

The Parish of Bardsey with East Keswick

Sermon

Sunday 4 February 2024: Angela Hannafin

Good morning and welcome to the first sofa sermon of February. Phew, we got through January. Let's listen to the New Testament reading for today, from the book of Colossians:

¹⁵ Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, ¹⁶ for through him God created everything

in the heavenly realms and on earth.

He made the things we can see

and the things we can't see—

such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world.

Everything was created through him and for him.

¹⁷ He existed before anything else,

and he holds all creation together.

¹⁸ Christ is also the head of the church,

which is his body. He is the beginning,

supreme over all who rise from the dead.

So he is first in everything.

¹⁹ For God in all his fullness

was pleased to live in Christ,

²⁰ and through him God reconciled

everything to himself.

He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth

by means of Christ's blood on the cross.

Paul wrote this letter whilst in prison, in order to encourage local Christians in a new faith community in Colossae, a small town, based in modern day Turkey. According to this letter, this church had been started by someone we know of as Epaphras. The purpose of the letter was for Paul to encourage the faith community to believe in the one true God. At the time of this evolving community, there were many other beliefs. Every town had gods and goddesses they worshipped – because they believed it would keep the world safe. Gods were, if you like, local inhabitants and it was important to keep the unseen world with its gods happy, to avoid disaster. If suffering happened, people would say it was because of the gods or not doing the right thing.

It was difficult to be a Christian in the ancient world, because you were taking a stand to believe only in Jesus, which went against the culture of the

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time, where many beliefs co-existed. In the letter, Paul was saying that there is essentially one true God, and that meant the local believers couldn't worship the other gods as well. Going against the culture and its superstitions would make them unpopular. The Emperor Nero, who was in power when Paul wrote this letter, blamed the fire in Rome on the Christians, who he was already persecuting. So Paul is encouraging them here to keep going and to persevere in faith.

The central part of the first chapter of Colossians is this 'poem', as some people have called it, which has two parts, with Jesus being the centre in both. It's full of imagery which links with Genesis, as Paul reminds them that Jesus existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. Everything was made by him and for him, and he holds all creation together. Jesus is Lord but that's different from the saying at the time, that Caesar is Lord. Here Paul is saying that we need to worship Jesus because he is the living Lord, who has made all things, and who is worthy of worship because of his sacrifice, death and resurrection for us and to us. We could say there are two 'verses' to this poem, both beginning with who Jesus is. He is the visible image of God, and also the head of the church. Here church is not a building, but a gathering of people who follow him. And through Christ, God has reconciled everything to himself, and made peace with the world because of Christ's blood. This poem is a gospel message in microcosm. God has made everything, and he has reached out to us through Christ, in order to live in peace with his people, who can respond through faith.

I think it's actually a relevant passage for today. We may think it's easy to be a Christian. In the UK we have political freedom and can come together with worshippers whenever we want. We don't have the same persecution that the ancient Christians knew. But our world is full of the same pluralism that existed when Paul wrote his book. Pluralism is not necessarily a bad thing but we need to remember that Jesus said about himself that he was the Way, the Truth and the Life. We are called to live a distinctive life with Christ as Lord. The call to make Christ Lord is also a call to leave behind our other gods, devote our lives to him, and to make our witness to him public. If we are honest, none of us live with the kind of devoted faith we'd love to have. We have all formed little gods, other things that we worship instead of God. Part of being a Christian is doing the hard work of knowing ourselves and daring to let God show us what those other gods are. When we can bear to face the truth about ourselves, we will start to step into true freedom, since there is no condemnation with Christ. The various 'isms' of our age – sexism, racism, ageism, etc, are trying to erode our faith in the one true God and pull us away from keeping Jesus centre. But there are also gods of power, money,

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sex and greed which stop us from really living as we spend all our time worshipping these false gods. They are false because they distract us from seeing ourselves as we really are – unconditionally loved by God. In Christ, all are made in God's image and able to receive his love, through faith.

Last week we worshipped with our friends at the Methodist Church. I love the Covenant Service and the meaningful words we said together. We admitted we had little gods that we worship who distract us from faith in the one true God. We pledged ourselves afresh to service of the one true God and faith in Jesus. The first words of the Covenant we pledged together, were this, I am no longer my own but yours. Your will, not mine, be done in all things, wherever you may place me, in all that I do and in all that I may endure. It's meaty stuff and the sign of true discipleship. To commit ourselves afresh to God at the beginning of the year is a good thing to do, and something we really need to do regularly. We are only ten days away from Lent, where we will ask God, through his mercy, to draw closer to us. In Lent we dare to ask God to show us how we can worship him more, how he can remove those obstacles, those unwanted gods that get in our way.

In our Eucharist we ask God to gather into his kingdom, all who share this one bread and one cup, so that we, in the company of all the saints, may praise and glorify God for ever, through Jesus Christ our Lord. And the next bit is really important, so I always make sure I emphasise it when I say it – by whom and with whom and in whom. Because it is by Jesus this is possible, with Jesus this is possible and in Jesus this is possible. All of our worship and life is all about him and no one else.

May we, through God's mercy and grace, draw near to him, to know more of Jesus, whose love and peace and comfort is on offer to all those who accept. May we endure with a true faith, centred on Christ, and may our Lenten journey help us to have that pure faith, so that, in the words of the famous song, 'the things on earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace'. AMEN.