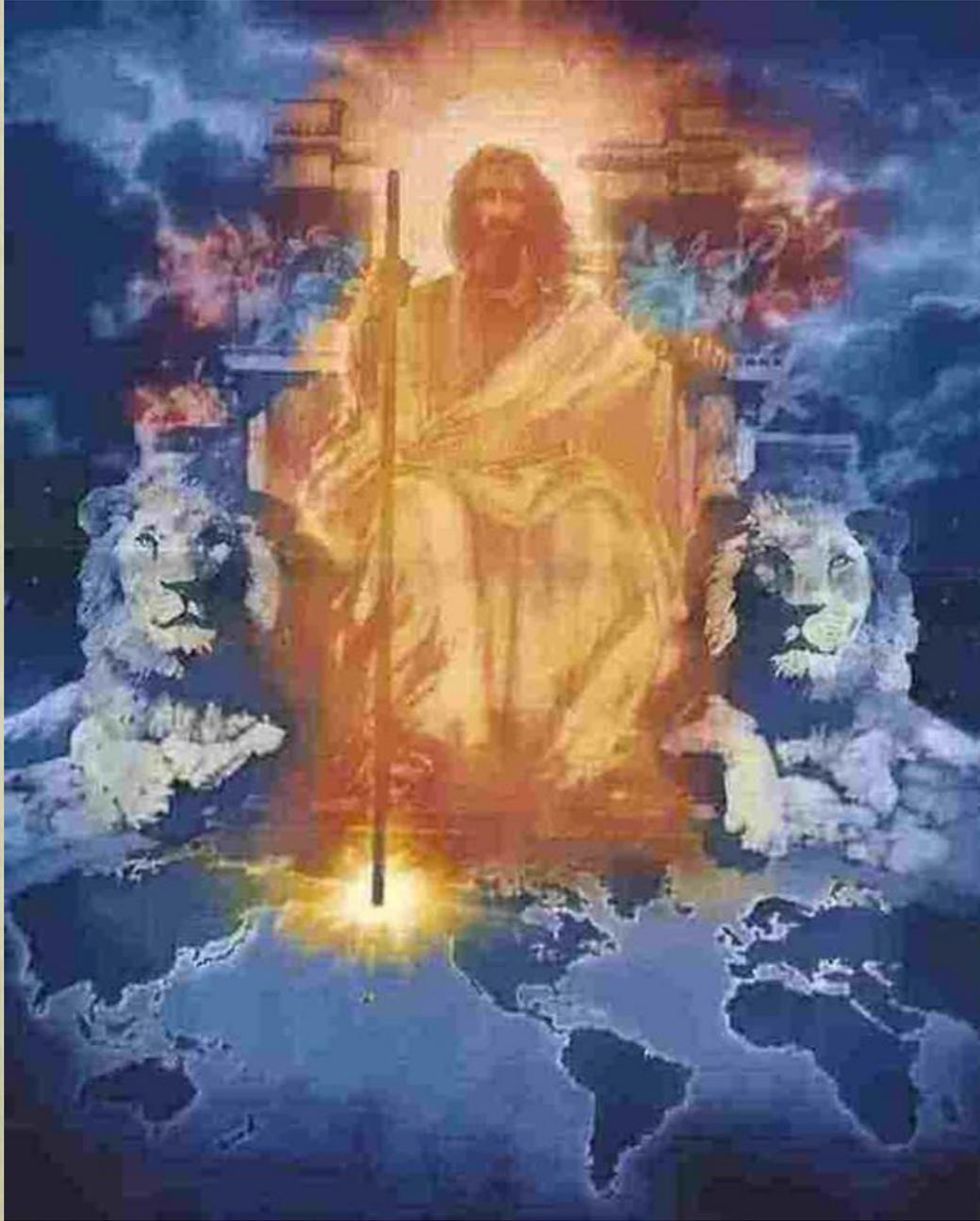


04. Colossians 1:15-24



“The humanity of Jesus did not disappear at the Resurrection. It was glorified. And that glorification touches every molecule of matter in the universe modelling its destiny and luring it forward.”

Sandra Schneiders – *Religious Life in a Post Modern Context.*

Colossians 1:15-17

[Stanza 1 - God's Beloved Son and Creation]

God's Beloved Son is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;

for in him were created all things
in heaven and on earth,
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.

The hymn makes two basic assertions concerning God's beloved Son. The first is that 'he is the image of the invisible God'. The second is that he is 'the firstborn of all creation'. The rest of the stanza draws out the implications of these two affirmations. Greek philosophers spoke of the cosmos, and especially of mankind, as being the image of the unseen God. The Genesis account of creation tells us that 'God created humankind in his image' (Genesis 1:27). By contrast, the focus of our hymn is on Jesus, and not on his being the image of God *along with* creation or with humankind. He stands out in contrast with the whole of the cosmos, with special accent on the invisible angelic world. He is the image of God and everything else is created 'in him', 'through him' and 'for him'. He is the one in whom 'all things hold together'.

If we want to find literature that points in the direction of our hymn, we must look, not to the philosophers or to the Book of Genesis, but rather to the personification of Wisdom as, for example, in the following texts:

‘Wisdom is a breath of the power of God,
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;
Wisdom is a reflection of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
and an image of God’s goodness’ (Wisdom 7:25-26).

‘The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.

Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth ...
then I was beside him, like a master worker;
and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always’

(Proverbs 8:22-23, 30).

‘Wisdom was created before all other things,
and prudent understanding from eternity’ (Sirach 1:4).

‘Before the ages, in the beginning, God created me,
and for all the ages I shall not cease to be’ (Sirach 24:9).

With you is Wisdom, who knows your works
and was present when you made the world’ (Wisdom 9:9).

The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;
by understanding he established the heavens’ (Proverbs 3:19).

‘If riches are a desirable possession in life,
what is richer than Wisdom, the active cause of all things?
And if understanding is effective,
who more than Wisdom is fashioner of what exists?’ (Wisdom 8:5-6).

The hymn goes on to draw out the implications of the unique position of the Risen Jesus. All things were created ‘in him’, and ‘in him all things hold together’. Just as wisdom was poured out on all God’s works (Sirach 1:9), and just as ‘by the word of the Most High all things hold together’ (Sirach 43:26; see Wisdom 1:7), so the life and glory of the exalted Jesus is poured out through his Spirit renewing creation. ‘A new creation is everything’ (Galatians 6:15). ‘If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away’ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The Spirit of the Risen Jesus fills all creation and binds everything together. It is here that the hymn echoes Stoic imagery. They thought of the divine as a living fire, immanent in the cosmos, and they identified the divine with ‘Nature’, for which, through which and in which everything exists. While the conceptual content of the hymn is very different from this, the language is similar.

In saying that all things were created ‘**for him**’, the hymn is pointing to Jesus as the goal of creation, the one towards whom everything is directed.

In saying that all things were created ‘**through him**’, it is speaking of his mediatory role. As Paul wrote elsewhere: ‘for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus the Messiah, **through whom are all things and through whom we exist**’ (1 Corinthians 8:6).

The language of hymns is the language of the heart. It resists the limits imposed by prose definitions. We could suggest that one aspect of the mediatory role in creation is that the exalted Jesus existed in the mind of God as the one in whom creation would reach its perfection. As an architect's plan exists before the building is begun, so the exalted Jesus can be said to be 'before all things'. However, the 'before' in this context, speaks of an ontological rather than a temporal priority, for there is no time in God and to introduce temporal imagery into the divine can lead only to confusion.

The Stoics thought of the whole cosmos as a 'body'. The religion that was in danger of seducing the Christians in Colossae seems to have thought of super-terrestrial spirits as the head of this body, powerfully coordinating and organising the cosmos. They also thought that the fullness which is the divinity could permeate humans only if they experienced visions and shared in the worship offered to God by the angels. To achieve this perfection we must follow certain ascetic practices.

Against all such thinking, the hymn fixes our eyes on Jesus. Whatever powers, whether terrestrial or super-terrestrial, exercise influence over our lives, they are all subject to him.

‘Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died ... Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power’ (1 Corinthians 15:20, 24).

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Romans 8:38-39).

Colossians 1:15-17

[Stanza 1 - God's Beloved Son and Creation]

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all things have been created through him and for him.

He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.

As the second stanza goes on to affirm, it is through our communion in the love which the Risen Jesus is offering in the community of the church that we experience the fullness of divine life, and the peace that comes with this divine communion.

Colossians 1:18-20

[Stanza 2 - God's Beloved Son and Redemption]

God's Beloved Son 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 God was pleased for all the fullness to dwell in him,
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.

After singing of the unique role of Jesus in creation, we are invited now to sing of his role in the community of love in which the new creation is being realised. This is not the first time that the church has been called a 'body'; it is, however, the first time that Jesus has been described as its 'head'.

In earlier texts the focus was on our communion with Jesus as members of his body, and on our consequent communion with each other:

'The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the **body** of the Messiah? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread' (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

‘Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with the Messiah. For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one **body** ... and we were all made to drink of one Spirit ... You are the **body** of the Messiah and individually members of it’ (1 Corinthians 12:12-13,27).

‘As in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one **body** in the Messiah, and individually we are members one of another’ (Romans 12:4-5).

Here, in keeping with the focus of the hymn, our attention stays on Jesus. It is Jesus (and not any other power) who is the **head** (κεφαλή) of this body. In other words, it is he who is the **source** of the church's life, and it is he alone who is guiding and directing it. It is he who is the 'beginning' (ἀρχή), the first to be raised from the dead. From him, and from him alone, comes the fullness of the new life that is offered to all. The hymn reaches its most lyrical heights in verse nineteen: **'for God was pleased for all the fullness to dwell in him'**.

At Jesus' baptism, we are told that a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased' (Luke 3:22). Here we sing of how it pleased God to raise Jesus from death into his eternal embrace, to fill him with divine glory, and through him, to pour out the fullness of this glory - the fullness of loving communion - upon the church.

It is by living in him – by belonging to his body the church (not to some esoteric cult) – that we participate in the fullness of divinity which he embodies: ‘For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified’ (Romans 8:29-30).

The first stanza was all-embracing. We sang of ‘**all creation**’, and the expression ‘**all things**’ occurs three times in verses sixteen and seventeen. Now as the hymn reaches its climax we dare to sing that God was pleased: ‘**through him to reconcile to himself all things**’.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes: ‘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 ... For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Corinthians 3:18 and 4:6).

Contemplating the fullness of God's radiant glory on the face of Jesus, we are astonished at God's love and at what it pleases God to do in creation through the mediation of his Beloved Son. How can anyone resist such love? How can anyone seek fulfilment in any other way? We dare to hope that this broken, sin-prone, world will be reconciled to God. We dare to express in song our hope that everyone, indeed, the whole universe, will know the peace that comes only through communion with God in Jesus.

It is a Christian hymn, grounded in the real world and grounded in the real history of Jesus. Paul chooses to quote it because it beautifully expresses his central insights. It is typical of Paul that it comes to its conclusion in a contemplation of the self-giving, love-giving, life-giving act of Jesus on Calvary. It is in contemplating Jesus on the cross that we see the glory of God revealed. It is in the love poured out there that we see what it means to be created in God's image, and it is from the pierced heart of Jesus on the cross that the church is born and that God's love radiates out for the healing and life of the world.



Colossians 1:18-20

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he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,
so that he might come to have first place in everything.

For God was pleased for all the fullness to dwell in him,
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.

Colossians 1:21-23

3. (3:1 - 4:1)

You, who were once estranged and hostile in mind,
doing evil deeds,
Jesus has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death,
so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable
before him —

2. (2:6-23)

provided that you continue securely established
and steadfast in the faith,
without shifting from the hope
promised by the gospel that you heard,
which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven.

1 (1:24 - 2:5)

I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel.

With these three verses, Paul concludes his introduction and announces the three main sections of his letter. Verses twenty-one and twenty-two prepare us for the final section on the holiness of believers (3:1 - 4:1). By choosing the verb which is translated here as **'estranged'**, Paul goes to the heart of their previous situation: they were worshipping strange gods. This statement implies that the Christian community is, on the whole, made up of Gentiles. The result of their being at enmity with God is that their deeds were evil, living as they were under **'the power of darkness'** (1:13).

In Romans 1:19-32 Paul gives an extended treatment of the same theme. He will go into greater detail later when he lists **'the ways you once followed'** (see 3:5-9).

Paul's focus is on the change that has happened in their lives: they have now been **reconciled**. Paul continues to keep our attention fixed on Christ through whom God has brought about the reconciliation. It is this change in their condition that Paul spoke of earlier: **'He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son'** (1:13).

We are reconciled **‘in his fleshly body through death’** – in the words of the hymn: **‘through the blood of his cross’** (1:20).

We are reminded of Paul’s words to the Romans: ‘while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son’ (Romans 5:10).

The goal of the reconciliation is that Christ may save us from condemnation when we ‘stand before the judgment seat of God’ (Romans 14:10):

‘that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus the Messiah’ (1 Corinthians 1:8).

To this end, we are called to be **‘holy, blameless, and irreproachable’** now.

In verse twenty-three, Paul warns the Colossians of the danger of their falling away from grace (compare Galatians 5:4; 1Corinthians 11:27-32), and being unfaithful to the gospel, which, with poetic licence, he declares to have been ‘**proclaimed to every creature under heaven**’ (see 1:6). He is preparing us for the middle section on fidelity to the gospel (Colossians 2:6-23).

It is of this gospel that Paul became a servant (διάκονος), and it is to the central content of the gospel that Paul now turns (1:24 - 2:5).

Colossians 1:24

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake,
and I am completing what is lacking in my flesh
of the afflictions of the Messiah,
for the sake of his body, that is, the church.

With this statement Paul begins the first section of the main body of his letter (1:24 - 2:5). He speaks of his sufferings and his striving in order to accentuate the importance which the proclamation of the gospel has for him, and he asserts that it is 'for your sake'. He will go on to say that God gave him his commission 'for you' (1:25): a commission to proclaim 'the Messiah in you' (1:27). He is struggling 'for you' (2:1).

Everything in this letter insists on the perfection of Christ and of what Jesus has done to reconcile everything to God. Paul is not adding anything to the sufferings which Jesus has undergone, as though these were imperfect. What is not yet complete are the sufferings which Paul has yet to undergo. He is not speaking of any kind of suffering, but on what he calls ‘**the afflictions of the Messiah**’: the tribulations, persecution and suffering that he is experiencing because of his communion with Jesus, and because of his fidelity to the commission given him by Jesus.

Paul sees his suffering as a privilege. He rejoices in the knowledge that he is walking the way of the cross. Through the special grace he has received of sharing in Jesus' Spirit, Paul, like Jesus, is giving himself in love for those to whom he has been sent. He rejoices to be able to contribute to the building up of the church, the community of those who are united to Jesus as his body, living with his Spirit. We recall his words: 'If we are being afflicted, it is for your consolation and salvation' (2 Corinthians 1:6).

We need to welcome in faith what God is offering us in Jesus. To do this we need to hear the gospel and we need to see it being lived. We need to witness the life-giving of Jesus in the lives of his disciples: ‘How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?’ (Romans 10:14).

What Paul is going through in his imprisonment is a living witness of the self-giving of Jesus. It draws us to wonder and to contemplate in Paul Jesus whose life he is living. Paul's fidelity and love in his sufferings draws us to contemplate the fidelity and love of Jesus. This helps us see the revelation of God powerfully transforming our own lives, enabling us to escape the dominion of sin, and to live a life of faith and love, with a secure hope of salvation. In this way we need each other, and Jesus needs us to minister his life to each other, as Paul offers himself in his sufferings for the Christian community in Colossae.