

## **Firstborn of All Creation**

### **Colossians 1:11-20**

These verses in the letter to the Colossians represent the writer's intercessory prayer for the community and thanksgiving for their redemption in Christ. The writer sings a hymn to declare God's revelation through Christ and assert the reign of Christ throughout the entire world. The hymn is a statement of a view of Christ that emphasizes his divinity. The hymn unfolds in three parts, describing him as one who participates in creation, holds all things together, and reconciles all things in heaven and on earth through his death on the cross. The hymn's inclusion in this letter serves to underscore the sufficiency of Christ over and against all other cosmic powers and warn the community against rival teachings that encouraged religious practices and pieties that competed with the gospel.

This text is especially fittingly assigned to the Sunday of the Christian year known as the Reign of Christ (or Christ the King). On this Sunday, we are reminded that, as Christians, we are subjects of Christ and Christ alone. Christ's power transcends all other powers. Also, salvation in Christ has been achieved for all. This is also the last Sunday of the church year and represents a transition point in the calendar. It is like a new year's eve, a time when Christians look back and reflect on the meanings of the past year and look ahead with hope to the future and its meanings that is yet to be revealed. Reign of Christ Sunday is a transition point in the Christian calendar and also a day on which Jesus Christ is hailed as a king. It is the advent of Jesus' nativity that in one week's time will be on the mind of Christians. So today we celebrate the multiple meanings of Christ's identity: the same Christ who rules over all creation also enters the world as a vulnerable baby.

Christ's reign takes on special meaning when understood within the context of the whole narrative of his birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection. Christ is no

ordinary king. We return to the Colossians hymn where the text yields several clues as to what kind of king he is. First, the text emphasizes Christ's rule over all people and, indeed, even over the nonhuman realm. Normally, a king connotes one who rules only over certain subjects, especially citizens of a geographical or political region. The multiple use of the word "all" reminds us that Christ is ruler and savior not just of some but of all.

Second, Christ is described as "the firstborn of all creation," existent even before humans were created. Actual kings usually ascend to their thrones by genetic inheritance. They are normally descendants of a particular line of people. The reference to being "firstborn" appears twice in our text, underscoring that Christ belongs not to a particular people but rather to all peoples.

Finally, on this subject, Christ's reign is established through crucifixion. The text refers to a reign whose freedom and peace are achieved through the saving power of death on a cross. He does not rule by threat or military domination or acquisition. His authority is not sustained by asking homage from others. He does not subject people to himself. His "kingdom," therefore, stands in stark contrast to other imperial rules. His is an entirely different sort of empire than that of Rome, under whose rule the Colossians lived.

One symbol Christians use to represent our crucified king is the crown of thorns. It is employed in art and literature to depict Christ's redemptive suffering for others. An example is Peter De Vries's 1961 novel *The Blood of the Lamb*. A desolate and desperate character named Don Wanderhope, who had just lost his daughter to cancer, had defaced a statue of Christ by throwing a cake at it. The pastry lands squarely on the face, just below the crown of thorns. But Wanderhope experiences the power of redemption offered in this symbol of sacrifice:

Then through scalded eyes I seemed to see the hands free themselves of the nails and move slowly toward the soiled face. Very slowly, very deliberately, with

infinite patience, the icing was wiped from the eyes and flung away. I could see it fall in clumps to the porch steps. Then the cheeks were wiped down with the same sense of grave and gentle ritual, with all the kind sobriety of one whose voice could be heard saying, 'Suffer the little children to come unto me ... for of such is the kingdom of heaven.'

Like the Colossians hymn, images such as this affirm that in the reign of Christ, God is "pleased to reconcile to [God]self all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (v. 20). **Barbara J. Blodgett**

We must remember that Paul's letters are written to the problems of real churches with real people struggling to understand a faith newly embraced. When confronted with new ideas and new world constructs, the temptation is to take the unfamiliar and fit it into an existing worldview. For many of Paul's fledgling churches, that means fitting Jesus into a Greek understanding of the world which made room for all kinds of ideas, prophets, and gods.

Paul's worldview began with and was shaped by Jesus Christ, "the firstborn of all creation" (v. 15). This is a radical shift that utterly changes the way in which we look at the world. To help his congregation understand just how radical it is, Paul speaks of our being transferred from one kingdom to another. His image conjures up pictures of refugees, rounded up after battle and taken to the victor's land, of Israelites marched far from home to live in Babylon—a kingdom so different, so far from home in both geography and style. Here the rules are different, the ruler is different. All the assumptions about the way in which life goes on—indeed about its very meaning—are different.

Some years ago a young couple in a church adopted children, two and five years old, from Russia. As the congregation watched them come into their midst, the congregation was continually struck by just how greatly the children's lives had changed. It was not simply a matter of moving from institutional living to a

home and a family with people they did not know, or of English words crooned to them at night instead of Russian. Everything was different: the food, the smells, the sounds. They were forced to make an incredible adjustment. Paul says that becoming a Christian is like that. It is not simply a matter of fitting Jesus into our present way of thinking. We are transferred, moved, deported, from one kingdom to another, from one way of living into another. Nothing is as we have known it.

The creedal hymn to which Paul turned speaks to an issue that faced both his pagan world and ours: How do we understand God's role in the creation of the world? Certainly in our own day that question is tearing at communities and school boards, creating anger and division. While there is little similarity between the Greek understanding of creation and that of modern science, the way in which Paul deals with the question is helpful. Rather than becoming bogged down in questions of how; Paul addresses the questions of who and why.

The answer, as with so much of Paul's thinking, lies in Jesus the Christ: "All things have been created through him and for him" (v. 16). It is here, in Jesus, that the means and the meaning of creation are found.

It is also here, in Jesus, that the redemption of creation is possible—a redemption not just for human beings but for all of creation. How does this help us as we struggle to make sense of the complexities of human social constructs—politics, philosophies, family? What does Paul say to the "green" concerns of ecology and diet and fuel consumption? Does that feel like a far reach in thinking? If we do indeed proclaim that Jesus is the way in which God "rescued us from the power of darkness" (v. 13), does he not offer a way out of our human dilemmas?

Does that sound overstated or simplistic? Consider this: Paul says that to follow Jesus is to orient one's life in a new way. Paul's insistence that in Christ all things hold together is another way to say that. Our faith in Christ gives us a worldview that is both large enough and consistent enough to address the myriad questions

and problems that confront human life. To proclaim Christ as King is to acknowledge his lordship over all of life, all of creation. **Neta Pringle**

On Saturday I spoke with a friend who changed churches a few years ago. At her old church there was seldom mention of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. Her new church is Christ-centered and Christ-focused. Paul would agree with her decision to change churches. To be Christian is to be Christ-centered. It is Christ who is the first born of all creation and our king of kings and lord of lords...let him be so in each of our lives.

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).