

# 'The Cosmic Christ'

## The Letter of Paul to the Colossians

Sermon of Evensong St James Lower Hutt by the Rev Derek Lightbourne July 8 2018

Keynote Bible passage: Colossian 1. 1 – 23

This letter in New Testament context is important in that it expresses profound beliefs about Jesus as the living expression of God. One aspect is Christ active in creation, hence the title of the Sermon: *'The cosmic Christ.'*

- 1) Background: First then we shall briefly consider the background to this letter, written by St Paul to the Christian believers in Colossae, a town in the west of modern-day Turkey. Paul hadn't got to personally visit the town but had lived in nearby Ephesus.

When in prison in Rome, two leaders of the church in Colossae, Epaphras and Philemon acquainted him to issues and challenges to believers there. Our own understanding may recall there were many gods and goddesses in the Greek pantheon, and this influenced the spirituality of peoples of the time. They were quite content to include Christianity into this mix. Paul however challenged this and thus strongly stated Christ Jesus held complete supremacy and was utterly self-sufficient. In some senses it was somewhat like what 'spirituality' offers today. Not only are there the great faiths like Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism, there's also lots of smaller 'options' like 'offshoots' of Christianity – Christadelphians, Christian Scientist, Mormon.... And there's the many who have no professed belief. Issues in the Colossian church included the carryover from Jewish practices of circumcision, and food laws. For some there was belief in angel worship and for others the basis of human wisdom. (2.18) Responding to this Paul counteracts that Christians need to hold to Christ, 'from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth this is from God'. (2.19) I like to read the poetry and wisdom to be found in different faiths. I well remember reading for example Kahlil Gibran's 'The Prophet.' That said, I am in no doubt that the writings of the New Testament Scriptures are pre-eminent in my faith and belief. As well as this challenge to the Christian faith Paul in the letter provides guidance as to effective prayer and principles of Christian living, including the well-known passage 'As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, meekness, humility and patience'. (3.12ff). Thus, for Christians today it is also a both a challenge and an encouragement.

That then is some background to the letter and it also goes to show that there's a timeless element to this writing in the context of contemporary spiritualities and no spirituality.

- 2) When reading the letters of the New Testament St Paul's ones are characterised in their beginning with what I describe as a '*contextual prayer*'. Notice how he easily enters into a prayer form: 'I thank my God....' Or in this letter: 'In our prayers for you we always thank God....' I find these helpful in praying in the same way the first disciples found what we describe as The Lord's Prayer. So, look for a moment and note in the face

of the issues at Colossae what St Paul includes, there being 4 aspects for then and now:

Paul first prays that (i) '*you will be filled with the knowledge of God's will*'.

That is, what we are seeking is to know the will of God for our lives, not only talking to God in prayer, but also seeking to listen, to discern God's will. As mentioned in earlier sermons for me this often comes in 'nudges of the Holy Spirit' in things unfolding.

(ii) The next petition is that we will be '*given wisdom and understanding by the Spirit*'. Thoughts there are coming into one's mind as to how to act or to speak,

(iii) '*that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in knowledge of God*.' Thus, as we do live in that way we become more aware of being in God's will and purpose. As Paul writes in another letter, 'what is true and pure, pleasing and honourable and just.'

Then a fourth petition (iv) '*that we may become strong in the strength of the Holy Spirit*' to counteract outside unhelpful influences which so pervade our society. One might think for a moment of the power of the media of advertising to determine how to live, what to buy, what to eat, what to medicate on. St Paul talks about enduring with patience .... which I do with all the advert breaks on TV!

This significant intercessory prayer ends with how it began an *invitation to thankfulness*, in this instance as being enabled to have this special relationship with Jesus achieved by what he did on the cross – 'rescued from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son.'

- 3) Now we come to what I regard is the climax of the letter, of what has been described as *the cosmic Christ – in all creation*.

One noted Bible scholar FF Bruce expressed it as 'declaring our Lord's divine essence, pre-existence and creative agency.' He obviously had in mind the verses from the reading: 'Christ is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created...all things have been created through him and for him.' (1.15 -16). For this we are reminded of the place of the Spirit at the start of creation 'moving over the face of the waters. Colossians reminds us of the pre-existence of Christ, 'the first-born of all creation', There's something very profound in the depth of this revelation. For me it brings an awareness of the wonder and awe of creation, so well described in the Psalms as in 104: 'O Lord, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.' One would think from this that humanity would have everlastingly cared for creation, rather than taking the 'stewardship or dominion and used it as a reason to exploit, dominate, pollute and desecrate it. Rather to take those words of the divine creator: 'Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground' (Exod 3).

I well remember visiting a Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka where this was expected, with what looked like hundreds of pairs of sandals lined up outside. Yet it wasn't only there, in the two Christian churches I visited the same applied – holy ground and sandals were gathered at the door. And if one thinks about it there is indeed a *sacredness of creation* that is implicit in

the Colossians insight and this should reflect our care for creation with its fragile ecological balance. I consider this is what is aimed at in the church's 5<sup>th</sup> Mark of mission ...to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation'. I'm also in awe and wonder at the circumstances by which life as we know it came about, in what has been called 'Fermi's paradox': that there is water, air, growth and reproduction on Planet Earth. His enquiry is how it can be that in all the billions of stars of the universe thus far not one had been found to have extra-terrestrial life more than likely microbes.

The selected passage concludes with further praise of the *nature of Jesus the Christ*, 'in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. He is the head of the body the church. For all its 'humanness' and sins and neglects of the past, and present, Paul reminds us here and in other passages that Jesus Christ is the head of the body the church. So, our seeking is to 'get it right.' That applies to what we do and how we are in the parish, as much as in the worldwide diversity of Christian believers.

*Finally* let us keep in mind the central premise of this letter of St Paul. He calls us to live faithfully in the life and love of Christ. It is appropriate then to end with a prayer excerpt: 'that you continue securely and strengthened in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven'. (1.23)