

**Welcome**

Good morning. So here we are, 3 weeks into Paul's letter to the Colossians.

Dan and Sean went over the greetings and the opening prayer the past 2 weeks. We've learnt about the Colossian women and men who received the letter and where Paul probably was when he wrote it.

This morning we're on verses 15 to 20. This is a poem about Jesus, written for the Colossians and it has an important place in this letter. And it has a very important place in our understanding about who Jesus is. Let's read it.

**Read passage Colossian 1:15-20**

I wonder.....What do you want God to look like?

What do you want God to be like?

That may sound like a strange question, but I think really, deep down, many of us have an image of what we want God to be like, and we can read our bible, and hear sermons, and see Him through our own lens.

And it's not always intentional. We barely notice. Until we come across someone who sees Him through another lens. Their own. They've created God to look as they want him- or her – to look. And suddenly it's different.

And we can be shocked. How could think that? How could they overlook that particular passage, or not prioritise this particular thing that I am passionate about.

It's not new. Many people have their own image that they hold to. Many of the ancient Jews had a particular notion in mind. The messiah that many were waiting for, was a warrior messiah, their God would provide a new King David who would fight the Romans. Release them from oppression. Be a great *Jewish* King. It was exclusive. Apostle Paul used to believe this himself.

There are echoes of this shape of God in nationalistic and far right movements throughout history. A God that fights and wins, that favours people that look like us, that hates our enemies, that blesses those who worship him by giving them money and power.

And it doesn't have to be that extreme. Because if I'm honest, I think I'd like God to have the same political views that I have, to like the same people that I like, and bless those I love... and not those I don't.

Now the pagan gentiles, the Colossians were of their number, they had many gods, so God could look like anything you wanted them to look like. Nature, love, wine, thunder, a mythical beast. There were many so there was no exclusivity there. They were often contrary and looked out for themselves not for humanity.

Again, I think there are echoes of this in our multi faith society. though it doesn't often come from people of other faiths. It's a kind of, spiritual, teaching that says you can have Buddha, and Jesus, and Mohammad and Krishna, and they all lead to the same God.

And that sounds comfortable, doesn't it? Friendly, warm, encompassing. It gets away from the endless religious wars that our world seems caught up in again and again. And let's not deny it, exclusive claims have and do lead to conflict.

What I'm saying is that it's easy to see God in the way we want to see Him... it's easy to do it and not even notice that we're doing it. It's an age old thing.

And along comes Paul. And he knows what people are thinking, and hoping for and praying for.

And he comes out with the boldest poem describing God, almost the boldest that you can imagine.

And He says we *know* what God is like. It's not a mystery. Because this invisible God sent to us a visible image of himself. Verse fifteen, the first line - the son is the image of the invisible God.

Any vague notions or guesses that we had can be put to one side. Jesus is *the* image of God. displaying divine mercy and love, power that works in weakness, and the divine mystery that will reconcile the whole of creation through the cross.

Now remember. Jesus was not a warrior – not like that.

He's not just for certain people, that look like us or sound like us.

He's not even just for people.

He's for the whole of creation.

And he is – *very* – exclusive. *All* things were created through him and for him. The *fullness* of God dwells in him. Says Paul. These are some enormous statements.

In magnificent cathedrals there are often beautiful details on the ceiling. You've got to crick your neck to see them. Like the roses on York minster, or the painting in the Sistine chapel.

We can miss them because they're hard to see.

But some savvy tourist destinations have put in full length mirrors, tiled, so we can stand straight and look into them and see the beauty and glory above.

Jesus is a bit like the mirror showing us what God looks like. He is the image of the invisible God.

...and the view is amazing.

In our prayer course the other week we considered the difference between praying through the telescope or the microscope. The telescope of creation and the cosmos and the BIG picture. The enormity of everything. And the microscope of our own lives, our own worlds, on any given day. The details. Sometimes I look at God through a microscope looking for tiny details. But this poem looks through the telescope. Big picture.

Jesus is the image of the invisible God and the view is...<boom>... beyond what our imaginations can see.

Let's look at some of the descriptions again...

He is the firstborn of all creation. All things were created through him and for him.

He is before all things and in him all things hold together.

He is the head of the body, the church.

The beginning, the firstborn from the dead.

In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

### **Poem / structure**

So, I said it was a poem. You may be thinking that it doesn't look like much of a poem. But it is, the translation hasn't done it any favours. It's written in 2 parallel stanzas and takes imagery from the books of Genesis, Exodus, Psalms and Proverbs.

It is the centrepiece of the letter and Paul refers to it repeatedly throughout the rest of the letter. It's the pinnacle text of explaining who Christ is, what he has done and the hope that we can all find in that.

### **Passage back on screen?**

## The first stanza outlines Jesus as the head of creation

Vs 15 tells us that *He is the image of the invisible God. the first born of all creation. For in him all things were created*

If you want to see God, look at Jesus. He is the image of the invisible God. it's not a guessing game.

But he's more than an image.... He's not an ambassador sent with a message. He is God on earth, in a form that we can see and understand.

It tells us here that *in him all things were created*. All things. The heavens and the invisible. And the earth and all we see upon it. He is the author and King of creation. Let's get our telescope out (invite people to) and consider the cosmos. Then zoom in a bit and consider our galaxy. All those stars we see. Zoom in a bit more, our own amazing planet. *In him all things were created*. Including the savannahs. The mountains. The oceans. The flora the fauna. I've just come back from the Black Isle and those hills and those waters are stunning! Zoom in a bit closer and think about people and history.

*In him all things were created*. So that's thrones, powers, rulers and authorities included.

From the Pharaohs of Egypt. From Nero and the mighty Roman Empire when this was written. Through to our post-modern, post-Christian whatever this is now. To whoever and whatever comes next. All nations. All times.

This message is relevant for absolutely every person in every nation and every era.

*Verse 17 says - He is before all things and in him all things hold together.*

Wow. These are some massive statements that Paul is making.

This guy, this man, born in a stable, who trained as a carpenter, who enjoyed a wedding feast with his friends. Who got his feet muddy in the river Jordan. He existed before creation began and he keeps the universe going.

Paul isn't daft, he knows how broken and corrupt the world can be, he's in prison as he writes this remember.

Has Paul got this right? We might ask. Are we crazy to believe this? What on earth gives him the right to claim this power and authority for Jesus? It's literally out of this world.

Well, look out for the semi colon in verse 18. This is where the poem turns the corner. This is why he makes these claims. Because...

*He is the beginning and the firstborn among the dead.*

Why does he make these claims? Because of Easter. Because of the cross. Because he was the first born from the dead. He defeated death. He died and rose again.

He is the first born over creation and the firstborn among the dead *so that in everything he might have the supremacy*

Easter spelled the beginning of a new creation.

Our world seems to be lacking in a very important thing right now, our young people particularly – that thing is hope. The ancient Hebrews knew about hope, their hope was based on two things. (1) That a good God made the world and he made it good, and (2) that the same God would return and sort it out.

They were *waiting* for God to come, to come in power and sort it out.

And so when Paul had his encounter with God on the road to Damascus. When Jesus was revealed to him. Though Paul hadn't been there at the crucifixion or the resurrection (we're all in the same camp as Paul in that regards), Paul hadn't known Jesus in his lifetime. He knew what his revelation meant. It meant

hope. It meant a new beginning. It meant that God was sorting things out. He had revealed his new creation in the resurrection of Jesus.

And as Paul saw lives, communities, and habits change in the name of Jesus. He saw hope springing up, spreading amongst the people. And he heard that the people of Colossae had got caught up in that epidemic of hope too. This is a poem about hope in the biggest and broadest sense. Even though Paul himself is in a desperate situation. This is telescopes out, cosmos level, world changing, hope.

**Now the second stanza outlines Jesus as the head of the new creation.**

*Verse 19 – God was pleased to have his fullness dwell in him.* In Jesus, God dwells. In one of these bodies, which can be embarrassing, and disappointing, and can get frail and break. God was pleased to have his fullness dwell. Becoming human was critical to his plan.

*Verse 20 - and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross*

God is reconciled to humanity through Jesus. Not only that, but this is a word for *all* things on heaven and on earth, creation itself is reconciled. We do not exist separate from the rest of creation, humanity is a part of God's creation.

I think the narrative that heaven is elsewhere, separate, can focus our minds on heavenly things – which isn't bad– *but* if it leads us to ignore questions of God's earthly justice, or care for creation, because we're all going to leave and go to heaven – that can be dangerous. God's plan is for *all* of creation.

We, the church, we, are part of the pilot project for this *renewed* creation. Jesus is the head of the body. We are part of the team that implements the new creation.

N. T. Wright put it like this – 'God the composer has created the piece, we are the orchestra that is needed to play the tune'.

His death and resurrection achieved the renewal and reconciliation of the cosmos.

If you are a Christian, a member of his body the church, it is so that through *you* God's new creation can come about. All the Christians in all the lands playing His music together. Making His love known throughout the world. Through Jesus and those whose lives are transformed by him.

I said earlier that Jesus is the image of God. Well we are supposed to also be a reflection of Him. His image bearers. Loving radically, playing a new piece of music together.

God's project, launched at Easter is one of hope. It's big picture, telescope scale, stuff.

Jesus is the divine mediator who reconciles all of creation through the cross. He restores the relationship between humanity and creator.

It's not limited to certain groups. or times. It extends over all of creation. Jesus restores and brings wholeness to all aspects of existence.

And even though it's big picture – slightly mind melting thinking– there is a microscope aspect too- because that same force shapes *your* life. Holds together *your* world.

And we can have a part in it. In our homes, in our offices, in the street. It is an active role. God has written this glorious symphony and we have a role in playing the music.

So when we think about what God is like. Let's pause a minute before we accidentally reduce God. before we use our microscope and not our telescope. Before we think about ourselves before the whole of everything else. Before we give a shape that is based on our own, limited, understanding.

Paul's picture here surpasses all understanding. All nations. All people. All history. All of creation. All of the cosmos. All of time.

What do you want God to look like?

Because he looks like a man from Nazareth, in a human body, dying on a cross.

He looks like the first born of all creation, holding all things together, making peace by his blood.

He looks like a saviour who is the first born of the dead. Making a way for us.

Let's raise our telescopes. Widen our vision.

Amen

**Sing**

Be Thou My Vision