



Jesus is Head of the Body

Colossians 1:15-23

We can't be exactly certain when Colossians was written but many scholars think that it was authored near the end of Paul's life, possibly around 60 or 61AD. Assuming that date is correct and that the letter emerged less than thirty years after the life and ministry of Jesus it's remarkable to consider how high and exalted a view the early Christians had formed of the one who had walked and talked among them not so long ago.

In the opening verse of this week's reading Paul describes Jesus as 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.' The Greek word *eikon* could also be translated as 'likeness' or 'representation.' If we want to know what God is like, we need look no further than Jesus. The vision of the greatness and supremacy of Jesus suggested by the word 'firstborn' is unpacked in the following verses which describe him as the one who has created all things and continues to hold them together. In verse 18, Paul speaks of a particular authority Jesus has over the church. He is not only the 'firstborn over all creation' (v15) but also the 'firstborn from among the dead,' in other words the firstborn of the new creation which God is bringing in.

Why is it that Jesus is worthy of being described in such remarkable terms? The word 'for' at the beginning of verse 19 suggests Paul is seeking to justify the astonishing language he has just used. In verses 19 and 20 we discover that the death of Jesus on the cross, resulting from his willingness to take on human form, and his subsequent resurrection can be thought of as the ultimate demonstration to the world of what God is like.

In Colossians 1:21-23 we discover more about the impact of Jesus' reconciling actions on our own lives. As Tom Wright comments:

'Paul is aware, I think, that the poem he's just set out in verses 15-20 is quite overpowering. Many ordinary Christians might read it, or hear it read out loud, and think, 'Well, that sounds impressive, but what's in it for me?' So at once he brings things into focus. This section might be headed 'You are Here.' If the poem is like a map of the entire cosmos, the whole story of creation and redemption, the present verses indicate where the ordinary Christian is located on the map.'¹

Paul reminds the Colossian Christians of their previous condition before encountering Jesus, 'alienated from God' because of their sins. In verse 22 he goes on to explain that the reconciliation Jesus is bringing about is not just happening on a

¹ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, 2002, 154

grand and cosmic scale. It is also personal, enabling each individual who follows Jesus to come into God's presence, 'without blemish and free from accusation.'

These verses contain lots of good news about what God has done for us in Jesus, but they conclude with a reminder of the response each one of us needs to make. We are to make our trust in Jesus the foundation of our whole lives, making sure that we are 'established and firm' in him (v23). In the words of Tom Wright, '... the effects of the gospel don't happen automatically. Christians, who have come into this experience of being ushered into the presence of the holy God, can't simply sit back and do nothing. They must 'keep firmly on'; they must now take responsibility for their own growth to maturity in faith.'²

1. In Colossians 1:15, Paul tells his readers that Jesus is the 'the image [or the 'representation' or 'likeness'] of the invisible God.' How do you think most people's perception of what God is like compares to the Jesus we find in the Gospels? What are the major similarities and differences?
2. During Sunday's sermon Trevor spoke about the way many churches refer to the Bible as their ultimate authority in spite of the fact that verses like Colossians 1:18 and Matthew 28:18 speak of Jesus as head of the church and the one to whom God has given all authority. Why is this distinction so important? If our aim is to live lives submitted to Jesus rather than just following the Bible, what difference does this make in the day-to-day?
3. This passage describes to us the rule and authority which Jesus has over all of creation. But verse 18 reminds us that there is a particular rule, or 'headship' which Jesus exercises over the church. What differences can you think between the authority Jesus has over the church and his rule over the rest of the created order?
4. What emotions do the words *reconciled, holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation* (vs22-23) evoke in you?³
5. Our current series is on mission and being the Body of Christ, but our initial sermons have focussed less on how to do mission and more on the difference Jesus has made to us and how he relates to the church. Why do you think it's important to think through these issues before launching out on new initiatives?

² Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, 2002, 156

³ Question taken from Martha Reapsome, *Colossians and Philemon: A Lifebuilder Bible Study*, 1989, 18