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Sermon

The Stunning Claims of the New Testament

Colossians 1:15-20

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Last time I spoke some were greatly surprised that I said there is truth in other religions. I was surprised at your surprise! Of course there is truth in other religions. Those of the Abrahamic Faiths (Jews, Moslems and Christians) all believe that there is only one God. C.S. Lewis in his book "The Abolition of Man" gives a list of morals that are shared with many other Faiths. There is truth in other religions.

But when it comes to the Person of Jesus and what happened at Easter the Christian Faith is unique. To use just one example; Jewish people believe that Jesus died but did not rise again. Moslems believe that Jesus rose but did not die. Christians believe He both died and Rose again. Only one of those statements can be correct.

And if we believe that Jesus rose from the dead then the claims that St Paul is making in our reading today are not only startling but also true. Yet they are also deeply offensive in a Society that believes all religions say the same things. The unique statements of other religions are equally offensive. And what our Society wants to do is take all of the distinctives from each of the religions and tell us that this will stop religious debates and even religious wars. What those who hold these views do not see is how deeply offensive they are being to ALL religions.

What St Paul is telling us from today's reading from Colossians cuts to the very heart of our Faith and provides a hammer blow to what our culture tells us is true. There are four things Paul claims for Jesus:

1. Who Jesus is in Himself.
2. Who Jesus is to creation
3. Who Jesus is to the Church
4. Who Jesus is to all things.

1. Who Jesus is in Himself.

Paul says that Jesus is the "image of the invisible God". This means that if we want to know that God is like we can see God in Jesus. One commentator says that Jesus is the mirror image of God. Another says He is more like a photocopy and another a photograph. All are saying the same thing; look at Jesus and you will see God. Paul is not alone in this. St John in his Gospel says that "no one has ever seen God, but God the one and only, who is at the Father's side, has made Him known." (John 1: 18) The writer to the Hebrews says Jesus is, "the

exact representation of God's being." (Hebrews 1: 3) Jesus Himself says, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9). Paul makes this plain when he says: God was pleased to have all His (God's) fullness dwell in Him (Jesus). Verse 19.

No other religion makes these stunning claims. They are unique and they are deeply offensive to people of our culture. That is why it is important for us to see that there is truth in other religions. We are not claiming that we are the only ones who know about God and His ways. But Christians know that God has revealed Himself in Jesus and that any and all truth claims must be tested by whether they line up with Jesus. Do they portray God in the same way as Jesus did in both who Jesus is and what He did? He ALONE is the image of the invisible God.

The same applies to Christians. Some people speak and live in a way that contradicts the nature and character of Jesus. When we do, we betray Him. Hypocrisy is one of the main reasons people reject our Faith. We say God is love and treat people as if they didn't matter. We may not agree, but we still respect the person as one who like us is made in the image of God. Everything we do must line up with the nature and character of God as revealed in Jesus.

2. Jesus in creation.

Again, the claims here are simply ludicrous if they are not the sober truth. The firstborn of all creation does not mean that he was the first created being but rather that he was there before creation began. Paul goes on to say, "For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities: all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hang together." Note the highlighted words. These are amazing claims about a carpenter from a Provincial town in Israel. All creation is held together by Him! Yet that is what St Paul and other New Testament writers say.

3. Who is Jesus to the People of God, the Church?

Jesus is the head of the body, the Church: He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy. Here Paul is telling us that there is One who has preceded us through death to what God has for us on the other side. Jesus was the first to take this journey and we will follow Him eventually. A friend of mine was at the bedside of someone who was dying, and they were a bit scared. They reported seeing light and all that my friend said just before the person died was, "Follow the light." N. T. Wright says that the New Testament doesn't give a lot of detail about life after death. What it does do is give us signposts pointing the way into the mist and the promise that Someone will meet us as we take that journey. One of the most common promises in the Bible is, "I will be with you." Paul tells us that "...nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Not even death. (Romans 8:38,39)

4. Jesus and "all things."

Here Paul is telling us what Jesus achieved on the Cross. God was pleased through Jesus to reconcile to Himself all things." Here we see the salvation that has been offered to us now extends way beyond us to the whole of creation. You will recall that Paul has already told us in Romans 8:21 "that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." Creation as we see and know it is not as God originally intended. The whole of creation says St Paul was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the One who subjected it in hope, that it will one day be liberated. (Romans 8: 20)

Paul is also telling us of the intimate connection between human beings and the creation. What we do does affect the planet and the cosmos. Some of this is now becoming obvious to us. We invent marvellous things like plastic that have revolutionised our lives only to discover that through misuse or overuse we are damaging

the world we live in to use just one example.

What Paul is telling us in this letter is that all of this will be redeemed through Jesus. As St Julian of Norwich said, "All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well."

Each of these four claims are just incredible when applied to the carpenter from Nazareth. Yet there they stand not only in this letter but in many other passages throughout the New Testament. What is your response to them? You may be still on the journey of discovery about Him and this has challenged you to keep exploring. We will be praying for you even though we don't know who you are. Jesus Himself said, "Those who seek will find."

You may have been walking with Him a while and once again have seen the awesome wonder of the One we follow. Make a commitment to renew your love and allegiance to Him. Other religions may well tell us some truth things but be assured that these things are unique to Jesus. There is no one else like Him. There is no other person who can reconcile us to God, ourselves others and the planet on which we live. What is your response to Him today?