

THE CHRIST-HYMN

Proverbs 8. 1, 22-31

Colossians 1. 15-20

John 1. 1-14

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

I wonder if you have ever heard the story of the old farmer who went to the city one weekend and attended a big city church. He came home and his wife asked him how it was. ‘Well’, said the farmer, ‘it was good. They did something different, however. They sang praise choruses instead of hymns.’

‘Praise choruses?’ asked the wife. ‘What are those?’

‘Oh, they’re okay. They’re sort of like hymns, only different’, said the farmer.

‘Well, what’s the difference?’ asked the wife.

The farmer said, ‘Well it’s like this ... If I were to say to you, “Martha, the cows are in the corn”, well that would be a hymn. If, on the other hand, I were to say to you, “Martha, Martha, Martha, Oh, Martha, Martha, Martha, the cows, the big cows, the brown cows, the black cows, the white cows, the black and white cows, the cows, cows, cows are in the corn, are in the corn, are in the corn, in the corn, corn, corn, corrrrrnnn,” and then, if I were to repeat the whole thing two or three times, well that would be a praise chorus.’

The passage that we heard read from St Paul’s epistle to the Colossians is a very remarkable text, one that has received more attention than any other passage in the letter. Scholars have come to believe that these verses actually constitute a hymn,

which is written in the form of poetry. The hymn existed long before the epistle to the Colossians was written; in its initial form, it was part of the Jewish Wisdom tradition. And it is thought that Paul simply inserted the hymn into his letter, making a few editorial changes to the text.¹

Why would Paul insert this hymn at the beginning of his epistle, I wonder? It is generally accepted that he did so in order to set the stage for, and even reinforce the major arguments that he wanted to present in the letter. The principal themes of the epistle to the Colossians are announced via this hymn.

The poem that constitutes this hymn actually has a pattern. There are three stanzas, if you like: verses 15 and 16 are the first stanza; verse 17 and the first part of verse 18 are the second stanza; and the remaining verses of our passage make up the third stanza.

Not only does the poem have a pattern; it also has a theme. It is actually a poem that was based on the different meanings of the Hebrew word for 'head'. In Hebrew, as in English, one word can carry several different ideas; and the poem cleverly explores and exploits some of them. Listen how it works.

Jesus Christ, says the poem in verses 15 and 18, is the *firstborn*. That is the first meaning of the Hebrew word for 'head', and it appears twice in the text.

The second meaning for the word 'head' is *before all things*; and we find this meaning cited in verse 17. If we wanted to, we could paraphrase this second meaning and render it as '*ahead* of all things' (no pun intended).

¹ The additions are 'the church' (1. 18) and the blood of the cross' (1. 20).

Thirdly, Jesus Christ is also the *head of the body*, which is the church. This third meaning for the word 'head' is given in verse 17.

And finally, the fourth meaning of the word 'head' is *the beginning*. According to verse 18, Jesus Christ is 'the beginning, ...so that he might come to have first place in everything'.

As I said just a moment ago, Paul did not insert this beautiful hymn into his letter just to provide some sophisticated kind of literary entertainment. He quotes this poem in order to tell the Colossians something they badly need to know. What is it?

What they needed to know above all, especially if they were to grow as Christians and increase in wisdom, power, patience and thanksgiving, is the *centrality and supremacy of Jesus Christ*. As the members of the church in Colossae got to know, and know about, Jesus Christ, they were able to better understand who the true God is, and what he has done. And they were able to better understand who they were, as a result; and what it means to live in Christ and for him.

It is for this reason that it is worth going slowly through the poem and pondering the depths of meaning that are to be found in it. Christianity is not simply about a particular way of being religious. It isn't a particular system for how to be 'saved' here or hereafter. It isn't simply a different way of holiness. Christianity is about *Jesus Christ*; and this poem, one of the very earliest Christian poems ever written, is as good a place to start exploring Christianity as any. This is what the Colossians needed to know, and today we Christians need to rediscover it.

There are three things in particular which the poem reveals about Jesus Christ and about what God has done in and through him.

Firstly, it is by looking at our Lord that we discover who God is. Jesus is ‘the image of the invisible God’. No-one has seen God, but in Christ he has come near to us and become one of us.

If someone is sitting in the next room, I cannot see them, because there is a wall that is blocking us. But if there is a mirror out in the hallway, I may be able to look out of my door and see, in the mirror, the mirror-image of the person in the next room. In the same way, our Lord is the mirror-image of the God who is there, but whom we normally cannot see. We may be aware of his presence; and indeed, many religions and many systems of philosophy have admitted that there is ‘something or someone out there’. But with Jesus, we find ourselves looking at the true God himself.

Secondly, Christ holds together the old world and the new, creation and new creation. The ‘salvation’ or ‘redemption’ that is offered by Christianity is sometimes described as if it meant that the ‘old world’ (the ordinary world of creation in which we all live) is worthless, or even evil.

According to this poem, our Lord is the one through whom and for whom the whole creation was made in the first place. The natural world, and all that lives within it, was Jesus’s idea and his workmanship. Our world is beautiful, because Christ made it so. The next time the lavish and generous beauty of the world makes you catch your breath, remember that it is like that because of our Lord.

Yes, the world is also full of ugliness and evil, that is true. But that was not the original intention, and the living God has now acted to heal the world of the wickedness and corruption which have so radically infected it. And he has done this through the *same one* through whom it was made in the first place. The Jesus through whom the world was made in the first place is the same Jesus through whom the

world has now been redeemed. He is the firstborn of all creation, *and* the firstborn from the dead.

Thirdly, Christ is the blueprint for the genuine human-ness that is offered through the gospel. Our Lord is the head of the body, the church; he is the first to rise again from the dead; he is the one by whose death God has dealt with our sin and brought us peace and reconciliation; and above all, he is the one through whom the *new creation* has now begun. In all these ways, Jesus is himself the one ‘in whom’ we are called to discover what true human-ness means. Many of us have often settled for second best in our human lives; and Christ summons us today to experience the genuine article.

In the days and weeks to come, I hope that you and I will be moved to reflect upon this poem again, and to meditate on it more deeply. As we do so, our hearts will surely be lifted; and we shall want more than ever to live in praise of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.