

You will remember last time that Paul opens his letter with his prayer for the Colossians that they may have the right kind of wisdom so that they would produce good deeds – the right kind of deeds – the ones which are according to God's will. He also prayed that they may be strong. And finally he prayed that they may give thanks – why? We actually touched on this earlier in the day – because we are going to share in His glory. It's worded a bit differently here but means the same. And with joy give thanks to the Father, who has made you fit to have your share of what God has reserved for his people in the kingdom of light.

How has God made us fit to share of what God has reserved for his people in the kingdom of light?

He rescued us from the power of darkness and brought us safe into the kingdom of his dear Son, 14 by whom we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven. Sound familiar? It's the ground we covered this morning. But rather than discuss what God has done for us from the perspective of grace as he does in Ephesians (although the idea of grace is here), Paul looks at it from the perspective of Christ. Our salvation is in Christ – we enter His kingdom only because we have been freed from the powers of darkness; our sins have been forgiven.

It focuses on His finished work, not to illustrate grace, but to emphasise the person and authority of Christ. Why was this necessary. From what we can understand from this letter and other parts of the NT, the Colossian church seems to have been under pressure from two sources. Firstly there were Jewish believers (or were they “believers”) who considered that the work of Christ was not fully finished, but that believers had to effectively proselytise into the Jewish law. They were known as Judaizers.

On the other hand, many theologians also think the church had been influenced by Greek philosophy which was later to plague the church as a heresy known as Gnosticism. It was influenced by the Greek philosopher Plato and the idea for Gnostics was that God was far too transcendent – un-knowable (separated from the universe and the human race) to have created such a base thing as the world, so he created a being called the Demiurge who did the creation bit. Gnostics viewed the Son as the highest created being but essentially part of the world (which they viewed as fundamentally evil). Gnosticism is now gone but the remnants of platonic philosophy remains in the view of many that God is somehow transcendent – He can't be reached. It is the basis of an error known as Deism and you'll find a lot of deistic thought hanging around the Christian faith. Paul, needless to say had a quite different view of God and Christ is central to that.

The gnostic view of the world was certainly not the same as the Jewish view of the world which was directly created by God Himself and was created good – because it is the craftsmanship of God. So how does Paul counter these two heresies?

He starts by defining what our Christology should be. Christology? Who is Jesus Christ, the Son of God? What is His role and function in relation to creation and to the church?

Let's start with creation. Here's what the GNB says: Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God. He is the first-born Son, superior to all created things. *16 For through him God created everything in heaven and on earth, the seen and the unseen things, including*

spiritual powers, lords, rulers, and authorities. God created the whole universe through him and for him. 17 Christ existed before all things, and in union with him all things have their proper place.

So who is Jesus, particularly in relation to creation? Everything in verses 16 and 17 must be taken as a whole. This information is given in the round. The reason I say that is because people, including gnostics and also Jews have used phrases from this to prove their case. However the overall picture these sentences present is quite clear regarding the deity and authority of the Son. That said I will deal with them sentence by sentence in the hope that I'll not quote them out of context either.

Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God

NIV – *He is the image of the visible God.* For Gnostics God was transcendent. Even for the Jews, He is invisible and can't be seen or experienced except by special people – prophets and the like. The Son, Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God. He's the God you can see. The Greek word *eikon* here means an image, and is where we get the word icon from. That's a problem. What do we mean by image. An icon is a representation, an image, but it's an inferior representation. Both gnostics and arians (people who deny the deity of Christ) use this to suggest Jesus is just an image of God.

There is another way we use the word image though and the world of computing illustrates it well. Sometimes it's necessary to take images of data from one computer and store it or move it elsewhere. The disk or data images are exact representations of all the data, in every respect, except the medium it's held on may be something different. Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He's the same thing. He is the visible likeness. He's God, but He's in a form we can see and understand – human.

He is the first-born Son, superior to all created things.

NIV - *the first-born over all creation.* One of the most confusing phrases in Colossians and Jews use it to suggest Jesus was created. That's why it needs to be read in the context of the rest. What does the first-born over all creation mean? The GNB gets most of the flavour of it by suggesting that Jesus is superior to all created things – but not created Himself. The NLT is even more explicit: *Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation.*

First-born over all creation isn't about the Son being created but first-born is a term used to describe pre-eminence. The use of the word image in the first sentence indicates that the Son is in essence exactly the same as God. First-born is a picture of authority that Paul expands later. A king gives his son regent powers so he has the same authority as the king: Psalm 89:27 *I will make him my first-born son, the greatest of all kings* (that's a Messianic prophecy incidentally). So first-born doesn't mean created but one who has been given authority over all creation to rule and reign – equal in authority to God the Father.

To make it clear that's absolutely what he means, the subsequent sentence clarifies the statement.

For through him God created everything in heaven and on earth, the seen and the unseen things, including spiritual powers, lords, rulers, and authorities.

Jesus is not a demiurge, a created being. It's the other way around. *For through him God created ..* His authority over creation comes because everything in creation came about

because God created it through Him. It is summed in the next phrase: *God created the whole universe through him and for him.*

For anyone who struggles with the deity of Christ, this is very clear stuff. He wasn't created, He created everything. He's not just our Saviour, our Lord, but He's our Creator. But Paul gives us more.

Christ existed before all things, and in union with him all things have their proper place.

NIV - *Christ existed before all things, and in union with him all things have their proper place.* Message - *He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment.*

Just to complete the picture, and to make it clear that the Son is not created there's this clear statement. He existed before all other things. He wasn't created. He was and is Creator.

I'm preaching to the converted here at MRBC. This serves to tell us what we already know and remind us it's here and in whom we have believed. Actually the second part of this last sentence is one that is also important. NIV *in union with him all things have their proper place.* Message - *holds it all together right up to this moment.*

This passage is one of a few that gives us a much bigger view of the role of God in creation. Much is said these days about the importance of God as creator. There is a considerable amount of literature on Creationsim and the like. But an area where theology is weaker is on the way that creation is sustained. Here we Christ holding all of creation together. Unlike the Greek view of creation where the world is evil and created by the Demiurge, the Christian view is that creation holds together in Christ. It's something that is sustained by God the Son.

In just knowing that, it doesn't just give us a high view of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, but it also makes us realise that Creation isn't just something that's there but something that is sustained by the one who is our Lord and saviour. Therefore we must respect it and use it as something that He has authority and power over.

I'll close by saying this. The whole of the passage here – and we have only done half so far – emphasises that Jesus is the incomparable Christ. He's not a created being or afterthought. He is the visible likeness of the invisible God, all things were created by Him and for Him. He's central to creation because it's His and He sustains it – and we haven't even got to the redeemer but yet. That's How great Jesus is! And it's to Jesus we belong by faith.

We must never lose that centrality to our faith because as soon as we do, we lose the sense of awe knowing that brings. Jesus isn't our cosmic chum, He's the one who made us, sustains our existence – and who has redeemed us. How precious is He?