

## Semon notes 21.7.19 The Supremacy of Christ

Reading: *Colossians 1:15-28*

### The history lesson in belief, of the stained glass window at Holy Trinity, Trowbridge

- As evangelical Christians we have what is sometimes described as a 'High Christology'. That means that we – as has been traditional in Christianity for centuries – have a very exalted view of Christ. We can see that illustrated in the stained glass of the window behind me.
- At the top we see Christ: crowned and robed in majesty, in his left hand he holds a great orb signifying his rule over the world; his right hand is raised in blessing. If we were Eastern Orthodox Christians we would immediately recognise this as a variant of the way of visualising Christ, known as '*Christ Pantocrator*' (Christ Almighty). When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, as the Septuagint in the mid-3rd century to 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, the Greek word *Pantocrator* was used to translate both *YHWH Sabaoth* 'Lord of Hosts' and *El Shaddai* 'God Almighty'. Both were Hebrew titles of the God of Israel in the Old Testament.
- In the medieval Western Church this image – this way of portraying Christ - became known as 'Christ in Majesty'.
- This reminds us of what Allan said two weeks ago about how we are a community with 'treasures old & new'. Some are so old and so familiar we no longer think about the centuries of belief and practice that are behind them. And, of course, as members of the Church of England we are the heirs of the pre-Reformation Catholic Church (from a time when there was only one Church in the West); with its roots going back into the Christian Church of the Roman Empire and (along with the Eastern Church) back to the very beginnings of Christianity.
- All of that in one stained glass picture, in a 19<sup>th</sup> century church in Trowbridge.

### **"You have won, O Galilean" (reputedly the dying words of the pagan Roman Emperor 'Julian II, the Apostate).**

- Who is Jesus of Nazareth, the Galilean?
- The Christian claims about Christ (that we see in our stained glass window) are astonishing. But let's time travel back 2000 years and just think about this.
- In the fourth decade of the first century AD, a small but expanding sect within the Jewish community in Jerusalem and its surrounding area began to proclaim a very controversial and astonishing new set of beliefs. These were connected to a Galilean preacher, teacher and miracle worker who had been condemned for blasphemy by the Jewish religious leadership in Jerusalem and executed by the Roman occupying power. The claims this group were making about Jesus were extraordinary. And controversial – to put it mildly!
- Over the next sixty years this sect would expand out of its heartland in Jerusalem and within the Jewish community, as large numbers of gentile Greek-speakers joined it and so totally changed its ethnic and cultural composition.
- Increasing conflict with the Jewish authorities led to persecution of the members of this group, which was regarded as a blasphemous and heretical sect, and this included expulsion of Jewish members from synagogues. Suspicious Roman authorities also began sporadic and, at times, lethal persecution. Sometime around the year AD90 the so-called 'Benediction of the Heretics' was introduced into Jewish daily prayers. From that point onwards pious Jews would thank God every morning that they were not a heretic, including a 'Nazarene' (a Christian). By the year AD100, therefore, Christianity had become a religion

separate from its Jewish roots and most – I would argue all – of its central core writings had been written.

- By about the same time, Roman governors were writing home for imperial advice about what to do about this strange little group, which had the most shocking beliefs. In AD112, Pliny, the Roman governor in Bithynia, wrote to Emperor Trajan, *they “sing hymns to Christ, as to a god”*. But, apart from this strange activity, seemed committed to nothing more menacing than swearing oaths *“never to commit any fraud, theft or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust.”* What should he do with such people? He was clearly perplexed and nothing in his career within imperial service had prepared him for such a situation.
- However, *within three hundred years this persecuted sect had become the official religion of the whole Roman Empire. As the pagan Roman Emperor Julian II, ‘the Apostate’, was alleged to have said: “You have won, O Galilean”*.

### The evidence from Colossians

- The reading we had this morning from the first chapter of the **Letter to the Colossians** reminds us of what we believe as Christians about Christ. It is a reminder of the spiritual earthquake which rocked both traditional Judaism and the Roman Empire. And it is a radical belief which should flood out into everyday attitudes and actions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is at the core of the community that has formally welcomed Alice this morning & to which Hayden, Ruth and Anna (and the rest of us) belong.
- It is not just isolated theological speculation. It is dynamite. Let’s think about it and its implications for a few moments. And of its impact on life.
- *In Colossians, Paul describes Christ as “the image of the invisible God” and “the firstborn of all creation”. (Colossians 1:15.)*
- The first statement – *“the image of the invisible God”* – would later be expanded on hugely as Church councils debated in what sense was Jesus the way in which God revealed himself? How did Jesus Christ’s nature act as an ‘image’ of God? In precisely what way was God supremely seen in him as a true likeness? But the implication of divinity is clear. What it amounts to is this. *We are certain – just like those 1<sup>st</sup> century followers – that the Jewish preacher and teacher Jesus (Yeshua, as they would have known him) was nothing less than God revealed in human form.* We can begin to understand the shock of traditional 1<sup>st</sup>-century Jewish believers. This is an extraordinary claim.
- The reference to *“the firstborn of all creation”* would also run and run. Could this imply that Jesus was created? On strictly grammatical grounds in the Greek, the phrase ‘firstborn’ could be construed to mean this. However, orthodox Christianity would & still does reply ‘no’; read in context (crucial this) it means that Jesus was not created. Instead, in a way that defies simplistic understanding, he is *as the Nicene Creed would later insist: ‘eternally begotten of the Father’*. In its most simplistic definition, it means that Jesus always stood in relationship to God his Father as his Son, and not as a created being, however exalted. In this sense he was always (eternally) in this intimate relationship with God. *Clearly, Paul had something like this in mind, as in verse 17 he declares of Christ that: “He himself is before all things.”*
- In an echo of an understanding that would also later inform the chapter 1 ‘Prologue’ to the *Gospel of John*, Paul went on to say that it was *“in him” (or “by him”)* that *everything in heaven and earth was created (verse 16)*. This includes every physical and spiritual aspect of

creation. In short: the creative power of Father God acted through his Son to make all that is.

- Such a view of Jesus ‘the Christ’ accorded to him a power and authority reserved for the creator-God of Judaism. It was for such beliefs that Christians were expelled from the synagogues!
- As if this was not enough, the same passage goes on to assert that all of creation only holds together because of him (verse 17), and *“in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell”* (verse 19) and, further, that it was through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross that peace was made with God: *“making peace through the blood of his cross”* (verse 20).
- At this point, Roman & Greek pagans would have recoiled in horror and incomprehension. God on a cross! Around the year AD200 an unknown graffiti artist scrawled his contempt for that on the wall plaster of a building on the Palatine Hill in Rome. By a crude picture of a donkey-headed man on a cross he mocked a fellow member of the imperial household with the words (in Greek): *“Alexamenos worships his God.”*
- If we looked at nothing else in Paul’s writings, this declaration of the nature of Christ would be sufficient to both illustrate the extraordinary way that the traditional Jewish concept of ‘messiah’ (‘Christ’ in Greek) had changed as Christians reflected on Jesus and the later reasons for the spilling of gallons of ink on parchment as later Church leaders sought to clarify exactly what this meant.
- Paul’s words, earlier in Colossians, focus on the nature of Christ that predated his earthly birth. But then, a few verses later, he declares the belief that Christ was sent by God to save the world. *The God, through whom the created order came into being, willingly went to a Roman gibbet to save the creation that was, and is, and always will be, so loved by God!*
- And that is what we believe. And that is why we are here. And that is the community that Alice is part of.

### **The implications of Colossians...**

- The earliest Christian writings reveal a highly exalted verdict on the nature of Jesus the Christ.
- Despite arguments to the contrary, both by those who insist that many of the key New Testament documents really represent later second-century beliefs, and the wildest conspiracy theories which see all orthodox Christian ideas about Christ as being foisted on the Church by the creed-writers in later centuries (eg Dan Brown!), early evidence points in a very different direction. Worship and deity were, in fact, soon central parts of the package of beliefs that the early Christians came to hold with regard to Jesus Christ and his nature.
- This occurred within the first generation of believers, including people who had known Jesus.
- It occurred long before much later Christians attempted to explain just how such a nature was possible. And it seems to have not created controversy within the early Church. It was, it seems, accepted by most people within the early Christian community. It fitted and explained their experience of Jesus.
- It is reflected in the stained glass window we have at the front of the church: we believe in Christ *Pantocrator*/Christ in Majesty, through whom God made the world; who came to die on the cross; he was raised from the dead; he ascended to heaven; he now rules with God his Father, united by the Holy Spirit who is active for God in us and throughout creation.
- Mind-blowing, astonishing, controversial.

- And it has immediate and active impact. (1) This Christ loves his creation & compels us to do likewise. Care for creation is not a fringe activity or an option; it should be hard-wired into Christian behaviour. (2) This Christ died for all people & compels us to be channels of his love to others. In the week of 'send them back', in a world of rising racial and nationalist tension, the Good News of Christ is for all, regardless of ethnicity. (3) This Christ knows what it is like to be a human being. As a good friend of mine once put it: "*Jesus had chilblains & ate baked beans.*" And if many people's 'Jesus' doesn't, then they have missed the point of what it meant that the Son of God became a real human being. Christ really understands being human. (4) This Christ is now seated at the right hand of God the Father: Christ has put us right with God and what separated us from God is gone; we have direct access to God; the power of God flows to and through us.
- This is not merely interesting, but abstract, speculation. Instead, this is the revolutionary manifesto that we proclaim. As Paul reminds us in verse 26: "*the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages*" has now been revealed! It points us forward to a certain future, even though we now live in an uncertain world, because this is: "*Christ in you, the hope of glory*" (verse 27). This belief, this reality, changes lives. This changes everything. One day it will finally change the whole created order. On this belief we make out stand!
- Alice, in the company of Hayden, Ruth and Anna, is part of this revolutionary tradition. All Christians are. So, go out and change the world! It was made by the one that we serve and is loved and held together by him. Only knowing him, and this, makes sense of life, the universe and everything. And if you don't yet know him: he loves you more than I can ever express and wants you to know this love; for you are very precious to him. Amen!