

Holy Trinity Brussels
Sermon at Morning Eucharist
2nd Sunday before Lent, 12 February 2012

Readings:

Proverbs 8:1, 22-31

Psalms 104: 26-37

Colossians 1:15-20

John 1:1-14

A hymn of creation

As we listen to our reading from Colossians, it strikes us as majestic and significant. But it is complicated. Although we grasp something of its sense, what exactly does it mean? It seems to be saying too much for us to grasp.

The first thing to say is that, although he is not mentioned in these verses, these verses are quite clearly talking about Jesus Christ.

Further, many scholars believe that Paul is here quoting a poem that he did not himself write. If this is correct, Paul must have felt that the poem aptly expressed part of what he wanted to say. If it was already well known to others, so much the better. Then by adding a few words, he uses the poem to make a powerful argument.

If we can separate the original poem and then see how Paul developed it, it may make it easier to understand both what the poem was saying and how Paul was able to use it to serve his particular needs.

A plausible and widely discussed reconstruction shows a poem that had three parts or strophes. Even if this is not entirely correct, it is still the words of the Bible, the words we are trying to understand.

The hymn to Christ quoted by Paul

1. He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn over all creation.
For by him all things were created:
all things were created by him and for him.

The **first strophe** shows us Jesus Christ as *the image of the invisible God*. This is a word-picture, a metaphor; striking and creative language. It challenges us: how can someone be the image of something invisible?

It tells us that Christ pre-existed creation, and that creation was brought about in and through him. This is a powerful assertion.

The hymn to Christ quoted by Paul

1. He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn over all creation.
For by him all things were created:
all things were created by him and for him.
3. He is the beginning and
the firstborn from among the dead.
For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,
and through him to reconcile to himself all things.

The **third strophe** points to Jesus Christ as the one who, because God was fully present in him, was able to renew creation, reconciling it to himself.

This implies that something had gone wrong with the relationships within creation. A dislocation had taken place. We could call that the fall, or sin.

These two strophes are very well balanced, and show Christ acting, first in the creation, then in the new creation, and all in a very intimate relationship with God.

Then we can see that the **second strophe**, which consists of three emphatic statements about Christ, forms a bridge between Christ's work in creation, and Christ's work in the new creation.

The hymn to Christ quoted by Paul

1. He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn over all creation.
For by him all things were created:
all things were created by him and for him.
2. And he is before all things,
And in him all things hold together.
And he is the head of the body;
3. He is the beginning and
the firstborn from among the dead.
For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,
and through him to reconcile to himself all things.

- *Christ is before all things:* his is the primacy.
- *In Christ all things hold together.* If there was no Christ, creation would fall apart. This is a warning to a world that thinks it does not need God.
- Finally, Christ is to creation as the head is to the body. His is the supremacy.

This is striking material. Many scholars believe that it is an early Christian hymn or confession: and we know from several mentions in the New Testament that the primitive church used such hymns. If it was already well known, quoting it would have been a powerful way for Paul to win his hearers to his argument. Some scholars even see reason to believe that the hymn must back to the very earliest Christian times, perhaps even to the mid-30s CE: just a couple of years after Christ. In any case, Paul must certainly have approved of it, or he would hardly have risked quoting it.

Now we look at **what Paul has added.**

First, words about Christ as the creator of heavenly bodies, supreme over all.

The hymn to Christ as Paul remakes it

1. He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn over all creation.
For by him all things were created:
things in heaven and on earth,
visible and invisible,
whether thrones or powers or
rulers or authorities
all things were created by him and for him.
2. And he is before all things,
And in him all things hold together.
And he is the head of the body
];
3. He is the beginning and
the firstborn from among the dead,
so that in everything he might have the supremacy.
For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,
and through him to reconcile to himself all things,
whether things on earth or things in heaven
].

We can infer from the rest of the letter that one of the problems at Colossae was false teaching about the worship of angelic or heavenly bodies who were thought of as below God, but above Jesus Christ. This could easily fit into the world-view we associate with Gnostic or Neo-Platonist thinking, that became common in the ancient world.

Nor is it so strange and remote for our day. Many people feel themselves to be subject to invisible, uncontrollable forces. This can easily drive people to despair.

Paul says there are no forces that are not subject to Christ. Not tsunamis or earthquakes; not radiation or polluted water; not epidemics or unseen viruses; not human plotters or immovable tyrants.

A great earthquake destroyed Laodicea and Colossae around 60-65 CE. How did people interpret that sudden disaster? We do not know the date of the letter: so we are left to wonder whether Paul was writing in the light of that disaster; or whether his words may have helped prepare the new church people to face it when it struck.

Second, Paul changes the meaning of the phrase “head of the body” from being the head of creation, to being the head of the body that is the church.

The hymn to Christ as Paul remakes it

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For by him all things were created:
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visible and invisible,
whether thrones or powers or
rulers or authorities
all things were created by him and for him.
2. And he is before all things,
And in him all things hold together.
And he is the head of the body, the church;
3. He is the beginning and
the firstborn from among the dead,
so that in everything he might have the supremacy.
For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,
and through him to reconcile to himself all things,
whether things on earth or things in heaven
].

This is a new insight. Paul sees the church as the new creation, the reconciled community, coming into being.

Can *you* believe that? It is what the Bible tells us: we, the church, this questionable and unreliable bunch, are the foretaste of what God is achieving through Christ: the reconciliation of all things.

We need to take such a challenge seriously. Do we inspire the world with the Christian vision of the world as it might be? What would the world say to that?

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the firstborn from among the dead,
so that in everything he might have the supremacy.
For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him,
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.

Third, Paul explains that the reconciliation of all things was achieved by Christ's sacrifice for us on the cross.

The victory that Christ won there reconciles fallen humanity with God.

It is there that God shows to the full his love for us; and inspires and enables us to rise above our fallen condition.

This victory, this reconciliation, makes peace: peace between humanity and God; peace between conflictual humans; peace between humanity and the creation which was given to us richly to enjoy but which, through abuse, through neglect and through selfish exploitation, is threatened with depletion, degradation and destruction.

When Christ achieves reconciliation, it is freely offered to us.

It is there to be taken or to be refused.

But ultimately there is no choice.

If we do not willingly accept the peace made by Christ, it will be imposed on us. Then it will not be so much peace as pacification, something the Romans were good at and any Jew would have known: the elimination of opposition imposed by overwhelming might.

Christ has won the battle. No power can ultimately oppose him. He will restore his creation.

The challenge to humanity is to accept and to co-operate with that goal starting here and now and to help bring it towards fulfilment through the church.

That makes the church into the place and focus of hope.

Across our readings and the hymn, quoted and used by Paul, **we can see theology being made**. Theology, too, is part of creation!

One of the biggest problems to monotheistic Jews who accepted Christ was how to reconcile their experience of God in Christ with their strict monotheism.

They found the answer at hand in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. The buttons were pressed and they had the hymn. Then Paul developed the hymn, applying it to the young gentile church. And it was not so far from there until John gave us the wonderful opening chapter of his gospel.

Have we the courage to take the words of scripture and to seek out the buttons that we can press and that will illuminate the problems of our own time?

The buttons are surely there. Are we courageous enough to seek them out and press them?.

We must, if we are to speak of hope to the world.

What do we conclude?

First, our readings remind us that the **creation of which we are part is wonderful beyond words**, a source of endless delight given to us by God, richly to enjoy.

But the relationship between humanity and the created order is frequently dislocated.

Given the creation to care for, to use and to enjoy, humanity has exploited it ruthlessly, treating it as an expendable plaything.

But *we* are not the lords of creation. The Lord of the creation is Christ.

If we abuse creation, we abuse our relationship with Christ.

Second, the reconciliation won by Christ on the cross is not just between us and God. It concerns the **triangular** relationship **between humanity, the rest of the creation, and its creating Lord.**

Bipolar relationships can be pulled, pushed and twisted. Triangular relationships are strong.

Christ has made peace so that we can operate within that strong, stable triangular relationship between humanity, the rest of creation and the Creator.

If we neglect our responsibility as stewards of the created order,
we put at risk our relationship with God.

If we neglect our responsibility towards God
we will find it hard to maintain a stable relationship with the rest of creation.

The church is called to lead the way, living out the triangular relationship that honours humanity, the rest of creation and our Creator: that willingly accepts and lives within the peace of Christ.

Third, everything meets in Christ.

Whatever threatens us, whatever grieves us, whatever we fear:

Christ is supreme over all. Therefore, we have hope.

Three weeks ago, Diana's uncle died. Len and Margaret were wonderful people, who spent much of their lives caring for others. They married young, aged 19 and 20. The vicar said to them, *You are sweethearts now. The challenge for your marriage is to remain sweethearts.* Then Auntie Margaret would say, *We are still sweethearts, Len, aren't we?* Their 70th wedding anniversary was coming up, when cancer struck.

Uncle Len said to Diana, as so many others have said:

I never thought that it would end like this.

Is there still hope? The Bible says Yes!

For Jesus on the cross faced not just all the rejection that humanity could throw at him; not just death, but the sense of desertion by his Father at the most crucial moment. Yet on Easter Day he triumphed.

There is nothing that the hidden powers can do which will defeat Christ.

There is no unseen or unanticipated threat, be it personal, material or spiritual, over which Christ is not Lord.

The battle is won, peace has been made. We can accept it willingly, or have it imposed.

How do we live through these difficult times?

In faith. Faith that Christ's triumph, already achieved, will be seen to conquer all and to reconcile all to himself.

We need, as we face such a challenge, to see ourselves as part, a small but precious part, of the history of salvation which we live out in the church.

At the close of Eucharistic prayer B, one of the oldest liturgical formulations that can be traced back to the 3rd century, and the prayer that we most often use when we celebrate the Eucharist, the people of God join in a great act of praise of the triune God, a doxology.

In doing so we apply to Christ words that are familiar to many of us:
by whom, and with whom and in whom.

These words are the liturgical echo of the poem, the confession, the hymn which we hear quoted by Paul and which takes us back to the very earliest Christian expression of the experience of Jesus Christ.

They remind us that our Lord is none other than the image of the invisible God *by whom* all things were created;

They remind us that our Lord is he in whom God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell and *with whom* humanity and the whole created order are reconciled to God and each other.

And they remind us that our Lord is he *in whom* all things hold together.

When we come to the Eucharist at peace with our brothers and sisters, as trusty stewards of his creation, willingly accepting the peace he has won for us: then indeed, we have every cause to praise our God for we have the hope that will surpass death itself: we *know* that we are reconciled with God.