

Church of All Nations

Colossians 1:15-28

July 20, 2025

Over the years I have not preached often on the epistle reading from our lectionary but today we will be looking at Colossians passage. Not taking a narrative as a text but teaching/instruction means a bit of a different sermon today. More a teaching sermon shall we say. Fresh off our two sessions on the Nicene Creed where question of the divinity of Christ were front and centre.

The book of Colossians - most likely not Paul as author, but certainly if not him then someone who had connection. Written in the 50's or early 60's. We cannot know with certainty what was going on with the fledgling Christian church in Colossae but we can get a picture by reading between the lines so to speak, of the letter. And it seems Gnosticism was the disturbing element and a threat to the fledgling Christian church

Gnosticism was not one religion but a diverse set of beliefs, and centered on the idea of salvation through knowledge (gnosis) of the true nature of reality. This Gnosticizing appears to be what a lot of ancient religious ideas appear to have been (and what not a few contemporary religious ideas seem to be); viz., a real hodge-podge of cobbled together beliefs and ideas borrowed from all over the religious spectrum. I use the illustration of wandering up and down the supermarket of religious ideas pushing your trolley and taking off the shelves whatever looks attractive and fits conveniently into your existing beliefs.

Gnostics believed that the material world, including our bodies, is flawed or evil, created by a lesser deity (the Demiurge), while the true, higher God resides removed in the higher spiritual realm. This spiritual world is populated by lesser created beings who can convey the secret knowledge required for salvation. Hence there is a clear distinction between the material and spiritual realms. Not valuing the material meant for some Gnostics what you do with your human body is conventionally not a matter of religious morality and if you thought the 1960's were a pretty wild times so were the plain just 60's!

The Colossian Christians had come under the influence of Gnosticism and now they are seeking for other superior spiritual beings who could give them the secret knowledge and passwords they needed to enter the the "fullness" of spiritual enlightenment.

Our author was determined to bring these Christians back to the first things of the Gospel - that Jesus Christ is the fullness of all fullness, is the most superior being ever to exist and, wonder of wonders, through baptism we gain unity with this very person.

The first part of today's reading Colossians 1:15-20 is an early Christian hymn and because it is quoted in Colossians it obviously predates the epistle. From Colossians 1:15 through Colossians 1:23, the author writes exactly two Greek sentences. The prose style here is breathless. The words jumble out from the tip of his (we assume) quill (or from his mouth if he is using a scribe) almost faster than he can get them down.

I think the most extraordinary thing about this - We're talking 20 or 30 years after Jesus had died and yet already there has developed a powerful identification between Jesus of Nazareth as the one who is also called "Lord Jesus Christ" and the "Beloved Son" and now this reaches its zenith with the exalted hymn that declares Christ to be the image of the invisible God, in him all things in heaven and on earth were created....

We have here the development of the Cosmic Christ or universal Christ. You will find this most prominent in the books of Colossians and Ephesians and in the prologue to John's gospel. You get quite a differing picture of Christ in these books and passages than say from reading Luke or Mark.

What is meant by the Cosmic or Universal Christ is the creative power behind the universe, the energy of the big bang, the surging ever expanding universe - sometimes what is called the Logos, the Word. This is the dynamic creative power of the universe. All creation then is sacred as the creation of the Logos.

And the epoch shattering Good News of the gospel is that the mystery that was hidden from the beginning of time is now being revealed. The humble and lowly man Jesus of Nazareth is nothing less than the personification, the historical manifestation the incarnation of this Universal Christ. So it is obvious that we must also say that the Cosmic Christ is far more expansive, than the 30 year life of Jesus.

The cosmic one in whom all of reality makes final sense. The Greek words *ta panta* crop up here again and again: "All things!" Christ Jesus the Lord created all things, maintains all things, holds together all things, and explains all things. If anyone in the mid-first century thought this whole Christianity and Jesus thing was some local religion with modest claims, Colossians 1 disproves that in dramatic fashion.

But there is also a wonderful emphasis here on the physical creation of God, its value, its majesty, and its place in our Christian theology. The Gnosticism in Colossae that undercut the value of bodies and all things earthy was wrong. Matter matters. God in Christ loves the creation, and its renewal figures very large in Christian eschatology as a result. This, too, can be under-appreciated in the church today, though ecological interest and concerns are far more widespread among Christians today than was the case even a quarter century ago. But there is no missing our author's belief here that Christ delights in the creation he made. We should too.

Banner at front of church