

St. Alban's Epping, 21st July 2019

“A BIG PICTURE OF JESUS”

(Amos 8:1-12; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15-29; Luke 10:38-42)

Throughout the ages, there have always been different ways of describing and thinking about Jesus. In the 1960's, I remember the hippie Jesus of peace and love. Then along came Jesus the Superstar. We had Jesus the freedom fighter. Currently we have Jesus the lovely man who preaches only about love, and wouldn't say anything negative or critical to anyone or about anyone: this is the current correction of Israel Folau's Jesus.

Virtually every description of Jesus I have heard has at least a grain of truth, although most of them ignore or distort a fair amount of truth as well. And how much is missed by these descriptions can be seen when we compare them to the words of Paul we heard in today's reading from his Letter to the Colossians. He brings us a truly big picture of Jesus, a picture which justifies the powerful description in our opening hymn which describes him as “Jesus, the name high over all”.

At the time when Paul wrote this letter, many ideas were circulating about the significance of Jesus, often quite distorted. Some influential preachers seem to have been suggesting that Jesus was pretty great, but that there were others who were just as important, just as significant. They saw Jesus as one of many options in the spiritual supermarket of that time.

Well, there are certainly many options in the spiritual supermarkets of today! Why choose Jesus in particular? Why not see him as just one of many equally valid options? Paul wanted his readers to get the true and the truly big picture of Jesus. He wanted them – and ultimately he would want us – to grasp hold of the unique greatness of Jesus, who is **Lord of Creation** as well as **Lord of the Church**.

In the opening verses of our reading, Paul describes Jesus as **the image of the invisible God**. We cannot see God in all his glory, but to look at Jesus is to see what God is truly like.

Paul calls him the **firstborn of all creation**. That could sound as if he was saying that Jesus was created before everything else. But the next thing we read is that everything was created through him. Even those other spiritual beings who might be found on the shelves of the spiritual supermarket in fact exist because of him – that is if they exist at all!

Christ is Creator, not someone who was created. He is firstborn: the eternal Son of God the Father. And as firstborn, he is the heir, the true owner of creation; he was there before all things. And indeed in him all things hold together: it is through him that creation continues to exist and to keep going.

As human beings we owe our very existence to Christ. We exist for him, and we find our true meaning and purpose in him. Yes, Jesus is Lord over all Creation. Of course we find this truth in other parts of the New Testament, particularly in those famous opening words of John's Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

So we have this big picture of Jesus as Lord of Creation. But though it is a powerful image, there is another side that Paul wants to bring out. For Jesus is also the **Lord of the Church**. Paul describes Jesus as the head of the church: any merely human church leader is there to point people to Jesus, not to gain followers for themselves. Far too many church leaders have got into all sorts of trouble by gathering followers for themselves, rather than for Jesus: seeing themselves as the powerbrokers rather than servants of Christ and of his people. But Christ is the true Lord, the true Leader, the true Guide of the church. The church finds its beginning, its true origin in him. He is the firstborn from the dead: his resurrection opens up the way to life for all who trust in him. Because of the resurrection his confused and frightened followers became the founding members of the Christian church. It is truly his church.

And why was Christ's resurrection so significant? Because his death was so significant. Through the blood of the cross, Christ made peace between God and humanity. Christ brought us forgiveness and reconciliation with God. In fact Paul says here that through Christ's death, God reconciled to himself not just humanity, but all things, whether on earth or in heaven. As Christ is Lord of creation, so his death is effective for all of creation. That is why we often find in the scriptures the message that our destiny in Christ is not simply “going to heaven” as people often put it, but actually sharing in the life and joy of the **new creation**, the new heavens and the new earth. There is our hope through Christ: a new and perfected creation!

So Christ is Lord of the Church as well as Lord of Creation. And that is possible because “in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” In Christ we see God in all his fullness. As later theologians put it together, Jesus is truly God the Son.

And because Jesus is truly the Lord, we have to say that in our Gospel reading, Mary had indeed chosen the best part when she sat at the feet of Jesus, listening to his words and seeking to learn from him and know him better.

Martha was busy getting flustered while trying to show hospitality. Generous hospitality was certainly commendable, but doing something simpler for her guests would have enabled her also to sit at Jesus’ feet. And that is what actually mattered most of all. We must listen to Jesus!

So if Jesus is Lord of Creation and Lord of the Church, how do we respond? It’s certainly worth learning from Mary’s wisdom, in giving priority to opportunities to listen to Jesus: we can’t literally sit at his feet, but we can make time to study and reflect personally on the scriptures, as well as gather to study the scriptures together, and even to hear sermons focussing on those scriptures! Yes, it’s lovely and it’s right to show hospitality and to do helpful things for people, but as we respond to Jesus we need also to give time and attention to the scriptures where we read the words of Jesus, and we read words of those who can authoritatively tell us about Jesus, and help us see how to live as his people.

Paul tells us that Jesus has a purpose for us as his people: we are invited to stand before God’s throne holy and blameless and irreproachable. That’s quite a challenge! I’ve spoken before about us being in an “in-between period”: we are already forgiven, but we are not yet perfect, so we still go the wrong way and continue to need ongoing forgiveness.

But there is that challenging goal, and so right now we are called to seek to live as those who will stand holy and blameless and irreproachable before God’s throne. There is no justification for us to think: “I’m forgiven. I can take it easy. I’ll be OK on the day.” As Paul says, we need to continue securely established and steadfast in the faith.

Paul worked very hard indeed as a messenger of Jesus the Lord. He was a faithful servant of the Gospel. At the end of our passage he writes of how he proclaims Jesus, warning and teaching everyone in all wisdom, because his aim is to present everyone **mature** in Christ. Christian growth is for all of us, and that growth has its different sides: reading and thinking and learning, praying and meditating, and living and serving and loving. Maturity is still the goal, spiritually and practically.

But Paul didn’t just work hard, toiling and struggling as he puts it, to be an effective preacher and teacher and guide. He also suffered as a part of that ministry of making the message of Christ known to the widest range of people: to Jews and Gentiles, and peoples of all races and classes and backgrounds.

He was imprisoned and beaten many times, and he must often have been reminded of those words of Jesus on the road to Damascus: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Paul came to realise not only that Jesus was indeed the Lord: he also began to realise the deep connection between Christ and his body, the church. To persecute Christ’s people is also to persecute Christ. Hence Paul can say in this passage that he is completing what is incomplete in Christ’s sufferings.

Of course there was nothing Paul could add to Christ’s sufferings on the cross, which were complete in themselves, and had truly brought about the salvation which is offered to all people. But while this world lasts, there will always be the reality of Christians suffering for their faith in this world where faith in Christ is not always acceptable.

So Paul tells us of Christ the Lord of Creation and the Lord of his Church. And **Christ is in us**: there is our hope of glory, and that hope is offered to people of all nations and backgrounds. Yes, no doubt many people will see the Gospel of Christ as just one more product offered on the shelves of the spiritual supermarket. But in fact, we need to always remember that Christ is gloriously unique: he is Lord of Creation as well as Lord of the Church. He is Lord of all, and he has opened up the only way into God’s wonderful and eternal kingdom.

So let us keep trusting and following him. Let us rejoice in the immense blessings he shares with us. And let us keep going in faith and in faithfulness, growing in our relationship with him and in our response to his marvellous Gospel. Amen.

Paul Weaver