

## **Colossians 1:15-23**

### **The Roman Empire**

I apologise to anyone who finds history boring, because I am going to start tonight with a few minutes of history. In order to get the most out of what Paul is saying in Colossians 1:15-23, we have to understand something about the Roman Empire.

The Christians of the first century were confronted by an empire which was truly awesome and like most empires was founded on 4 concepts.

### **Centralised power**

In marriage and in the family, the father reigned supreme. The father had control over the women, children and all other members of the household, especially the slaves. Indeed, under Roman law, even when a slave was freed, they continued to be legally under the power of their master. And in society as a whole, the same structure was firmly in place, with the emperor as the father supreme. The

purpose of the social structure was to secure his rule and authority.

The people in power kept those below them in subservience by making sure that they continued to be dependant and poor, never giving them the means to be independent. They treated them in the same way that modern western society, courtesy of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, keeps the countries of the South dependant with unfair trade and perpetual debt.

And while we deplore the way in which people were suppressed in Roman society, let us not forget that we live in a world where people are suppressed; the equivalent of slave labour is used to produce toys, clothes, tools and some of the food for the Western market; the majority of those who work in sweatshops, on coffee plantations and in the sex trade are women and children.

But to return to the Roman Empire; what would happen if a new community started to

grow within the Empire, a community which stated:

*“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”* (Galatians 3:28)

This went completely against the Empire and its ideas about a superior race, superior class and superior gender.

### **Economic and military control**

Rome was a very efficient military machine. Roman armies would conquer a country, the soldiers would get their plunder, a garrison would be set up to keep the natives quiet and the area would be made profitable for Rome. Roads and bridges would be built and a steady stream of taxes, tolls, tributes, cloths, grain and natural resources would soon be on its way to Rome. Rome made sure that the conquered lands did not have the resources to start a rebellion.

Just imagine however that within this empire a community springs up where the leader rules not by military might but by sacrificial death; a

community which says that greed is not a civic virtue, it is idolatry.

### **Powerful myths**

Everyone loves a good story and the story which backed up the power of Rome was a good story. It was called the Pax Romana, the Roman peace. The story was that the rise of the Roman Empire had brought peace, fertility and prosperity, all blessed by the power of the gods.

As Rome conquered the known world, the story of Rome became the story of the world. The whole rhythm of life was regulated by this story. Feasts and festivals celebrated Rome’s victories over the barbarian peoples, including of course the people of Judea and Galilee. These feasts often included sacrifices which reminded all peoples who was to be worshipped; the Roman gods and the emperor. The Romans thought of themselves as many people in the modern West think of themselves today; developed, civilised, chosen by God or

the gods to bring our superior ways to the rest of the world, whether they want it or not. But what if there was a new community which brought a different story, a story of a victim of the empire who offered a different kind of prosperity?

### **Imperial images**

Images of Caesar dominated both public and private places in the Empire. You would see them in the market, the square the baths and of course in the temples. In homes, images of Roman gods were on silverware, lamps and walls – everywhere you looked there were pictures of peace and prosperity, masking the inequality and violence which characterised at least parts of the Empire. You may remember that Jesus, asked with a trick question about whether or not to pay tax to Rome, said: “Show me a coin. Whose image is on this coin?” Then when the people replied “Caesar’s”, Jesus came out with his famous words:

“Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

In the face of this imagery, Paul proclaimed to the Colossians (1:15) Jesus as the true image of God. And he called on them to bear the image of Jesus in shaping an alternative to the Empire.

### **The uniqueness of Christ**

The passage we read is a powerful statement of the supremacy of Christ over every other force or power in the whole universe. Paul shows us Jesus as the image of God, both the author and purpose of creation. He has always existed, and he is the one who reconciles his creation to God. It is easy to say the words, but far harder to take them in. Let’s unpack these mind-blowing ideas

### **Jesus is the image of the invisible God (15).**

Jesus is unique. The word image which Paul uses can mean representation, like a king’s head on a coin. It can also mean manifestation. When you look at Jesus, you see God. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

He is the reflection of God. There are many illustrations we could use, but none of them gives us a complete picture. Basically, Jesus shows us God.

I think it is Philip Yancey who points out that the disciples never once questioned God's love. Because for 3 years, day in and day out, they saw God's love in action. As Jesus walked the dusty Roman roads of Palestine, they could see God in action. He preached the good news to the poor, proclaimed freedom for the prisoners, gave sight to the blind, released the oppressed and proclaimed the year of the Lord's favour (Luke 4:18,19).

Look at Jesus as he touches the untouchables; look at Jesus as he heals the sick; as he weeps at the grave of his friend Lazarus; look at Jesus as he clears the temple; look at Jesus as he deals with the woman caught in adultery; look at Jesus as he weeps over Jerusalem; look at Jesus as he denounces the hypocrisy of the religious leaders.

Jesus himself said:

*"Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father"* (John 14:9).

It amazes me that still today you occasionally hear people say that Paul takes the simple teaching of Jesus and distorts it. Paul is in fact a very faithful interpreter of Jesus' words and there is nothing in his letters which goes against the teaching of Jesus in the gospels.

**Jesus is the author and purpose of creation (16,17)**

John tells us at the beginning of his Gospel that *"through him all things were made"*.(John 1:3) This does not mean that Jesus on his own created the universe. Once again we find what we always find in the Bible, Father Son and Spirit working in perfect harmony, each taking part in the act of creation. After all, the Bible opens with the words *"In the beginning God ..."* and in Genesis 1:2 we read that the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. Paul here is emphasising that *"all things were made through him and for him."*

Not only that, but *“in him all things hold together”* (verse 17). Not only is Jesus the beginning and the end, but everything depends on him for its existence now.

Now if this is true for the universe, how true it is for us in our Christian experience. Christ is there at the beginning, as we become Christians. He is here with us in our daily lives, sustaining us and carrying on to its conclusion the good work which he himself has started. And he will be there at the end as we pass through death into eternal life. If he is capable of looking after the universe, he is capable of looking after you and me.

### **Jesus has always existed (18)**

I think Paul is reaching the limits of human language to describe God here. People get themselves tied in knots trying to figure out in detail what these terms Father, Son and firstborn mean. Father and Son are not just two convenient words to describe the relationship between 2 persons in the Godhead. The words express a real truth. But the truth is much wider

than our limited idea of human parenthood. A human male may become a husband at one point in time; he may become a father at another point in time. But God, Father and Son, have no beginning in time; they *were* (or should I say *are*) outside time. And in any case, God does not have a wife!

I am really reaching the limits of what I can understand about God when I say these things. I am reminded of Deuteronomy 29:29:

*“The secret things belong to the Lord our God but the things revealed belong to us and to our children for ever.”*

### **Jesus is the one who reconciles all creation to God (18-20)**

Paul is not concerned to give us endless speculation about time and timelessness or to encourage us to play mind games about the nature of the trinity, he is wanting to tell us who Jesus is and what he did for us on the cross.

*“God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Christ”* (19)

This is yet another picture Paul is using to explain who Jesus is. The word fullness was used of a ship which had its full complement of men and cargo and was therefore ready to go. Nothing more was needed.

And this fullness of God in Christ is expressed in reconciliation. Man was made for fellowship with God. Sin broke that fellowship and caused an estrangement between man and God. Just as in human relationships, when estrangement takes place it affects both parties. On his side, God condemns human sin, selfishness. On our side we distrust God and we are alienated from him. When Jesus died, God ended the barrier on his side by the death of his Son. The Good News is that God has taken the initiative; he has done something about sin so that it no longer stands where it once stood, between God and man. The way back to God is open because of what Christ has done and people are invited to respond to him by faith.

**The wonder of salvation (21-23)**

**You were enemies (21)**

Paul does not beat about the bush here. There is a temptation for preachers to phrase things nicely. This is OK so long as it does not get in the way of the truth. We need to face the unwelcome fact that we have done wrong and that doing wrong has warped our minds. We may not like Jesus' words in Matthew 15:19: *“Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”*

We live in an age where many people are re-defining evil. Adultery is not really wrong. It's alright as long as no one gets hurt. Stealing from your employer is OK. It's just taking something which the company won't miss. But the words of Jesus do not change just because people in 21<sup>st</sup> century do not like them.

**But you are reconciled (22)**

Despite the way that we slope off in the opposite direction, Christ, the author and sustainer of the universe has caught up with us and brought about reconciliation. This is not a piece of philosophy, it happened through

Christ's physical body. The real body of Christ was attached by real nails to a real wooden cross. Why? His death was for our sins. The good news is that Jesus, through his death on the cross has made possible the forgiveness of our sins. He has taken on himself the punishment due for our sin. The weight of our guilt has been removed, because he has broken the power of sin, freeing us from every addiction. Jesus has disarmed the powers of evil.

We are now, like the Colossians, "free from accusation". So we can resist the voice inside us which says "You're not good enough. You've failed before and you'll fail again. You feel safe worshipping in church. You feel good about your faith here. But just wait till you get home. All your feelings will vanish and you will fail again." If we are tempted to feel that way, we should turn to Christ and remind ourselves of his victory on the cross.

### **Established and firm (23)**

The picture here is of a building, secure on its foundations – and the foundation as Paul tells us elsewhere is Christ himself.

We are established and firm if we continue in our faith in the gospel message.

This is the gospel we have heard, and has proved living and powerful in our lives.

It is the gospel which the world is hearing as the good news about Jesus reaches out into places Paul had never heard of.

It is the gospel Paul had received and served, the link going back to Christ himself. The gospel centres on Christ and his death on the cross

We are going to conclude by looking at what the Bible says about why Jesus had to die. Turn with me please to Isaiah 53, page 740. We will start at verse 3 where the writer is talking about the suffering servant who was to come:

**3** He was despised and rejected by men,  
a man of sorrows, and familiar with  
suffering.

Like one from whom men hide their faces  
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

**4** Surely he took up our infirmities  
and carried our sorrows,  
yet we considered him stricken by God,  
smitten by him, and afflicted.

**5** But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was  
upon him,  
and by his wounds we are healed.

**6** We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to his own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

My being a Christian does not depend on me  
being clever or me being good. It depends on

Christ and on what he has done for me. That is  
why this evening I can come to God without  
blemish and free from accusation.