

Christ, Cosmos, and Clothing

1st Weekend of Kingdomtide – June 10/11, 2006

Sermon Background Study

Colossians 1:15-20; 3:1-4, 12-14 (NRSV)

¹⁵He 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. ¹⁸He 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. ¹⁹For 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.

3So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

¹²As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Who is Jesus? This is the question on the lips of the Colossians. It is also on the lips of the millions who have seen and read The Da Vinci Code. In Colossae, as in our world, false claims about Jesus were put forward by some. This letter is Paul's response.

Is Jesus “a mere man” as Professor Teabing tells Sophie in *The Da Vinci Code*? Are there powers greater than Jesus, as some in ancient Colossae suggested? Paul's letter to the Colossians should put to bed the silly notion that the first Christians didn't worship Jesus as divine. Today's Scripture passages from Colossians address three questions: Who is Jesus? What does it mean for us? What should be our response? Let's take a look at each.

Who is Jesus? (1:15-20)

The first passage is a bit like a hymn in two stanzas, v. 15-17 and v. 18-20. The first stanza emphasizes that all things were created in Christ, through Christ, and for Christ. In case we miss Paul's point here, he gives us a list: all things visible and invisible, all thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers. Eugene Peterson paraphrases Paul this way in *The Message*:

“We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels — *everything* got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment.”

“So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above . . . ”

Regrettably, the NRSV is somewhat misleading in its translation of Colossians 3:1. Paul is not expressing any doubts about the status of the Colossians nor is he speaking to a mixed group, i.e., some Christians and some not. Paul's Greek would be better translated “If, as is the case, you have been . . . ” or “Since you have been . . . ” Paul is reminding the Colossians that all Christians have been “raised with Christ.” But what does Paul mean by “raised with Christ”?

Earlier in the letter, Paul speaks of Christians as having died with Christ (2:20). But we, of course, have neither *physically* died, nor have we been *physically* raised (resurrected). We can understand Paul only when we truly grasp that there is a non-physical reality, the things that are unseen (Hebrews 11:1). Christ's death and resurrection inaugurated the coming of God's kingdom not as some sort of metaphor or spiritual truth, but in reality. As Christians, as those who have faith in Jesus Christ, we participate in this reality. Our “old selves” have died and we have been reborn (John 3). Obviously, this new birth, this new creation, is not of the same manner as Jesus' death on the cross and physical resurrection, but Paul wants us to grasp that our own “death and resurrection” *with Christ* are no less real. The links that bound us to the old order have been severed and, instead, we have been bound to a new and heavenly order.

I realize that all this can seem very abstract and hard to grasp, but that doesn't make it any less true. In keeping with our rebirth, we are to put away the old and clothe ourselves with the new.

For any Jew, this sort of language could be used only with respect to the LORD God. Paul was a Jew and not just any Jew, but an educated, zealous Pharisee. He knew the meaning of what he wrote. He knew that he was speaking of Jesus as one would speak of God. Yes, Paul struggles to find the right language, just as Christians have been struggling for two thousands to make sense of a mystery. On the one hand, Paul says that Jesus is the “firstborn of all creation” which might make us think he is about to lump Jesus in with the rest of creation. But no. In the next phrase, Paul says the opposite – all things are created in, through, and for Jesus! It takes an expansive, open, and imaginative mind to hold together seemingly contradictory truths about God. Such minds are God’s desire for us.

Notice also that Paul speaks of *all* things and *all* powers. There is no person, no government, no angel, no demon . . . nothing . . . that was not created in, through, and for Jesus. Everyone, everywhere, at all times, sits under the lordship of Jesus Christ, whether or not they know it or acknowledge it.

The focus of the second stanza shifts from creation to re-creation, renewal, and restoration, the embodiment of which is the church. Christ is head of the church, yet distinct from it, just as Christ is distinct from creation. Why is Jesus Christ, though fully and completely human, unique? Because he is the one person in whom God’s fullness¹ dwells.

And what is God’s purpose in all this? The reconciliation of the entire cosmos to God, the undoing of the tragedy of the Garden. And how is all this done? Through the crucifixion, the “blood of his cross.” This is the good in Good Friday – that, in a way we cannot fully explain, we and the entire cosmos have been put right with God through Jesus’ death on the cross. To some, such a claim is not only bizarre but offensive, but for almost 2,000 years, Christians have proclaimed that it is true.

What does it mean for us? (3:1-4)

It means that through Christ we have been made right with God. Here, Paul wants us to grasp the “already”² aspect of this claim. Thus, as Christ has died, we have died. As Christ has been raised to new life, so have we been raised to new life. But, we might expect, Paul also works in the “not yet” – we will be revealed with Christ in glory when the truth of Christ is revealed to all of creation. As Michael Gorman puts it, we identify with both the *exalted, cosmic* Christ and the *humble, crucified* Christ.³ Thus, having been raised “already,” we are to set our minds on the things of God, for that is where the truth lies. And if we can train our minds to focus on God, then our hearts will flood open to God.

What should be our response? (3:12-14)

We have been chosen by God. We are God’s beloved, set aside and made holy for God. The appropriate response is straightforward. We are to clothe ourselves in Christ. We are to live out Christ’s compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. We are to bear one another’s burdens, as Christ has borne ours. We are to forgive one another as Christ has forgiven us. We are to dress ourselves in love, for only then can we find the unity and harmony that is to characterize the body of Christ. We are to love as God has loved us.

We don’t live in this way because we have something to gain nor because others might expect it of us. We live in this way, clothed in Christ, because we have been raised with him and our lives, therefore, must reflect what is so. To the extent that our minds and hearts do not embrace the truth about Jesus, then we can never hope to embody the love of Christ.

Why we do what we do matters. Is Jesus the image of the invisible God? Were *all* things created in, through, and for him? If Professor Teabing is right – then the answer is no and we are left to our own devices, making our way through this world with only each other to depend upon. But if, as Paul claims, God truly resurrected Jesus, then our hope lies in God, not in ourselves. What *really* matters is what is true.

Christians proclaim to the world that the renewal that Paul speaks of in Colossians 3 is real. It is as concrete as Jesus’ own death and resurrection. But we also know that we still must learn to walk in the Spirit of Christ, to walk in God’s way, to walk in a manner befitting the new clothes that we wear. Paul knows that we are talking about a process, not merely a moment. It is why he speaks of the new self as being renewed in 3:10. It is in the same sense as our proclamation that God’s kingdom has come already, but not yet in all its fullness. We have been renewed and we are being renewed. We have been saved and we are being saved. Praise God!!

¹Peterson is very helpful when paraphrasing “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” From *The Message*: “So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding.”

²Here it is again. This “already/not yet” reading of the New Testament is inescapable.

³from Gorman’s excellent introduction to Paul and his letters, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, Eerdmans, 2004.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

June 11 – June 17

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 1 Kings 10-12; Psalm 80 The Queen of Sheba visits; Solomon begins the decline of Israel by importing foreign wives and their religions; after Solomon's death, the kingdom splits in two</p>	<p>Day 2 1 Kings 13-15; Psalm 81 The long litany of largely bad kings begins and a prophet emerges who will try to call the people back to God</p>
<p>Day 3 1 Kings 16-19; Psalm 82 The story of Elijah and his confrontation with Ahab and Jezebel</p>	<p>Day 4 A day for reflection and catching up</p>
<p>Day 5 1 Kings 20-22; Psalm 83 The confrontation continues; Elijah pronounces God's judgment for the murder of Naboth</p>	<p>Day 6 Jonah; Psalm 84 Jonah tries to escape from God but can't. What do you think is the biggest "miracle" in the story?</p>
<p>Day 7 Philemon; Psalm 85 Paul writes a remarkable letter asking Onesimus to treat a runaway slave as he would Paul.</p>	

Sermon Notes

June Book Recommendation

***Recapturing the Wesleys' Vision*, by Paul Wesley Chilcote**

John Wesley's theological brilliance can be seen in his unerring commitment to the "both/ands" of the Christian faith. Jesus is fully God AND fully human. We are saved AND we are being saved. These and many other Christian claims are not choices, they are truths that we must sustain even if we don't fully grasp the mystery. This book is a slender introduction to the Wesley brothers' proclamations of the Good News. You will be introduced to the writings of John and to the theology of Charles' hymns. You will see how the Wesley brothers sought to hold on to the vital tension between faith and works, Word and Spirit, the personal and the social, and more.

The book is well-organized into four sections of two chapters each. Questions for reflection and discussion are provided at the end of each chapter, making this book very suitable for a Sunday School class or other small group.

***Inspiration*, the St. Andrew Bookstore, has copies of the CD recordings of a two-week class on *The Da Vinci Code* that Scott Engle recorded in 2004. This is a two-CD set and costs \$5.**

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The difficulty of writing a background study on this passage from Colossians is that, like so much of Paul, every sentence, every phrase, is packed with meaning and power. Yet, we sometimes shy away from such passages. If we do more than let our minds dance across the surface of the words, it can all seem so "heavy." Do you ever feel intimidated by such passages? Do you find yourself reading quickly past much of it? What can we do to help ourselves to be ready for, to even desire, "solid food"?

Do you see how even in these few verses (1:15-20), Paul blasts away any notion that we could think of Jesus as a mere man? Why do you think this is so important to Paul? We have to be careful to give up our claim that Jesus was fully human while we proclaim his divinity, though this is not Paul's emphasis here (see Philippians 2: 5-11 for that). In *The Da Vinci Code* Robert Langdon says at the end of the movie, "What really matters is what *you* believe?" What do you think Paul would say to that? Why?

When writing this study, I didn't choose to concentrate on the virtues - compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience - that Paul enumerates in v. 12-14. In Paul's metaphor, these virtues describe the new clothes that we put on when we place our faith (our trust) in Jesus Christ (in standard Christian vocabulary this is called "justification") and begin our renewal (in standard Christian vocabulary, the process of renewal is called "sanctification"). Are these virtues prized by the "real world" that we live and work in every day? Paul urges us not to lie to one another. Is this "realistic"? Are these truly the virtues that we, as disciples of Jesus Christ, try to embrace each day? If not, why not? What holds us back? What do you think Paul means when he writes that loves binds everything together in perfect harmony?