



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

The complete Christ

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Colossians 1:15-20

15 The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. **16** For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. **17** He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. **18** And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. **19** For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, **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.

Disciples are more than just believers and followers – for they themselves take on the mantle of the One they follow.

One of the greatest needs of the contemporary church is to be a community that is strong on discipleship. The days of sermon-tasting, worship-hopping and following the latest religious fad are fast coming to an end. We are called to embody the concept of discipleship which involves practice as well as theory; learning by doing. Walk and talk must be united in a common purpose.

In writing to the Colossians, Paul was challenging those who were enemies of his ministry. The Letter to the Colossians is Christ-centred and shows the supremacy of the Person of Christ and the completeness of what God has done for us.

In practical terms, Paul even had to deal with physical opposition (prison links together four letters often referred to as the Prison Epistles). He sent the letter with Tychicus and the converted slave, Onesimus.

It is little wonder that Paul encouraged these Christians not to *“move from the hope held out in the gospel”*. (1:23)

Here, the enemy appears to be a blend of Judaism and other Eastern practices; later to be called Gnosticism. This explains why the Christology in this epistle is central. A high view of Jesus Christ is more obviously formulated here than anywhere else in the New Testament – and certainly in those documents ascribed to Paul.

Following Easter, it is good for us to focus on the Person of Jesus Christ.

There was a subtle distortion of Christian understanding which:-

- did not seek to eliminate Christ, but to show him less than adequate
- saw him as a created being - greater than humans, but less than God

Text: Colossians 2:9 -

“For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness.”

In one brushstroke, Paul puts the whole matter in perspective. We do not know all the details, but we can be certain that subversive propaganda was circulating that denied who Jesus Christ was.

This false view of Jesus Christ was a dangerous challenge to Christianity and it has appeared, disappeared and reappeared throughout history. To replace Jesus with new ways of thinking is to collude with an inadequate understanding of God as we know him in Jesus Christ.

Some of the great thinkers have found that the more they study people and life, the more aware they are of the adequacy of God. Dr. Paul Tournier wrote, *“God upsets all our neat intellectual formulae.”* In Jesus Christ is the complete fullness of God.

Nearly all (if not all) errors or mistaken ideas in the world can be put right with a clearer view of Jesus Christ. There is no need for speculation, mystical visions or ritualistic regulations when Jesus has *“all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”* (Colossians 2:3).

Colossae probably would not have been much remembered had it not been for the church there. It was a small town built on a stream in the Lycus Valley, 160 kilometres inland from Ephesus. Paul worked tirelessly out of Ephesus for two years and Colossians 2:1 indicates Paul knew some, although not everyone, in this early Christian community.

Although the town may appear insignificant, the epistle raises issues of vital importance for the Christian, as it draws this marvellous statement about Christ.

It was a truly cosmopolitan town, where there was a constant influx of new ideas. We can relate to this, for we live in a cafeteria community where we choose a touch of this and a bit of that. This epistle might relate to a modern Sydney better than others.

It was written by a disciple of Christ to a community of followers
Its case is stated with clarity and without fear
Paul's name is understood in the context of:

- his office - *‘an apostle’* - an envoy with special qualifications
- his authority - *‘of Jesus Christ’* – it is not his own authority, but that of the Risen Lord
- his humility - *‘Timothy our brother’* - in Pagan religions, a slave was initiated into a cult and became a freedman - no less! But this takes us a step further; he is now a brother!

In God's revelation, Christ communicates himself, not just particular aspects about himself. This is central to all genuine theology. I draw your attention to 1:15-20 and the concept of Christ we meet here.

The unsurpassable glory of Christ is expressed in his all-inclusive Lordship. He is the source, the head, the sustainer of both the cosmos and the Church.

David Watson told the story of a minister who was invited to a large, thriving church. He accepted the invitation on condition that all 57 groups in the church would disband for a year while the entire membership were engaged in study oriented toward witness and service to the world, beginning in the church's own community.

He could have had in mind Dr. Carl Bates' comments, *"If God were to take the Holy Spirit out of our midst today, about 95 per cent of what we are doing in our churches would go on, and we would not know the difference."* A bit of hyperbole, perhaps, but the body of the church ought to look in a spiritual mirror from time to time to see if its Head is still there.

In these weeks following Easter, it is good for us to consider the complete Christ. What do we actually mean when we say this?

That Christ is the Lord of time - v.v.15-17

The three pivotal moments of cosmic history are in the hands of Jesus Christ. At the dawn of time, the Son brought everything into being (v.16). At just the right time, we are met by Christ through incarnation and cross. At the conclusion of time as we know it, he will draw all things together.

- This is the framework which gives stability, hope and meaning – not just a few dislocated ideas about God.
- We put this into the context of the uncertainties and pressures we face today
- Our confidence is secure in Christ. How we need such confidence today!

In one sense, the false teachers in the city of Colossae were no different from the peddlers of false ideas today - in that they did not want to deny the importance of Jesus Christ, but they relegated him, demoted him or dethroned him. We remind ourselves that:-

He existed before creation - v. 15.

Jesus Christ did not originate at Bethlehem. Interestingly, the term 'first-born' does not refer to time, but to place and status. Jesus Christ was not the first created being, since he himself is Creator of all things.

He created all things - v. 16a.

Jesus created all things and it follows that we declare the truth – before anything ever was, there was Jesus Christ in God. John 1:3 - *"All things were made by Him."*

All things exist for him - v. 16b.

All things are *'in him... for him ... and through him'*. Paul is affirming that Jesus is the cause of everything:

- the primary cause - he planned it!
- the instrumental cause - he produced it!
- the final cause - he did it for his own pleasure!

He holds all things together - v. 17.

This exposes an answer to one of the boldest questions science can ask. It speaks of the deep issues relating to how things come together and cohere.

A child was fascinated by the teacher's model of the solar system – with our sun in the middle and the planets and moons moving around this certain centre. The child then asked, *"How does it all hang there?"* That is not a question for the astronomer – it's our question!

The essence of what we believe about God and creation is not just that God brought it into being at a particular moment in time, but that it owes its existence – not only its beginning – to God's power and activity.

The supreme sign of the Christian faith is the cross. His whole purpose is made clear for us in what happened on the cross. When we talk about *'the Complete Christ'*, we suggest all that goes before leads to it and all that flows from the empty cross is our living hope.

- The mending of a broken humanity
- The re-building of damaged relationships
- The bringing of reconciliation in word and deed.

Paul was concerned that we should understand that, on the cross, Jesus dealt with the issue of sin once and for all.

In *The Journey that Men Make*, James Armstrong wrote, "One of the most therapeutic aspects of mature religious faith is its doctrine of forgiveness. It is not God's will that a person be humiliated by remorse. Shame serves no lasting purpose ... God is not a sadist, enjoying the mental agony of his children. God's name is love. He is one with the offender, understands the circumstances of the offence, and forgives when called upon to do so ...

"We are not wiser than God, nor should we be more demanding than he is. If he is willing to wipe the slate clean and give us a fresh start, we must be willing to accept ourselves, live with the past and learn from its scars, and move into the future with strength and determination. Forgive yourself, even as God has forgiven you."

This word has a powerful application for any Christian who wants to punish others and feels justified in doing so. Our God is a forgiving God; so ought we to be!

We so easily miss what is before our eyes and ears:

Johann Sebastian Bach was not appreciated as the church organist at St Thomas', Leipzig. The church council responded to his presentation of St Matthew's Passion by reducing his salary and moaning, "If Bach continues to play in this way; the organ will be ruined in two years and most of the congregation deaf."

When God restores our lives, he touches our thinking, our desires and our purpose. We find a new bearing on life. The mystery and power of the cross is that God has enabled this new direction by making peace through the love he has shown to us in the death of Christ.

That Christ is the Lord of every aspect of life - v.17

Putting life into manageable compartments is one tendency that has spilled over into the way people live out their faith. Every part of our discipleship is his and we must resist the temptation to unhelpfully separate things:-

- Our Christian life is both inside and outside church
- Our Sunday offering is not only what we give, but also what we keep
- Our times of prayer and, equally, our times of leisure.

The Greeks divided a person into body and spirit. The on-going consequences of this remain. We make the same unhelpful division in terms of our discipleship and I am convinced it is a hindrance when we are communicating the good news.

It affects our devotions. Prayer is not just a formula of words, or a series of desires springing up in the heart; it is the orientation of our whole body, mind and spirit to God. Prayer is a "conversion of our entire self to God."

When you examine the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, you see the wholeness of his life. Jesus enjoyed wine, food and laughter with his disciples; his first sign was at a wedding reception; and his ministry focused upon farming, fishing and the world of agriculture – the industrial context of his day.

Because of Easter we know all life is changed. There is a powerful story of how London was bombed night after night for lengthy periods during World War II. It was Harvest Weekend and a city church was set for Harvest Thanksgiving. In the centre of the gifts was a sheaf of corn.

The service was never held – because, during an air raid, a bomb demolished the church. On the flattened bomb site where once the church stood, later that year about Easter time, there appeared shoots of green. Not even the bombs could end the life of the corn. This is Easter hope. Jesus was crucified and died and yet was raised from the dead.

I enjoy reading Bill Bryson's travel books. *In The Lost Continent: Travels in Small Town America*, he writes about the United States many people don't see - beyond Florida, California and the Grand Canyon.

He reflected on a town Carol and I visited about 12 years ago. The small town of Hannibal is in Missouri and was the boyhood home of the noted author, Mark Twain. Like us, Bryson found the visit to Twain's white-washed, green-shuttered home a disappointment.

He expressed his disillusionment like this:

"It purported to be a faithful reproduction of the original interiors, but there were wires and water sprinklers clumsily evident in every room. I also very much doubt that young Samuel Clemens' bedroom had Armstrong vinyl on the floor or that his sister's bedroom had a plywood partition in it."

He said that the house, which is owned by the city of Hannibal, attracts some 135,000 visitors each year. But Bryson was disappointed that he was not able to actually go inside the house. "You look through the windows," he says. "At each window there is a recorded message telling about each room."

As he proceeded from window to window, he met another tourist who seemed to know a lot about the house. Bryson asked him, "What do you think of it?" The friendly stranger replied, "Oh, I think it's great. I always come here when I'm in Hannibal – two or three times a year. Sometimes I go out of my way to come here."

Bill Bryson was fascinated, "Really?" he replied. "O yes," the man said, "I must have been here twenty or thirty times by now. This is a real shrine you know. As the two of them continued walking and touring together, Bill Bryson said to the man, "You must be a real fan and follower of Mark Twain. Would you say the house is just like Mark Twain described it in his books?"

Oh, I don't know," said the tourist "wouldn't have the foggiest notion. I've never read any of his books!"

Visiting his shrine, but ignoring his books is a serious problem. Sadly, that may be a description of how many people deal with Jesus Christ. They visit peripherally, but fail to accept him and follow him ... and fail to read his book and apply his teachings to their daily lives.

This Sunday, I remind you of the Complete Christ. We stress the pre-eminence of the Person of Christ and a complete salvation. This Complete Christ calls for a new and living way from

all of us. The demands of discipleship flow from the freedom that is ours in Christ. The application is in relation to family, work and public witness.

Easter does not end on Easter Day – rather, it begins. The power of the Easter message lies not only in what the first disciples witnessed: ‘an empty tomb and a Risen Lord’ but also in communities and lives which experience his transforming power.