



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Fifth Sunday after Trinity Year C

Colossians 1.15-28

Luke 10.38-42

Last week we looked at the remarkable and beautiful opening to Paul's letter to the church at Colossae. Paul had of course not met them as it was, his co-worker for Christ, Epaphras who had taken the good news to them. The church had flourished and Paul who is writing from prison in Ephesus is obviously delighted with the progress the Christians are making and assures them of his constant prayers for them.

There are dangers facing the church though. Until recently they were pagans worshipping pagan gods and taking very different moral standards as the norm. Now they have turned their back on the behaviour they had followed. Now all is new in Christ. Apart from this, all sorts of philosophies were rife and it was easy for the original Christian message to become diluted. The whole centre of Christianity is Christ. So Paul presents this beautiful poem. The beginning of St. John's gospel is very similar. Both readings, the first verses of the gospel of St. John and this reading from Colossians deal with Christology. That is, the understanding of the nature and divinity of Jesus Christ.

The passage from Colossians is unique, identical material to this does not appear anywhere else in the bible, however we can compare it to Philippians 2.6-11, and John 1.1-14 because it is a Christological hymn. These readings are my favourite passages from the gospels. They spell out quite clearly the nature of Jesus Christ as human and divine, pre-existent with God and of God.

It is important to set readings in context. Colossae had been of great importance but by Paul's time it was in decline. The church here seems to have been growing and Paul is full of praise in his initial greeting, (1.3-8). Colossae however was a cosmopolitan town with a large Jewish population. Many cults were practised there and these led directly to the rise of the erroneous teachings which came to undermine the church at Colossae. It became known as the Colossian heresy. To combat this Paul wrote the letter and he makes references to it in Colossians Chapter 2:

¹⁸ 'Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together.'

Therefore his central teaching is the emphasis on the supremacy of Christ. Paul has to make the Christians here quite clear about Christ as human and divine and his role as redeemer and saviour. At the beginning of his epistle to the Colossians Paul gives the traditional greeting to the church. This is followed by his thanks to them centred around his prayers for them. Here the address is personal but from verse 15-20 the style is very different, it is majestic and exalted and all personal pronouns are missing. So the passage stands in isolation as a hymn of praise. It is called a hymn but this is different from our concept of a hymn. It is more a creedal statement or confession of faith. It is believed that this 'hymn of praise' as with that of Philippians, may have been used in the very early church prior to Paul's writing.

The opening makes Christ's status as, 'image of the invisible God' absolutely clear. That is, Jesus Christ is co-existent with God and of God. 'Firstborn of all creation' does not mean he was brought into being by God, the first of created beings. What this opening states is that, 'In him all things in heaven and earth were created.'

¹⁵ 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.'

The statement sets out the fact that Christ was in the beginning with God bringing all into being. The opening of John 1 is almost identical in its statement that Christ is part of the Godhead and is co-creator:

¹ 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.'

Both state that Christ, the second person of the trinity, was 'before all things.' And all things were created by him. And Colossians goes on,

¹⁸ 'He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.'

This refers to Jesus, the incarnate God. It is Christ who is not only head of the church but of every created thing. The church is not any building; the church is its members, every single one. They make up the body of Christ and he and only he is its head.

The focus then turns to the resurrection referring to Christ as 'the first born from the dead.' Look how the words, 'so that he might come to have first place in everything' compare with the words from Philippians 2:

'Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name

that is above every name,

¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bend,

in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.'

Jesus Christ died for us on Calvary and rose for us. He bore our sins for us. This is stressed in these lines because it is absolutely central to our faith. God came to us in Jesus, we of ourselves were helpless. It is through the grace of God freely given in love that Christ laid down his life for us and won salvation for us once and for all. At the resurrection all was changed forever. Jesus Christ is the King of all that is, and was, and is to be. This ushers in God's newly created order.

¹⁹ 'For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.'

St. John sums this up when he writes,

^{1.12} 'But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.'

Christ's divinity is shown in the resurrection. No resurrection, then no foundation for faith. Paul makes that clear in 1 Corinthians 15.17

¹⁷ 'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. ²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.'

It can seem as though these passages are somehow theological and therefore distant from us. They are anything but distant. They are the whole crux of Christian belief. This is the point that Paul is making in the passage to the Colossians. This must be the foundation of their faith as it is with ours. Jesus Christ died and rose again, God and King. Christ is King of the cosmos as he is Lord of his body here on earth, the church. That is us, every one of us who call ourselves Christian. We do not simply act for ourselves and for what we want. Whenever we act we should ask, just what would Jesus want of us in this situation? Further to that, does my action really show that I am a member of the body of Christ?

This passage of high Christology makes Paul's teaching to the Colossians clear. He is laying down the fundamentals of Christian faith to them. The fundamentals of the faith we follow. This is who Jesus Christ is; this is the God whom we confess. We confess it every time we say the creed, our statement of belief. It is the foundation of the baptismal promises of new Christians.

Both the opening of John's gospel and this passage, examine the nature of the Christ who rules the cosmos as the second person of the trinity but who walks alongside us in our suffering and our joy, immanent, God with us.

The Colossian Christians have turned to Christ as saviour and God. The passage above has summed up the nature of Jesus Christ, the face of God humanity has seen. If you want to know the nature of God, says Paul, then look at Jesus Christ. The disciple Philip says, 'Show us the Father.' Jesus answers, 'I am in the Father and the Father in me.' That is the totality of it. As the beautiful communion prayer expresses it, when humanity was 'still far off, you met us in your Son and brought us home.' This is what Paul is telling the Colossians. They were far off but they have been brought close to the Father and home to his kingdom.'

²¹ 'And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²²he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him—.'

As newly baptised Christians accepting the nature of Jesus as part of the Godhead and trying to live in his way, they have received the full promises of God won through Christ in his death and resurrection. There is a condition however. Relationships, any relationship, is a two way thing, great gifts come with responsibilities, so Paul says,

²³ 'provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.'

This then is what they must do; hold firm to the gospel of Christ, hold firm to the teaching they received and indeed to the teaching they are now receiving from Paul himself. There must be no watering down of the gospel, no backsliding and no running after misleading and false philosophies.

²⁴ 'I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.'

We know just how much Paul has suffered already in his work to spread the gospel for his master. Now he is once more in prison. But he rejoices in his suffering because he is doing the will of Christ. Jesus said, 'Whoever would be my follower must take up his cross,' well Paul is doing that quite literally. He knows all about persecution and hopefully he will be an inspiration to other Christians who are sadly following the same road, the road Jesus trod before them. He is not suggesting that Christ's suffering, made once for all on the cross, was somehow lacking, no in no respect. No but the suffering that will come before all is completed, Paul is sharing in. At his resurrection Jesus broke the bonds of death and changed the world and all that is forever. That was the beginning of God's newly created order and it is up to every Christian to work so that it may come to fruition in God's time with Jesus at the head.

²⁵ 'I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, ²⁶the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints.'

In Christ all has come to fruition, as promised of old, and indeed was God's plan from the beginning. This takes us back to the nature of Christ and the wonderful poem in his praise at the beginning. That great mystery has been revealed initially to the Jews and all turned to him in faith, 'the saints' by Jesus and his followers. Now the word is spreading outwards as Jesus intended that it should. Paul is the Apostle to the Gentiles and he and his fellow missionaries are taking the good news of Christ to the Gentile world.

²⁷ 'To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. ²⁸It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.'

Now anyone who receives the word of Jesus, who turns to him and tries to live according to the Christian teaching, is an inheritor of the promises of God and co heir with Christ. All who turn to him are children of God, not just any specific race or group, all are equal and all are loved.

Our gospel reading is the story of Martha and Mary. It might seem at first glance that this account is entirely unrelated to our reading from Colossians but that is not so. Let's go back once again to last week's gospel reading. We have been told that Jesus had, 'Set his face toward Jerusalem,' and that time is of the essence. Last week Jesus, on his journey, met the lawyer who was intent on trapping him. Needless to say he failed and Jesus gave the famous illustration of the essential commandment, 'Love your neighbour.' The gospel story for today follows on,

³⁷ 'He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

³⁸ Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.'

So it begins, 'As they went on their way', we know that Martha and Mary live with their brother at Bethany, a village only two miles from Jerusalem. We also know John's account of the raising of Lazarus is just prior to his final entry into Jerusalem. By that time Jesus knew the family well and Lazarus was his friend. The raising of Lazarus prefigures the resurrection. Now then it is quite obvious that this story cannot have happened at the end of Jesus' ministry but earlier. Jesus had turned to face the ultimate fight with evil; he had a gospel to proclaim but not in one journey. Why then does Luke put it here? It does not happen in the final week so it must have importance to give it such prominence.

On the surface it appears to be a rather slight account, especially when compared to the theology which has gone before in the passage from Colossians. It has been interpreted variously. Here is Martha who is fussing about with the chores and getting the dinner while Mary quietly listens to Jesus. She complains and Jesus corrects her. Of course listening to the word of God is more important. Mary has chosen the best path; she is listening with rapt attention to her Lord. From a spiritual point of view it has been argued that contemplative prayer is much more acceptable than active. Actually of course that's not true and I think we are missing the point in that view. If Luke chooses to put this short account in such a prominent position he does so for a reason. Well then, we need to look at the culture of the times. Jesus was extraordinary in his dealings with women. Just think of the encounters we see in the gospels and the way he treats them with respect. Certainly many respond to him and follow him loyally even to the foot of the cross. It was to a woman he revealed the wonder of the resurrection.

In those days women would not be expected to mix with the men. The women would be in their part of the house, the chores were their job. They were separated into two worlds and a man would not even want to be seen in public with a woman. Think of the horror expressed when the woman came in with the jar of perfume (In John's gospel he says it was Mary) it wasn't the expense only that caused outrage it was that she sat at the feet of Jesus. That was a no no. To sit at the feet of a rabbi meant that you were learning from him and indeed that you wanted to pass that teaching on, just as Paul would have done at the feet of his teacher Gamaliel. A woman was to keep away from the men and learning was barred.

What Mary does is shocking, she comes into the men's space, throwing convention to the wind. She sits at Jesus' feet and absorbs his every word. Women were not allowed to behave that way. They should, according to all cultural traditions, do exactly what Martha is doing. However Jesus commends Mary. Jesus cuts through tradition, he cuts through petty rules. He turns convention on its head as the previous story illustrates. It is the hated Samaritan who does the work of God. Jesus is revolutionary; the word of God is revolutionary. In Jesus there is the dawn of God's new kingdom.

The point Jesus is making is the point that all who accept him are children of God. All are equal in God's sight; all are inheritors of the kingdom. There are no artificial barriers anymore; he comes to break those down. As John puts it,

^{1.11} 'He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,'

Mary learned at that first moment that Jesus was the one. She knew he was her Lord and she stood out against all the norms and dared to cross the boundary of tradition and expectation. She learned from him and no doubt from that moment her life would never be the same again.

This is not the end of the story though because we meet them both again at what was to be a momentous occasion. Martha is no longer the one simply occupied by household affairs. On the death of her brother she goes to meet Jesus, she utters those remarkable words of faith, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'

This is not simply, why didn't you come earlier? It is faith in the power of Jesus to restore and heal. That shows utter belief in his power, a power from on high. Mary is to say exactly the same later on. Then comes the direct statement,

²⁵ 'Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?'

No longer does Jesus instruct people to say nothing. Now the truth about who he is must be proclaimed, it is out in the open and Martha voices the truth.

²⁷She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

This is a woman who recognises Jesus for what he is; it is as momentous as Peter's recognition, or Thomas' or Mary Magdalen's. Martha is a follower now. How different is this Martha from the one in our passage. Mary and Martha are two women whose lives have been touched and turned around by Jesus. They see the dead walk again. They know the cosmic power of their Lord. Soon Jesus will be the risen Lord who will have conquered the power of death forever. We are not told what happens to the sisters after this but it is safe to say that they are firm disciples of their Lord and God and will live their lives as such. This is the essence of this story. No wonder Luke gives it a prominent place. Mary, and as we see later in John, Martha and all who turn to Jesus in faith and love, receive the promises of God. It doesn't matter who you are, there is no status with God.

This is Paul's message to the church at Corinth, Jesus is God, follow him, turn to him and become his beloved child.

'Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?' John L Bell.

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