

All Things

Reign of Christ Sunday

November 26, 2023

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Scripture

Colossians 1:15-20

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, 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. He 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 in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 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.

Sermon

On Wednesday, the nation remembered that tragic day in 1963 when President John F. Kennedy (1917-1963) was fatally shot in Dallas, bringing an end to Camelot. Sixty years. It was another age, another time, another world. Two other significant figures also died that day. One was the humanist, social critic, and pacifist Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), a leading intellectual of his day and author of *Brave New World*, ranked among the top 100 novels of the twentieth century. Written in 1931, *Brave New World* envisioned the world in the year 2540.

The other notable figure who died sixty years ago on November 22 was Clive Staples Lewis—C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), the Oxford don, scholar, medievalist, and author of children's books, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and many volumes of Christian apologetics, such as *The Screwtape Letters*, *God in the Dock*, and perhaps his most famous theological work, *Mere Christianity*. In his memoir *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, Lewis told the story of his conversion from atheism to theism to his eventual trust and faith in Christ, calling himself "the most reluctant convert in all of England."

More people are reading C.S. Lewis today than ever before. Children of all faiths (and none) are still hearing about the adventures of Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy venturing through the magical wardrobe into Narnia, the world of the White Witch, and the powerful, never safe, but always good, Aslan, a character who symbolizes Christ.

What an imagination Lewis had. Lewis is a beautiful example of how imagination, namely a *Christian* imagination, a *baptized* imagination images and envisions the world, figures and

transfigures the world. Lewis created a marvelous world for his characters, for us really, and in doing so, allowed us to reimagine our world and envision what is possible. By offering an alternative world, he transfigured the way we see this world and our lives within it. It's all the more remarkable, given that one time, in a conversation about faith with J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973) over a pint of ale at the Eagle and Child pub in Oxford, Tolkien became increasingly frustrated with Lewis, who was still a non-believer at this point. Tolkien was a devout Roman Catholic. Growing impatient with Lewis, Tolkien said, "Your inability to understand stems from a failure of imagination on your part!" Can you imagine telling C. S. Lewis that he suffers from a failure of imagination?

My mentor at Princeton Seminary, James Loder (1931-2001)—who was an enormous C. S. Lewis fan and sketched images of Aslan for his children—often said that we must distinguish between the *imaginary* and the *imaginative*. Something that is imaginary takes you out of the world, out of reality; it's a flight of fancy, often escapist. There's nothing wrong with this. An imaginative act, however, is an entirely different faculty. My friend Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) understood this distinction and said imagination was the capacity *instar omnium*, meaning, equivalent to all in importance. As a faculty of the self, imagination has the capacity to create, order, and reorder how we see the world. The imaginative act, the imaginative thought, the imaginative word has the power to put you more deeply *into* the world as it truly is, put *into* the same world but now transfigured, put you more deeply into the real and true. [1]

What does this have to do with Colossians 1 or with the Reign of Christ Sunday? A lot. Today is the last Sunday of the liturgical year, patterned after Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Next week is Advent, and we begin the annual cycle afresh. This week, we lift a different, often neglected aspect of the Christian life: Colossians 1 casts a vision of what might be called the Cosmic Christ, the Christ who reigns over our lives as the great reconciler of all things. Colossians 1 paints a picture of Christ, the Church, and the world, of the world that is to come and the world as it *already* is by God's grace. Colossians 1 is crammed with Christological significance—it would take a lifetime to unpack what Paul is claiming here in this text, which was probably written as a hymn to Christ.

The honest question, then, is this: is this text imaginary or imaginative? Is it just wishful thinking, a fancy of what the world might be? Or is it a baptized imaginative rendering of reality rooted in the person and work of Christ, in what he accomplished, in what he continues to offer the world? [2] Colossians casts a vision here for us, and it's up to you and me to decide: imaginary or imaginative?

Paul's answer is clear: it's imaginative. In fact, either Paul or the writer of this hymn wants us to pay attention to the *image* that shapes our *imagination*. For the hymn says Christ was the "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). The Greek here is *ikon*. We could also translate it as "symbol." Christ is the *ikon*, the symbol, the image of the invisible God. It's important to remember that Paul understood an *ikon* or symbol as sharing, that is, participating *in* the reality it represents. That's what a symbol does; it participates in the reality toward which it points. We tend to use "sign" and "symbol" interchangeably, but they're not the same. A sign, by contrast,

merely points, indicating a way or sharing a message (think of a Stop sign). A cross, by contrast, is a symbol, not a sign, because it both points and participates in the reality toward which it points, to what stands behind it. Similarly, Christ as *ikon* or image makes the invisible visible. He shares in the reality of God. Christ as *ikon* participates in a deeper reality, and that deeper reality is God. Christ allows us to see, to image, to reimagine what we see. 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 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 *all things* through Christ and in Christ.

All things...*ta panta*, in Greek. Every order of the universe, every level of reality, every principality, power, authority, throne, and dominion. From the micro to the macro level, the work of Christ on the cross was to reconcile, to make peace with and among all the powers of the world, in order that every principality and power and throne and dominion might yield its authority and serve the benevolent intentions of God. Christ's life, ministry, and resurrection together mark the "beginning" of this work, and his life and ministry, resurrection, and ascension show us that God desires to fill "all things" with Christ's presence. To fill all things. 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*. There is nothing and no one outside the scope of Christ's presence and power. That's the goal. That's also the claim for reality, right now, because of the resurrection.

Now, you might think all this is imaginary theological mumbo-jumbo, a flight of fancy. Perhaps. Or maybe it's a baptized imaginative recasting of the world that the Spirit is right now, crafting for us, so that we can begin to see and feel and know that this new world is both here *and* on the way. This imaginative rendering of reality put Paul and the early church more deeply into the world, freed them to engage with the world, and sent Paul traveling all over his world. They all knew that reality was different because of Christ.

Indeed, reality is never the same when one is in Christ. We come to see that all things are held in Christ. And when we *know* this, *trust* this truth, *fall* into this truth, *relax* into this truth, *indwell* this truth, then everything changes. That's why Christ is the beginning of all things, the *arche* (Col. 1:18), and in him, all things become new.

The presence of Christ transfigured Paul's life. And Paul extends that invitation to us to see our lives and our world from that perspective, to see ourselves as already participating in the power and presence of Christ, to be *en Christos*, in Christ, as Paul loved to say, to exist in Christ. To be *in Christ* means that we live in the reality of the Christ who has *already* reconciled us to God, who has *already* reconciled every wayward power and principality in the universe. Not someday. Not one day. Right now, we are reconciled. We live in a world that is no longer at enmity with God. Right now. In him all things hold together.

Now, you're probably thinking that I'm completely detached from reality, that this is an imaginary flight of fancy. This isn't the way the world is. This is ludicrous. Maybe. Or maybe

this is an imaginative rendering of the world as it is and is becoming. It's a rendering of reality in the light of Christ that helps us to see what the world was created for, through which we understand the meaning of Christ's life, and that helps us to discern the shape, scope, and meaning of our lives. Through this imaginative rendering, we realize that we are not where we will be, and so we begin again the process of waiting and hoping for Christ to be born yet again into our lives, so that our lives and the life of the world might conform to that image, that *ikon*, that vision that we find in Christ.

That's the goal, which is already here and on the way. This is how Paul describes the Christian life because it was what he was allowed to see and available to each of us. The imaginative vision transfigures the here and now; we are on the way to becoming what is already true.

I know it all sounds abstract, mainly since this is not how we ordinarily think about things. Perhaps C.S. Lewis is helpful here. This is what he wants us to imagine, imaginations baptized, to see what Christ has done and is doing in us, through us, for us. Lewis wrote:

"Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what [God] is doing. [God] is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently [God] starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is [God] up to? The explanation is that [God] is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but [God] is building a palace. [God] intends to come and live in it Himself." [3]

Our lives are a *palace*—expansive and large and beautiful. For "Once a King [once a Queen] in Narnia, always a King [always a Queen]." [4] And so the work continues. For truly God intends to come and live in us.

Come, Lord Jesus. Come.

Sources

- [1] James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment* (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989), 24ff. Loder on C.S. Lewis, 131ff. On Loder's use of Kierkegaard see Kenneth E. Kovacs, *The Relational Theology of James E. Loder: Encounter and Conviction* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).
- [2] The notion of the imagination baptized is taken from Lewis in *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1955), 181.
- [3] C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 174. Lewis borrowed this analogy from George MacDonald (1824-1905).
- [4] C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier Books, 1970), 186.