



Revd Ro's Reflection on Second Sunday Before Lent

Colossians 1. 15-20

John 1. 1-14

I have been watching the programme 'Secrets of the Museum' over the last weeks. The museum is the V&A and the programme follows its army of curators and conservators who are working tirelessly to preserve the thousands upon thousands of artefacts in the museum's collection, many of which are hidden from public view in its vaults. They have to be preserved and restored regularly to keep them in the best condition possible. The collection, which is priceless, does not belong to the museum, it belongs to the nation. The museum holds the objects in trust and they have the great responsibility of preserving them for future generations. This programme was dealing with the set of cartoons by the great Renaissance artist Raphael on loan from the Royal Collection.

To us a cartoon is an amusing sketch but a Raphael cartoon is a huge painting made for tapestry design. The paintings were completed in 1516 and the tapestries were made in Brussels and were destined to hang in the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. Amazingly they still exist and are hung on special feast days. To construct these tapestries the huge paintings on paper by Raphael which are above life sized and depict episodes from the lives of St. Peter and Paul had to be torn into smaller pieces and each piece given to a set of workers to construct their section of tapestry. Each painting showed the pin pricks around outlines of the figures which gave the template for the images.

Can you imagine these huge paintings deconstructed just pieces, each piece useless on its own and only making a perfect image when all were fitted together in the tapestry on completion and when the pieces of paper were stuck together in the giant jigsaw which became the finished Raphael cartoon once more?

Something is only as good as the sum of its parts. If one part is missing or distorted it affects the whole. In this case when the parts of this image come together the vast painting shows the figure of Christ who is calling St. Peter and his first body of disciples.



The line that I am comparing this to in the epistle reading of course is verse 18 'He is the head of the body the church.' It is shown superbly in this painting on a literal level but if you look at what I have just said about the Raphael painting on a deeper level the church of Christ is the sum of its parts, its members.

We are Christ's body. The church of course is every Christian. Our church, any church, only has one head and that is Christ. There is no way anyone is more important than anyone else, we just have different roles. Look at St. John's gospel set for today verse 13, ' But to all who received him, who believed in his name he gave the power to become children of God.' We are all children of God and co heirs with Jesus Christ and equal in his sight. Everyone of us make up his body.

It is an image Paul uses again in 1 Corinthians 12

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ... If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, But God has so arranged the body..., ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. ²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it '

I have quoted this passage at length because it is so important to Paul's understanding of what the church should be and how Christians should behave. We are all a part of the body of Christ; we all have gifts and talents with which to serve him, no one greater than another, all necessary to the whole. God created every human being as equal in his sight. We are unique and we are servants of God, his hands his feet here on earth. If we stop to think 'I am a member of Christ's body it is awe inspiring. The next question we need to ask is, is my behaviour, my attitude worthy of that great calling so that people look at us and our church and see Christ at work?

Just like the great Raphael cartoon the whole painting only becomes the image of Christ in action if each piece, vital to the whole picture is fitted perfectly into its rightful place. Without a single piece fulfilling its function the image would be marred and distorted. It is the same with us, we are all of equal value and Christ needs each one of us to fulfil our God given role within the church, his body

on earth. We are commissioned to be the image of Christ in action. There is the clear example of 'every member ministry.'

Both readings, the first chapter of the gospel of St. John and this reading from Colossians deal with Christology. That is, the understanding of the nature of Jesus Christ. I have dealt with John 1 over the last few weeks and in more detail in my Reflection for Christmas 2. I will therefore use it to illustrate my points rather than go through it again in detail.

The passage from Colossians is unique, identical material to this does not appear anywhere else in the bible, however we can compare it to Philippians 2.6-11, and John 1. 1-14 because it is a Christological hymn.

I will begin by saying that these readings are my favourite passages from the gospels. They spell out quite clearly the nature of Jesus Christ as human and divine, pre-existent with God and of God.

It is important to set readings in context. Colossae had been of great importance but by Paul's time it was in decline. Paul did not take the gospel to Colossae; it is likely to have been his co-worker Epaphras, Col. 1-7. The church here seemed to have been growing and Paul is full of praise in his initial greeting, 1. 3-8. Colossae however was a cosmopolitan town with a large Jewish population. Many cults were practised there and these led directly to the rise of the erroneous teachings which came to undermine the church at Colossae. It became known as the Colossian heresy. To combat this Paul wrote the letter and he makes references to it at 2.18 'Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking,¹⁹ and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together.'

Therefore his central teaching is the emphasis on the supremacy of Christ. Paul has to make the Christians here quite clear about Christ as human and divine and his role as redeemer and saviour.

At the beginning of his epistle to the Colossians Paul has the traditional greeting to the church. This is followed by his thanks to them and then a prayer. Here the address is personal. From verse 15-20 the style is very different; it is majestic and exalted and all personal pronouns are missing. So the passage stands in isolation as a hymn of praise.

It is called a hymn but this is different from our concept of a hymn. It is more a creedal statement or confession of faith. It is believed that this 'hymn of praise' as with that of Philippians, may have been used in the very early church prior to Paul's writing.

The opening makes Christ's status as 'image of the invisible God' absolutely clear. 'Firstborn of all creation' does not mean he was brought into being by God the first of created beings. What this opening states is that, 'In him all things in heaven and earth were created.'

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for 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. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.'

The statement sets out the fact that Christ was in the beginning with God bringing all into being. The opening of John 1 is almost identical in its statement that Christ is part of the Godhead and is co-creator.

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.'

Both state that Christ, the second person of the trinity was 'before all things.' And Colossians goes on

¹⁸'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.'

This refers to Jesus, the incarnate God. It is Christ who is not only head of the church but of every created thing. The focus then turns to the resurrection referring to him as 'the firstborn from the dead.' Look how the words, 'so that he might come to have first place in everything' compare with the words from Philippians 2

'Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.'

Jesus Christ died for us on Calvary and rose for us. He bore our sins for us. This is stressed in these lines because it is absolutely central to our faith. God came to us in Jesus, we of ourselves were helpless. It is through the grace of God freely given in love that Christ laid down his life for us for us and won salvation for us once and for all

¹⁹'For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and 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.'

St. John sums this up when he writes,

¹²'But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.'

Christ's divinity is shown in the resurrection. No resurrection then no foundation for faith. Paul makes that clear in Corinthians 15.17

¹⁷'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. ²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.'

It can seem as though these passages are somehow theological and therefore distant from us. They are anything but distant.

They are the whole crux of Christian belief. This is the point that Paul is making in the passage to the Colossians. This must be the foundation of their faith as it is with ours. Jesus Christ died and rose again for us, God and King. Christ is King of the cosmos as God and Lord of his body here on earth the church. That is us, every one of us who call ourselves Christian. We do not simply act for ourselves and for what we want. Whenever we act we should ask, just what would Jesus want of us in this situation. Further to that does my action really show that I am a member of the body of Christ?

This passage of high Christology makes Paul's teaching to the Colossians clear. He is laying down the fundamentals of Christian faith to them. This is who Jesus Christ is; this is the God whom we confess. We confess it every time we say the creed, our statement of belief. It is the foundation of the baptismal promises of new Christians.

The two readings examine the nature of the Christ who rules the cosmos as the second person of the trinity but who walks alongside us in our suffering and are joy, immanent, God with us.

As I write the death toll from COVID 19 has passed 100,000 in this country. Archbishop Justin was interviewed on BBC Breakfast the day after this number was reached. He was describing how thousands of people in their day to day lives work in service and love for others. In fact we can say they are acting as Christ's body on earth. Archbishop Justin is acting as an assistant chaplain in St. Thomas' Hospital London and is holding the hands of those who are dying, watching and praying with all who need him. As so many are doing he is assuring them of Christ's love. 'Where hope in this?' He was asked – the hope is in Christ's resurrection and his conquering of death and his winning eternal life for us. The hope comes from the fact that Christ is the light in the darkness – a light that no darkness can ever overcome. He walks alongside in suffering and love. The archbishop spoke of the presence of God in our grief, which of course he has experienced himself, and the power of prayer. All those thousands of NHS workers and volunteers are no less than Christ's body because he has no hands but ours, they are doing his work. This is God with us.

I think of Archbishop Justin's words of faith and hope. Jesus is the crucified God who won eternal life for humanity and is with us in every situation.

In this time of lock down we do not have the old days of 'normal' church and every member ministry may seem impossible. But actually it is vital now. Every single Christian is called to be a minister. We can't all be chaplains or out there working in the community. We are staying home and staying safe, protecting others and ourselves. I haven't really left the house since last March; I am shielding mum. But we are still called to be God's hands on earth, or his voice. It is our task to talk to people who need us, to be a friend and to bring the love of Christ where it is needed. We need to think of ways that we can do that. 'Pick up the phone, bring a smile' is something I heard said on TV today. We can take his love to others simply in our conversations with them.

Christ is there in every home because he walks alongside us. We simply have to call to him in prayer.

'He is God the Saviour, he is Christ the Lord ever to be worshipped, trusted and adored.' Caroline Noel

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