**Citizenship in Heaven**

**Philippians and Colossians – #22**

**The Letter to the Colossians 1:15-20**

**Christ Rules Over All**

***Colossians 1:15*** *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.*

***16*** *For in him were created all things in the heavens and on the earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities; all things were created through him and for him.*

***17*** *He himself is before all things, and all things hold together in him* ***18*** *and he is the head of the body, the church.*

*He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, in order that he might be in all things preeminent.*

***19*** *For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,*

***20*** *and through him to reconcile all things to him, making peace through the blood of his cross (through him), whether the things on the earth or the things in the heavens.*

**Notes**

1. It is generally agreed among NT scholars that this section of Colossians is a hymn because its poetic form is clear enough. The hymns can be divided into two strophes (1:15 to the first part of 18 // and the last words of 18 to 20). Paul himself became lyrical as the Spirit inspired him to express all that Christians had in Christ (1:13-14) based on what Jesus is in himself.

2. Christ is the Lord of the Cosmos because all things are sustained “in him” (1:17).

3. Christ’s role in creation is not a common theme in contemporary Christianity. His redemptive work takes place in the Cosmos.

4. The first Christians would have composed this hymn not just in honor of Christ’s role in creation (cf. 1 Cor. 8:6), but also to have a hymns that will run parallel to OT Psalms and the confession of faith like the Jewish Shema and its contrast in Hebrews 1:1-4. Now, they have in Christ all that can be given by the Creator-Redeemer.

5. The hymn is not addressed to Christ, but it is praise of Christ. Christ, in, through, and to whom God has accomplished both his creative and his redemptive purposes. This tells us much of the intellectual vitality of the early Christian communities and of their understanding of their faith:

a. Creation and salvation are the work of the same God

b. The Cosmos is not empty. It is full of the dwelling of the Creator-Redeemer. Here we see the earliest attempts to explicate the significance of Christ and to communicate it to a wider audience who live in a Cosmos that has not accepted Christ. Nevertheless Christians now become aware to this new reality.

6. This hymn is one of the earliest Christological confessions that came out of worship.

**Why should this hymn be placed at the beginning of letter?**

1. Paul does tend to cite Christological confessions at the beginnings of some his letters (Rom 1:3-4; Gal 1:3-4; 1 Thes 1:9-10; cf. 1 Cor 1:7-9, 23-24, 30; 2 Cor 1:19-20), but here the confession is extensive. Later in Chapter 2 when Paul addresses the Judaizers, Paul is not just denying their faith and their life but in vv. 2:16ff, he says food and seasons are the work of Christ the Creator. Faith and praxis *[process of a theory becoming practice – ed.]* are not two separate compartments. If the Colossian Christians believed the Christ as the Creator of the Cosmos then there are no rules that could be applied to what is allowed and what is forbidden because is Christ created it all and all were created for Christ, (Col 2:8, 16, 18, 20).

2. The divine status of God’s Son “*who is the image of God*” is used (2 Cor 4:4) who came to save the Cosmos being the Creator “the Image of the invisible God” who created the entire “invisible” and “invisible” creation. There is nothing seen or unseen that does not belong to Christ

3. This word “image” had a range of meaning:

a. It means representation

b. Likeness

“Image” was known in the ancient world and was used by Plato who had used it in the sense that the cosmos is the visible “image” of God (Timeous 92c) and for the sun as the “image” of the “god of the good” (Republic 6.509a).

Man is the “image of God” as in Genesis 1:27-27, and Psalm 8 in the OT man is the “god” of the universe.

4. But in the NT, Christ is the image of the invisible God. Such a term was not used any where out side the NT.

**Wisom Bridges ‘Invisible Gulf’**

In Hellenistic Judaism (Jews who live outside Palestine and speak Greek), “image” was known, as the divine Wisdom is God. This comes in the second collection known to us as the OT Apocrypha (particularly Wisdom 7:26). So also in Philo (*Legum allegorjae* 1:43). The divine Logos in Philo was called the second God of Israel and the Logos is so prominent that he is God (*De confusione linguarum* 97, 147;). The invisible God makes himself visible in and through his wisdom. The importance of this in Hellenistic Judaism was that “image” could thus bridge the otherwise unbridgeable gulf between the invisible world and God on the one side and visible creation and humanity on the other. In Jewish theology Wisdom and Logos (the two are often equivalent) has become the means that leads to the knowledge of God and safeguards the unknowability of God by providing a mode of speaking of the invisible God’s self-revelation and his actions in “image/likeness.” Both words were used as the very stamp of God’s nature (Heb 1:3) so also the Logos in (Jn1: 1) or the One who comes in “the name of the Lord” to reveal God.

**Why Christ was called the Image if the Invisible God?**

Because the Image functions on two levels:

1. The Image can be seen, and here it is seen in the flesh.
2. The Image reveals God but also hides God’s nature or God’s being who is unknown because what God reveals is what God gives in communion.

**Image of God’**

The Fathers of the Church of the 4th and the 5th centuries

Gregory of Nazianzus 4th century

He is called “image” because he is of one substance with the Father; he stems from the Father …, the being and the nature of image or copy of the original and to be named after it. But there is more to it than this. The ordinary image is a motionless copy of a moving being (like the image of a king on a coin). Here we have a living image of a living being, indistinguishable from its original to a higher degree than Seth from Adam and any earthly offspring from its parents. Beings with no complexity to their nature have no points of likeness or unlikeness. They are exact replicas, identical rather than like. *Orations* 30.20

Theodoret of Cyr 5th century

“The term *image* signifies that one living being shares the same substance with another being. However, and by contrast, inanimate images, precisely because they are inanimate and have no soul, do not possess the substance of that of which they are images [i.e., they are mere outward copies].” *Interpretation of the Letter to the Colossians*, 1:15

**The “First Born of all Creation” – A Jehovah’s Witness Trap**

Q – Can the “firstborn” mean “first created” being as JWS say?

A – This is what the Arians of the 4th Century believed and it was revived in our time by the JWS. But we should recognize that what is attributed to the First Born does not belong to a creature who created all visible and invisible. Here the First Born is the First who does not die. He is the First of the New Creation. The Son’s deity becomes more clearly distinct in the words of Colossians 1:16 where “First Born” must denote primacy over creation, and not just within creation. This is indicated by the conjunction linking the two verses: he is “First Born of all creation because in him were created all things. By saying “all things” the First Born can’t be among these things that were created: “all” means everything, the universe, the totality of created entities. Included in the phrase’s meaning is everything within that totality, however it may be subdivided, e.g. both “in the heavens” (1:15) “and on the earth,” ‘the visible and the invisible” (1:15). Likewise in the final clause of the verse, if “everything was created and exists (in the present tense) through him and for him,” which distances the First Born from creation as “creation” means an end.

Athanasius of Alexandria 4th century

Not then because he was from the Father was he called “Firstborn,” but because in him the creation came to be; and as before the creation he was the Son, through whom was the creation, so also before he was called the Firstborn of the whole creation, the Word himself was with God and the Word was God. … If then the Word also were one of the creatures, Scripture would have said of him also that he was Firstborn of other creatures; but in fact, the saints saying that he is “Firstborn of the whole creation” demonstrates that the Son of God is other than the whole creation and not a creature. … He is called “Firstborn among many brothers” because of the relationship of the flesh, and “Firstborn from the dead” because the resurrection of the dead is from him and after him.” *Discourses Against the Arians* 2.63

**Embodied in Christ**

1. The “in him” is the beginning of a sequence of prepositional phrases by means of which the creation of “all things” is described: “in him, through him, to him.” Such use of the prepositions “from,” “by,” “through,” “in,” and “to” or “for” was widespread in talking about God and the cosmos (Rom. 11: 3; 1 Cor. 8:6, as partially also in Heb. 2:10). The same is used here for Christ.

2. Once again, the primacy of Christ leads Christians who sung these verses to what was written in the Psalms such as

- (Ps 104:24): “*you made all things by wisdom and to a very close parallel*”

- (Prov 3:19): “*The Lord by wisdom founded the earth*”

- (Wis 8:5:”wisdom that effects all things”.

Such language meant that Christ was known to his followers during his ministry in Palestine as God’s Revelation in creation. This seems to have been forgotten in the twentieth century.

3. The power of Christ that is revealed in keeping and in maintaining creation and its continuity is the powerful action of God expressed by Divine Wisdom, in and through whom the universe came into being, is now embodied in Christ, and its evidence is now made clear by the light of his cross and resurrection (Col 1:18 20).

**The Significance of Three Prepositions**

What is the significance of the three common prepositions, “Through,” “For” and “To”? In the last line of Colossians verse 1:16, which was not known outside the NT, we face the specific work of divine wisdom because it is used here for the “Image of the Invisible God.”

1. The Hymn uses the present context. All work of creation and redemption is accomplished “in Christ” (1:14). It is the key note of the whole Melody that unlocks the mystery of the divine purpose. “In Christ” creation and redemption are one. In the cross and resurrection (1:18, 20), both past and future find the clue to their ultimate significance and the reason for being created (A. Schweitzer, *Colossians,* page 70-71).

2. Even the “thrones or dominions, and principalities or authorities” all belong to this Person, since they were created by Christ and now all are reconciled “In Him” to the rest of the “visible” world. So the result is that all are now under the One Head. This hierarchy of heavenly powers – of “thrones and lords” – are located in heaven (cf. Dan 7:9; Rev 4:4; though cf. Wis 7:8 and Eph 1:20-21). They, like the “principalities” and “authorities” (Col 2:10 and 15, with 1 Cor 15:24; Eph 1:21; 3:10; 6:12), these creatures are numbered to indicate not only Christ’s supremacy but also the hostile ones among them are subjected to Christ who triumphed over the “principalities and powers” by his death on the cross (Col 2:10, 15). Christians should have no fear but sing this Hymn in Joy for all hostile elements are under the authority of the “Image of the Invisible God”.

**Before All Things**

Verse 1:17 “*He himself is before all things, and all things hold together in him*”

1. The power of the divine belongs to the very Person of Christ. He is eternal because He is “before all things.”
2. More challenging even to us today is to think that all things in the whole Creation Visible and Invisible are kept and preserved by Christ.

**Abba Philemon**

Brother George, beloved of Jesus, our Beloved God,

May the peace of him who has defeated death be in your heart. You asked me if I am or was ever afraid of evil and was troubled by what I hear of the news. I don’t hear any news and I don’t read the newspapers and all I hear comes from our guests who are troubled by what takes place in Egypt, the attack on Churches and persons. I don’t have the right to ask my Savior, “Why do you allow this or that to happen?” But after a vigil I was given a vision that evil has its temporary course and it will run out of power because it has been created, and will be executed by mortal creatures who have no power to make their evil plans run forever. I was astonished at how evil appears under many “masks” but under what the fools among us may imagine as beautiful, there is the ugly face and even death. When we bind our being to a created power, we end where these created powers end, and that is death.

As for your question of the death of good and holy people, I have nothing to say because I am not God. Our Lord and God Jesus Christ allows death, that is physical death, to happen to take our old bodies to its original source that is dust, so that our bodies may rise up on the Day of our Final Deliverance that is the Day of the Resurrection.

I pray that you have a sound faith and that you have not fallen into the pit of popular beliefs of our simple-minded brothers who think that Satan and his demons run wildly and control the world, as if Jesus no longer has authority over them.

Have joy in the Lord Jesus because Jesus is our life. He is our healing because of our sickness, He is our strength because we are weak, He is our light because of the darkness of this life, He is our peace in our troubled world, He is our true health in sickness, He is our food, our love, our rest, our hope, our present, our future and our eternity.

Have your roots in Christ, who became man for your sake so that you may share his life.

This is enough

Philemon / 10June 1967

**Question**

If we are in Christ, and if Christ holds the whole creation, how do you see the cosmos?

Verse 18: “*And he is the head of the body, the church*.”

1. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, in order that he might be in all things preeminent.

2. The Hymn now reaches its end purpose, stating that Christ is the head of the body and this body is the church

3. The name Church appeared first in the Greek OT "ἐκκλησία” ***ekklesia* –** this is from the Greek words ***kaleo***(to call), with the prefix ***ek***(out). This usage of the word "ἐκκλησία” means the assembly of Yahweh, but in the NT clearly in this phrase is where Christ has his place in these cities, such as “the church(es) of God” (1 Cor 1:2; 11:16, 22; 15:9; 1 Thes 2:14), defining each church as an assembly of New Israel. The Incarnation added to this assembly a new name, that is, “the body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:12); and the multiple membership of this one body indicates that “*we the many are one body in Christ*,” (Rom 12:5). This new teaching, the church as the body of Christ, is not known in the OT. This name, the body of Christ, points to the existence in these particular localities where this body is so explicitly described in 1 Corinthians 12:27: “*you are the body of Christ is, in Corinth*.” Here, in Colossians however, “the church” is also in the Cosmos as the place of the Christ from which Christ reveals himself.

**Fullness of God**

Verse 1:19: *“In Him the fullness of God dwells”*

What is this fullness?

Chrysostom: By the term *fullness* some speak of the Godhead, like as John said, “*Of his fullness have we all received*.” That is, whatever was the Son, the whole Son dwelt there, not a sort of energy, but his divine life. *Homilies on Colossians* 3.

Ambrose: With regard to his Godhead, therefore, the Son of God so possesses his own glory that the glory of Father and Son is one: he is not, therefore, inferior in splendor, for the glory is one, nor lower in Godhead, for the fullness of the Godhead is in Christ. *Of the Christian Faith* 2.9.82.

**All Things Reconciled**

Verse 1:20: “*To reconcile to Himself all things”*

Ephrem the Syrian: Thus, as peace began to be [established], the angels proclaimed, “*Glory in the highest and peace on earth*.” When lower beings received [peace] from superior beings, “*they cried, Glory on earth and peace in the heavens*.” At that time when the divinity came down [and] was clothed in humanity, the angels cried, “*Peace on earth.*” And at the time when that humanity ascended in order to be absorbed into the divinity and sit on the right – “Peace in heaven” – the infants were crying forth before him, “*Hosanna in the highest*.” Hence, the apostle Paul also learned that one should say, “*He made peace by the blood of his cross [for] that which is in heaven and on earth.*” *Commentary on the Diatessaron* 14.

Chrysostom: But what are “*things in the heavens*”? … The earth was divided from heaven; the angels had become enemies to men, through seeing the Lord insulted…. What Christ did on the cross was to translate up into heaven sinful humankind still in bondage to the evil one. Thus he, in effect, brought up to the angels the enemy, the hated one. Not only did he make the things on earth to be at peace, but he brought up to them the one who was their enemy and foe. Here was peace profound. Angels again appeared on the earth thereafter, because humankind from its side had appeared in heaven. *Homilies on Colossians* 3.

Basil the Great: For the true peace is above. Yet, as long as we were bound to the flesh, we were yoked to many things which troubled us. Seek, then, after peace, a release from the troubles of this world. Possess a calm mind, a tranquil and unconfused state of soul, which is neither agitated by the passions nor drawn aside by false doctrines that challenge by their persuasiveness to an assent, in order that you may obtain “the peace of God which surpasses all understanding and guards your heart.” He who seeks after peace, seeks Christ, because “*he himself is our peace*,” who has made two men into one new man,117 making peace, and “making peace through the blood of his cross, whether on earth or in the heavens.” *Homilies* 16.10.

Cyril of Jerusalem: The Savior endured all this, “*making peace through the blood of the cross, for all things whether in the heavens or on the earth*.” For we were enemies of God through sin, and God had decreed the death of the sinner. One of two things, therefore, was necessary, either that God, in his truth, should destroy all men, or that in his loving-kindness, he should remit the sentence. But see the wisdom of God; he preserved the truth of his sentence and the exercise of his loving-kindness. Christ took our sins “*in his body upon the tree; that we, having died to sin*,” by his death “*might live to justice*.” He who died for us was of no small worth; he was no material sheep; he was no mere man. He was more than an angel, he was God made man. The iniquity of sinners was not as great as the justice of him who died for them. The sins we committed were not as great as the justice he wrought, who laid down his life for us. He laid it down when he willed, and he took it up again when he willed. *Catechetical Lectures* 13.33.

***Pope’s Notes***

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