

Prayers

To God

Pray on quietness for peace and for blessing on your own home and family.

For myself

Pray to ask the Lord for the strength to do what is right this day. You know what is required of you, so ask Him to keep you 'up to the mark' this very day.

For others

Weekly theme: the supply of power

Lord God Almighty, You are the source of all power, and yet we our economies are built upon by the need to consume power in the form of gas, oil, coal or nuclear power. May we be mindful however of our need for another sort of power, spiritual power, and the only source of that power, which is found in Your love and Your salvation. We pray for the day when people will be as thirsty for You, Lord God, as they are for all other forms of power, which You have indeed made, if we would but acknowledge it! AMEN

Meditation

Giving and receiving is at the heart of the life of our faith:
But it is the manner in which we do it that gives quality of life.

Giving time to things which need our attention;
wholeheartedly:

Giving love to those who mean so much to us;
completely:

Giving money away to those who need it most;
unconditionally:

Giving effort to those things which need to be done;
without reserve:

And giving ourselves to the work of the Gospel;
unstintingly!

Receiving help from others when we need it;
appreciatively:

Receiving love from those who mean so much to us;
passionately:

Receiving money for our work and as gifts;
appreciatively:

Receiving the results of other people's work;
enthusiastically:

And receiving the blessings of the Kingdom of God;
joyfully!

Bible Passage

Colossians 1:15-20

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. ¹⁶ For all things in heaven and earth were created in Him, everything visible and invisible, whether thrones, angelic powers, rulers or authorities; all things were created through Him and for Him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in Him all things have their proper place.

¹⁸ He is the head of the Body, which is the Church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that in everything He might be supreme; ¹⁹ for God was pleased for all things to be found in Him, completely, ²⁰ and to reconcile all things to Himself through Him, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace through the blood of His Cross.

Review

This is an amazing passage of Scripture. Paul begins his letter to the Colossians with a commendation and a promise of his prayers (1:3-14), and whilst describing these prayers, he speaks of the saving work of God through Jesus (1:13,14), which triggers this eloquent and profound description of the power and authority of Jesus. Strangely, Jesus is not mentioned by name, but it is clear who this passage is about! Most of the words Paul used in this passage are well known (with some exceptions) but what he says with them is astounding, and as we read, we feel very close to a mystery, the mystery of Creation and Redemption itself in the heart and mind of God.

In order to understand why Paul said these words, a little detective work is required. If we read Colossians carefully (particularly 2:3,8f.), we can see evidence 'between the lines' that the church had been affected by some common beliefs of the first century which are easily seen in other writings of the time. This was that God created the world, but our access to Him was controlled by angelic powers; for example, even some Jewish philosophers of that time considered that the Law was given to Moses through angels (see Gal. 3:19, Heb. 2:2 and Acts 7:53). In the church, these deeply rooted beliefs tempted some to believe that Jesus was a great angel sent by God to sort out humanity. This was totally unacceptable to Paul, and this passage of scripture is the greatest of his arguments against such beliefs. For

a fuller understanding of them and the way that Scripture refutes them, this passage should be read alongside Hebrews 1, which says more about Christ as 'superior to angels' (Heb 1:4).

The passage itself powerfully reveals that Jesus was involved in partnership with the Father in the creation of the world (1:15-16), stressing that absolutely everything exists because of Jesus, and the distinctive words of this passage are the words 'in Him', 'through Him', and 'for Him'. Whatever Paul thought of angels in general, he did not regard them as having anything to do with the spiritual or physical nature of the Universe. The middle of the passage (1:17,18) emphasises the importance of Jesus as the Head of the Church, not just as an important part of it, but essential to its whole existence, and without whom it would not exist. The last part (1:19,20) concludes by confidently affirming that the work of salvation, described here as reconciliation between humanity and God, is uniquely and exclusively the work of Jesus Christ, on the Cross.

The whole passage is often described as an ancient hymn, and some have claimed to find evidence of a rhythmic structure to this hymn in the original Greek, which would make it suitable for chanting as a form of 'creed' or for singing as a 'hymn'. There are almost as many theories about this passage as there are scholars, but the text we have before us was what Paul chose to write to the Colossians to tell them in no uncertain terms that it was not possible for them to find any philosophies which explained the nature of the Universe, the Gospel of salvation, or even Jesus. It was the fact of Jesus Christ Himself and the Gospel which explained all these things; not the other way round! Strangely, people today still try to 'explain' Christ, when in reality, it remains true that we find the truth about everything in this world, in and through Him.

Going Deeper

These verses are packed with words of power, meaning and significance, as well as mystery; and they are commonly regarded as the greatest explanation of the 'cosmic' nature of Christ in the New Testament. We shall now look at the main headings identified above to unravel some of the power of these great words for us today.

'All things ... were created in Him'

There are a wonderful series of overlapping words and ideas in this poetic description of Jesus as present in the activity of Creation! To begin with, the 'image of God' according to Genesis, is man and woman (Genesis 1:27), but in this passage it is Jesus who is described as 'the image of the invisible God' (1:15). At first sight, this all seems to be irreconcilable, for on the one hand, Jesus is being equated with God the Father, but then, the actual words used are virtually the same for created humanity! The only way that we can hold this together is by the classical doctrine which says that Jesus is both fully God and fully human, and the words which call Him 'the image of the invisible God' uniquely describe Him as exactly that!

Jesus is also described as the 'firstborn of all Creation'. In our language today, we think of the 'firstborn' in a very physical way as the eldest child, for example. The ancient people thought in the same way, but they also used the term differently, meaning the one who would pass the Father's inheritance on to future generations. This is why Jacob, for example, could steal the 'rights of the firstborn' from his older brother Esau (Gen 25:29f. etc.). The spiritual meaning of the 'firstborn' was therefore more important in those days than the physical. In our passage, when Paul called Jesus the 'firstborn of all creation', he was not saying that Jesus was the first 'being' who was made; far from it, for He was God Himself as we have just read; he was saying that Jesus was the physical embodiment of the Father's inheritance of love, given generously to the whole world.

It was very important that Paul said this, for the young church at Colossae was being taught by some who had joined it that Jesus was an angelic mediator between God and the rest of the world, and angels were part of the heavenly creation. No, said Paul in our passage, Jesus was with the Father in creation and there was no need for any angelic mediators of any kind. This is the meaning of verse 16 in which Paul gives a list of the names of some of the angelic powers that were talked about in those days; 'everything visible and invisible, whether thrones, angelic powers, rulers or authorities' (1:16). Mostly, we have no accurate way of knowing what these terms referred to, and in view of the wider picture of what Paul is saying, it hardly matters. His point was that they were irrelevant.

At this point, the main thrust of what Paul was saying begins to come through, particularly in the sentence 'in Him all things have their proper place' (1:17). People were using the philosophies and teaching of the day to try and explain Jesus and what they knew of the Gospel, but Paul was boldly countering that attempt by saying that this was the wrong way to try and understand both God's work in this world and the Gospel of His redemptive love. His impassioned plea was that those who had been touched by the love of Jesus were people who were able to interpret the whole world around them through Jesus, because they had come to know Him as God. They did not need any philosophy, or angels, or any other interpretations of heavenly powers and authorities. Christ Himself was sufficient.

Christ, the Head of the Church

Some scholars, who think that this passage is an ancient hymn, have tried to work out the rhythm of the whole passage and suggest that some or all of verse 18 is an addition by Paul. The theories are very attractive and can be read about in most commentaries. You will see in your Bibles that some translations write the passage out as if it had some kind of verse structure similar to a Psalm, for example. However it came about, Paul placed at the very centre of this great text a clear call to the Colossian church to abandon all teaching about angels or any other doctrine which did not honour Jesus as 'supreme' (1:18).

In saying 'Jesus is the head of the Body, which is the Church ...' Paul was using language that he had used in many of his other letters to describe the relationship between Jesus and his disciples after the Resurrection (see Rom 7:4; 1 Cor 12:12f.). The Church is meaningless without Christ, and meaningless without Jesus' disciples being connected both to each other and to their Lord. That is the power of the analogy of the body; and to call Christ the 'head of the Body' was not, from Paul's point of view, merely to assign to him the important part. Even today we recognise that a body will not function without a head! This was a title of absolute honour, and it implied complete privilege and respect. Whilst Paul often talked of the proper respect that should be shown to earthly authorities (Rom 13:1f. for example), he emphasised that within the Church there was no other heavenly power.

If you read through this text and count the number of times the word 'all' occurs and where it is used, then you begin to understand the strength of Paul's words. Jesus was 'all' things to Paul and to the Church, and Paul would not countenance any teaching, especially in a church he regarded as his own (through Epaphras – see 1:7) which gave Him anything less than absolute honour as head and as God. No angels were required! Incidentally, this does not mean that Paul did not believe in angels as agents of God, but the absence of much positive teaching about angels in the New Testament is probably due to the need to counter this heresy in the life of the early church.

God was pleased ... to reconcile all things to Himself through Him'

The last part of this great passage may be thought of as beginning in verse 18, but becomes clear in verse 19. Whereas the first part was about Creation, this last part is about God's work of Salvation. Because Jesus was part of Creation, and because Jesus was the perfect 'image of the invisible God' within this world, He, and He alone, was the One through whom God worked to 'reconcile all things to Himself' (1:19); it could not be done through angels!

The remarkable thing about this last part of our passage is the universal nature of God's work of reconciliation in Christ. We could spend time describing how and why reconciliation is needed, and what Jesus did in order to secure it, as some writers do when talking about this

text, but that is the function of other parts of Scripture. Paul threw the theology of Creation and Redemption wide open with these words and obliges us to think bigger about the whole of our faith. It is right and proper that we concentrate upon the personal and individual in the task of evangelism, but when we do this, we are taking part in one small part of God's great redemptive activity.

Redemption, salvation, liberation or deliverance would all be words which describe the work of God in Jesus Christ which overcomes the catastrophic effects of evil in the world which are described by the Bible. The evil itself originates in the story of the Fall in Genesis 3, but is illustrated in almost every page of the Old Testament, effecting everything; individuals, God's people, nations, and even Creation itself (see Isaiah 34:8f. for some examples of this). We make a mistake if we think of Jesus' work on the Cross, specifically mentioned here as the means of reconciliation (1:20) as merely for our personal benefit, or even the personal benefit of every person who has ever lived or will live. The darkening of the sun in the afternoon of Jesus' death (so easily dismissed by us today as some form of 'eclipse') was but one sign of the cosmic events taking place at that very moment. It is not something that, being mortal, we can fully understand; but the whole of Creation is affected by the Gospel we preach and the reconciliation won for us by Jesus Christ.

We, of course, may only see this fully when we see a 'new heaven and a new earth' (Rev 21:1), and as evil and death are eliminated (Rev 20:11-15). But I do believe that there are signs of the cosmic effect of the Gospel within the world we know today, and they are part of the Gospel.

Discipleship

Application

Certainty in the Gospel

It seems almost insulting to talk of 'applying' this text; partly because this implies personalising something that is essentially too big for us to fully comprehend. Paul wanted the Colossians to know with absolute certainty that the Gospel was not something they could tinker with as they liked, listening to this theory or that, and debating (as people loved to do in those days) the moral and ethical possibilities of this or that way of thinking about the Universe. Yet the very fact that a group of ordinary people who made up the early church in Colossae were debating these things, and needed to be corrected by Paul, is in itself a message for us today.

A message for God's people today

In our world, we have lost interest in debating these matters, leaving them to theologians, whose discussions are regarded by most Christians as inane, and scientists, who have more to tell us about the Universe than a normal person can understand. Moreover, morality is something that people now regard as a matter of personal conscience, as if what we do makes no difference one way or the other to the Universe in which we live. This is not life at its best, or real faith in Christ as preached by Paul and written about in the New Testament. Perhaps the best way we can respond to this sweeping and magnificent passage of Scripture is to realise that it was indeed addressed to the 'normal' people of the day, challenging them to think of their faith in Christ as the one and only governing factor within the whole of the Universe and for all of time. We need to re-learn how to 'think big' today, especially in a world where our own planet is suffering severely from the effects of supporting us and the lives we wish to lead.

Can we preach the eternal and cosmic consequences of the Cross to a world and a planet which needs redemption and salvation just as it has always done? I hope so, and I hope we

have no need to talk about any kind of cosmic power or authority, however angelic, apart from Christ!

Ideas for what to do

- Reflect on what it means to allow Christ to be Your 'Head', Your leader and Your guide in all things. What does this mean we must do? How can we show our trust in Him, and how do we live by faith in Him in practical ways?
- Pray for all who struggle to yield everything to Christ as their Lord and master. Some will find this hard because they do not find it easy to allow others to take control of anything in which they are involved. Yet the call is clear and they need our help and companionship if they are ever to discover the true delights of faith.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Write down a list words or ideas that describe 'who Christ is' that you can find in this passage. Discuss this in your group
2. Is Christ honoured as the 'Head of the Church'? Why is he not honoured in this way, sometimes even within the church?
3. If Jesus is to be found 'in' all things (1:19), can we 'find' something of Jesus in people who do not know Him, and what does this mean?

Final Prayer

Jesus, the very fact that we can talk to You is a miracle of Your grace. Thank You for being able to hear all the prayers of those who love You, and for being able to care for each one of us individually. It is beyond our understanding, and Your love is very real! Thank You, Lord Jesus; **AMEN**