Jesus: Lord of All
Colossians 1:15-20

Here's a picture of a five-pound note. How would you know if it was genuine or not? Apparently, in the old days, to train bank staff to spot forged notes they didn't show them loads of forgeries, what they did was to keep showing them the genuine article: this is what the real thing looks like, this little detail here, that squiggly line there. So that if ever they saw a forged note, they could spot it.

Well, we're looking at Paul's letter to the church at Colossae. And the young Christians there are being offered the spiritual or philosophical equivalent of not one, but a chest full of bank notes. People are telling them, 'look, Jesus is great, but Jesus alone is never really going to make your life rich. If you really want to flourish, if you really want to enjoy fullness of life, you need this…' Some new religious experience, some new religious practice, some new philosophy. And today what's on offer to you might be different, but the set-up's basically the same, isn't it? God, religion, that's ok if it works for you, but if you really want to flourish, you need to be free, you need to be successful, or to have power, or be having lots of sex, or lots of beautiful friends. That's how you flourish in life.

So how could they – how can you - know whether what you're being offered is genuine or not? Is this chest full of bank notes that's on offer going to make you rich or is it full of fakes of the real thing?

Well, what Paul does is he puts the genuine article in front of them and says, this is what you need. This is what can give you the wisdom, the meaning, the purpose, the solidity in life you're searching for, this is true riches, and in comparison, everything else is a fake.

Reading: Colossians 1:15-20

Lord of Creation
Look at v15, where Paul writes, 'He is…' And the 'He' he's talking about is Jesus. So Paul's going to tell us who Jesus is. And if you think about it, that was a question that kept following Jesus during his lifetime, wasn't it? Who is he? The disciples are in a boat about to sink, they watch Jesus calm the storm with a word, and stunned they ask, 'who is he?' Jesus heals a bed-ridden, paralysed man and the religious leaders grumble, 'who does he think he is?' He rides a donkey into Jerusalem, fulfilling the prophecies of how Israel's king would come, and the whole city asks, 'who is this?'

So, who is Jesus of Nazareth? And so much stands or falls on how you answer that, doesn't it? So Paul tell us, verse 15, 'He is the image of the invisible God.'

Now, we live in an incredibly visual age, don't we? And images and films just have this power to hook you and draw you in. And whilst these guys lived in a different technological age, for them religion was also incredibly visual: there was ceremony and sacrifices and physical idols. So how were they, how are you supposed to relate to a God who is *in*visible?

Now you could say, well, there's creation: and the sheer physical, visual beauty of spring days and mountains and sunsets all point us to their maker, don't they? It's just they're never quite enough. You need something more. And so when Paul

writes that Jesus is *the* image of the invisible God, he's saying something extraordinary. He's saying that above every other expression of beauty, it's in Jesus that you can see God.

Now, last Sunday Clive and I were chatting, and one of your kids ran past, and Clive said, 'he's the spitting image of his dad, isn't he'. And he is. You look at the son and you see the father. And Paul is saying, that's who Jesus is. Not in physical characteristics, but in his nature, in his character, in his love and power and justice and compassion – he is *the* image of the invisible God.

And yet, he means even more than that. You see, who does the first chapter of the Bible tell us was created to be the image of God? Humanity, you were. Let us make them in our image, God said. And mankind was meant to image God in creation, to be the symbol, the representation of his loving rule in the world. But that image is marred and scarred. But now, Paul says, Christ has come and he is *the* image of God. He is *the* perfect example of all that mankind was meant to be.

So in Jesus you see God in all his glory, put on public display, but you also see humanity as we were meant to be. So when these Colossians, when you are presented with this menu of spiritual or philosophical dishes to choose from, to make your life full, Jesus isn't just another option on the list, is he? He is *the* image of the invisible God. He is perfect God and perfect man.

Now, others would reject all that. But they might not reject what Paul says next: v15, he is 'the firstborn of all creation.' And whether someone's a Buddhist, or a Muslim, or even a Western secular liberal, they'd all agree that Jesus was just a man, created and born like the rest of us, just wiser and nicer than the rest of us.

So is that what Paul means by *firstborn of all creation?* That he's created, he's not the Creator? And the answer's 'No', for two reasons. Firstly, the Bible uses the title 'Firstborn' to refer to the one who takes the highest place, the one to whom all honour is due. So neither King David or King Solomon were firstborn sons, yet they're called the Firstborn, because they sat on the throne, they inherited the kingdom. And over all creation Jesus is the Firstborn – the king upon the throne, the one to whom all honour and allegiance is due.

But secondly, look what Paul says in v16, 'For by him *all* things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible.' What does that word *all* mean? It means *all*. And if Jesus created *all* things then he himself cannot have been created. Because nothing gets left out of that word *all.*

But what if someone thought, as people do today, that Jesus might still just be some exalted spiritual being, someone on a different plane to the rest of us, an angel, for example, come as a man? Or that other highly spiritual individuals could offer you something more than Jesus? Well, Paul spells it out, that Christ created every level of angelic or spiritual power: v16, 'whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.'

Now, elsewhere Paul uses some of those terms interchangeably for spiritual powers and earthly powers. And so he's saying that when you look at all the

power structures in the world – whether natural or supernatural, whether spiritual or political, or scientific or commercial – Christ made them all and is over them all. So any power they have, whether it's for good, or whether it's been corrupted, is borrowed power. And you won't find ultimate meaning or hope through those powers.

But, they will promise you that you will. The powers of religion or spirituality, the powers of politics or nationalism or commerce, promise you the way to human flourishing – behave like this, or buy this, or join us, and you'll be happy. Whereas Paul is saying, no created power, no politician or economic model, no spirituality ancient or modern, can be your Messiah. Jesus is. He is the Power over every power, and there is no area, no corner of life, no place anywhere over which Christ is not sovereign.

But then Paul goes even further: v16, 'all things were created through him *and for him*.' Now, I hesitate to talk about science in a room full of scientists, but whilst science can tell you the how and the what of the universe, the mechanisms, and the reactions, and stuff it's made up of, it can never tell you the *why?* of the universe, can it? Science can never tell you the purpose, the meaning, the *why* the universe exists. And it can never tell you the *why* of your life. It can tell you how you grow and develop, it can tell you how your heart beats and your lungs breath, but it can never tell you why your heart beats, why you exist. It can never tell you for what purpose you're here. In fact, if a scientist is an atheist he will tell you there is no purpose to the universe, or your life. There is no *why*.

But Paul can, and it can answer the longing in your heart for meaning and purpose, that atheism and secularism can never answer. And that is that you were made for Christ. You, and all the universe with you, were made for his glory. As St Augustine said, you were made for God, and your heart will always be restless until it finds its rest in him.

You see, why do you think the world was made? This week I read of a number of tourist destinations around the world that have become so popular that their governments have shut them to try and preserve them. And sometimes we can think of the world as our playground, can't we? It's been created for us to enjoy, to visit, to travel, to get the most out of. And yet you're not the reason the world exists. And you're not even the reason *you* exist. Christ is.

Now, those of you with toddlers know that every two year-old needs to learn that they're not the centre of the universe. But they think they are! I mean it took all of Su's and my willpower to stop one of our girls from having us live as if she was the cosmic centre! But if a toddler has to learn that, don't we all need to go on learning it? That all that is, is not for me, it's for him. And Jesus is not just the architect or the builder, he's the purpose. He's the *why* of everything.

And that has profound implications for you and me, doesn't it? Every Christmas Linley organises her mini orchestra. And in the brass and wind section there's Christophe and Hannah on trumpet, and Su and Jane and Zannah on flutes, and on sax there's Naomi and Lucas Pos… and me. And during rehearsal there comes a time, somewhere into the first song, when Linley gets everyone to stop playing.

And then she says 'sorry, but someone's playing out of tune.' And through years of experience everyone turns and looks at me.

And when something is out of tune it just sounds *off*, doesn't it. The music just doesn't work. So, if all of creation and its beauty is for Christ, if it's all been created as a symphony of worship to him, is your life in tune with that orchestra? Or are you like me on the sax? Is your life finding it's true meaning in living for his praise and glory? - In the way you do business, or science, in the way you teach or invest, in the way you live and love? Because you'll only *really* flourish, life will only truly work, you'll only be who you are really meant to be, when you get that life, the universe and everything is not about you – but him.

And Paul says in v17 that 'He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.' So not only has he created everything, he *keeps* everything. Every electron circling every atom, every planet circling every sun, he holds it all together. He is the theory of everything. And that means that if he can sustain a universe, he can sustain you. If he's the one who stops everything from falling apart and descending into chaos, when your life feels like it's doing just that, it's not some new technique you need, it's not some new spiritual experience you need, it's him.

In the book of Job in the Bible, Job's world was disintegrating, and his life was wracked with physical and spiritual pain. But do you know what he discovered? He discovered that it wasn't answers he needed, after all. It wasn't theological arguments about the nature or root of suffering, it was God that he needed – God in all his greatness, God in all his majesty, God as Lord of creation, standing over and above his beautiful, yet mysterious world – a world where you don't get all the answers to your questions. What you get is Him. And when, like Job, you feel like life is disintegrating, when it feels like you can't take anymore and you're breaking up, it's Christ, as Lord of creation who can hold you together.

But for that to happen, you have to be his.

Lord of Life

Now, your workplace probably has some kind of organisational pyramid. At the top is the CEO, or headmaster; then come the heads of departments, and then their deputies and somewhere down the food chain, is you. And, at first, it seems that's what Paul is saying about Jesus: v18, 'And he is the head of the body, the church.' But Paul's saying much more than Jesus is the church's CEO, the spiritual top-dog. You see, he's told us that Jesus is Lord over creation, but now he's going to tell us that Jesus is Lord of the new creation, of re-creation, of new life and the new humanity he's creating.

And he's the head of that new people. And so if you're one of his people, if he's your head, he's not just your leader, he's your life. He's *the* influence, *the* power, *the* defining character, and the object of worship of his people. And if we want his life flowing through us, we've got to stay connected to him. You see, Paul says in v18 that Jesus is 'the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.' And in Jesus' resurrection God has broken the power of death – but not just for him – but for

you, he's just the first, so that now you too can know the power of his new life surging through you, and experience that life in this life and in the one to come.

And the reason Paul gives, v18 is so 'that he might be preeminent.' You see, if we can think that the world is our playground, what do you think religion is for? I mean we can be tempted to think that religion or church is about me. And faith is about making me happy, or a better, more balanced, more integrated person. But Paul tells us that just as creation is for Christ, so is the new creation – so is the church, and his resurrection life and transforming power that we can experience. It's not so we're the centre of God's attention, it's so that Jesus might be the centre of ours, that he might be preeminent.

So let me ask you, is he? Is he pre-eminent in your life? Does the way you seek to grow and thrive as a person, say that? Is he pre-eminent in the way you think of work, or your home life, or your leisure time? Because it can be!

You see look what Paul says next. Verse 19, 'For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.' So it's not that God's revelation of himself in Jesus was *more* than in any other exemplary religious figure, but somehow incomplete, and sure there's Jesus, but you can get even more if you add Buddha, or whoever, as well. It's that God's revelation of himself in Jesus was *full*. *All* his fullness – of wisdom and power and glory and life, was and is in Christ, with nothing lacking.

So Paul's saying, if you're looking for fullness of life you won't find what you're looking for anywhere else. And anyone who suggests you can is like someone who brings you a bucket of water and tells you it's the Pacific Ocean and you can sail your boat in here. No… it's just a bucket, Christ is the ocean.

And yet there's a problem, isn't there? Because if Christ is Lord of creation, why is the world so dark and hostile and so full of suffering? And if Christ is the fullness of God, how can you drink of that fullness, how can you launch your boat in the ocean of that fullness, when we know our lives are anything but worthy of it? How can you approach a God who so perfect when sometimes we can't even look at ourselves in the mirror?

The Lord who Gives his Life

And the Bible doesn't bury its head in the sand or hold back from telling us just how bad the world is, does it? But it's its diagnosis of why that is that's so challenging, because it tells us that the beauty of the world has been marred by humanity in rebellion against God. You see, it's precisely because we've been looking everywhere else but to God for fullness and thriving. We think that we can find this life inside ourselves, and we've just got to express the real us, and make ourselves the cosmic centre, but that just leads to selfishness and pride; or we've looked to possessions, stuff, to fill that hole we feel, but that just leads to greed and consumption; or we've looked to our race or our tribe for meaning and identity, but that just leads to nationalism or tribalism, and war; or we've looked to our status, which just leads to oppression and domination of others.

And it's all because we're looking to something other than God as the object of our worship – as the thing that takes pre-eminence, and let's us flourish. And as a

result, we're alienated from God, and creation groans. And we, and the whole of creation, needs to be reconciled to him.

And Paul says, that's exactly why Christ came. Verse 20, 'And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.'

Now, would your CEO or president die for you? I don't know about you, but when I was a doctor, rather than die for me I think some of my heads of department were out to kill me! But the Bible tells us that while we were still sinners, while we were still alienated from him, Christ died for us. That the hands that threw stars into space, were nailed to a cross of wood for you. And at the cross, he took all our sin, all our looking elsewhere, and died for it; he absorbed in his body the anger of God against all our rebellion, so that we might be reconciled to him and he to us.

And at the cross, he has made us rebels, who were estranged and alienated, his friends. But it's not just us he's putting right. Paul says *all things* – in heaven and on earth, are going to be reconciled. That in his resurrection from the dead, God has begun to put right the decay and dislocation of creation, until the day comes when he finally puts all his enemies under his feet.

So now, you can come to him and drink of the ocean of his fullness, you can come and taste and see that the Lord is good. You can discover that nothing else on offer, in any sphere of life, compares to him, and nothing and no one is worthy of your worship, of your life, than Christ.