

## “HOLY AND FAITHFUL”

### 3. Looking to Jesus

#### *Colossians 1:15-23*

This morning, we're continuing our exploration of the letter which the Apostle Paul wrote to the new Christians in the town of Colossae. These people had come to faith as a result of the preaching of Paul's friend Epaphras and Paul is now very keen that they should grow in their faith, but not be side-tracked by the teaching of other people whose take on the Gospel was a mish-mash of all kinds of other beliefs and philosophies. The problem Paul sees is that they might end up downgrading the place of Jesus in all that and that the centrality of Jesus to their faith might be compromised. Some of the people whose ideas were circulating in Colossae around that time saw Jesus as just another prophet among many others, as a good teacher but nothing more, or as one of a phalanx of spiritual beings who somehow emanated from God so that he didn't have to have anything to do with the created order. Jesus, Paul maintains, is a unique figure of cosmic significance whose place at the heart of the Gospel cannot be underestimated.

And, as so often in Paul's preaching and writing, in amongst the nitty gritty of responding to particular concerns, there is a passage of sublime power and magnificence which extols Jesus and lifts the reader's eyes to another plane. The passage Maureen has read for us this morning is an amazing description of the Jesus who needs to have the first place in his followers' lives and contains within it so much for us to reflect on and take in that there is enough material just in these few lines for a whole series of sermons in itself. Many scholars think this is actually a great poem used in the worship of the early church that Paul has taken and adapted or added to or commented on, but whatever it is, it contains plenty for us to think about and can help us, I hope, to see why Jesus must be uncompromisingly and unashamedly at the very heart of our faith still today. Amongst all the other things we could say about these words, here we see Paul writing about the part Jesus plays in **Incarnation, Reconciliation** and **Sanctification**. Big words – religious words. But don't be put off by the language – let me try and explain.

### INCARNATION

Like the words *carnivorous*, *carnival* and *chili con carne*, you'll see that *incarnation* has at its root *carn*, which is from a Latin word meaning “meat” or “flesh”. *Carnivorous* animals eat meat. *Carnival* was originally the celebration when you'd eat up all your meat before the fast began. *Chili con carne* is chili with meat. *Incarnation* is all about being made flesh, about embodying something. You see, Jesus came into our world to make God real, visible to us. He clothed God – the unseen, spiritual force – in human flesh. As Paul puts it here, “*he is the image of the invisible God*”. In that visible, tangible human body was somehow all of God's “godness” – that's what the “*image*” – the “*eikon*” in Greek was. It was something that encapsulated the main characteristics of the subject, like a passport photo or a short CV is for us today.

And Paul emphasises that “*God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him*”. Everything we need to know about God is somehow wrapped up in Jesus. And that is very important for Paul because he is wanting to counter the arguments of the false teachers that, amongst other things, Jesus wasn’t really God and, in particular, that he wasn’t involved in creation. So he stresses that in v16 – “*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.*” Jesus is not some arm’s length being, remote from God who played a minor part in putting the world together, as the Gnostic-type thinkers maintained – he’s been there from before the very beginning of time, operating as part of the Godhead. And he continues to do that, sustaining and preserving what has been made – “*He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*” Jesus is the awesome, almighty, eternal and infinite God wrapped up in a human body. We can’t really grasp that with our finite human minds, but that’s what this is all about.

And it’s important that we accept that he really was in a human body. Again, Paul subtly – almost subliminally – reinforces that as he speaks of his blood being shed in v20 and of his “*physical body*” in v22. He was not, as the Gnostics tried to maintain, some sort of ethereal being with no connection to this earth: he was fully God and fully human, something that has baffled many people and led to all kinds of splits and schisms within the Church down through the centuries. It’s one of those many odd paradoxes that are part of the foundation of what we believe.

He wasn’t just another spiritual power among many others – a kind of angel or spirit, floating around and wafting in and out of our lives. Paul says here that he created all “*thrones, powers, rulers and authorities*” and in everything he has the supremacy. He cannot be put with all those Gnostic beings, any more than he can be put on a level with the Buddha or Mohammed or Vishnu. Jesus is unique and supreme among all the powers and above all humans. He is, as the carol puts it in words that we have so much trouble trying to fit to the music of *O Come, all ye faithful*, “*Very God, begotten not created [who] abhors not the virgin’s womb.*” And the question then, of course, is “Why?” Well, that’s where **Reconciliation** comes in.

## **RECONCILIATION**

Paul tells his readers here that “*Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour*” (v21). That word “*alienated*” there is a Greek word which means “transferred to another owner”. God had created us and intended us to be in a positive relationship of love with him. He put humanity into a world that he saw as perfect and which contained everything we needed to get the very best out of life. But human beings turned their back on God, having yielded to the temptation of disobeying the only rule he gave them. And so they came to see God as remote, incomprehensible and judgemental. Humans thought they knew best and went their own way, effectively transferring their allegiance to the forces of evil – or at least, allowing selfishness and rebellion to influence all their decisions and choices.

Apart from messing up humanity itself, those choices and decisions began to wreck creation as well. Something needed to be done.

God gave laws to try and help us do the right thing, but they were largely ignored. He sent preachers and prophets to try and persuade us to reconnect with him, but they were abused and ridiculed. We still couldn't connect with this remote deity. So into the world came God himself, clothed in human flesh, wearing a human body. That was Jesus, "*the image of the invisible God*", coming amongst us to remind us that God identifies with us, helping us to see that God is not remote, showing us that he understands what suffering is all about, demonstrating that being a human does not prevent us having a relationship with the God who made us.

Indeed, in Jesus, God identifies with us even in physical death. As we've said, Paul is at pains here (as elsewhere) to stress that Jesus did actually die, he did shed his blood. And in some way that we can never fully understand, that death now makes it possible for us to be reconciled with God. We can get back to the state God originally intended for us. That is going to have eternal consequences for us – and for all creation. Without humanity doing its selfish best to bleed the earth dry of resources for our own personal gain and selfish gratification, everything can be put right again – "*through Jesus God will reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross*".

And not only that, but Jesus has blazed a trail for us through death and out the other side. He is, as Paul puts it, "*the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead*". Jesus died as a human being and he was brought back to life as a human being. We can now be assured that death is not the end, but the beginning of a glorious eternal future, reconciled with God and enjoying all that he originally wanted for us. Jesus – fully God and fully human – has done that. No-one else could do it. No other god could achieve that. No mere human being could ever manage that. Only Jesus, who stands in glory at the heart of our faith. Whatever anyone else might preach or promise, they cannot reconcile us to God. And once we accept that and commit to following Jesus, then we see what **Sanctification** is all about.

## **SANCTIFICATION**

Now, for some people, sanctification has a very specific theological meaning. I'm aware of that and I really don't want to confuse anyone about it today, so let me just explain how I'm using the word today. It's another of those words with a bit of Latin at its root. Anything with "*-fication*" at the end comes from a Latin word which means "making" – "electrification" (making something electrical), "petrification" (making something like stone), "glorification" (making something glorious). So sanctification means putting that together with the Latin word "*sanctus*", meaning to "make holy". "*But now God has*

*reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation*" writes Paul in v22. Because of what Jesus went through on the cross, we can now be reconciled to God and he now treats us a free from accusation, he does not condemn us. We have been put right with God and are to live henceforth as people of integrity – whole beings whose actions and words match our beliefs. That's why Paul addresses the folk at Colossae as "*holy*" in his greeting. Jesus – the unique, glorious, amazing Jesus – has made us holy, has brought us back to God.

But you may remember – and if you don't there's a reminder in the title of this series – that Paul did not refer to the Colossian Christians simply as "*holy*", but as "*holy and faithful*". So he says here that we will be presented "*holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation*", but we need to "*continue in our faith, established and firm, and not move from the hope held out in the gospel*". It is vitally important that we hang on to the hope that we have been given, the hope of a future in God's presence. And when I say "hang on to the hope", that's not hanging on in some desperate attempt to see if it works. We know – and we've said it many times before – that this hope isn't a vague wish that things will be OK. It is, as Paul writes elsewhere, a "*sure and certain hope*". Paul isn't saying here, cling on to that hope for grim life: it might just work. He's saying don't allow anyone to lure you away from that hope now you've got it. Keep Jesus at the very heart of all that you believe. Don't give up on what you've discovered. This is the Gospel, says Paul in v23, so stick with it. After all, as Peter said to Jesus in *John 6*, where else is there to go anyway?

So this is what Jesus does – Jesus and no-one else. He shows us what God is like, through his incarnation, helping us to see that God is not remote from us, not disconnected from us. He draws us back to God, reconnects us to him, reconciles us. And then he helps us to lead a life worthy of the Lord, presenting us as holy and giving us what we need faithfully to continue living with real hope of an eternal future with God – a future, we might add, that starts now and allows us to get the very best out of this life too. Hallelujah!

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This passage is an amazing description of the Jesus who needs to have the first place in his followers' lives. Many scholars think this is actually a great poem used in the worship of the early church that Paul has taken and adapted or added to or commented on. Here we see Paul writing about the part Jesus plays in **Incarnation**, **Reconciliation** and **Sanctification**.

#### **INCARNATION**

This is all about being made flesh, about embodying something. Jesus came into our world to make God real, visible to us. He clothed God in human flesh. As Paul puts it here, *"he is the image of the invisible God"*. In that visible, tangible human body was somehow all of God's "goodness – *"God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him"*. Everything we need to know about God is somehow wrapped up in Jesus. And it's important that we accept that he really was in a human body. Paul reinforces that as he speaks of his blood being shed in v20 and of his *"physical body"* in v22. He wasn't just another spiritual power among many others – he created all *"thrones, powers, rulers and authorities"* and in everything he has the supremacy. He cannot be put with all those Gnostic beings, any more than he can be put on a level with the Buddha or Mohammed or Vishnu. Jesus is unique and supreme among all the powers and above all humans. Why? Well, that's where **Reconciliation** comes in.

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### **For reflection and discussion**

- 1) Jesus is at the heart of Paul's gospel. What is the heart of the gospel for you? What are the non-negotiable of your faith?
- 2) What do you see in Jesus that helps you in your view of God?
- 3) If everything really was created by Jesus (v16), how do you explain the presence of evil?
- 4) Why do you think Paul stresses "*Christ's physical body*" in v22? How important is the incarnation?
- 5) V23 seems to introduce a note of conditionality into salvation – "**If** you continue ..." How do you respond to that?
- 6) How would you respond to someone who says that Jesus is special, but not unique?