

All Things Colossians 1:11-20

Reign of Christ/ 24 November 2019

The Church orders its Sundays and patterns its worship upon the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and reign of Christ. Today marks the culmination of the liturgical year. Next Sunday we begin the annual cycle afresh with Advent. Yes, Advent leads us into Christmas, but Advent also leads us here, to today: the Reign of Christ or Christ the King. This week we lift up a neglected aspect of the Christian life, namely Christ's reign over every aspect of our lives, Christ's reign over the world. It's what we find here in Colossians 1, which lifts up a particular image of Christ and the Church and the world, of the world that is to come, but also the world as it already now is by God's grace. And tucked into Colossians 1, particularly verses 15-20, is an old hymn of the early church, crammed with Christological significance—we could be here all day, all week, indeed, spend a lifetime unpacking what this hymn says about the risen Christ.

Why did God take on flesh in Jesus of Nazareth? Why did God send the son? Why did he suffer and die on a cross? Why was he raised from the dead and elevated up into the heavenly places? Why did God give us the Holy Spirit and then send us out to the world with the gospel? And what is this gospel, this good news? It's beautifully summarized in this hymn in Colossians. Everything leads us *here*, to this text, to this Sunday, to all the claims being made by this day.

The early church sang with joy that Christ was the "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). Christ is the image, the *ikon*, we could even say *symbol* of the invisible God. The author of the hymn, perhaps the apostle Paul or someone influenced by him, understood that an *ikon* or symbol shares in the reality it represents. That's what a symbol does, it participates in the reality toward which it points. A *sign*, by contrast, merely *points* or *refers*, a sign indicates a way or conveys a message (think of a Stop sign). A cross is a symbol, not a sign, because it participates in the reality toward which it points, it shares in the larger reality that stands behind it. Christ as *ikon* makes the invisible visible. God projects through Christ, so that Christ images for us the being of God. Christ is, therefore, a manifestation, an epiphany, of something other, because as *ikon* he participates in a deeper or higher or wider reality and that deeper or higher or wider reality is God. God projects Godself upon Christ. We see *through* Christ and see God. We see *through* Christ and discover God's intention for the world. We see *through* Christ and discover God's plan of redemption and resurrection that pulsates in the heart of all things. We see *through* Christ and discover that God's intention in Christ is, as it was from the beginning of time, to reconcile back to God *all things*.

All things. Ta panta, in Greek. Thirty-four times we find this Greek construct in the New Testament. All things, the *all*—meaning every order of the universe, every level of reality, every principality, power, authority, throne, and dominion. The all, the whole thing matters to God. And in Christ all things hold together (Col 1:17). From the micro to the macro level, the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ was and is about one word: *reconciliation*. To make peace with and among all the principalities and forces and powers of the world, to redeem every

principality and power and throne and dominion, so that everything in creation can finally serve the benevolent intentions of God. Christ's life and ministry and resurrection, together, share in this work and his life and ministry, resurrection and ascension show us that it's God's desire to fill "all things" with God's presence. To dwell among us. To fill every aspect of our lives with God's presence. Christ sums up God's intention for the entire cosmos: to fill all things, so that nothing, no one is left outside the loving arms of God's presence and power. That's also the claim for our lives, right now, because of the redemptive power of the cross and resurrection.

In this light, you can see why the early church affirmed universalism, the belief that everyone and everything in good time will be redeemed and reconciled to God.¹ Universalism is still a contested claim among Christians, although, I think, it's right there in the text. Some can't, won't believe it.

Last Monday, our service learning team left Puerto Rico, but we stayed on in Old San Juan for two extra days. We were in a bookstore and struck up a conversation with someone who was going through a tough time. He asked what brought us to the island. I said I was pastor and told him about our group from Catonsville Presbyterian Church. He really wanted to talk with me. So we sat down. He told me he was having nightmares of going to hell, he believed his sins were great, and even though, as he said, he had been "born again," he was full of fear and very confused. He was even more confused, I think, when I told him that I don't believe in hell, and that there's nothing that can separate us from God's love, that God loves him through and through. I told him that he is worthy of God's love and mercy, despite his sin. I talked about grace and God's generous embrace that reconciles all things. I don't know if he could hear me. We talked about God's compassion. I encouraged him to be compassionate toward himself, to be kind to himself. Then I said, "Give yourself a break." Our conversation was inadequate and I wonder what will come from it. Perhaps he heard a word of hope, perhaps I planted a seed the Holy Spirit will bring to life in him. But he really couldn't wrap his head around the fact that I don't believe in hell. He was so fearful of judgment. I grieved for him, and I pray for him. This young man was in agony. He was bound by a belief system that made it difficult to accept God's mercy.

He's not alone, I'm afraid. Why is it so difficult to see, to hear that God wants to come close to us, to be near us, like Jesus—*Immanuel*, God with us—that God wants to fill our lives with God's presence? This claim run throughout the New Testament, and yet it's easy to miss. It's here in Colossians and Hebrews and throughout Paul's writings. What does Jesus say in Revelation? "See, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:5). In Ephesians 4, we find these words, "...he who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things" (Eph 4:10). Did you hear that? *That he might fill all things*.

I really love the way C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) understood the work of God in Christ. "In the Christian story," he says, "God descends to re-ascend. [God] comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity; down further still, if embryologists are right, to recapitulate in the womb ancient and pre-human phases of life; down to the very roots and seabed of the Nature [God] has created. But [God] goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with [God]. One has the picture of a strong man," he says, "stooping lower and lower to get himself underneath some great complicated burden. He

must stoop in order to lift, he must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders.’²

The masculine imagery might be problematic, but Lewis beautifully articulates the work of Christ. Christ came down and in to every nook and cranny of our lives, “to the very roots and seabed of Nature, . . . to bring the whole ruined world up to God,” so that there’s nothing left in us, in the depths of our psyches, or in our past, or in the world around us to separate us from the presence and love of God. There is no sin, there is no loss, there is no sorrow, there is no pain, there is no tragedy, no abyss or void in human existence left untouched by the power of the cross! Through Christ and in Christ, God confronts the power of sin and death and takes the entire cosmos—*all things*, the *all*—into Godself in order to redeem it. “For in [Christ],” the hymn declares, “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to [Godself] *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:19-20).

To acknowledge the reign of Christ is to claim that there’s no place in the universe untouched by the gracious power of God to redeem and to heal and make whole. This is the greater reality that we participate in through the life of the church. It’s the goal of history. It’s the goal of creation. *This* is the good news.

As Paul said to the church in Rome, “For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be the glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

All thanks and praise and honor and glory be to God, today, tomorrow, and always!

¹ See, for example, David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), a theological *tour-de-force*.

² C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 111.