

Colossians 1:15-20
Colossians 2:6-10

July 28, 2019

Who is Jesus?

Last Sunday, Wendy McCormick led us through a portion of John's Gospel that revealed a Jesus who was not only a prophet and miracle worker, but also someone who referred to himself as "I Am," the mysterious name for God that was first revealed to Moses in the Old Testament. Wendy observed that Jesus' miracles and his testimony about himself often caused his disciples to ask "Who is this Jesus?" Today I would like to pursue that question further by taking a look both at how the early Church and St. Paul answered it. I hope that we can gain additional insight into what is known as the Incarnation as well as draw some practical applications from Paul's letter to the Colossians.

First, let us pray:

Father in heaven, we pray that you would inspire us by your Holy Spirit so that we can come to a greater understanding of the nature of our Savior, Jesus Christ, and of the tremendous idea of the Incarnation—that in Jesus, you entered human history to save us. Amen

A short time ago we recited the Nicene Creed. In this creed, Christ is affirmed as being "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things are made." Later on, we also recited about the Son of God: "Who for us, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Ghost and the Virgin Mary." We tend to recite these words as a matter of course, perhaps hardly thinking about what they mean, but this definition of who Jesus is was very difficult for the early Church to first articulate. In fact, it took over 300 years before the Church at the Council of Nicaea was able to agree on the formula that became the Nicene Creed. Some 300 bishops comprised the Council, which was overseen by Emperor Constantine. He wanted to establish consistent doctrines within the Church, and he insisted the Church come to an agreement on this issue.

The Council, however, was divided. Many of the bishops argued that if there are two beings, Christ and God the Father, who are equally divine, it would amount to polytheism because there would be two gods. Therefore,

they concluded, Christ could not be God, but must be a created, lesser being. On the other hand, many bishops argued that, although the Bible does not explain how, it states in many ways and places that the Father and Son are one—that the Son is of the same essence as the Father. The debate was intense and often acrimonious. Bishops even excommunicated one another and drove each other from office. Suffice it to say that the dispute finally ended in AD 325 in the affirmations of the Nicene Creed, which state that Jesus is not a created being but is, as the creed says, “God from God” and “one substance with the Father,” while at the same time having become “incarnate” as a human being.

If we were to include the further debate over the status of the Holy Spirit, we would have an even more problematic doctrine to account for, which is how all three persons of the Trinity can be conceived of without falling into polytheism. That debate was not settled until AD 381 at the Council of Constantinople, when it was affirmed that the Holy Spirit is to be “worshiped and glorified together with the Father and the Son.” Today, however, we’ll concentrate just on the relationship of Father to Son.

All of this relates to today’s lectionary readings from Colossians because the apostle Paul was facing a similar situation when he wrote this letter about AD 63. He was, at the time, in prison in Rome, and, according to Church tradition, he would soon be martyred there. Apparently Paul had never visited Colossae, but he had lived in the city of Ephesus for several years. While there, it appears that a man named Epaphras, who most commentators believe had been converted by Paul, traveled to three smaller cities not too far from Ephesus —Colossae, Laodicea, and Hieropolis—and founded churches there. Years later, Epaphras met with Paul while Paul was a prisoner in Rome and reported to him the state of affairs in those churches. They apparently were doing well, except that in Colossae some ideas were being taught that Epaphras was concerned about. Paul, in turn, was sufficiently alarmed by Epaphras’s report that he decided to write to a church he had never visited, and whose members he didn’t know.

The ideas that Paul was concerned about were related to an early form of Gnosticism. According to Gnosticism, the universe is made up of a hierarchy of spiritual and material forms that radiate out from God. The spiritual realm is most like God and therefore pure and good. Material things are most unlike God and therefore impure and bad. Anyone who wishes for salvation has to disassociate themselves from material things, including their own bodies, so that they can attain the realm of pure spirit. This putting off the body and

material desires can only be achieved through learning special, sometimes secret, knowledge about how to climb the ladder of spirituality and attain unity with God.

For Paul, these ideas were dangerous to the Church. The Gnostics implied that only a few so-called enlightened persons could be saved, whereas Christianity taught that salvation was available to everyone. They also implied that a truly spiritual person would have nothing to do with the material world or the flesh. This meant that Jesus, for example, could not have become a human being because he would have been too pure to be identified with a material body. On the other hand, the Gnostics also saw Jesus as just one of many spiritual beings flowing out from ultimate source of being. He was, perhaps, the being closest to God, but he was nevertheless a creature rather than the Creator.

So, in his letter to the Colossians, Paul tries to counter these Gnostic ideas. He writes:

Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Here Paul declares that Jesus himself created the spiritual realms, along with any rulers or powers there might be and, perhaps most importantly, that **“in Him [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.”**

Most of the believers in Colossae were former Gentiles, but we also know from historical records that there was a large contingency of Jews that had been resettled there from Palestine. Within this group, a kind of Jewish Gnosticism had developed in which some of the Gnostic doctrines I have described were blended with Jewish teachings about hierarchies of angels and special feast days and seasons. It was tempting for Christians to adopt some of these teachings, especially since reverence for angels, who were spiritual beings, and pious practices of observing special feast days and seasons

seemed to be especially spiritual. Unfortunately, this whole approach slipped into a way of life where salvation depended on complicated practices in which angels were worshipped, mystical visions were exalted as indicating spiritual maturity, and the practice of asceticism was required in order to attain to life in the spirit. Instead, Paul admonished the Colossians, believers were not to think that these observances and requirements were necessary for salvation. Rather, he insisted, believing in Jesus is sufficient for the forgiveness of sin and the enjoyment of eternal life in fellowship with God.

But at the same time that Paul wanted to convince the Colossians that Jesus was above all beings, he also wanted to refute the Gnostic notion that Jesus could never have been associated with matter. Emphasizing this point, Paul also writes later in the letter that **“In Him [Jesus], the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,”** leaving no question as to whether Jesus had a material body.

It was important to Paul that the Colossians understood these two complementary ideas about who Jesus is: One, that Jesus was fully divine (therefore one with the Father) and secondly that Jesus had come in the flesh as a human being (therefore one with humankind). Why? Because only a true human being could represent other human beings as what Paul calls in his letter to the Romans the “new Adam.” Jesus, he writes in Romans, was the new or second Adam who was completely obedient to God and therefore could suffer and die as representative of his fellow humans. But secondly, only God—not any created being—could truly reconcile himself with sinners and grant forgiveness of sins. That was why Jesus, besides being human, also had to be deity.

Paul suggested to the Colossians that they could learn some important lessons from these ideas, and I think we can as well.

First, we can be assured of the forgiveness of our sins, not because of our own spiritual attainments, but because, as Paul writes, **“God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins”** and **“You who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he [Jesus] has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him.”** Paul is saying that Jesus has done everything necessary to reconcile us to God; we need not do anything to add to his work in salvation. For the Colossians, that meant that they did not have to be afraid of whether they were spiritual

enough or rigorous enough in certain disciplines and observances to be saved. For us, too, it means that because of what Christ has done we can approach God directly and be accepted by him. As it is written in Hebrews, **“For we do not have a high priest [Jesus], who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”**

Secondly, we can be confident that all of us, from the least to the greatest, can come to fullness and maturity of faith simply by putting our trust in Christ. There are no spiritual elites who, by virtue of secret knowledge or special practices, have greater access to the knowledge and wisdom of God than the simple follower of Jesus. Paul writes about the Colossians, **“I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”**

Thirdly, we can rejoice in the mystery of our death and resurrection in Christ, which gives us the promise of forgiveness and of future glory. Paul writes to the Colossians, **“when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands.”** Therefore, Paul states, **“you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.”** This means that we are free from what Paul calls “elemental” practices or extra, human-made, rules and regulations supposedly necessary to salvation. Paul writes, **“These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.”** Instead, he says, **“seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.”**

All these benefits are ours because, as Paul writes in Romans, **“God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.”** But what does Paul mean when he writes that “God was in Christ”? This brings us back to the question facing the bishops at the Council of Nicaea, namely, who is Jesus? In fact, the Church is in crisis again over this very question. In what has been called the “new

quest for the historical Jesus,” theologians debate whether Jesus should be considered divine. Some argue that Jesus himself never claimed to be God. Some speculate that Jesus was merely an itinerant peasant teacher or a mystic or perhaps even a member of the Zealots, who were trying to undermine and overthrow their Roman occupiers. In any case, they contend, Jesus was only human. He probably died on a cross, but there was no resurrection from the dead. Recently, several influential books aimed at the popular audience have been published on the subject, and some of this theological perspective has percolated into the pews, especially in the mainstream denominations.

Somewhere along the line, each of us must make a choice. As N.T. Wright, a leading contemporary scholar of the New Testament puts it, “[The Incarnation] is either the most devastating disclosure of the deepest reality of the world, or it is a sham, a nonsense, a bit of deceitful playacting.”

If you believe the words of the Nicene Creed, you believe that Jesus was truly God as well as truly human. And if, indeed, the Incarnation is true, many life-changing revelations follow. For example,

1. We know that God exists because He became incarnate and revealed himself to humankind.
2. We know that there is meaning to life because there exists a God who purposefully created the universe.
3. We know that God is loving and forgiving because he gave himself up for us in Christ, reconciling us to himself.
4. We know that because God loves and forgives us, we can love and forgive one another.
5. We know that we can live together in community because the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—lives in eternal community and loving harmony.

Perhaps that last revelation—that we can live together in true community and harmony—is most important to us now as a congregation while we take the next steps in our life together. As Paul writes in the third chapter of Colossians, **“As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule**

in your hearts, to which indeed we were called in the one body. And be thankful.”

Amen.

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