

07. Colossians 1:25 - 2:15



Cosmic Christology

## Colossians 1:25

I became the servant of Christ's body according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known,

Paul is the servant (διάκονος) of the Messiah for the church, for he has received from God a 'commission' (οἰκονομία) to proclaim the gospel and so build up the church. Once again, we have the language of 'making full' (πληροῶ see 1:9): 'to make the word of God fully known'. Paul is speaking of geographical growth (as in 1:23). He is speaking also of the growth in 'perfection' of all who believe in the one who is proclaimed.

## Colossians 1:26

the word of God, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been shown to his saints.

Paul is speaking of what they have been privileged to come to know because of what they have been shown (φανερῶω) by those who have proclaimed to them the gospel. The pagan cults with which the Colossians have to contend put great store on 'revelation', which, along with 'visions', were special experiences reserved to the initiated few. Paul, on the contrary, is speaking of something which everyone can know who heeds the message proclaimed in the gospel.

The gospel is about Jesus in glory sharing his life with us and inviting us to share in the fullness of love-communion which he has with God. Paul refers to the gospel as a ‘**mystery**’ because what God has done in Jesus and what is being proclaimed in the gospel is something which was previously unknown. In his letter to the Romans he speaks of the gospel as ‘the proclamation of Jesus the Messiah, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages’ (Romans 16:25). Formerly, the Gentiles did not know of such a grace, and the Jews did not expect God to offer salvation to all peoples of the world without their having to live according to the Law.

In other letters, written to mixed communities in which many of the Gentile members have had connections with the synagogue, Paul endeavours to show how the gospel is consistent with God's self-revelation to Israel. It is perhaps because fewer of the Christians of Colossae have had previous connection with Judaism that Paul stresses the aspect of 'mystery'. This may also account for the lack of scriptural argument in this letter.

The 'mystery' is that the Messiah is living in Gentile communities, precisely as Gentiles. It is that 'the Messiah is in you [Gentiles], your hope of glory' (Colossians 1:27).

**‘The Messiah in you, your hope of glory’.** Reading these words we find ourselves at the heart of Paul’s personal religious experience, expressed so beautifully in his letter to the Galatians; ‘It is no longer I who live. It is the Messiah who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me’ (Galatians 2:19-20).

Paul understood that the grace which he had received was one intended for everyone. With Jesus living in us, ‘there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in the Messiah Jesus’ (Galatians 3:28).

Paul saw that it is God’s will to be ‘all in all’ (1 Corinthians 15:28), by uniting everyone to God ‘in the Messiah’.

It is here in this universal ('catholic') vision of God's plan for humankind that we find Paul's master insight and the core of his gospel. In his letters to the Galatians and Romans, Paul moves from this central insight to explain the place of the Jewish law in God's providence, and the communion of love in Jesus that God wills to exist between Jews and Gentiles. It is this same conviction that leads him to defend his mission to the Gentiles against attempts made to confine God's saving action within the boundaries of Judaism. It is this conviction that lies behind the collection which he organised for the poor in Jerusalem, and it is this conviction that leads him to pursue unity in the churches, and to argue the necessity of forgiveness, forbearance and love.

There is only one God. There is only one Spirit. There is only one Lord, Jesus the Messiah. The whole of humanity, indeed the whole of the created universe, is to become what it was always meant to be – a single organism receiving its life from the divine love in the heart of Jesus. It is the Christian who has been shown this and who has been invited to make it known to the whole world by the life of love evident in the Christian community. This divine design is now being realised in the church and through the church is now being revealed to the world, so that all humankind will be drawn by the Spirit of the risen Jesus into his body. We will reflect on this aspect again at the end of this letter.

## Colossians 1:28-29

<sup>28</sup>It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in the Messiah. <sup>29</sup>For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.

The universal dimension of God's saving action in Jesus is summed up in verse twenty-eight. It is Jesus who is being proclaimed, and to 'everyone' (the word occurs three times in the one sentence). The proclamation is not something that is done once and is then considered finished. It is ongoing and involves instruction and moral exhortation. Its goal is to make everyone 'perfect' with the kind of perfection that belongs to God. Jesus summed up his own exhortations with the words; 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48). The perfection of the Father is the perfection of love, and it is to this perfection that we are called.

## Colossians 2:1

I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face.

Paul picks up the point he has just made in the previous verse, and, using an expression that is typical of Paul's style ('I want you to know'), he assures the Colossians that his striving is not just for the churches which he has personally founded, but for those, like Colossae and neighbouring Laodicea, 'who have not seen me face to face'. Paul seems to assume that this letter will be shared with the neighbouring community.

## Colossians 2:2-3

<sup>2</sup>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, the Messiah himself, <sup>3</sup>in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

The word translated 'encouraged' in verse two is the Greek παρακαλεω. It is Jesus himself who is calling them. Paul is in touch with this call and is encouraging the Colossians to attend to the Spirit of Jesus in their hearts, and follow the Spirit's prompting. Paul does not want them to feel alone in their struggles. He also wants their hearts to be brought together in love, for it is love that will sustain them, and it is love that will open them to understanding and insight of what Paul refers to again as a 'mystery': God's mystery, which he clearly identifies here with Jesus.

God's eternal design for humankind which has been revealed and which is to be proclaimed to the world is a 'mystery', not only because it transcends human comprehension, but also because, as we have just observed, it has about it an element of the unexpected. It is not explicitly revealed in the Law or the Prophets, but has been revealed first in the Messiah. In his first letter to the Corinthians the 'mystery' was the fact that God reveals his wisdom and power in the apparent folly and weakness of the cross. Here it is the fact that God's saving action in Jesus is for everyone, and that it reaches out to Gentiles as Gentiles.

## Colossians 2:4

I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments.

The stress on **understanding** (συνέσις), **knowledge** (ἐπίγνωσις and γνῶσις) and **wisdom** (σοφία) is because it is precisely in these areas that the Christians of Colossae are under threat from the errors to which they are being exposed. Those who are enticing the Christians to take up certain practices are using **arguments** that are **plausible** in that they have the appearance of truth, but they are not centred on Jesus in whom are **‘all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge’** (Colossians 2:3). Paul does not want them to be ‘led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to the Messiah’ (2 Corinthians 11:3).

## Colossians 2:5

Though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in the Messiah.

Paul finishes this section where he began, by speaking of his **joy**. We are also given an insight into how Paul sees his letters as a way of reassuring a community that he is present to them in spirit though he is unable to be with them in body.

## Colossians 2:6-7

<sup>6</sup>As you therefore have received the Messiah Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, <sup>7</sup>rooted and built up in him.

Through faith, the Colossians welcomed the gospel, and in so doing they ‘received the Messiah Jesus the Lord’. The word ‘Lord’ picks up the central thrust of the hymn. Paul’s plea is that, having welcomed Jesus, they will continue to live their lives in communion with him and in obedience to his inspiration. They have put down their roots in him and they are drawing their life from the spring of his love-communion with the Father.

Paul changes the metaphor, reminding them that their lives are constructed on the solid foundation of Jesus’ love and of what Jesus offers them through communion in his life. Their ‘foundation is Jesus the Messiah’ (1 Corinthians 3:11).

## Colossians 2:7

and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Once again (see 1:7-8), Paul reminds them of the sound teaching which they have received and invites them to thank God for the way they have been blessed.

If we do not believe the gospel, we will find ourselves putting our faith in things other than the gospel; if we neglect the wisdom of authentic tradition, we will find ourselves prey to all kinds of deceptions.

True wisdom is the fruit of sanctity. It does not contradict reason, but it does go beyond it, opening us to receive the revelation of God. While we grow in discernment, let us never lose the docility of a child who expects to learn from authority.

## Colossians 2:8

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition

Paul has already stated the importance of their remaining ‘**securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard**’ (1:23). He has already indicated his concern ‘**that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments**’ (2:4). Here he issues an explicit warning, pointing out where the danger to their life in the Messiah lies. There are ideas going around which, if they take notice of them, will take away from them everything which they have received: their faith, their freedom, their life in Jesus and the salvation for which they hope.

They must not allow themselves to be captivated by these erroneous ideas which he describes as ‘empty’ in that they lack substance, and as ‘deceitful’ in that they lack ‘the word of the truth’ (1:5). Paul gives no details here of what these empty deceitful ideas are. He says only that they are ‘according to human tradition’: their origin is not in God. Paul is alluding to Isaiah where God complains: ‘These people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote’ (Isaiah 29:13). Jesus, having quoted this text, adds: ‘you abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition’ (Mark 7:8).

## Colossians 2:8

according to the principles of this world, and not according to the Messiah.

These empty and deceitful ideas are based on ‘principles’ (στοιχεῖα) that do not go beyond this present world. Here, as in Galatians 4:3,9 where the same expression (‘principles’) is used, the reference seems to be to the elements of earth, air, fire and water, treated as gods. They are not ‘according to the Messiah’.

## Colossians 2:9-10

<sup>9</sup>For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, <sup>10</sup>and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.

Paul uses the words of the hymn to speak of Jesus: ‘**in him all the fullness of deity dwells bodily**’ (compare 1:19). The present tense indicates that he is speaking of the risen Jesus. The word ‘**bodily**’ (σωματικῶς) could therefore be referring to the ‘spiritual body’ (1 Corinthians 15:44) of the exalted Jesus from whom radiates the fullness of God’s glory. However, the word σωματικῶς was also used to stress what is real rather than what exists only in the realm of thought or imagination. The emphatic ‘**in him**’ is Paul’s way of stressing that we must look to Jesus, and only to him, and that in him we will find all that we need to enjoy the fullness of divine life. ‘**In him**’ they are already experiencing this fullness. They must not allow themselves to be distracted from him or persuaded that they have to go elsewhere to find the life and the security which they are seeking.

He is the head of every ruler and authority.

The words with which Paul concludes verse ten give us an important clue as to the nature of the erroneous teaching that has occasioned this letter. It also explains why Paul chose to begin his letter with a hymn which stresses the supremacy of Jesus in regard to ‘things invisible, whether thrones or dominations or rulers or powers’ (1:16). As will become clearer later, the Colossians were being told that these super-terrestrial beings exercised power in the world. They were being told to be certain of salvation they needed to follow the esoteric rituals of the cult which enabled them to join in the worship being offered by (or perhaps to) the heavenly beings.

For the moment Paul is content to make his main point, which is that if these beings have any power, it is subject to Jesus who is their head: the source of their being and of their power. They are subject to him, so the Colossians have no need to distract themselves from him or to think that they need to perform other rituals or practices to ensure their security.

We are reminded of his words to the Corinthians: ‘Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth – as in fact there are many gods and many lords – yet 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’ (Corinthians 8:5-6).

## Colossians 2:11-13

<sup>11</sup>In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of the Messiah.

<sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses

The languish indicates that Jewish ideas were part of the influence on the Colossians. Through circumcision a person was initiated into the Jewish community which claimed a special belonging to God. Paul is asserting that baptism is a ‘**spiritual circumcision**’, the ‘**circumcision of the Messiah**’, the circumcision that welcomes a person into the communion with God that comes with union with Jesus. In circumcision, flesh was removed. In baptism we cut away all that has its source in our sin-prone nature to ‘**live our lives in him**’ ( 2:6).

We have been ‘buried with him in baptism’. We have also been ‘raised with him’. In earlier letters when Paul speaks of our rising with Jesus, he is referring to the future when, at the coming of Jesus, the dead will be raised to life, and with transformed bodies will enter into eternal life (see 1 Corinthians 15). He will speak in this way also in his letter to the Romans (see Romans 6:1-14; 8). Here, and for the first time, he speaks of our present life in terms of resurrection. He will speak in similar terms to the Romans: ‘We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as the Messiah was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life’ (Romans 6:4).

We are sharing now in the life of the risen Jesus: 'I have been crucified with the Messiah; and it is no longer I who live, but it is the Messiah who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:19-20).

We are already with him who has been raised, sharing in the fullness of divine communion which Jesus, and he alone, has to offer us. We have 'trespassed' (left the right path: παραπτώμα) through our failure to follow God's will, but we have been forgiven through God's grace (χαριζομαι).

## Colossians 2:14

<sup>14</sup>He erased the record that stood against us with its legal decrees. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.

Paul refers to a 'record' (χειρόγραφον). The simplest and most straightforward interpretation is that he is referring to a record of human sin, made, according to Jewish tradition, by recording angels. The record shows that we have sinned and the task of the recording angels is to declare that we are guilty and deserve the stipulated punishment.

It is this that seems to be behind the fears that have been raised among the Colossians who are being persuaded to carry out certain ascetic practices that will wipe the slate clean, and avoid the condemning voices of the super-terrestrial powers whom God has appointed to govern the world. Paul dismisses all such suggestions with the powerful statement that 'he' (the risen Jesus) nailed these records to the cross. They are dead and buried, finished, irrelevant, wiped out by his gracious love.

## Colossians 2:15

<sup>15</sup>He displayed to public view\* the rulers and authorities, and in his triumphant victory procession he showed\* them as they truly are, in him.

Verse fifteen is difficult. A contributing factor is that two of the verbs (marked with a \*) do not occur elsewhere in Paul, and the first of them is found nowhere else in the New Testament. This makes it difficult to determine the nuance intended by Paul.

One thing is clear: Paul is using the image of a triumphal victory procession (compare 2 Corinthians 2:14). Where opinions differ is in the place of the 'rulers and authorities' in this procession. Some see these powers as enemies of Christ whom he has 'disarmed', 'triumphed over', and who are being led in procession as vanquished and so no longer to be feared. Others see them as sharing in the triumph, but clearly under the headship of Christ, the victorious general.

It is Christ who has triumphed. The procession is in his honour and our eyes are to be fixed on him. If the super-terrestrial powers are on the side of God, the procession demonstrates that they are under the command of Jesus. If they are against God, the procession demonstrates that they have been disarmed and conquered. Either way, ‘**he is the head of every ruler and authority**’ (2:10), and he has made ‘**peace through the blood of his cross**’ (1:20).