

Colossians 1:15-20

Intro

Who's in charge of this church gathering here at St Nick's this morning? I wonder if there's a visitor or a newcomer who wondered that as you came in this morning?

- ⌚ Is it the Rector?
- ⌚ Is it the church wardens?
- ⌚ Maybe it's the PCC, or the staff or the bishop.
- ⌚ Or maybe you're of a democratic kind of mind and you'd say all of us, we're all in charge.

It's an important question and this morning we're going to look at the Bible's answer. But just to say, just to warn you the Bible's answer is scandalous, and most people in our day and age think it's an unpleasant answer.

Before we come to it we're just going to get our bearings and think about why Paul is writing to this new little Colossian church. He's got a concern about them and he's got a command for them.

- ⌚ His concern comes in Chapter 2v4: **I tell you this so that no-one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.** And as you read through this letter it becomes clear that the Colossians are in danger of being seduced by certain beliefs – fine sounding beliefs, mind you – but beliefs which are most certainly not Christian. I wonder if you've ever felt embarrassed about your Christian beliefs, or threatened by those who believe something else. My sister almost gave up on Christianity 5 years ago because of a friend who nearly deceived her by fine sounding arguments. Well in Colossians Paul's saying to us – I don't want you to be fooled into giving up the best thing in the world.
- ⌚ And therefore he gives them a command – it's there in 2v6: **So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him,** That's the command you've made a start with

Jesus – now continue with him. Don't get led astray, don't give up on Christianity.

We won't actually get to Chapter 2v6 for another 3 weeks or so – but by the time we do we'll have a pretty clear idea why that command makes sense. Why in fact it would be utter stupidity to do anything else other than to stick with Jesus Christ. In church is the right place to be at...on a Sunday morning. It's the right place to be because the answer to our question a moment ago is that Jesus Christ is the one in charge of this little gathering. Do you see that in v18 **And he –Jesus Christ- is the head of the body, the church**

But who is Jesus Christ? Paul's answer is a big one – Jesus Christ is the ruler of the universe. And that's our first point -

1. The ruler of the universe... 15-17

Now Paul begins his description of Jesus by saying this, v15 - **15 He is the image of the invisible God.** Now what does he mean? Well when you look at an image of someone you get an idea of what they're like. And there are different kinds of images.

- ⌚ So an image of someone can be something like a painting: a portrait – and if the portraits any good you'll be able to tell who it looks like.
- ⌚ Or even better you can take a photo – and that'll tell you exactly what a person looks like.
- ⌚ But painting and photos are just still life. So perhaps the best kind of image would be a film – because you can see what someone looks like and how they move and talk and what they say and do.

Of course a film isn't the real thing – if you've seen a film of the Queen that doesn't mean you've actually met the Queen. A film image isn't the real thing but it's a good representation. But is what Paul meant about Jesus? He's an image of God – he's not the real thing – but he's a good representation. No that's not what Paul meant. And we can see what Paul means when he calls Jesus the

image of the invisible God when we look at the next four verses. And he says 4 things about him.

First of all he says He's the ruler of everything, 15

That's that phrase at the end of v15 - **the firstborn over all creation**. Which could be a bit confusing to us because it makes it sound like Jesus himself was created – as if there was a time when Jesus didn't exist, before he was born. But Paul didn't mean that just here, Jesus wasn't created he was the creator, we'll see in a moment – no, the firstborn is the one who has the privilege of ruling. Elizabeth II's first born is Prince Charles – and one day, eventually, as firstborn, he'll have the privilege of ruling over the United Kingdom. That's the point of the title Jesus Christ is in that sense **the firstborn over all creation** – it's a way of saying he has the privilege of ruling over everything.

Why is that? Why should anyone have the right to rule everything? Well what if that person made everything? Because that's the next thing about Jesus:

He is the maker of everything, v16

Jesus isn't part of creation – he's the cause of creation. Which is a striking thought isn't it. When we're asked how we think the world began were probably quite used to saying 'Well I think God made it.' But it would be just as accurate to say 'Well I think Jesus made it'. V16 - **16 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** That's right – by Jesus.

- ⌚ The one who was born in a barn and laid in a manger and tucked in by his mother was the one who created his mother.
- ⌚ The one who walked and talked and ate with his friends was the one who created his friends, and created the food they ate, and created the sun they walked under.

- ⌚ The one who hung on a cross rejected by his friends and scorned by his enemies, with nails driven through his hands was the one whose hands flung stars into space.

We went for a visit to the Natural History museum yesterday – I love the Natural History museum, it's just amazing – full of all kinds of amazing birds and beasts, and next to each exhibit there's a little plaque that has someone's name on – the collector who donated it, or the zoologist who first identified it. And there were lots of different names – but on each plaque there could have been another name – the collector, the zoologist, what about the maker.

- ⌚ Because as you wander into the dinosaur hall and see those huge skeletons you ought to know – Jesus Christ made them.
- ⌚ And as you go a bit further and see that vast huge full size model of the blue whale you ought to know – Jesus Christ makes them.
- ⌚ And then as you go into the earth sciences section and there's this great big model of planet earth you ought to know – Jesus Christ made the earth.

– **all things were created by him** – he is the ruler of everything because he is the maker of everything.

And – next thing – he's the goal of everything

As I say we were visiting the Natural History museum and as we were standing on the platform there was a big advert for a ten week course in philosophy. And it said it would be asking the fundamental questions:

- ⌚ Who am I?
- ⌚ What should we be doing in life?
- ⌚ Why are we here?

I wonder if the students on the course will discover the answer that Paul gives here. I don't think they will because the advert also said – the truth lies in side everybody, just waiting to be revealed. But

you won't find the answer to why we exist inside yourself, or through philosophy or through science.

Let me read you some words from the conclusion of Stephen Hawking's book – a Brief History of Time. As one of the most brilliant scientists of the day he's lamenting the unsatisfying nature of science –

Even if there is only one possible unified theory, it is just a set of rules and equations. What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe? The usual approach of science of constructing a mathematical model cannot answer the questions of why there should be a universe for the model to describe. Why does the universe go to all the bother of existing? 'If we find the answer to that,' he says, 'we would know the mind of God.'

And if you've understood Colossians chapter 1 v16 then you know the mind of God! Why does the universe go to all the bother of existing? V16: **all things were created by him and for him.**

That's why we're here. We're here for Jesus. And it's not an answer that any philosopher or scientist could ever arrive at. Everything exists for the honour of Jesus Christ. The universe is a Jesus centred place.

...

Everything exists for the honour of Jesus Christ. He is goal of everything.

And what's more he's the sustainer of everything

Paul's saying that the universe isn't like a clock work watch. With a watch once it's been made and wound up you can leave it – it doesn't need the maker anymore – it'll keep going – well it'll stop eventually but until then it's happy ticking away on it's own.

The universe isn't like that. It constantly needs Jesus. The only reason atoms keep existing, and stars keep shining humans keep breathing is that Jesus second by second keeps sustaining – everything. Sometimes we like to think of ourselves as independent – but the truth is that if Jesus just for millisecond stopped upholding the universe – it would disappear. That is how dependent on Christ we are.

So now we can see what Paul means when he says Jesus is the image of God. It's not that he's some kind of representation of God but not the real thing. No he is very much the real thing: he's nothing less than God himself. But the point of calling him the image of God is that in Jesus God has made himself known, visible – so that we can actually see what he's like. Which is great – because it means that kind of claims are actually examinable. The life of Jesus Christ is laid out in the Gospels for anyone to examine – which is the point of Christianity Explored – the aim of the course is to look at Jesus life in the Gospels in order to make up our minds: are these claims about him true or are they false?

Just think about it for a moment – Paul is saying that a man who died 20 or 30 years earlier, a man who had been personally known to many people who Paul knew, a man who had died a death on a cross in living memory – Paul's saying these things about that man.

They are staggering claims.

- ⌚ In status – the ruler of everything
- ⌚ In the past – the maker of everything
- ⌚ In the future – the goal of everything
- ⌚ In the present – the sustainer of everything

It's an astonishing picture isn't it.

Now look at v18 again. There's a new emphasis in it now isn't there? ¹⁸ **And he is the head of the body, the church** Him – Jesus Christ the ruler of the universe.

Which brings us to our second point... The ruler of the universe...

2...is also the head of the church, 18-20

Which means the church is a pretty special organization, isn't it? Week by week it's easy to forget that isn't it - and it seems likely that these Colossian Christians were in danger of forgetting it too, of – do you remember – being deceived by fine sounding arguments. There seems to have been a kind of dissatisfaction among them. It's good to be a Christian, but is it enough? Is Christianity really all I need? Is Christ really all I need?

And Paul's answer is yes! Did you notice that little picture of the church that Paul used in v18 – he said **he is the head of the body**, That's what it means to be a member of the church: it's to be connected to Jesus in such an intimate way that we can be described as part of Jesus body. So if you're a Christian you are in relationship with, you are intimately bound to someone who is just awesomely incredibly majestic, someone in fact who is the ruler of the universe. And if you move on from Christianity what are you going to move on to. There's no where else to go, there's no one else to go to – anything else would be a step down.

Let's press the point home by looking at the next few verses.

For a start there's no surer security than Jesus Christ, 18

We saw last week in vv12-13 that God **has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves**. But do you see – now we know just what kind of king this Son Jesus is. You couldn't find a more powerful king. He made everything – and that means everything: look back at v16 again ¹⁶ **For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers**

or authorities. There isn't a power or force in the universe which is beyond his control.

Even death, death which eventually overpowers everybody, even death has been overpowered by Christ. V18 - **he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.** He's supreme even over death. His resurrection from death proves it. And when here Paul uses that word firstborn again it's the same idea as in v15 – Jesus rules over death. But not just that because Paul also adds the word 'beginning' **he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead** He's not only mastered death, he is just the beginning, the first among many to follow in his wake. To know Christ is to know the only one who can take your hand and guide you to and through your death -

And there may be some here this morning who are consciously facing death, through illness, through old age. Well just as you received Jesus Christ as Lord – continue with him – because there is no surer security than him – he will hold on to you and guide you through it.

But then here's another reason why it would be madness to move on from Christ – because there's no truer experience of God, 19

Our society's a bit like the Colossian society: it's a plural society. In other words if you were to go out into Sevenoaks and ask someone what their experience of God is they would say one thing. And then if you asked somebody else they'd say another thing. That's just the way our society is.

But it's not just that society is plural. It's that the majority of people in society are pluralists. In other words they believe that it is arrogant for one religion to stand up and say this is the truth – all other religious experiences are wrong. No no that is a dreadful thing to say.

Someone is much more likely to say to say, ‘Look I’m glad you’re a Christian. It really sounds like you enjoy it. And your church sounds supportive and a really good place to meet people. In fact I came to one of the carol services over Christmas; it was really good. But I get the same kind of support from my meditation class, or from my sports team...’

Christianity is one valid option among many valid options – that’s popular pluralism – that’s what most people believe isn’t it?

But look what Paul says about Jesus, v19: **19 For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him.**

- ⌚ Yes Jesus was a man
- ⌚ Yes he lived and breathed and died a man
- ⌚ But he was unlike any other man - **19 For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him.**

Fully man – yes – and yet fully God too. No wonder Paul described him in v15 as **the image of the invisible God**. Jesus is the place God has chosen to reveal himself.

- ⌚ So if you want to know what God’s like, then you need to look at Jesus.
- ⌚ If you want to know what God thinks, then you need to listen to Jesus.
- ⌚ If you want to experience God – then you need to experience Jesus.
- ⌚ And if you don’t know Jesus, then you don’t know God.

19 For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him,
There’s no truer experience of God to be had: Jesus is the way, the only way, to know him.

Now we just need to think because it may be that as Christians some of us have lapsed into being what you might call practical

pluralists. In theory we say Jesus is our king, but in practice we've become pygmy Christians, because we believe in a pygmy Christ. In other words we're embarrassed by such scandalous claims, and in practice we prefer to live in a world where our faith is a private thing. Let me read part of a letter to a parish magazine in a different church which I came across:

Dear editor, I feel very strongly with the members of the PCC who find evangelism unattractive to English people. I would never dream of imposing my beliefs on anyone else just because I feel I have found the right way for me. Surely it is up to each of us to work out our own particular path.

Now I'm sure that there are some people here today who'd agree with that. But what she's saying when she writes that letter is this: 'I am a pluralist. I do not believe that Paul was right; or that the New Testament is right in what it claims about Jesus Christ.' But she's wrong – So if you've received Jesus Christ as Lord – continue with him – because actually there's no truer experience of God than through Jesus, and every other way is mistake or a lie.

And then here's a final reason why we ought to remain with Jesus.

Because there's No other peace with God, except through him.
v20

So what we've been saying so far is that through Jesus it's possible to know God. And actually Paul is going further than that because he's saying through Jesus it's possible to know God *and survive the experience*.

Because of course as sinful human beings our relationship with God is in tatters.

- ⌚ Jesus is the ruler of everything – yet we've resisted his loving rule
- ⌚ Jesus is the maker of everything – yet we've taken all his goodness for granted

- Ⓟ Jesus is the goal of everything – yet we don't live him – we've lived for ourselves
- Ⓟ Jesus is the sustainer of everything – yet we carry on as if we don't need him.

And in that state to meet God would be the most dreadful experience. We've become God's enemies. Imagine that enemies of an Almighty, All powerful God.

And yet look what Paul says – vv 19 and 20: ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fulness dwell in him, ²⁰ 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.

Do you see the point? God himself has taken the step to restore our relationship.

- Ⓟ It was mind blowing step – he became a man to do it.
- Ⓟ It was a costly step too – he died to do it.

But the point is that Jesus is the way to make peace with God - *God was pleased...through him to reconcile to himself all things*, All things he says *whether things on earth or things in heaven* – in other words

- Ⓟ it doesn't matter who you are Jesus is the only way to make your peace with God
- Ⓟ and it doesn't matter what religion you are – your religion actually won't help you a jot when front up to God – Jesus is the only way to make your peace
- Ⓟ And in fact it doesn't matter what you've done – you might feel unforgivable. From other people perspective you might be unforgivable – but here's the truth – through Jesus you can make your peace with God.

Of course it doesn't happen automatically. When Paul says that God has reconciled all things to himself through Jesus – we know that we still need to accept the amnesty and grasp the hand of peace. And in fact we also know that many won't. But that kind of reluctance is tragedy because God has made provision through

Christ for all things to be reconciled to him, **by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.**

So if then if you've received Jesus Christ as your lord – continue with him – there's no other peace with God except through him.

Let's just finish by looking at chapter 2 again:

- ⌚ Verse 4 – What's Paul's concern for the Colossians? **I tell you this so that no-one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.**
- ⌚ And if we keep in mind that the ruler of the universe is the ruler of the church. Then we won't be deceived. Church is the right place to be.

So then, v6, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him. That's Paul's command, let's ask God to help us as we seek to obey it.