

“The Preeminent Christ”
Colossians 1:15-18 (NRSV)

I don't know if you noticed, but a lot of Vancouver Sun newsprint was used both before and after last week's visit by the Dalai Lama and other Nobel Peace Prize laureates to Vancouver in connection with Victor Chan's generously funded **2009 Vancouver Peace Summit**, held at the Chan Centre, which was immediately followed by Craig and Marc Kielburger's Free the Children **We Day Assembly** for younger people, held at GM Place. Both events seemed hugely popular in this most secular, but idiosyncratic and eclectically spiritual, of Canadian provinces, with recorded attendances of over 8,000 and 6,000 participants respectively. The noble purpose of these conferences was to highlight and encourage the value of compassion, the practice of random acts of kindness, and to propel further beneficent social change locally and abroad. Although there were, ostensibly, to be no particular religious emphases, it was difficult, at times, to separate the Dalai Lama's own Buddhist convictions from his message; and it was made clear in a number of journalists' articles that the Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed and other “prophets” were to be regarded as being in the same class. But this idea, of course, runs counter to most of the major religions' own conception of their founders.

For the Christian faith, **Jesus Christ** is definitely much more than a prophet. He is the Son of God as well as the Son of Man. As **the Nicene Creed** declares, he is “the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father.” Further, he is God in the flesh. He is the incarnation of the Almighty God, “who for us and for our salvation ... came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human.” For Christian believers, as Jesus Christ himself said, he is “the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through [him]” (Jn. 14:6). **Jesus Christ is preeminent – peerless, supreme, all-sufficient.**

Much like the folks organizing the 2009 Vancouver Summit, the Gnostics of Paul's day believed that Jesus Christ was only one among thousands of “emanations” from the great, unseen God. He was “merely one among many intermediaries, and however great he might be, he was only a partial revelation of God” (William Barclay, p. 139). But the Apostolic Church believed otherwise. They believed, to use a cliché, that “he is Lord of all, or not Lord at all!” This also what Paul taught in his Letter to the Colossians. Verses 15-20 are the most sublime and closely reasoned presentation of **the supremacy of Jesus Christ** anywhere in the Bible.

1. **Christ – supreme in eternity** (Col. 1:15a).

The opening line of verse 15 describes Christ as **“the image of the invisible God.”** That God is **invisible** is a given in both the Old and New Testaments (e.g. Isa. 45:15; 1 Tim. 1:17; Heb. 11:27). However, while, for example, John’s Gospel also affirms this, by saying, “No one has ever seen God,” it also goes on to say, “It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (Jn. 1:18). **Jesus Christ is, literally, the exegesis or exposition of God.** How does he do this? Much of the answer is found in our text as we try to understand how Christ is the image of God.

The Greek word **“eikon”** – translated as **“image”** or **“representation”** is a word from which we derive our English word **“icon.”** Sometimes it also meant **“a picture”** -- as when an ancient soldier was recorded as having sent a portrait to his father with the note, “I sent you this little portrait [eikonion] of myself painted by Euctemon, [a friend]” (William Barclay, p. 142). A thousand years later, **the Eastern Orthodox Church** would understand the meaning of the art of painting icons in a similar manner. Although to us such art might seem to be an infringement of the second commandment, Orthodox Christians felt they were legitimately reproducing sacred representations of the One who represented or portrayed the Holy God. Making an icon included the idea that this work of art reveals something about the personal character of God. Each icon was and is unique. Each icon is to tell us something different about God. Nevertheless, whatever we think about Orthodox practice, from the Bible’s use of the word “image” or “icon” we can say, **“Jesus Christ is an accurate portrait of God.”**

So, too, according to Holy Scripture, Jesus Christ is **not just a plaster copy of God, ‘like him’; but “a [true portrayal] of God** in human life, the ‘projection’ of God on the canvas of our humanity and the embodiment of the divine in the world of [humankind]” (Ralph P. Martin, 1978, p. 57). The writer to the Hebrews put it this way: “[The Son] is the reflection of God’s glory and **the exact imprint** of God’s very being ...” (Heb. 1:3). The Greek phrase, “The exact imprint” here meant the impress left by a die on a coin or a seal on wax. **“Jesus Christ is the exact impress of the essence of God”** (Phillip Edgecumbe Hughes, 1977, p. 41).

Thus Jesus Christ’s supremacy in eternity is boldly proclaimed as Paul says, **“he is the ‘eikon’ of the invisible God.”** He is supreme. He is no second-rate, Gnostic emanation from God. He is God.

As “the image of the invisible God” emphasizes Christ’s relationship to the Father, Paul now goes on to declare that Christ is “the firstborn of all creation,” introducing his relationship to creation. Here also he is supreme.

2. Christ – supreme in creation (Col. 1:15b-17).

Paul describes **Christ’s supremacy in four ways** in verse 15 to 17. In verse 15b, Christ is declared to be **the first born of all creation**”; in verse 16a, he is seen as part of **the actual Creator himself** – “for in him all things in heaven and earth were created ...”; in verse 16b, he is **the goal of creation** – “all things have been created through and for him”; and, in verse 17, he is **the sustainer of creation** – “He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

Verse 15b calls Christ “the firstborn of all creation” which, at first sight, might be taken as teaching that Jesus Christ was the first person created. Indeed, the **Jehovah’s Witnesses**, and the fourth century **Arian heretics** long before them, take it this way. But they do so by ignoring the context, which makes Jesus Christ Creator of everything. New Testament revelation underlines this latter truth. For example, the opening of John’s Gospel states: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (Jn. 1:1, 3-4). In this context, the use of the phrase “the firstborn” means **“first in rank or honour.”** In fact, it is a code word for **the coming Messiah** (cf. Ps. 89:27). So when Paul called Christ “the firstborn of all creation” he meant that the highest honour belonged to him. **Christ is completely supreme in all creation!**

Why? Because Christ is Creator. Because life, eternal life, “the life of all ages,” the life that was with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, comes from and through him (cf. 1 Jn. 1:1-4, J. B. Philips). This how Paul puts it in his Letter to the Colossians: **“for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created**, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him ...” (1:16a). As part of the Holy Trinity, **Jesus Christ is the agent of creation from nothing** (Eduard Lohse, 1971, p. 50). The extent of Christ’s creative work is dazzling. It includes things in heaven and things on earth, things we cannot see as well as things we can see. It includes even the angelic world. “Thrones, dominions, rulers and powers” are the Bible’s way of describing four classes of angelic powers (Peter. T. O’Brien, Word Biblical Commentary, 1982, p. 27).

The Gnostics taught that Christ was a spiritual emanation from the true God, but here Paul, in conformity with the rest of apostolic witness, boldly declares that **Jesus Christ is an integral part of the Holy Triune God** who, somehow in concert together, created “heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them” (Exod. 20:11). This is an astounding, deliberately combative proclamation! Think of it! **Christ is Creator of all, even the invisible spirit-world!**

We are well aware of **what this implies** when we think of a universe, which is millions of light years in breadth and length, height and depth, and at least 13.5 billions of years in the making, and which includes the complexity and minutiae of all creatures found in the sky, on the earth and in the oceans. The Bible asserts Jesus Christ had a part to play in creating even the tiniest creatures. For example, there are over 800,000 insects catalogued to date -- with billions of numbers in some of the species – all informed and infused with something of the creative power of Jesus Christ. It is awesome.

Further, Paul goes on to say, Christ is not only the Creator of Creation, but **he is also its end, its goal**. After all, Paul says, “... **all things have been created through him and for him**” (1:16b). This is another astounding statement. Peter O’Brien, a Bible commentator says, “Paul’s teaching about Christ as the goal of all creation ... finds no parallel in the Jewish wisdom literature or in the rest of the extant Jewish materials for that matter” (p. 47). The idea is this: **everything in all creation began with him and will end with him**. All things sprang forth at his command, and all things will return to him at his command. One day, every knee will bow before him and everything will give him glory (Php. 2:10-11). Or as the writer of the Book of Revelation declares, Jesus Christ is “the Alpha and the Omega,” the beginning and the end (Rev. 1:8a; 21:6, 13).

Since this is true, **we ought to live completely for Jesus Christ**. Any other course of life is completely irrational for the believer. Paul used similar logic in his Letter to the Romans: “For from him and through him and to him are all things” he wrote. “To him be the glory forever! Amen.” And then he goes on to call us to total, sacrificial commitment, which he concludes, is our “reasonable or spiritual worship” Rom. 11:36-12:1). Are you living for God, revealed in Christ, or are you living outside rationality?

In verse 17, Paul reaches the apex of his argument. Christ is superior in creation because **he is also its sustainer**. “He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. The perfect tense used in the verb “hold” tells us that all things have held together in Christ from the beginning until now, and even beyond. Christ continues to hold all things together.

Apart from his continuous creating and redemptive activity, all things would disintegrate. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews puts it this way: the “Son ... through whom [God] also created the worlds. ... sustains all things by his powerful Word” (1:1, 3).

Physicists tells us that among the atom’s whirling protons and electrons there is a vast, miniature microcosm of space, not unlike the huge macrocosm of the realm of space in which our solar system and the other galaxies are suspended. Though some have theories as to why the atom and the galaxies hold together, none know for sure. Christ is not contained in matter, but holds it together by his word.

There are two illustrations of this I would like to mention, both taken from the realm of art. There is **a medieval painting** which shows Christ in the clouds, and below him the world of nature, peopled with humanity. From Christ to every object there is painted a thin gold thread. The artist was saying that Christ is responsible for sustaining the existence of every created thing.

A modern version showing this truth was completed by **Salvador Dali** in 1951. He portrays a very human yet cosmic Christ, crucified on the cross, yet devoid of nails, blood and a crown of thorns, hanging suspended in the blackness of space, over sunlit clouds and some mountains of the world, and the poignant particular scene to which our eyes are inevitably drawn, down at the bottom of the painting, of a boat and two fisherman. On the bottom of one of his original studies for the painting, Dali explained its inspiration: “In the first place, in 1950, I had a ‘cosmic dream’ in which I saw this image in colour and which in my dream represented ‘the nucleus of the atom.’ This nucleus later took on a metaphysical sense; I considered it the very unity of the universe, ‘the Christ’” (Robert Descharnes, Dali, 2003). It won a poll to decide Scotland’s favourite painting in 2006. You can find it where I saw it in the Kelvingrove Museum in Glasgow, in 2007.

An Irish poet, **Joseph Plunkett**, said virtually the same thing when he wrote,

I see his blood upon the rose,
and in the stars the glory of his eyes,
his body gleams amid eternal snows,
his tears fall from the skies.

I see his face in every flower;
the thunder and the singing of the birds

are but his voice – and carved by his power
rocks are his written words.

All pathways by his feet are worn,
his strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea,
his crown of thorns is twined with every thorn,
his cross is every tree.

Seeing Christ as he is will keep us from heresy, for it will steel us against a scaled-down, watered-down Christ which currently captures so many hearts if he captures anyone at all these days. And it will cause those of us who know him and love him to continue to pursue his kingdom.

Paul's hymn sings of the supremacy of Christ in creation. He is **“the firstborn,”** and thus he has the highest place. He is **the Creator** of everything, every cosmic speck, every living spirit. He is **the goal**, and all creation is moving, willy-nilly, towards him and for him. He is **the sustainer** of it all. He is holding the very breath that allows you and I to live as we listen to Paul's words. What a stunning revelation this is! It is meant to stretch our puny minds and dominate our thinking and change us. When we truly understand what is being said here, it is amazing that we should ever look anywhere else for meaning and purpose in life.

3. **Christ – supreme in the church** (Col. 1:18).

And, finally, **“He is the head of the body, the church”** (1:18a). Christ, the Risen One, is sovereign over the church, just as he is sovereign over creation. When we become believers, we became part of Christ's Body through the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). As members of his Body we are totally dependent upon “the head of the body” – Jesus Christ, “the only King and Head of the Church” as Presbyterians are fond of saying -- for direction. He is to control us.

The reason for Christ's exalted position in the church is that **“he is the beginning, the first born from the dead ...”** (1:18b). Without Christ's resurrection there can be no resurrection for others (1 Cor. 15:20ff), but with his resurrection everything has changed. “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:17).

In the mystery of the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ -- God's “only begotten son” -- chose to enter his own creation, take on a body created and, somehow, sustained by God's almighty power, die and then undergo resurrection, and

so be “the firstborn from the dead.” What a wonder! The Gnostics in all their arcane speculations could never have dreamed up something so stupendous as this. Such a plan, such a dream, such gracious action and intervention could only come from the mind of Almighty God.

And what does this mean to us? Simply this: **“that he might come to have the first place in everything”** (1:18c). The word “everything” extends his “firstness” to as wide a scope as conceivable and beyond. There is no room for similar Saviours. Jesus Christ is preeminent; he must have the first place in everything.

First place in our thoughts and actions.

First place in our dreams and accomplishments.

First place in our friendships, marriages and families.

First place in our work and pleasures.

First place in our church.

First place in our ministry and mission.

Amen

The Rev. Dr. J. H. (Hans) Kouwenberg
Abbotsford, BC
October 4, 2009s