

**CREATION, CRISIS AND CONSERVATION CONFERENCE
AUCKLAND – FEBRUARY 2005**

**“First place in everything”
Christ and the Cosmos
(Colossians 1:15-23)**

Stephen W. Pattemore
United Bible Societies

Intro

*Mount Corcovado rises a sheer 2400 ft over Rio de Janeiro, and on Mount Corcovado, stands *Christ the Redeemer, a 100 foot statue *dwarfing the visitors at its base. *It took 5 years to build, almost two years spent on the *head and face, and is covered with soapstone mosaic. *Christ’s arms are portrayed stretched out, in a figure that both recalls his crucifixion (yes, the nail-prints are there in his hands) and symbolizes his protection and blessing over the thriving metropolis.* The views of the city are staggering.

*Now statues of Christ don’t often move me. But this one is quite amazing. *It is beautiful and dignified. Its size and location combine to give a sense of the *stature and immensity of his person. And the symbolism of its form and setting appropriately declare the redeeming work of Christ* – for the millions in the slums and the palaces at the foot of the mountain and for what remains of the natural world around them.

*But this stupendous figure is insignificant, less than a speck of dust, a frozen, earth-bound, speechless, sightless pebble, in comparison with the person it represents. In size and beauty and strength and grace and mercy and love and sacrifice and life Jesus exceeds everybody and everything there is in the entire universe. And if Colossians chapter 1 is the Mt. Corcovado of the New Testament, then the Christ portrayed to us in these word sculptures is himself yet more wonderful than the finest human words can tell.

Background

Lets take a moment to set this passage in its social and biblical contexts:

The church in Colossae was founded at a time when Paul was busy in Ephesus and people took the gospel message out from there to many nearby cities. Colossae was one of these, a church which had grown out of a significant period of growth in the Christian movement in west Asia minor..

But it was a church under threat from false teaching which combined adherence to Jewish legalism with a twisted dualism. Spirit is good and matter is evil. God is spirit and God is good, so God can’t be directly involved in creating this evil universe. So – on the one hand you have the fullness of God, and on the other you have lots of emanations – a hierarchy of divine and semi-divine beings. And one of these lesser demi-urges is responsible for making the universe with all its problems. Jesus? He’s up there, certainly, but not unique or even necessarily at the top of the heap.

Now all this may sound very remote and irrelevant to us here today. But is it? I suspect that our modern Christianity is tainted with more than a little of the Colossians problem. Particularly in our understanding (or lack of it) of the creation and Jesus humanity. Don't we have a basic preference for spirit over matter? A concern for "souls" rather than bodies? A picture of heaven as a rather airy, transparent, insubstantial place in the sky? (And we are quite good at legalism too.) So perhaps we should listen to Paul quite carefully after all.

Secondly, let's note the setting of our text in the book itself. The whole passage is part of Paul's prayer for the Colossians, a prayer which winds up asking that they will spend their lives in thankfulness to God. And the grounds for that thankfulness is God's action in adopting us, and rescuing us, and transferring us into the kingdom of his Son. And what is that son like? Well, let me tell you.....
So this whole passage is wrapped up the clause about thankfulness.

Now let's look in a bit more detail at what this passage has to say

Christ and God

First of all, it teaches us something about Christ's relationship with God.

He is the "Image of the invisible God"

The word for image is εἰκὼν from which we get "icon" – an image or resemblance of something else. Something that gives form and shape to a resemblance.

We know a little bit about icons don't we?

*We have them on our desktops.

Little symbols that stand for something else, that point to something much bigger and more impressive. Touch the icon and you touch all the power of Microsoft word!

*Coming a bit closer to the context we may know of the religious pictures used in the worship of the Orthodox church. *These are not idols. Orthodox Christians describe them as "windows into heaven", physical pictures which point to the reality of the saints whom we can't see, "windows into eternity", or as the 7th Ecumenical Council in Nicea in 787 declared held in Nicea in 787 proclaimed:

"Icons are in colors what the Scripture
are in words: witnesses to the Incarnation,
the fact that God has come among us
as a person whom we can see, touch
and hear, to offer us the new life
and begin the new creation."

Now what does John say?

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (John 1:18)

So Jesus is a living breathing icon of the invisible God, making God present to us, making God visible, allowing us to see what God is like in every detail. Now this is a staggering claim. That the carpenter from Nazareth is the image of God. Touch Jesus and you touch the power of God.

In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell

In case any of this makes people think Jesus is somehow less than fully God, Paul drives his point home. No he's not somewhere in the middle of a descending hierarchy of spiritual beings. He is all that God is. He is the "place" in whom God in all his fullness was pleased to take up his residence. All the attributes and activities of God—his spirit, word, wisdom and glory—are perfectly displayed in Christ (Bruce, 2007). This is no temporary indwelling as the verb with its present tense at chapter 2:9 makes plain: "in him all the fullness of deity dwells (κατοικε□) bodily."

Christ and the Cosmos – Past and Present

But let's back up a bit to that previous phrase, because we haven't really exhausted it yet:

Image of the invisible God

Where have you heard of someone being "made in the image of God"?

Yes, it was our earliest ancestors, the first human beings.

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, ^d and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them; ^f
male and female he created them.

Now two things need to be said – firstly this image of God in humanity has been distorted by sin. We no longer perfectly reflect the nature and the person of God. But secondly, nowhere does it ever say that humans are no longer the image of God. Every human being walking (or not walking) on this planet, rich or poor, famous or unknown, good or evil, is made in the image of God.

And it is God's purpose to renew and perfect that image in us by the increasing transformation of the people of Christ into that same image by the power of the indwelling Spirit

2 Cor 3:18;

¹⁸ And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

Col 3:10;

¹⁰ and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.

This phrase is telling us that Jesus is all that we were meant to be, he is the perfect man, the unspoilt, undistorted image of God. It tells us as much about his relationship to creation as it does about his relationship to God– he is one of us.

Firstborn of creation

Prototokos doesn't necessarily imply that in his essential nature he had a beginning, a beginning before anything else. It is frequently used in both biblical and non-biblical literature to stand for the one who holds first place, the one who stands to inherit everything. Once again it ties him very closely to the creation, but places him on the very highest supreme place.

But there's more (vv. 16-17)

He is intimately involved at all levels in the creation of everything that there is. What sort of things? Everything. This phrase "all things" now echoes as a drumbeat down through the passage. Nothing is left out. Everything. All things get it?

Heavenly and earthly – celestial and terrestrial

Galaxies and supernovae and pulsars and stars and planets and grasshoppers and termites and elephants and mosquitos and frogs and kauri trees and paspalum and you and me.

Visible and invisible – material and immaterial.

Matter and music, light and laughter,

Thrones and dominions and principalities and powers

Angels of all ranks and orders, demons and spirits, everything that exercises power in anyway.

He made them all. Nothing is left out.

What does it mean to say that everything there is was created:

In him?

This could mean "by him" but since there is another phrase to do that, it probably means "in intimate relationship with him"

He is the ground of their being, the source of their life and their very existence, nothing was created outside of relationship to him.

Through him?

He is the agent, the mastercraftsman, the one who God Almighty used to form everything there is.

For him?

He is the goal and the purpose and the direction that it is all heading. Creation is his delight and his pleasure. It is good (as God so pointedly says in Genesis 1).

Before everything

Not only in time but in precedence.

In him all things hold together

His relationship with creation is not limited to its beginnings. Everything there is, derives its existence and its stability and its being every minute from him. He continues to be intimately involved in it, its integration point.

Do you see how Paul is countering the false teachings of the gnostics? On two fronts: If the Colossian heresy required Paul to emphasize the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ, it equally required Paul to underline the essential goodness of creation as God's handiwork, and its part in God's eternal purposes, and God's intimate involvement with his creation..

Christ and the Church

There is one part of creation which stands in a special relationship to God and to Christ. That is his church.

Part of created and fallen world but the firstfruits of Christ's reconciling work.

Christ's relationship is quite special here.

He is the head of the body, the church.

How closely connected is your head with your body?

the beginning, the firstborn from the dead

This assumes of course that he died. That he experienced those most dreadful of consequences of our sin – not just physical death but spiritual alienation from God. But he arose.

He is the first member of the new order of creation – resurrected, renewed, conquering death. His resurrection is the promise of resurrection for us, and for the whole of creation.

That in everything he might be preeminent.

Christ and Cosmos - future

We have already looked at v.19, but what is the purpose of the fullness of godhead dwelling in Christ? Look at v.20

Through him to reconcile ALL THINGS to himself, things in heaven and things on earth, making peace by the blood of his cross.

Although Paul is very strong that all things owe their existence to Christ and to God, he is also clear that everything is not as it should be. There has been an estrangement. Not only the human race, but the whole of creation is out of synch as a result of sin. And through Christ's death on the cross, God has set about putting everything right again. Yes you heard correctly – EVERYTHING. Paul is not about to let us miss this point.

How much of the universe is God responsible for as Creator?

Just that much of the universe is in his plan of redemption and reconciliation and renewal. No more, **NO LESS.**

Paul goes on to talk about the specifics of Christ's redemption and reconciliation of the Colossian Christians. But finally, what is the message of hope to which we as reconciled people must hold to: the gospel, the good news, which is being preached *to every creature under heaven* or "in the whole of creation under the heavens". We might be tempted to think Paul is exaggerating just a little. And perhaps he is exaggerating the breadth of his own ministry. And surely the gospel relates only to people? But in the light of this whole passage we cannot allow this restriction. It is only fitting that our gratitude to God for all that he has done in creation and in redemption should find its outworking in our carrying that good news to the whole of creation, being agents of his plan of cosmic renewal and reconciliation.

Summary

God has from the beginning been intimately involved with his world. But in Christ, he has immersed himself in it, he has identified with it in an irreversible way. At the right hand of God stands a man, the man Christ Jesus. Never will God disassociate

himself with his creation. That's the promise. Christ's death on the cross is the means by which the whole creation is to be renewed and reconciled to God. And just as Christ is raised to glory, the firstborn, the one who is the unspoil image of the invisible God; then it is the turn of God's children, those who bear the image but in whom that image is blurred and unfocussed by sin, to be re-created, renewed, re-fashioned after the image of their creator, from one degree of glory to another; and then it is the turn of the rest of creation, which is currently waiting and groaning in anticipation. There's good news now, as people in whom the image of God is being renewed go about God's work in caring for and restoring the world. But there is coming a day when the whole created order will be renewed, will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the glorious freedom of the children of God. That new heaven and new earth is both distinct and continuous from the one we live in, in just the same way that Jesus resurrection body was both distinct and yet continuous with the body that suffered such violence. Yes creation is under seige, yes we are both a part of this groaning threatened creation, and also the cause of much of creation's grief because of our failure to fulfil our very first commission on this earth – to tend the garden. But the death and the resurrection of Jesus changes everything. It is good news for us and for all of humanity and it is good news for the kakapo and Maui's dolphin and *ascarina lucida* and hochsteders frog and the ozone layer and the clean water sources and the problems of global warming and of nuclear waste and for the whole of creation.

What should our response be to this?

As reconciled people, we need to take seriously the many dimensions and implications of this reconciliation, purchased by Christ's death.

If God through Christ and the Spirit, is responsible for the creation of the whole of the universe, and for the redemption and reconciliation of the whole of the universe, not in some distant way, waving a wand to make everything alright, but becoming a part of it, a part of us, in order to make this costly reconciliation

Then - how we relate to creation matters

It matters how we relate to the physical world. It matters that we should care for it, that we should not trash it or exploit it, or treat it as a disposable temporary shell. We are not destined to escape it, God's eternal purpose is for us to live in a renewed universe.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians, that in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, and has entrusted his message of reconciliation to us. And here we read that that reconciliation reaches to every part of the created universe. We, then are ambassador's for Christ, in our sharing of the gospel message with human beings, in our actions which demonstrate God's love and God's justice, and in our active extension of God's peace to the created world around us.