

Sermon - The Image of the Invisible God (16-1-22 DC)

Colossians 1: 15-23

Good morning! This morning I want to talk about God, not in a sort of stratospheric or a wishy washy way, but coming to a firm reality and a practical understanding about what the so-called invisible God actually is or who he is. As members of a church or people visiting church, for whatever reason we are all a bit biased about God compared to the overall population. I mention this at the outset because as a society we are all individually on journeys with differing views and understandings about God and his/her importance. We range from committed Christian believers, through other faiths, agnostics and atheists.

I bet even within this congregation that there are different views of what God may look like or even be. Central to our faith, as Christians we believe in the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Three dimensions of the one Almighty God that we describe every time we say together the creed or affirmation of our faith. Do you know what, I still struggle getting my brain round this three-fold nature of God – and I suspect many others do too. Am I right?

Contemplating God, if we do it at all, is remarkably difficult and potentially mind-blowing. I've often heard it said that if we could fully understand and describe God, then he, she or it wouldn't be an Almighty God at all. God is mysterious and mighty and beyond our ken. So do we stop trying to understand God because it's all too difficult?

An alternative is that we often define God within our own understandings and desires. God can become an expression or definition by ourselves. After all, many would ask 'who has actually seen God? And why would my view of God be wrong?'

As humans, most of us really struggle with abstract definitions and concepts; we like reality in our lives, something certain, something a bit concrete. So then, what does God actually look, sound and feel like? For many, there is an attitude of I won't believe before I can see or experience him. So wouldn't it be good if we could actually see God.

All of us like physical prompts to our understanding. (Share Visual images in which people feel they see the existence of God: Hubble telescope – stars and universe, Sunset, Waterfall, Flowers, Picture of someone delivering food aid, icon of Christ.) Sometimes during a service, I look at the image of Christ in the east window, and it helps me re-focus on what is important.

I don't know which of these images helps you most in imagining God - but none of them are God himself. So this is where we come to our passage from Colossians. Who were the Colossians?

Colossae was not a particularly important town in what is now Turkey, populated mostly by gentiles but also had a strong Jewish community.

As a church in Colossae, they were polluting the simplicity of the Christian message or Gospel by dragging in Jewish customs and beliefs plus others from general society around. Mysticism, Gnosticism etc. They were beginning to portray God in their own image rather than the real one.

Paul was writing to them to get back to the basics of who Christ was and what belief in him is all about. No woolly or self-serving/expressing theology.

This is very useful to us because we are tempted to do the same – we can get too clever or too bland in pursuit of inclusivity. The old biblical argument of losing our saltiness or pithiness of our faith. Worse perhaps, just losing the essentials through conforming to the world about us. No longer a light shining out but a mirror reflecting darkly.

Paul tackles the rather Jewish concept of the Invisible God – seen by the works of his hand and communicated with by spiritual messengers (angels and the like), plus prophets, priests. Like the wind that you can't see but you can see the effects.

What Paul is saying in this passage is not so much that Jesus is the image of the invisible God but that he was, and is, the visible manifestation of God. A God who is real and not virtual. In Jesus, you actually see God in all his glory – here on earth, in person.

Remember at the time this letter was written, people and/or their parents had actually seen the physical Jesus in human form, had listened to his words, witnessed the events and miracles of his life, and his crucifixion and resurrection, all within the memory of that generation or their parents' generation. 2000 years does not change that reality of God's existence on earth. It happened and he was real - not today going into the historical justification of the existence of Christ, except to say that the evidence is overwhelming, and it's not just from the Bible.

Perhaps with the passage of time, to our generation in history, we are beginning to see Jesus in a rather vague and conceptual way. A sort of virtual presence or reality. More spiritual than tangible.

So what are the fundamental, and at the time, ground-breaking truths about Jesus that Paul declares in his letter to the Colossians - and to ourselves when we are being rather malleable about our faith?

Jesus was not only present and the author of creation but he is the very purpose of creation.

‘All things were created by him and for him’.

Now you might say that Paul is being at odds with what we proclaim in the Apostle’s creed. ‘I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth’. But his statement of Christ the creator is echoed also in that first chapter of John’s Gospel.

V1 ‘In the beginning was the word and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was with God at the beginning. Through him all things were made.’ V14 ‘The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.’

This why we believe in one God; there is nothing to separate God the Father from God the Son (Jesus) and God the Holy Spirit. Jesus is one particular aspect of God and central to how God practically relates to us – and importantly how we relate to God. Jesus is the visible manifestation of God to us. In modern terminology he is the user interface between humankind and God.

One point from Paul is that it is easy for us to gloss over is that we often think of God’s creation as being the physical universe, the trees and mountains, the fish and the seas. But Paul is at pains to point out that creation is also the way humans relate to each other, ‘thrones or powers or rulers or authorities’. Things visible and invisible. Christ’s creation is not just the physical but also the inter-relationships of humans to God and between each other. All are held together by Christ and his purpose; all of these things should all be Christlike.

When we turn to look at Jesus as God, to see him as the visible manifestation of God, we don’t just have a sort of nefarious spiritual experience, but rather the practical expression of how our lives should be led, his teachings on what love and compassion is and what they should look like in action. We know them as the fruits of the Spirit, Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Generosity, Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self-control (Galatians 5 v22), but they are all based on Christ’s teaching and example during his physical ministry on earth. One thing I can’t help but feel right now in our society is that the world would be a much kinder place if we adopted his principle of Let him who has no sin cast the first stone – which is not of course about denying justice but tells us a lot about the spirit of forgiveness.

In Jesus we see godliness in its fullness. Love God, Love our neighbour. All sorts of insights into the practicalities of godliness. As we watch the news channels endlessly churning over all the bad things in the world, you can’t help but be drawn into thinking the world is just terrible and sinking into the abyss. But the reality is that even now the world is full of love: the caring neighbour doing the shopping, the love of parent to

child, the kind words of encouragement, empathy, sympathy, the examples of care and compassion that are given every day but rarely reported.

These are Christ's ways and we are called to exercise them, as Paul makes clear that we are to see Jesus as supreme over us, yet we are to be at one with him. There is a special relationship between Jesus and us, his church. We are his body here on earth and he is the Head of that body, no one else. Jesus is Lord and King over us – and in return for this special relationship of obedience and faith, living the best we can by his ways, we are in receipt of the Good News that is the fundamental of our Christian faith, the Good News that Paul warns the Colossians and us - not to dilute or mix up with other things. What is that Good News? That in Jesus we see God's total commitment to a relationship with humankind, even to the point that he would die for us - and for all that we get wrong, he will forgive us and give us fresh hope for the future.

V 22 But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation – if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.

If you want to see God, and start to understand God, then the message from Paul is look to Jesus, or turn to Jesus. He is the visible manifestation of God himself. A one true God, prepared to sacrifice everything for his people and wanting to be chosen by his people. He is specifically calling us as a church to be obedient and Christ-like in all we do – to the point that we too become part of the image of God to the world that all may discover the relevance and importance of the one true God to their lives, even if at the moment they don't fully get it.

As we come together as church and for Holy Communion today, in our 150th year, with all our uncertainties, fears, doubts and lack of clarity over the precise theology of what we believe and our contemplation of the nature of an Almighty God, Paul is saying keep it simple and come instead in joy and confidence because Jesus is our working model of God and his relationship with us the human race, and particularly with us his body, the church. Through his sacrifice on the cross, He is humankind's source of true Hope, the true image of God. As the song says,

**'Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
look full in his wonderful face,
and the things of this earth will grow strangely dim,
in the light of his glory and grace.'**

Amen