

Things are not as they seem

Jer 23:1-6
Lk 1:68-79

Col 1:11-20

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for 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. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 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. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and 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.

Lk 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

There's an apparently true story of some young men who hopped on a bus in America in the 1930s and decided to start picking on this man sitting by himself at the back of the bus. They sat near him and started insulting him, but he didn't respond. So they went a bit further with the insults and apparently one of them got quite near him and slapped him on the shoulder and egged him on to fight. But still the man didn't respond. When the bus got near this man's stop, he got up, and as he got up, the young men realised that he was actually a lot bigger than he looked when he was sitting down. He then gave them his business card and got off the bus. As the bus took off down the street, these young guys gathered around to see what the business card said, and saw the words, "Joe Louis – professional boxer". And if you know your history, these guys had just tried to pick a fight with the man who would go on to become the heavyweight champion of the world for quite a few years, and one of the most successful boxers of all time.

The reason I tell that story is to illustrate that things are not always as they seem. And I want to focus on the readings in Colossians and the crucifixion narrative to make that point today.

When we look at the world today it's easy to have a sense of despair at all that is wrong. Every few days at work we get what's called a Daily Monitoring email which has links to news articles reporting on current disasters that are happening in the world. Thankfully at the end of each of these emails there is usually a funny true story, just to lighten things up a little after all the doom and gloom. But it would be very easy to read these emails every few days and throw your hands up in despair and just think, "what's the point?" and give up. But it's readings like the one in Colossians that give hope that say things are not as they seem, that God really is in charge, despite what goes on in our lives and in the lives of millions around the world.

Let's look at this passage that St Paul writes in Colossians and check out what he says:

"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things...were created...all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 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".

In listening to that you could be forgiven for thinking that these are pretty outrageous claims about Jesus. They're about as outrageous as some of the claims that Jesus made about himself.

But you know, one of the great things I find about Jesus is that there *is* something about him that is different to

any other person who has ever lived. To make the claims that he did and be worshipped by billions throughout the ages, shows that there is something amazing about this man – and something that fits together and is trustworthy despite the apparent paradoxes of what he said about himself. Jesus is the one person for whom the ultimate paradoxes actually fit together.

He says he is God, yet also says he is humble in heart, and yet in saying both of these things, he doesn't come across as a complete megalomaniac. He says, in Matthew 26, when he's asked by the high priest if he is the Son of God, "From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven". Think of yourself as the High Priest for a second, and this guy says that to you. Apart from the utter blasphemy that you as High Priest would have seen it as, you would think that he's a complete nutcase...unless what he's saying is true and he really is the Son of God. In a recent book of interviews with Bono, he is asked about his faith, and the interviewer suggests to him that all this stuff about Jesus, of miracles and being raised from the dead, it's all a bit outrageous isn't it? And Bono's reply is great. He says, replies "the alternative is that billions of people throughout the last 2,000 years have had their lives completely transformed by a madman. Now that's outrageous!"

That's the Jesus who is trustworthy. When St Paul in Colossians says that God has transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son, we can rest in that, and I don't think it just means going to heaven when you die. I think it means, probably more so, the life we can have here and now, not a life where you come to Jesus and everything goes well for you, but a life where we're able to handle what life throws at us, where we can respond in a Christ-like way, where we have the maturity to examine ourselves instead of blaming everyone else for our problems. That's what I think is living in the 'kingdom of his beloved son', where we ask 'what is the right thing to do in this situation' instead of just 'what do I feel like doing'. It's a life where we are totally and fully surrendered to God's will and not our own.

Surrender is facing the fact that I can't do life on my own, where I realise that living a self-sufficient life, which might provide a sense of well-being for a while, ultimately leaves me empty and without direction. It is a life where we have had enough of that and decide that we want the peace of God instead, the peace which comes from living our lives in union with Him, where our attitude is 'not my will but thine be done'. That produces a life of hope, where we're not swayed by the circumstances of life.

The passage in Colossians also says that "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell". In every single piece of his being, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. And that even includes on the cross itself. And this is where we come to the crucifixion passage. On the cross, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. He's sometimes called the crucified God. To answer the question that many people ask - why doesn't God show himself to us, the answer is that he already has, in the most humble, vulnerable and humiliating way possible, paying the ultimate sacrifice, because he said we are worth dying for. And if you look at how the Romans carried out crucifixion, you can see how brutal and horrific it was.

'generally, death on a cross came slowly, sometimes after several days through shock or a painful process of suffocating as the muscles used in breathing got more and more tired. Often, as a further disgrace, the person was denied burial and the body was left on the cross for the birds to pick at or to rot.'

'Crucifixion was also a public affair. Naked and attached to a stake, a cross or a tree, the victim was subjected to savage ridicule by frequent passers-by, while the general population was given a grim reminder of the fate that awaits those who dare to assert themselves against the authority of the Roman Empire.'

Now that's the physical side of crucifixion and what Jesus went through. But imagine also the scandal of this man who is supposed to be the Messiah, being crucified. A crucified Messiah was an oxymoron. Because the religious leaders looking on would have been well aware that in the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy, it says that anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.

But at the same time, the term Messiah literally means 'God's Anointed'. So you can imagine the disciples' confusion as they saw their Messiah being crucified. It didn't make any sense.

But what the first Christians came to realise was that this was God's way of bringing his creation back to himself. St Paul, as an ex-Pharisee and religious leader and now a Christian, is also aware of this when he writes to the

Galatian church, and he quotes the passage from Deuteronomy when he says

“Christ saved us from the self-defeating, cursed life by absorbing it completely into himself. Do you remember the Scripture that says, “cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree?”. That's what happened when Jesus was nailed to the cross. He became a curse and at the same time dissolved the curse.”

This is victory in defeat, to quote Sammy Horner's fantastic song. And it is this message which is the main one that comes out of the story of the crucifixion. The pain that Jesus went through on the cross, having nails hammered into his hands and feet, hauled up naked for all to see and mock and spit at, then dying an agonising death – that actually pales into insignificance when compared to the fact that he was also taking upon himself the wrongdoing of you and me when he was on that cross. He took upon himself all the wrongdoing that you and I have ever done and said you don't have to deal with the burden of that anymore. I'm taking it for you. I forgive you for everything you've ever done that has hurt others, and hurt yourself. He demonstrated on that cross that no wrong is off limits to God's forgiveness. No wrong. This is what Jesus did on the cross, and he did it purely because he loves us, because that's just what he's like.

It is because of his death that we can now come into an intimate relationship with the God of the universe. That's what grace is, an undeserved gift, the best gift imaginable despite what you have done, despite what I have done. The fullness of God was pleased to dwell in him. Jesus' death proves that this is a God of infinite love and grace.

There is an old Christian song by a guy called David Meece called 'We are the Reason'. And some of the lyrics say:

We are the reason that he gave his life
We are the reason that he suffered and died
To a world that was lost he gave all he could give
To show us the reason to live.

That's the message about God that I first heard when I was a young Christian in a conservative church about 20 years ago, and I'm glad it's still with me. Because in a church like this where we're so active in social justice issues and our whole ministry is based around care for the poor, it is easy to forget the reason we care for the poor. In the 1st letter of John it says 'we love because he first loved us'.

I'm glad for the conservative Christian teaching I got back then. Back around the same time when I was in College, a lot of people in the Christian Union that I was in were quite skeptical about whether Christians should be involved in social justice issues. It was sort of like oh yeah but the real issue is saving souls. One of our leaders would express some concern about the emphasis on social justice that a lot of churches display at the expense of the spiritual side of the gospel by saying that 'Jesus wasn't just a social worker'. I remember thinking 'yeah but it's the opposite. Justice is the very thing the church neglects!'. But 20 years on, I see where he's coming from. Jesus wasn't just a social worker and it's churches like ours that need to hear more of that. Because if he wasn't anything more than that, then he's no different to people like Gandhi or Martin Luther King or William Wilberforce.

Jesus makes a difference in our hearts. We have acceptance and he changes our attitudes. We've just had an election campaign where we've been offered bribes worth billions of dollars by both the major parties. We've been told that there is nothing more important than the economy, the implication being that it will bring us the life that we're really after. But study after study is showing that, despite good economic times, not everyone is benefiting and those that are, are still not happy. Our lives don't consist in the abundance of our possessions. Now I hardly need to say that to this church, because most of us don't have many possessions anyway. But we still need to realise that we will never have the life we're after until we come to see that, individually and collectively, we need something greater than ourselves to base our lives on. We must never forget in this church that looking after those less well off, and seeking justice, is not enough. Jesus said that without me you can do nothing. We need saving, individually and collectively. Every single one of us needs love and acceptance, and the good news is, though it can be hard for some of us, is that all we need to do is receive the gift.

The image of the invisible God, who was before all things, showed his love by coming to a sick world to pay the ultimate sacrifice for us that we can have relationship with God again, that we can have life again. That's why we have communion, because we remember what he has done for us.

Going back to where I started, things are not as they seem. Despite the brokenness of the world around us, and the brokenness of some of our own lives, God is in charge. The church is the society of the broken because it is in fellowship with each other under God that we find forgiveness and acceptance.

And if you feel broken today, you're in a good place, because they say that if you haven't got a broken heart, God can't get in through the cracks.

Let's reflect on that as we come to communion.

by Nils von Kalm
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