



Centennial Bible Study:

Expanding Minds

Session 2

Christ in All Creation

Colossians 1:15-20

Gathering

The picture of God we have in our minds informs the content of our faith. Have participants share an image of God that is meaningful to them. What image comes to mind when they think of Jesus?

Encounter the Word

Colossae was a small inland city about one hundred miles east of the port city of Ephesus in Phrygia, modern day Turkey. Located on an east-west trade route it had been a major city for at least five hundred years before the time of Paul and was known for its wool and textile industry.

Scholars disagree about whether Paul or a close associate actually wrote the letter to the Colossians. Regardless of authorship, its theology resembles Paul's in other letters.

The writer of Colossians does not know the community personally, which was founded by Epaphras while Paul was imprisoned. When Epaphras and Paul hear of problems caused in the young church by troublemakers, Paul takes the occasion of returning a slave, Onesimus, to his owner (see the book of Philemon) to have Tychichus report to the Colossians on Paul's condition and deliver this letter to be read aloud to the troubled churches in Colossae and Laodicea.

The specific identity of the opponents mentioned in the letter isn't known. Phrygia was a region known for its fascination with magic and mystery. At the time of the letter, numerous mystery cults, religious traditions, and philosophies were vying for the attention of the Colossians. Among the competing practices were the cults of Cybele and Mithras, in addition to devotion focused on Apollo, Dionysus, and Asclepius. There was a large Jewish population in the region, and the Colossians may have been confronting some variety of Judaism.

More important than their specific identity is the way these opponents understood perfection or maturity before God, and the attitude they adopted toward others in the Colossian church. Christ was for them only a beginning; to be fully mature or perfect before God meant engaging in more elaborate and visible forms of religious devotion, including ascetic practices and ecstatic visions. By such observances, or the lack of them, they sought to identify who was "fleshly" and who was "spiritual." The letter's point is that in Christ the Colossians already have "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge," even though they may not be obvious, but are hidden. The writer reminds the Colossians that maturity will not come through more esoteric practices, but by increasing in awareness of the gift already given by God in Christ, the grace of God (1:6, 9, 10, 12; 2:2; 3:10).

The sign of Christian maturity is loving service in the community (3:14-15), not the pride of an ascetic or mystic, which easily becomes judgmental when others do not measure up to a standard. Maturity in Christ is not fleeing the world, but coming to grips with the realities and structures of the world.

Most scholars agree that Colossians 1:15-20 is part of a hymn about Christ, which may have been familiar to the Colossians or borrowed from another context. Because verses 12-15 describe what happens in baptism, the source might have been a baptismal hymn. (Compare to other hymns about Christ in the New Testament, e.g. Philippians 2:6-11 and John 1:1-14.) Some translations, such as the Contemporary English Version (CEV), print these words in verse form to make clearer the poetic nature of the text.

Notice the cosmic sweep of the hymn and overall flow: In terms borrowed from the Wisdom tradition of Judaism, the verses 15-17 describe the preexistent Christ's work in creation and preservation. Verses 18-20 speak about Christ's redeeming work.

Engage and Reflect on the Word

Colossians 1:1

"He is the image of the invisible God." Christ is the one who makes the invisible God visible (John 1:18; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Hebrews 1:3). The preface used in the Holy Communion liturgy during the Christmas season says, "In the wonder and the mystery of the Word made flesh you have opened the eyes of faith to a new and radiant vision of your glory; that, beholding the God made visible, we may be drawn to love the God who we cannot see." The author uses the Greek term *eikōn* (English, icon), "image" to signify that when we meet Jesus, we encounter the ultimate power in the universe. This language picks up two strands from the Hebrew Bible: wisdom as the image of God from before creation (Proverbs 8:22) and humankind created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). God is invisible, but God is revealed in God's "image." Paul also uses the term in 1 Corinthians 15:49 and 2 Corinthians 4:4 for the resurrected Christ, now representing humanity as God has always intended it to be.

- What does it mean for you to think of Christ as the image of God?

Colossians 1:16

In saying Christ is "firstborn of all creation" the writer does not mean Christ is the first of God's creatures, but that he has priority and sovereignty over all. "All things" came to be through Christ's agency. Even the angels and the cosmic powers (represented by thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers) were created through Christ. If even these powers were created in Christ, then people have no reason to fear and worship anything or anyone but the true God. Everything is also created "for" Christ. He is the goal of creation. Not only were all things created through Christ, but he continues to sustain the whole creation (1:17).

- The writer of Colossians chose to borrow an early hymn to express the Christian faith. How are hymns especially suited for proclaiming the faith? What are some differences between the message of a hymn focusing on God (objective) and one focusing on the singer's thoughts and feelings (subjective)?

"All things" is a big category. The following two illustrations give some sense of the breadth of creation:

The Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson estimates that 1.5 - 1.8 million species have been identified and named worldwide. Over one half of all identified species are insects including approximately 300,000 beetles! But this is perhaps only 10% of the total species that exist. While it's true that most are microscopic bacteria, fungi, and nematodes, that's still a lot of world yet unknown.

Olbers' Paradox is named after a 19th century astronomer, Heinrich Olbers. Here's the paradox: if there are truly millions of stars in the universe, then our every line of sight should surely end at a star. Why, then, doesn't the night sky appear to be covered with glitter? Simple distance isn't the answer because, although light grows dimmer with distance, the overall number of stars would increase enormously. Even expansion of a limited universe (and a finite number of stars) wouldn't account for more than a trivial amount of dimming. So perhaps the best explanation, or at least the more current one, is that the universe is so immense that the starlight hasn't had time to reach us.

- Do you think of beetles and bedbugs and a starry night differently knowing these things? How can scientific knowledge inform our understanding of the Christian faith? Can our Christian faith inform our knowledge of science? How or how not? College is a time of expanding knowledge in many areas. How can your understanding of the faith expand to keep pace? Is your faith challenged by what you learn in other areas?

Colossians 1:18

“He is the head of the body, the church;” Note how Christ’s supremacy over the church as his body parallels the earlier praise of his supremacy over the realm of creation. (see also Ephesians 1:22-23). “Head” may also have connotations of source, origin, or beginning. The church is Christ’s true body. Here it seems that the author is thinking in broader terms of the universal church rather than only about the local gathering of believers.

“He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,” “Firstborn” both signifies primacy in the sense of time and connotes sovereignty, origin, source, and authority. Here “firstborn” refers to the resurrection of Christ as first in time (Acts 26:23; Romans 14:9); other sisters and brothers will follow (Romans 8:29). In addition, Christ is supreme over both creation and in the new creation begun through God’s raising Him from the dead. Christ is supreme over all.

Colossians 1:19

“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” This means that when Christ acts, God is at work. Just as nothing in all of heaven and earth is outside of God’s power and presence, so nothing is outside of Christ’s sphere.

Colossians 1:20

“And through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things...” This ultimate power has not gone away. It is still active in the church, because Christ is the head of the church. Those who are incorporated into the church, then, are in touch with the power of God. The author isn’t talking about abstract ideas but about present experience. Through baptism, Christians are initiated into the church; they have passed over into God’s kingdom (1:13 and 1:21). The transfer to a new realm and the reconciliation are real, because they were worked by God.

- If God is doing the transferring and reconciling, what happens to some Christians’ claim that baptism is only valid at a certain age? How does the hope of a cosmic harmony described in the hymn give us courage to live faithfully and authentically in a sometimes hostile world? Some see in this passage a promise of universal salvation for all of creation. What do you think? What is the role of faith in redemption?

A discordant and unharmonious creation is reconciled by God in Christ. God overcomes the hostility of the cosmic powers towards God. “Through the blood of the cross” presents not a particular theory of atonement, but a description of how Christ died. His life was violently taken from him on an instrument the Romans used for execution. “Peace” in the Scriptures has a rich meaning. It signifies health, wholeness, and well-being.

The same God creates and redeems. Some early Christian thinking, later declared heretical, portrayed the God of creation and redemption as two different gods. Some even denied that creation could be saved. Redemption meant rescue from the world. Many Gnostic movements shared these characteristics. Against such rejection of the physical world, Romans 8:19-22 speaks of the redemption of all of creation, not just of humans or only souls.

Julian of Norwich, a 14th century Christian thinker, ponders the meaning and motivation behind God’s care and redemption of creation. She writes:

...a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, on the palm of my hand, round like a ball. I looked at it thoughtfully and wondered, “What is it?” And the answer came, “It is all that is made.” I marveled that it continued to exist and did not suddenly disintegrate; it was so small. And again my mind supplied the answer, “It exists, both now and forever, because God loves it.” In short, everything owes its existence to the love of God. In this “little thing” I saw three truths. The first is that God made it; the second is that God loves it; and the third is that God sustains it.

- How does Julian’s perspective compare with other ideas you’re familiar with about why God creates, sustains, and redeems the creation?

Phil Hefner, a Lutheran theologian, has coined the phrase, “co-creator” to talk about the vocation of human beings in the world. We are co-creators with Christ. We aren’t gods, but partners with God in caring for creation.

- Is Hefner's phrase helpful as you think about your role in God's creation? What opportunities, responsibilities, and challenges come with being a co-creator with God? How else would you describe your calling in partnership with Christ?

Corita Kent, a 20th century Roman Catholic artist and teacher said:

Creativity belongs to the artist in each of us. To create means to relate. The root meaning of the word art is to fit together and we all do this every day. Not all of us are painters but we are all artists. Each time we fit things together we are creating – whether it is to make a loaf of bread, a child, a day...In a way the maker (artist) gives us a small taste of that larger art – the new world we are trying to build – a world in which each person, each country, lives in harmonious relationship with each other person and country.

- Do you ever think of yourself as an artist? How can using our minds to explore the truth be a creative activity? What does it mean in a world of suffering, confusion, and fear to affirm that all things hold together in Christ or that they have been reconciled in him?

Closing

Among Eastern Orthodox believers the use of icons is common. Icons are images of Christ and other biblical scenes. They are considered "windows to heaven." They are an aid in worship, prayer and meditation, taking seriously the mystery of the Incarnation, the human nature of Jesus, and the goodness of creation. Their use affirms that a physical object can be the meeting place between God and human beings. Consider using an icon as the focus of your closing meditation and prayer time.

Or close with prayer remembering all those who seek truth in the varied disciplines of the university. Pray also that your community may be an example of reconciliation and peacemaking on your campus.

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