

Colossians 1:15-23
(John 1:1-18)
“That in Everything He Might Be Preeminent”

Introduction

Our text begins out on the edges of the cosmos and moves inward through three concentric circles down to the innermost ring where you and I live our lives. The outermost circle celebrates the preeminence of Christ over the entire cosmos, the central circle his preeminence within his new creation, the church, and the innermost declares his preeminence in the lives of his new creatures, folk like you and me who have been given new life through the tender mercy of our God and King.

The reason Paul goes to such lengths to emphasize Christ’s preeminence is that we might understand and rest confidently in his complete and utter sufficiency. The Christians he was writing to at Colossae were tempted as insidiously as we are today to think that Christ alone was not enough, that more was needed than God’s grace to make life full and meaningful. They were looking around at philosophy, they were seeking mystical visions, they were submitting to rules and regulations, all in the hope of achieving some superior level of experience known only to the spiritual elite. Paul will have nothing of such talk. He wants them to realize that when you have been joined by grace to Christ, you have been given all of the riches of glory, even the very fullness of God, which cannot even conceivably be surpassed.

And so Paul composes this song of praise to Jesus Christ in three stanzas: Jesus is Lord of all creation, Lord of the new creation (the Church) and Lord of the new creature (the Christian). Paul wants us to realize all that is ours in Christ, and never to waste our energy looking for fulfillment and meaning in anything apart from those gifts that Christ himself has given.

Body

1. Christ and the creation: Lord of the cosmos:

Christ shows us who the Creator is.

If you would know the God who made the cosmos, look at Jesus. He is the one through whom and for whom all things were created. He doesn’t protect us from God: he reveals God to us. “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” When you are overwhelmed by the vast and lonely reaches of space, look with wonder as the one who spoke it into being touches broken people in order to heal them; watch him take a little child into his arms; see him eat with sinners like you and me. Whenever we are tempted to think ourselves insignificant specks, lost in the vastness of the cosmos, the Scriptures call us to remember that the Word through whom everything

that exists was created became part of his creation, lived our life and died our death, so that we might live with him now and for eternity.

Christ shows us who we humans were meant to be.

He is the first-born of creation. We need not wonder what humanity might have been had we never rebelled against God: We have only to look at the way that Jesus loved, the way that he battled for his Father's glory, the way he laid down his life for us while we were still enemies rebelling against him. This is the companionship for which God created us, that in the midst of the vast reaches of the cosmos we might be his chosen representatives and oversee all that he has made. Paul writes elsewhere, "When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? ... Do you not know that we are to judge angels?" (1 Corinthians 6:1-3).

We forget too easily the incredible dignity that God has given us by creating us in his image for intimate and loving relationship with him. Paul wants us to stop looking for intimacy and significance in all the wrong places.

Christ is the sustaining and unifying principle of the creation.

Scientists and philosophers seek a unified and unifying theory that will explain our origins and the trajectory of our possibilities. But apart from Jesus Christ, that unified theory will always elude them, because Christ alone is the origin, the sustainer and the end of all that is, both visible and invisible. We know that we have barely seen the edges of the cosmos. It is so vast that it staggers us. We feel so small, yet the meaning of it all is found, not in the vast stretches of space, but in an encounter with a living person. Until every knee bows before him and every tongue confesses that he is Lord, there will be pain and suffering, war and violence. He alone is our peace. All of which prepares us for the middle circle: the new creation that was inaugurated in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

2. Christ and the new creation: Lord of the Church:

Christ shows us who the Savior is.

He is the head of his body, the church, which is called and equipped to continue his ministry: that is, to give God skin so that the world should be able to look at the Church and know something of who God is. We are meant to be the continuing incarnation, the body of Christ in the world. Through us he continues to speak and to act, to touch the broken, to eat with sinners, to give hope, to bring healing and salvation to the world. That is the purpose of the Church of Jesus Christ. We are here, not merely for ourselves, but for all those who do not yet believe in the Christ, who have not yet bowed the knee.

There is an essential symmetry between the first and second stanzas of this great hymn that Paul has written. What the creation was originally meant to be, the Church now is meant to be, both as a sign of what is coming and as a new reality, as those being called out of the rebellion of the creation against its Creator, and called into an intimate relationship with the One who makes all thing new. We are to be the trustees of this new life that God is graciously offering to the world.

So, the analogy of the body is very apt, for Christ is the head of the church and animates it by his Spirit. People should be able to look at the Church and see how God intends people to live in community with him and with each other, and how we live not as plunderers, but as stewards of the creation.

Christ shows us who we Christians are meant to be.

He is the first-born of the new creation – the one through whom and for whom the church is called into being. In the same way that the meaning of the cosmos can only be comprehended in Christ, the meaning of the Church can only be comprehended in Christ. I read in a ministry journal, “Ministry today means catering to the whole person.” I suspect that the author simply meant that we are called to minister to the whole person, not just to try to get people to believe the truth of the gospel without it impacting every part of their life. But, the language of “catering” is revealing because it shows a move from being centered on Christ’s agenda to an attempt to cater to every perceived need or desire. We must never forget that the church is through Christ and for Christ alone. We are seeking, quite literally, to create “little Christs” who will speak and act as he spoke and acted.

Christ is the sustaining and unifying principle of the new creation.

In his work of reconciliation, he begins the task that will end at last in the reclaiming of the entire cosmos. “And he made known to us the mystery of his will ... to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (Eph 1:9,10). Again, note the symmetry: just as the cosmos holds together in him, so to the Church holds together in him. When we divide and fight, we deny the Lord who reconciles us to each other.

Of course, all of this is mere talk if it is not transforming us individually in the way that we relate to one another, to the Lord, and to his world. So Paul concludes this section by addressing the inmost circle: the individual Christian. He says, “And you.” What does he say about us?

3. Christ and the new creature: Lord of the Christian:

By nature, you and I are alienated from God.

What is true of the cosmos is true of us: we are at enmity with God, running away and therefore running down, bound to a sort of spiritual entropy. If we seek

meaning from philosophy, from mystic visions or from submitting ourselves to legalistic religious observance, we will at last find ourselves traveling ever further from God's purposes for us. He has created us for freedom, the freedom of loving, trusting relationship with one another and with him.

By grace, we are reconciled to God.

In Christ, we have new life, and are reconciled to God and to one another. We are to be the supreme sign and proof of the resurrection. The gospel is to be validated by our lives. The world will believe or disbelieve the gospel to the degree that our lives validate or invalidate what we profess to believe. He who has reconciled us to himself wants us to be his ambassadors of reconciliation (see 2 Corinthians 5:20).

By the power of the new life, we are to continue steadfast and true.

The steadiness of our lives should give hope to the world that those who have been made new in Christ have been given the power to stand no matter what life may throw at us. As Paul writes elsewhere, nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

Conclusion

When you and I are tempted to be dissatisfied with our lives, to wonder whether we don't need something more than the gospel, when we crave mystic experience, or esoteric knowledge, or rigid discipline that keeps us from the edges of the path, at such times we need to join with Paul in rehearsing this great hymn of praise. We have been made new by the one who is Lord of all: Lord of creation, Lord of the Church, Lord of your life and mine. He has given us more than we will ever need to be all that he created us to be and to do all that he created us to do. He has invited us to begin walking together with one another and with him in the confidence that as we grow together toward maturity in Christ, he will do in and through us "far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us" (Ephesians 3:20).

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