

‘THE SUPREME SON’ COLOSSIANS 1:15-23

[St Mark’s Online Services, Sunday October 17, 2021]

1. More Than Meets The Eye.

Have you ever had that experience of meeting someone, forming some initial impressions, and then later discovering that there’s a lot more to that person than you first thought? Sometimes we find ourselves saying, don’t we, that there’s more to someone than meets the eye. And that’s part of the joy of a developing relationship isn’t it? That you don’t get to truly know a person in just one conversation. You certainly don’t understand a person just by looking at them. Perhaps we should say that this is true of everyone: that there’s more to them than meets the eye?

But what about Jesus? Could he be the exception to that rule? After all, he’s someone entirely without guile or pretence? He’s a man of perfect integrity. What you see is what you get. And what you see reveals so much about Jesus. We’ve just finished a series in Matthew 8-9. Even if you just took those two chapters on their own and made a list of what you learn about Jesus when you watch and listen to him, you’d see so much of who he is and what he can do- healing the sick, confronting evil, speaking with incredible authority, calming storms, offering forgiveness to sinners, confounding his enemies, raising the dead to life. He looks like God in the flesh. And if that’s true could there possibly be more to him than meets the eye?

Well, in those verses Emma read just now from Colossians, the apostle Paul has lots to tell us about Jesus. And some of the things Paul teaches us here are not things you could learn about Jesus just by looking at him. Because they concern things God’s Son had a hand in even before the world existed. They concern things Jesus does now that are invisible to the human eye. And they speak of things he will inherit in days yet to come. These verses in Colossians show us that even with Jesus there’s more than meets the eye! And that’s staggering isn’t it? But the verses in front of us today really do paint a mind-bending picture for us. Just when you thought you had a grasp on who Jesus is and what he’s done, along comes Colossians chapter 1.

And I want to look at this chapter today with you under two headings. First I want to remind you of what Paul says about the cosmic significance of Jesus. Then I want to remind you of how he is, at the same time, personally significant- for each one of us.

2. Cosmic (1:15-20).

But we start with verses 15-20 and the cosmic significance of Jesus. And I want to point out three things.

- revelation

The first concerns his role in God's revelation. And here I'm thinking particularly about that very first line of our passage. Verse 15: 'The Son is the image of the invisible God'. If someone asked you whether God can be seen, what would you say? At one level of course, the answer is "no". He's invisible. And yet the Bible also teaches us that God has revealed himself in history through a man who was seen. And heard. And touched. Jesus makes the invisible God visible. He himself says that if you've seen him, you've seen the Father¹. And that's because he is the Father's image- his perfect reflection. He is himself fully God, as Paul says so explicitly in verse 19.

[Read 1:19]

Such a thing has never been said about any other person who's lived. And if it were said of someone else it would be laughable. But this is true of Jesus. And it's in this way that he is God's revelation of himself to the world.

- creation

But the second thing I want to point out is the role the Son plays in creation. Verse 15 calls him the firstborn over all creation. Paul doesn't mean 'firstborn' in the sense of being the first one created. He was never created, because he has always existed. But he means 'firstborn' in the way that all ancient cultures used that word- to refer to the most favoured son. The Father may have other children, but this Son is his most exalted². And it's because he's the Father's firstborn Son that he is also the heir of everything that belongs to the Father. This is what Paul means at the end of verse 16 when he says that all creation is 'for' him. And this is why he is 'over' all of creation. He rules it. He is supreme above all creatures.

But his supremacy over all created things is not just because God has made everything for him. It's also because God made everything through him! This is the key point of verse 16. And when we say 'everything', we mean 'everything'. You and I often use words like 'all' and 'every' to exaggerate something. "Steve Smith is better than every other cricketer who's ever lived." "All my friends think the same." "Every news outlet is misleading people about this." "You always leave the toilet seat up." You get the idea. But when Paul uses this kind of language he's not exaggerating at all. There's no hyperbole here. And he wants to stress this in verse 16. The Son was the one through

¹ John 14:9

² See Psalm 89:27

whom God created things in heaven and on earth. Visible things and invisible. Thrones, powers, rulers, authorities. All things have been created through him. Just think about that!

And, verse 17, he pre-existed all these things and all the things God has created are held together in him. Not only did he play a significant role in creating the universe, but he continues to play a role in sustaining it. The sun keeps shining because of Jesus. The earth keeps turning because of him. The trees keep growing in him. We keep breathing thanks to him. As the little ditty goes, he's got the whole world in his hands. That's why he's supreme.

And this is the point Paul is making in verse 18 as well, where he specifically talks about the church. The church is part of what God has created in the world. And Jesus is the church's head. And not as some kind of distant monarch who just has a notional role over the church. No- Jesus entered the world for the church. And tasted death for her, for us. And he's passed through death into eternal life- so that he's the beginning of our new future. In verse 18, he's the firstborn in a different sense- the first to be born anew out of death into resurrection life- the one who has paved the way for us to do the same. And because of all this, Jesus is supreme in the church as he's supreme in all creation!

- reconciliation

But the third thing we have to notice here is the very unusual and striking thing Paul says in verse 20. Because there he speaks of the Son's role in a cosmic reconciliation. The same comprehensive language we noticed back in verse 16 is used here. I'll read again from verse 19.

[Read 1:19-20]

When we think of Christ's reconciling work we tend to think of God welcoming individual sinners- making them friends rather than enemies. And we see Paul talk about exactly that in the next paragraph. But what does he mean in verse 20 when he talks about the blood of Christ reconciling all things to himself- things on earth and in heaven? Well, in order to understand this we first need to grasp that the heavens and the earth have, by nature, a disturbed relationship with the creator. It's not just individual humans whose lives are in tension with the Son's lordship. All creation is caught up in this resistance. And so what Paul is saying here is that the death of Christ ultimately has the effect of ensuring that every part of his creation will come again one day to acknowledge the lordship of Christ. In this sense, the 'peace' that is restored to all things is perhaps less about the creation's willing submission to Christ and more about the way the creation's resistance is "pacified" by Christ's victory.³ I think this is the fulfilment of Old Testament

³ Peter O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Word Biblical Commentary)- p. 56.

prophecies like Isaiah 11 which look forward to a day when wolves and lambs can live together peacefully, when children can play safely with snakes, when lions will eat straw rather than eating other animals. I think this is what Paul talks about in Philippians 2 when he describes every knee in heaven and on earth bowing before Jesus and acknowledging him as Lord. This is the cosmic reconciliation Christ's death accomplishes.

All this is to say that there is more to Jesus than meets the eye. In order to know Jesus well we depend upon God's word to teach us. His word teaches us what we cannot see just by observing his spectacularly unique life. We need passages like this one to show us the Son's eternity, his supreme kingship over all, how much the future of the universe is about him. And thank God we have texts like Colossians 1 which help us to grasp Jesus' part in God's cosmic revelation, in God's cosmic creation, and in God's cosmic reconciliation.

And I hope your reaction to this is similar to mine. Because I read these verses and they cause my knees to bend. I feel more awe for Jesus. I realise how easy it is for me to work with a picture of Jesus in my mind that is simpler and smaller than the reality. I'm humbled by the sense the apostle Paul gives me of his majesty, and greatness, and vast, vast importance. And my heart is led to worship- the kind of worship that delights in what one knows yet simultaneously grasps that there's so much more still to know.

And do you want to know the thing that strikes me most about these verses? It's how little they say about us! And I'm caused to reflect on how often my gratitude to Jesus and my worship of him is a response to what he's done for me. But these verses remind me how much larger than me is Christ's purpose and significance. Of course it's not wrong to call him 'My Jesus, My Saviour'. And he does deserve my praise because he is- the one who rescued me, the one who welcomes me into God's kingdom. But 'my Jesus, my Saviour' doesn't say anywhere near enough about him does it? These verses show me that he would be worthy of worship, now and forever, whether he not he ever lifted a finger for me. [Pause]

3. Personal (1:21-23).

And it's with that in mind that we turn to the second paragraph. And now I want us to think together about how the Christ of cosmic significance is also, incredibly, wonderfully, Christ for us personally.

- reconciliation

And the first thing to see here is that Paul takes his point about the cosmic reconciliation Christ accomplishes and he shows us how that incorporates people like the Colossians, and people like us. And it's verses 21-22 that tell the story.

[Read 1:21-22]

The word that describes our relationship with God apart from Christ is 'alienation'. And not chiefly because God was against us. But rather because we all, by nature, make ourselves his enemies. Our minds are set against him, and so our behaviour is evil. But by his shocking death on the cross, Jesus pays for sin- for hostility in the mind and evilness in behaviour. He takes it upon himself and it dies with him. And instead we are given his purity as we stand before God. Did you hear those words? Holy. Without blemish. Free from accusation. Adjectives that are a fitting description of the one who died, but which are actually used to describe forgiven sinners- like those Colossians, and like us. Can you believe it?

Those words are not easy to believe, are they? Because we know ourselves too well. When we're honest with ourselves we know clearly our own unholiness, we are all too conscious of our blemishes, and we are well aware of all we could legitimately be accused of. And as a result, we so often see ourselves differently to how God does. But if you've entrusted yourself to Jesus, these are the adjectives God's own word uses to describe you. Holy. Without blemish. Free from accusation. Let them sink in.

- continuation

And as you do, look as well to verse 23. Because there Paul reminds us that these things will be true of us not only now but on the final day when we meet Jesus if . . . if we don't turn our backs on him. That's a sobering "if", isn't it? It's given to us to make sure we don't take Christ's stunning grace for granted. If you continue in your faith. That's the key idea here. And it's a key idea right through the book of Colossians. It's the idea that captures our central responsibility as Christians. If Christ's gift to us is reconciliation, what he requires us of is continuation. Keep the faith. Hold firm. Don't move from the hope held out in the gospel.

Is that really our central responsibility as Christians? Surely there's more to it. No. There is not. This is really all Christians must do once they have turned to Christ. They must continue in faith, and never give up. Of course, as we continue in him we will bear fruit⁴ and we will mature⁵. But these are the work of God in us. Our part is to always be faithful to Christ. And if we will simply do that, all that God promises us is ours. If you've never thought about this word before as a summary of the Christian life I commend it to you today: continuation. As the Christian life begins with faith- with acknowledging our need of Jesus and reaching out to him, so must we continue. Rejecting every

⁴ Eg. 1:10

⁵ Eg. 1:28

temptation to turn away. Resisting every spiritual danger. Recognising every possible distraction.

And why would we not? If we've come to the one who alone can give us life, why would we ever turn away? As you may know, as a church this term we're learning from Colossians together - in our Sunday sermons, and also in Home Groups, and Youth Group, and Kids Church. And one of the great things about learning together across the whole church family is the way we can talk together about what we're learning. And at our family table last Sunday one of my daughters shared an illustration she'd heard at Kids Church that morning. The Kids Church leader had said that if water and sunlight are what cause a tree to grow in the first place, why would you then look for the tree to continue to grow by nurturing it in other ways. Why would you stop giving it sunlight and water? In the same way, if the gospel of Christ bears fruit in our lives to begin with, why would we then look to grow as Christians in some other way. If Christ is the source of life and health and fruitfulness in the beginning then he will always be. And we'd be mad to look anywhere else. This is what Paul is saying in verse 23. If you've come to Christ, and instead of being God's enemy he's made you spotless and holy before him with no accusation standing against you, if the gospel has borne that kind of fruit in your life already, then just make sure you stick with the Jesus who's done that. Don't budge. Don't move from that hope which the gospel holds out. Continuation.

- proclamation

And finally, proclamation. Because at the very end of our passage Paul wants to say one final thing about the gospel which holds out this hope. He says, verse 23, that it's this gospel which he served, and which in his day had been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. It's not entirely clear in what sense Paul meant this, but I suspect what he's trying to do is underline the point he made back in 1:6- that this gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world. And his key point, I think, is that this gospel is for the whole world. It's the gospel, the divine message, for every creature under heaven. You can't get a stronger statement than that of how personal the work of Christ is. He's not only the cosmic Christ but he's the Christ for every person who has ever lived and who ever will live.

And if you're listening today but you're not yet a Christian, you haven't yet entrusted yourself to Christ, Paul is saying that this message is for you. You're one of God's creatures. And this gospel is a personal word from God to you. It tells you, with compassionate honesty, that the state of your relationship with God right now is one of alienation. God wants you to know that you are not right with him and you need to be reconciled. But God also wants you to know that he sent his son to earth to rescue and purify you. And the hope of standing before God without accusation is yours if you will simply trust Jesus and continue in that trust till your life's end. God invites you to come to him and receive his welcome.

And if you're listening today and you're already a Christian, Paul is saying that this message is just as much for you. You too are one of God's creatures. And you need this hope now as much as you ever did. Which is why your number 1 aim in life must be to continue in your faith. But this final sentence also reminds you, reminds me, that if the gospel is for every creature under heaven than we have an invitation to share it, an opportunity to play our part in making sure every creature under heaven hears it.

This is the word spoken to us today. As Christ reveals God to the whole world, and as he was at work in the cosmic creation, and as Christ sustains and rules the creation even today, including our church, and as Christ has fulfilled his role in God's cosmic reconciliation, so too our fidelity to him will see us play a part in God's cosmic story.

So that in everything he might have the supremacy.