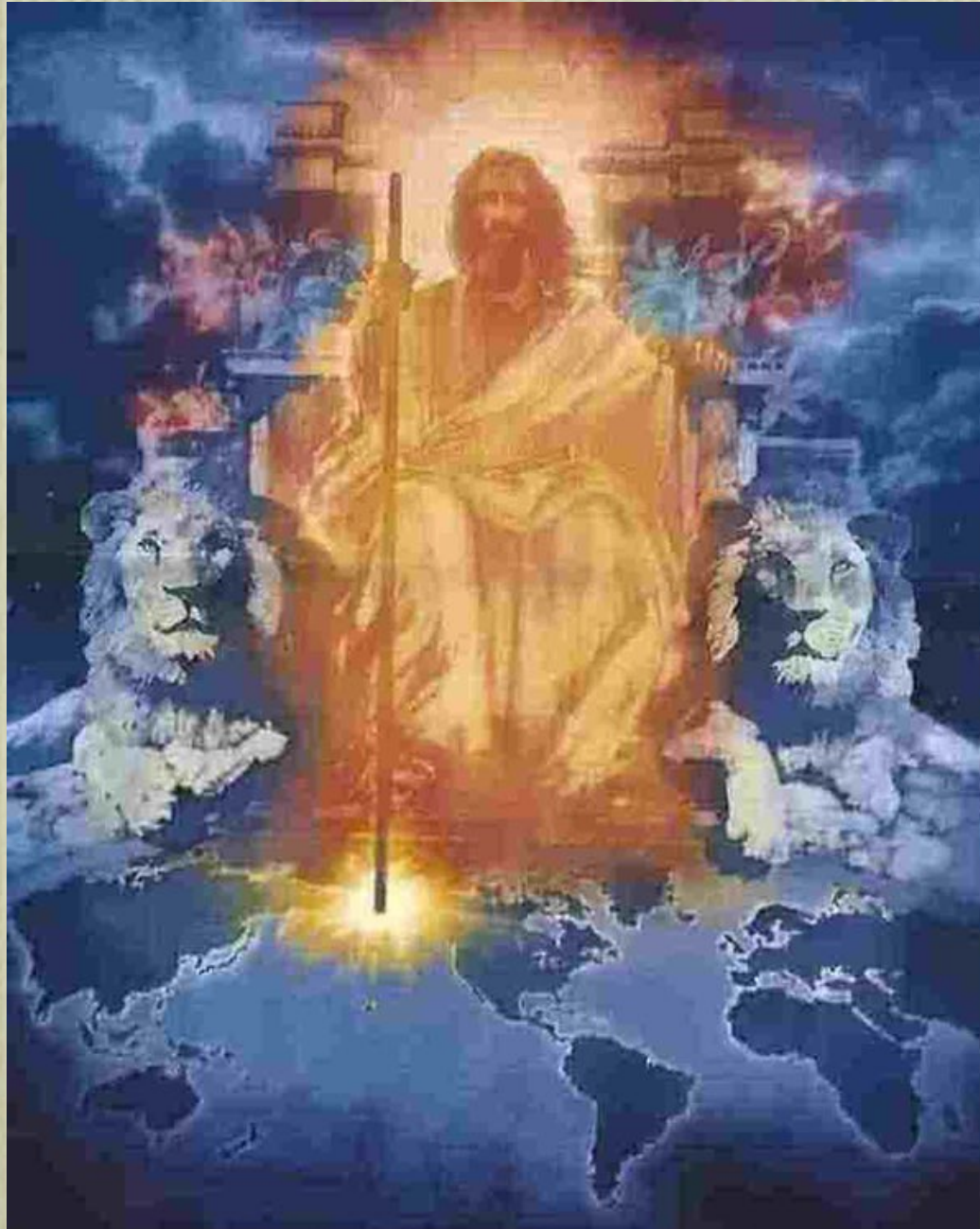


The Resurrected Jesus: Colossians 1:15-20



“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.*

Paul's Letter from Ephesus to Colossae 54AD

Colossians 1:15-20



Colossians 1:15-17

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

- ¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;
¹⁶for 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.
¹⁷He himself is before all things,
and in him all things hold together.

Colossians 1:18-20

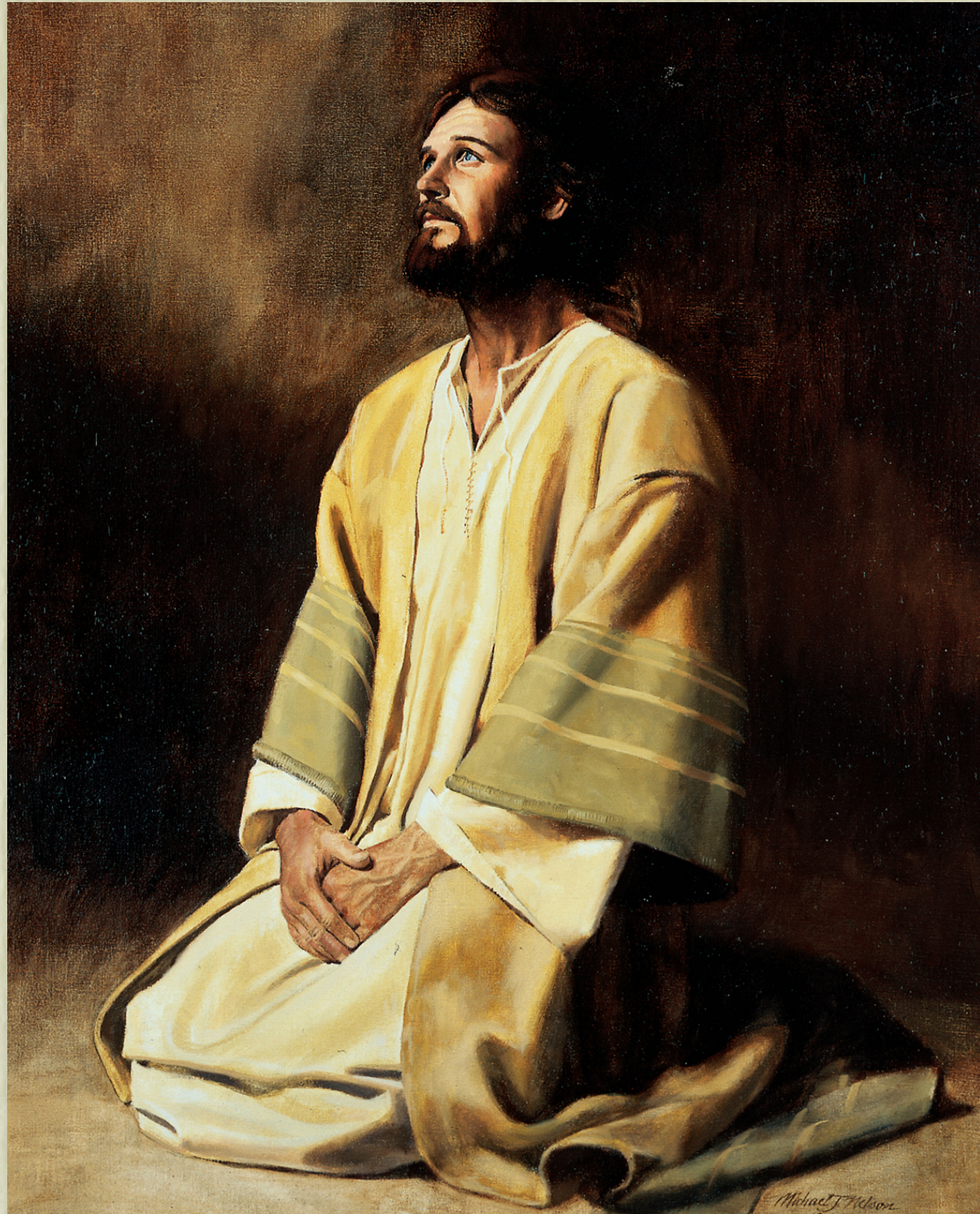
[Stanza 2 - God's Beloved Son and Redemption]

- ¹⁸He 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.
- ¹⁹For God was pleased for all the fullness to dwell in him,
- ²⁰and 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.

Being a hymn, this passage is to be received as one receives poetry. We are not to look for the kind of precision that satisfies the logical mind. It is the language of the heart, which aims to lift us to insights that the inquiring mind cannot fathom. If the poetry is good, the richness of evocative suggestion more than compensates for the lack in logical definition.

The Hebrew scriptures constantly speak of God as Creator and Redeemer. This hymn stands in this tradition, except that the focus is on ‘**God’s Beloved Son**’ (Colossians 1:13).

Through reflection on the unique intimacy that exists between Jesus and God, Christians came to think of the one and only God, not as existing in isolated individuality, but as one because of perfect love-union. While retaining strict monotheism, and while upholding the obvious truth of the distinction between Jesus and the God whom he addressed as 'my Father', they could no longer use the word 'God' without including Jesus whose words, whose actions, whose face and whose heart revealed the true God to them.



It is this insight that finds expression in this hymn, which contrasts God's Beloved Son with all created things and states that '**he is before all things**'. This hymn speaks of Jesus as the manifestation in time of a 'Son' who is eternal, not created.

The hymn is an early example of what Pliny, the governor of Bithynia-Pontus, wrote c.112AD to the Emperor Trajan informing him that Christians sang hymns to Christ 'as to a god' (Epistles 10.96).

We are all the richer for the penetrating insights that have come from the contemplation of Christian theologians whose love and prayer has taken them beyond the paths that we are accustomed to walk. While we learn from them and are grateful for the grace to share their faith and their insights, theological reflection on the divinity of Christ is perhaps best pursued by theologians who are mystics.

It seems to me that the hymn can be appreciated at a level which, if not as profound as that just mentioned, nevertheless draws us close to the heart of Jesus, ‘**God’s Beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins**’ (Colossians 1:14). Leaving the peaks to your own contemplation, I will attempt to describe only the lower slopes of the mountain.

It is a hymn about Jesus, ‘**God’s Beloved Son**’ (Colossians 1:13), of whom Paul wrote: ‘when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman’ (Galatians 4:4). It is a hymn about Jesus ‘the image of God’ (2 Corinthians 4:4), through whom God brought about a new creation: ‘if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!’ (2 Corinthians 5:17). It is a hymn about Jesus through whom God revealed his redeeming love to the whole world, when Jesus gave himself in love even to pouring out his life’s blood on the cross. Through him God chose to draw to himself the whole of creation and all people, ‘reconciling us to himself’ (2 Corinthians 5:18-20); ‘and if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life’ (Romans 5:10).

It is a hymn about the risen, exalted and glorified Christ, the 'first fruits of those who have died' (1 Corinthians 15:20). It celebrates the new creation, the final great eschatological event in which God grants the gift of his life-giving Spirit in its fullness. Paul wants the Colossians to know that the full outpouring of God's grace is not to be found in strange, occult, pagan cults with their esoteric taboos and rituals. God's loving action is for the liberation of all and is to be found in Jesus and in the communion of love that is to be found in the Christian church. As he writes to the Romans: 'The whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now... It will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Romans 8:22 and 21).

The labour pains reached their climax in the death of Jesus on the cross, and found their resolution when God raised his Beloved Son from death to life. Sin has lost its power to deceive, and death has given way to life. This is what God is offering to the whole human race and to the whole of the created universe. It is now possible for peace to reign everywhere. There is no need to fear death. There is no need to fear the effects of sin. There is no need to live in fear of the mysterious cosmic powers that are said to hold sway over people's minds and hearts. Everything that is true (everything that is real) is offered to us in Jesus and can be enjoyed in the divine communion of love that comes through faith in him.

Let us examine the text of the hymn more closely.

Colossians 1:15-17

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

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation;

¹⁶for 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.

¹⁷He 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;
She 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’

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

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

With you is Wisdom, she 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 she 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 his word 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 (see Galatians 6:15; 2 Corinthians 5:17). His Spirit 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 (compare 1Corinthians 15:24; Romans 8:38).

As the second stanza goes on to affirm, it is through our communion in the love which he 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]

- ¹⁸He 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.
- ¹⁹For God was pleased for all the fullness to dwell in him,
- ²⁰and 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 Christ 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 1:15-17

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Christ has no body now but yours



Christ Has No Body Now But Yours

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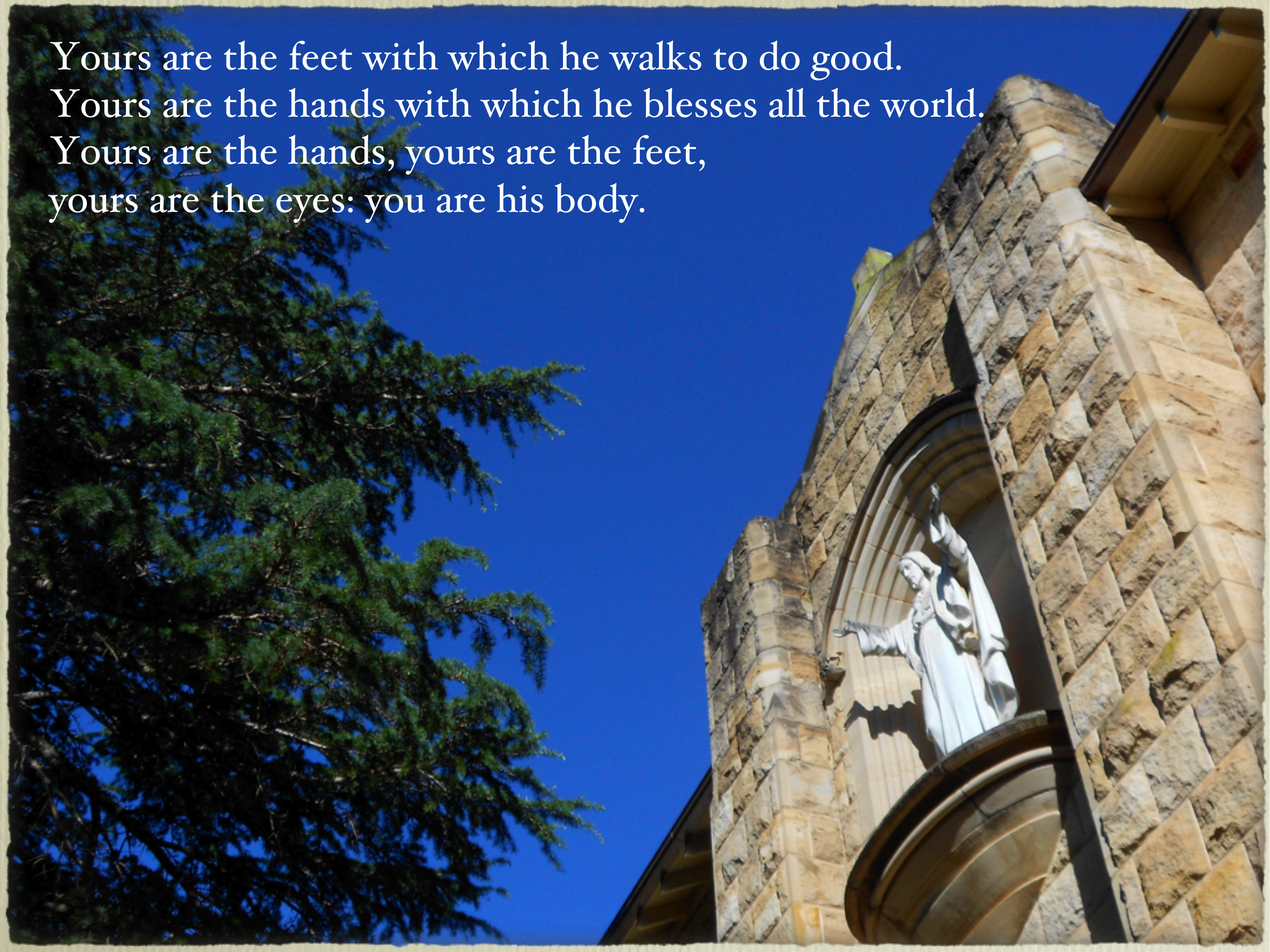
Christ has no body now but yours,
no hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now but yours.

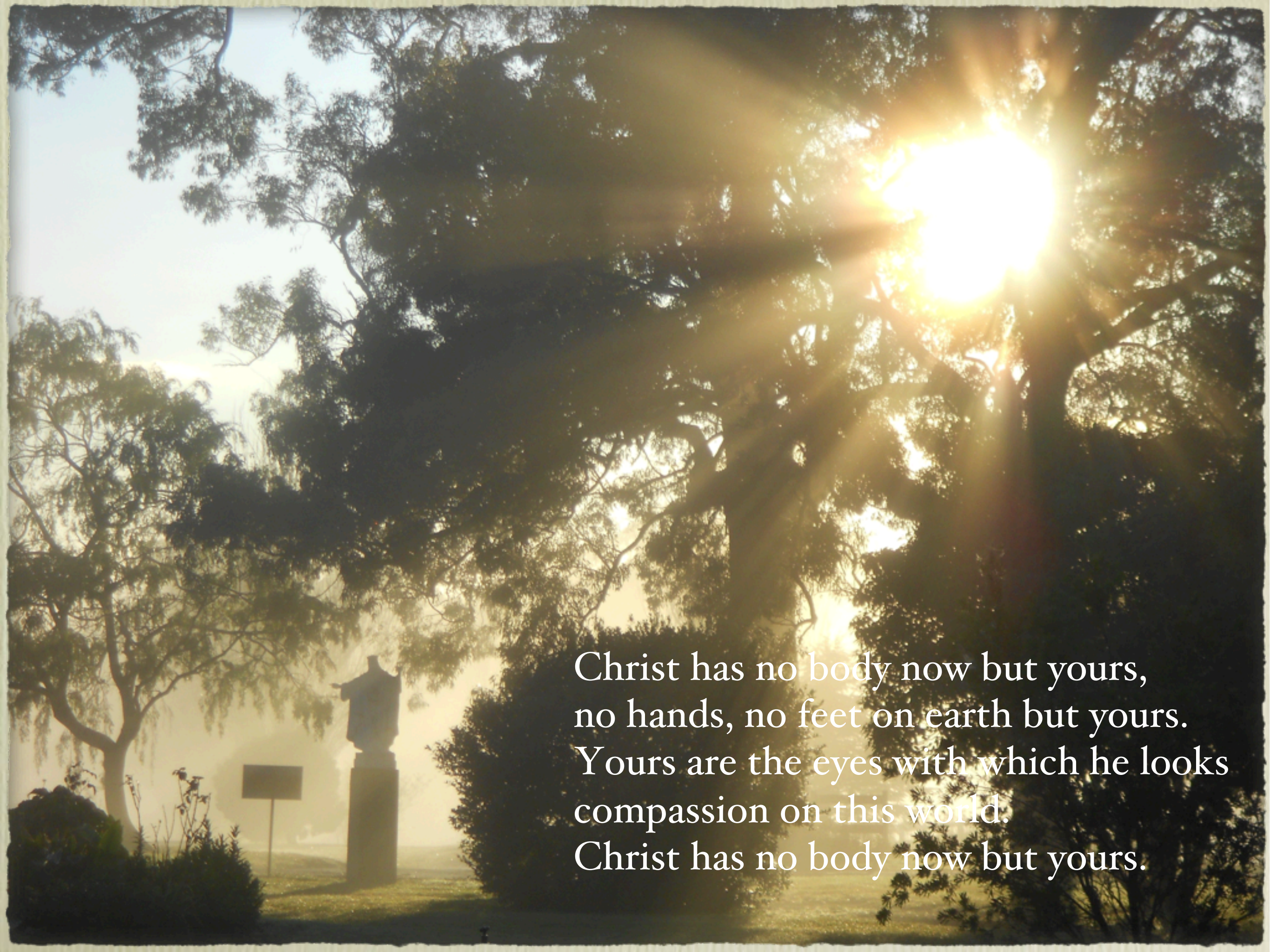


Christ has no body now but yours,
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Christ has no body now but yours.



Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.
Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
yours are the eyes: you are his body.



A photograph of a park scene. In the foreground, a statue of a person stands on a pedestal. The background is filled with large, leafy trees. A bright sun is visible through the branches on the right side, creating a strong lens flare and illuminating the scene. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and serene.

Christ has no body now but yours,
no hands, no feet on earth but yours.
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
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