

“ASPECTS OF THE CROSS - 2”
Colossians 1:15-23

Once again this morning we have the immense privilege of sharing in communion. As part of our worship we commemorate the event which forms the pivot of human history, the occasion when Jesus Christ was executed on the cross of Golgotha, a sacrifice for the sins of the world. As Jesus prepared himself and his followers for that event, he shared the Passover meal with them in a borrowed upstairs room and re-interpreted that meal, which was so precious to the Jewish people as they recalled their liberation from slavery, as a means of remembering for evermore the liberation of humanity from the power and oppression of evil. As Jesus took the bread and the wine his command was, *“Do this to remember me.”*

This Jesus, we have just read, is *“the firstborn over all creation.”* He stands pre-eminent over everyone and everything else. Indeed, it was he who created this whole cosmos (v16) – the earth and the heavens and everything contained within them. He created it all pristine and perfect. There was Jesus, the Christ, at one with the Father and the Holy Spirit, watching over a cosmos at one with itself, everything working in harmony, everything perfectly balanced, everything just as God wanted it. At the end of each day of creation, we read in *Genesis* that God looked at what had been made and pronounced it good. At the end of the week, *“God saw all that he had made, and it was **very** good”* (*Genesis 1:31*). Now, however you interpret that biblical account of creation, the fact remains that it worked and it was just as God intended it to be.

But then, of course, things started to go wrong. Somehow evil, sin, entered the cosmos and it was fundamentally altered. Selfishness, rebellion, disobedience got into humanity. Those first human beings decided to do things their own way and what had been so perfect ended up fatally flawed. Their actions and attitudes had a knock-on effect on the rest of the created order and in judgement God pronounced that everything would from then on be affected by the sin of humanity. He told Adam, *“Cursed is the ground because of you”* (*Genesis 3:17*). And as we look back over human history we see just how that has come true – a perfect world has been distorted, damaged, fragmented, dismembered.

Ultimately, it is to do with relationships. From that first rebellious act of flawed humanity, has come a mess of tattered and broken relationships. They have been picked apart, dismembered, destroyed. We see the relationships **between human beings** ruined by war, violence and hatred. The first story in the Bible after the creation of the cosmos and humanity’s descent into sin is that of Cain and Abel – a story of jealousy and murder. From then on the story of the human race as recounted in the Bible is a list of wars and murders, violence and rapacity. The history of the world is told in terms of warfare and oppression, between nations and within them. Our news bulletins are filled with stories which demonstrate that nothing has changed – this week it has been murders, shootings, tales of torture, financial greed and avarice.

But the relationship **between humanity and the rest of creation** has also been dismembered. In our desperate desire to appropriate the abundance of this planet to resource our own greed, we have destroyed so much of what was originally so good. Mountains of waste, plundered landscapes, animals and birds hunted to extinction, so-called “natural” disasters which have come about because of our tinkering with eco-systems and delicate environmental balances – all bear sorry witness to the capacity of humanity to gorge itself on the fruit of the earth.

And, of course, at the root of it all is that broken relationship **between humanity and God**, the God who created the cosmos, who lovingly placed men and women within it to work with him for the common good of all things. Once Adam and Eve had broken the only rule that God asked them to observe and then felt they had to hide from him, the die was cast. No longer was there that profound understanding between Creator and created, that sense of oneness that would be reflected in all other relationships. From the moment of that first rebellious action, as one writer puts it, *“the unity and harmony of the cosmos have suffered a dislocation, even a rupture, so requiring a reconciliation.”* And so God had to

put into place his plan to bring about that reconciliation, to repair the fragmented, dismembered set of relationships that evil had brought about.

God's plan was to use Jesus, part of his own being – in effect his own son – to effect that reconciliation, that repair. He was going to make peace with humanity himself and thus enable restored, renewed, reconciled humanity to be reconciled with each other and with creation. The key to that happening was forgiveness on the part of God. In his immense, infinite love, he had to forgive flawed humanity their rebellion and disobedience. And because of the way God had set things up, that forgiveness could be achieved only if there was a sacrifice of some sort, a sacrifice that involved blood, the liquid life that flowed through his creation and through the veins of each human being.

For centuries, men and women tried to effect that reconciliation through the sacrifice of animals, but God could see that it didn't really get to the root of the problem. Having sacrificed a goat or whatever, people would go off and do the same things all over again. Sin seemed to have a power over them that they just could not break. So God sent Jesus to be that supreme, once-for-all sacrifice that would deal not only with the consequences of sin, but also the power of sin. Only through Jesus could the situation be redeemed. As Paul writes in the words we read from *Colossians*, “*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.*” Harmony was going to be restored to the cosmos. The damage would be repaired. The balance between humanity and the rest of creation could be renewed, reset. The relationship between humanity and their Creator would be healed. The dismemberment between human beings would be repaired.

And Jesus became that sacrifice. A real body shed real blood on the cross. Paul is insistent here and elsewhere that it was Christ's “*physical body*” that was sacrificed. Jesus died on that cross so that we might live as God intended – here and now, and on into eternity. His physical body was broken so that a broken cosmos could be reunited, reconciled, re-membered. We come to the cross acknowledging that it is for our sin that Jesus hangs there. We come believing that what he does on that cross changes everything for us. We come accepting the possibility of renewal, redemption, reconciliation. And as we accept that, we are drawn closer to God and closer to each other. The things that divide us from him and from one another are done away with and we can grow together as his body. As in communion we remember Christ's body on the cross, so we begin to be re-membered too – and we can get involved in the task of re-membering his body.

Here, at the foot of the cross, our divisions are put aside. We come together aware that anything which divides us is a result of sin. We are all affected by sin in some way or other. None of us is any better than anyone else. In God's sight we are all equally flawed, all equally loved and all equally offered the opportunity to be reconciled to him and to each other (and those two things are inextricably linked).

Here, at the foot of the cross, the possibility of healing and reconciliation is acknowledged. As Luther wrote, “*The cross teaches us to believe in hope even when there is no hope.*” With God there is never no hope, and the cross of Jesus Christ is the eternal witness to that. God was able to deal with the greatest, most fundamental barrier to restored relationship – the evil that infected his creation – through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. If the cross dealt with that, then there is no reason whatsoever why our petty differences should not be overcome: clinging to those resentments and rivalries can only be an expression of unbelief and disobedience.

Here, at the foot of the cross, we pledge our devotion to God. As we look up at our crucified Saviour and see the love that burns in his eyes for each of us, our only response must be surrender to that love. In his comments on this passage from *Colossians*, William Barclay writes as follows: “*The cross is the proof that there is no length to which the love of God will not go in order to win men's hearts; and a love like that demands an answering love.*” As we take the bread and the wine again this morning, let us remember what Christ has done and let us allow him to re-member us, that we might love him and each other as he wants.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do you understand by the phrase "*firstborn over all creation*"?
2. The created order has been damaged by the effects of evil. How is that most obvious to you?
3. Why do you think Paul is so insistent that we are reconciled by Christ's **physical** body?
4. Do you think of Jesus' death as a **sacrifice**? What does that mean to you?
5. Imagine you are standing at the foot of the cross. What do you feel as you look up at Jesus? Use that as a basis for prayer.