

Colossians 1v15-23

Given at Ferndale Baptist Church
27th July 2008

This is my last sermon at Ferndale (I won't say the last ever, but at least for a while). It's been at the back of my mind since the rota was put together. So over the past couple of months, I've been pondering what I might speak on. Out of everything I could say to you this morning, what one thing should I leave you with? Is there one thing to encourage you or maybe even challenge you with before I go?

Those of you who were here on Tuesday night were probably expecting me to speak on 2 Timothy. And I almost did. I got pretty far with that other talk before I changed my mind. And this passage from Colossians is the reason. I'll be honest, I thought of lots of great things to say. But I always had this passage in the back of my mind. *"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation."* And every other thing I could have said seems quite trivial in comparison. When I was trying to think of the one thing I wanted to leave you with, I eventually realised there is only one thing. In fact, there's only one person. The Lord Jesus Christ. And so what I want to do this morning is to lift our eyes to him, one last time. And anything else I could have said should be obvious. I want to spend my last sermon making a big deal about Jesus, because I hope you'll keep on making a big deal about Jesus long after I've gone.

This is a letter, and Paul is writing to the group of Christians in Colosse (a city in what we now call Turkey). Paul hasn't met them, but he's heard about them, and he's been praying for them. *"Since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you..."* (v9). And the thing he's been praying for them is that they would be filled with the knowledge of God's will, so that they might live a life *"worthy of the Lord"* (v10). He wants them to joyfully give thanks to the Father for bringing them into the kingdom of the son he loves, *"in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins"* (v13). Jesus is the one who made it possible for them to be rescued, he has paid their debt, and their sins are forgiven. Ultimately, everything they have to be thankful and joyful about come from the Lord Jesus. That's what Paul wants them to realise, as God opens their eyes wider and wider to be able to see it.

And so Paul breaks into one of my favourite parts of the whole Bible. Some people think this was a hymn that was being used by the first Christians, but Paul makes it his own by quoting it in his letter. And, for reasons I haven't got time to go into now (you'll need to read the rest of the letter to find out), this was exactly what the Colossians needed to hear.

"He is the image of the invisible God." God is invisible to us, but Christ allows us to see him. We can know what he's like, because we know what Jesus is like. But he's more than just a picture like one of these rubbish ones in the handout. Paul says later on in verse 19, *"God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him."* Jesus is God himself. The whole infinite glory of God squeezed into a human being; God-made-man.

He's Lord over all creation – he's the firstborn, which means he has the place of highest honour over everything. *"For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him"* (v16). Jesus was involved in the creation of everything. He wasn't created and he didn't just come along later. He created everything. *Things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible* – those two pairs of opposites cover every single thing in the universe! You only have to know a tiny bit about our universe to have your mind boggled. The size of it, the scale of it is so massive that we can't really even begin to understand it. But even that's only a fraction of what the Lord Jesus

created, because we can only see the obvious parts, the parts which are visible and on earth. Who knows how much more there is that we can't see?!

There is nothing and no-one superior to him, because he created it all – thrones and powers and rulers and authorities – they're all beneath him, the Lord of the universe who made them. And all things were created *by* him, but also *for* him. They're his own possession.

“He is before all things,” in terms of time *and* importance. He has always existed, so he is before everything. And he is superior to everything too. In every way possible, he is before all things. *“And in him all things hold together”* (v17). Just think for a second what that means. All things hold together *in him*. It's Jesus who keeps everything going, from the mind-bogglingly big things to the mind-bogglingly small. It's Jesus who makes the earth spin and keeps it orbiting the sun. It's Jesus who makes gravity work and the rain fall and plants grow. It's Jesus who makes the bits of your body work in the right way so you live and breath like you should. Every single thing in the universe owes its existence to him, but he does more than just makes things – he keeps them going too.

For those of us who are Christians, he is the head of the church. He's our shepherd, he's our leader, he's our captain. But it's more than that. He's *“the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead.”* He's the reason the church exists in the first place. Without him, there'd be no church. It's because death wasn't the end for him, it's because he was resurrected, that we can have the same hope ahead of us. He was the first *of many* so that he might have the supremacy, in the church and in the world. *For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross* (v19-20).

That last bit is the most important bit. Paul isn't running out of steam here, he's building to a crescendo. Out of all of these awe-inspiring things we can say about the Lord Jesus, it's the cross which brings him the ultimate glory. Any of these other things on their own would have been enough anyway, never mind all of them together. But the pinnacle of his glory, his crowning achievement was on the cross, even though it looked like anything but.

This same Jesus was put to death on a wooden cross. If what we've heard so far is true, doesn't that sound ridiculous? The creator of the universe, the one who made all rulers and authorities allowed himself to be captured, beaten, abused and killed by them. But he did. He died willingly, for a purpose: *“to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross”* (v20). When two things are reconciled, it means they are put back together. Whether it's two people or two nations, reconciliation is an end to conflict, and relationships being put back together. That's what his death achieved. He made it possible for the whole of creation, including us, to be reconciled to him.

But why? Why do we need to be reconciled in the first place? And what could be so serious that it needs blood to sort it out? Paul goes on to explain it in verse 21. To most of the Colossians this was a reminder – they knew this already. But it was important that they heard it again. Even if you've heard this before, you need to hear this again, because the state we're in without Jesus is dire.

“Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour” (v21). That was true of the Colossians, and it's true for all of us too. This is the position we're in by nature. *Alienated from God and enemies in our minds*. Every single one of us has turned their back on the God who made us. We're alienated from him, which means our relationship has been ruined. Things should have been idyllic, with us living closely with God, and

him caring for us as only a creator can. But we threw all of that away because we ditched God. This is more than just a tiff or a difference of opinion. We're *enemies of God*, because of our evil behaviour. We all do things which fall far short of God's standards. You only have to turn on the TV or open a newspaper to see some really obvious examples of evil behaviour. In fact, we don't need to turn on the TV, do we? We all do things which fit into the same category. But at the root of the evil we do to each other is what we've done to God – we've rejected him. We put ourselves in God's place, and try to run things our way. We're alienated from God because we've rejected him, and the injustice and pain and upset in the world are just symptoms of that. And the consequences are severe...

It'd be possible for you to hear me saying all this and to just think, "that's a shame. It'd be lovely to be friends with God, but I'm not really missing him. I think I'll live." But if you think that, then you haven't realised just who we're talking about. The one who made everything, including us, and keeps everything going, including us. The only one in the whole universe who deserves our worship and adoration. And we've stuck two fingers up at him. Imagine what would happen if you did that to someone important like the Queen – there'd be outrage! But we've snubbed someone infinitely more worthy than her. We've committed the ultimate crime. And the ultimate crime deserves the ultimate punishment – it deserves death.

That's why it took blood to sort it out. That's why it took a death to put things right. But not just anybody. Look at verse 22. "*Now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death.*" Things are put right by the death of the Lord Jesus. The offence to God was so great that someone had to die. But I couldn't do it – I deserved to die because I rejected God. You couldn't do it, because you deserve it too. I've used the example before of an inmate on death-row volunteering to take the punishment for his cell-mate. That would be impossible, because both of them deserve it. It had to be someone who didn't deserve it. The Lord Jesus is the only man in the whole of history who hasn't deserved to die. But he's God too. The ultimate, infinite scale of the crime we committed against God could only be matched by an ultimate, infinite sacrifice. Only Jesus, God made man, could do it.

How does that make you feel, knowing that someone had to die instead of you? It's a hard idea to swallow. It hurts our pride, doesn't it? That someone would willingly do that for us. We'd much rather sort it out ourselves, but the truth is, we couldn't. Instead, God (who we were enemies with, remember) loved us enough to sort it out himself.

And now all those who trust in him are *reconciled* – things are put right, the damage is repaired! The effect is that we're totally forgiven. Have another look at verse 22: "*But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.*" Our crimes are paid for. Any guilt we once had is taken away. Without blemish and free from accusation. There's not a mark on us, because Jesus paid our debt completely. And in God's eyes we're perfect.

In a nutshell, this is the gospel. I don't know what you understand by the word 'gospel.' I suspect if I did a survey, I'd get some varied results. You may well know it means 'good news' – but what is the good news?

This is. That the Lord Jesus, who is God and creator and sustainer of the universe is also our Saviour. He stepped down to rescue us from the mess we got ourselves into. And he did it by willingly giving up his own life for us. Now, if we trust him, we have the solid hope of living forever with him. He's the "firstborn from among the dead" – we'll follow in his footsteps and be raised to life. But all of that hinges on who Jesus is. The Gospel is the Lord Jesus, who is Lord of

us all, and our only hope.

We should never, ever reduce this to an entrance exam or a secret formula for getting into heaven. This isn't about a simple transaction that happens between you and God when you become a Christian and that's it. This is so huge, and the scale of it is so monumental, that it will affect everything. And I mean everything.

So what I want to do to finish is to help you see how the gospel, how the reality of who Jesus is and what he's done, should affect your lives. That's what I want to say as I leave. If I were going to be cheeky and ask for a leaving present, that's what it would be. Make a big deal about Jesus, and make that affect who you are. If you get that right, I won't need to say anything else.

The first and most obvious thing I have to say is to those of you who aren't Christians, or those of you who aren't sure. If you've heard me preach before, you'll hopefully have noticed I do this every time. But I don't speak directly to people like you to single you out or to gift the Christians a breather. I honestly believe this is the most important thing you need to hear. This isn't just a nice idea you can take or leave. This is reality. This is how things really are. And if this is how things really are, you need to do something about it.

You need to realise that Jesus is Lord, whether you acknowledge him or not. Every corner of creation and every single thing in it belong to him, even you. But you're still stuck where the Colossians were – enemies of God. Alienated from the one who made you and loves you. The good news, the amazing news, is that he loves you so much that he died for you. He's made it possible for you to be reconciled – for things to be put right between you and him – if you'll only trust him to do it. Why not do it right now, and get to know your Lord and Saviour?

Now maybe you have been listening so far and thinking this is all a bit basic. It's beginners stuff. You've been patient, because there might be someone here who needs to hear it, but you've moved beyond this.

If you "move beyond" this, you're a gonner. There's no suggestion the Colossians didn't know this. But they needed to fix their hearts and minds on the Lord Jesus more and more. As the letter opens up, you see that this is the only antidote to the issues the Colossians were having. As they wandered off track, they needed the truth of the gospel to bring them back.

I've said this before, but I make no apology for saying it again – the gospel is the basis of who we are. Don't ever move away from the good news of the Lord Jesus. Ever.

Have you heard the joke where a Sunday School teacher asks a boy, "*what's small and grey, has a bushy tale and collects nuts?*" The boy looks puzzled and says, "*I know the answer's Jesus, but it sounds like a squirrel.*" The assumption is that, in Sunday school the answer is always Jesus (to be fair, it often is!). But we tend to think you leave the simple answers behind in Sunday school – things are more complicated in "real life."

What I want you to realise is that the questions might get more complicated, but the answer stays the same.

The truth of who Jesus really is will give you a heart for those who don't know him. How can you leave people as his enemies, denying his lordship, when he's done everything to put things right? And this will keep your service of others focussed on him, when the temptation is to do big projects or just do nice things.

The truth of who Jesus really is will make you aim for holiness – if you're a Christian, you're "*holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.*" Why live like he hasn't? But it will stop you falling into following rules too. He's done everything. There's nothing you need to do, and nothing you can do, to earn your way into God's good books.

The truth of who Jesus really is will help you keep going when things are tough. He's taken care of our future – ultimately, we have a sure a certain hope because he's already been there. But he's Lord of the Universe right now. That should be an immense comfort to us, to know he's got it all under control.

The truth of who Jesus really is will shape your life together. Every aspect of it. How you run services. Which meeting you have when. How you spend the offering. What events you put on and why. Everything. It will lift you out of stressing and even falling out about petty details. And, I hope, it will lead you to take risks and attempt big things for Him. Jesus won't fit in a box, and nor should we!

The gospel is what brought me to Ferndale three years ago. It wasn't anything to do with getting 'work experience' or qualifications, and it certainly wasn't for the money. It was for the gospel, and the opportunity to help people get to know the Lord Jesus. And the gospel is what kept me here. It hasn't been easy. If I'm honest, there have been points where I could've jacked it and gone to work in Woolworths. But the gospel kept me here – I knew God was at work in my life and the people around me. And now the gospel is what's taking me away. Whatever you think the reason for me leaving might be, the truth is it's this. The gospel. It's an opportunity for me to get students in Reading and Guildford doing what I've been urging you to do – put Jesus at the centre of their lives so that they live and speak for him.

Ultimately, of course, the truth of who Jesus really is should move us to worship. He deserves nothing less. Don't let your life together as his body become about anything less.

And so, if you'll let me, I want to finish with a quote from a guy who's taught me a lot, and usually puts things better than me. He's dead, but dead people tend to make better teachers anyway. It's the great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon on this very subject:

"The Lord Jesus is the fullness which fills all in all. Creation is too small a frame in which to hang his likeness. Human thought is too contracted, human speech too feeble, to set him forth to the full. He is inconceivably above our conceptions, inutterably above our utterances."