Andean culture and belief by accommodating and reinterpreting Spanish Catholicism and integrating it into their belief structures. Pachamama, their god of the earth, can be re-presented as Mary, mother of God. Llamas can substitute from sheep in pictures of the nativity; guinea pigs can replace bread in the Last Supper. Many gods can be one god and one god can be many gods. The search for meaning, for different forms of theistic belief are ancient but also modern quests. Similar strategies are evident today, my god is not so different from your god, so what you believe is actually pretty similar to what I believe, so let's agree to co-exist. You can pretend that when you hear me worship it is your god I'm worshipping.

But Paul is pretty unambiguous: Jesus Christ is the first-born over all creation, he is the first-born from among the dead. In him all things were created, God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him. There is only one Lord, only one Word of God, only one saviour of the world. And we believe in him!

So as we say, yes, Amen, this is our faith, we believe and trust in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we reaffirm our membership of the

same body of Christ, the church, which stretches back to Paul, to the community of Colossae, to the first disciples. Our witness is as fragile as theirs, like them we stumble on the path of faithful discipleship, like them we face a frequently hostile and aggressive world, but with them we share faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, our creator, saviour and redeemer.

Amen