

Synod Sermon

Colossians 1:15-20; Luke 5:33-39

1. Introduction

It is a great privilege to be asked by Bishop Mark to preach the sermon at this Synod Eucharist at what I trust will be my last Synod in this Diocese. Given the number of Synods we had last year and the number of extensions I have had, I say this advisedly! I was

consecrated as bishop in this cathedral fifteen years ago at a time when Bishop George was rebuilding his leadership team. At the time I remember being completely surprised and very humbled by the high trust placed in a relative newcomer in my new spiritual home. I have never forgotten the love and acceptance I experienced, and since then I have given myself wholeheartedly to try to be the *confidence builder and bridge builder* that Bishop George hoped I would be as together we have sought to remain focused on Jesus and his mission in the world. In fact it has been my continuing passion to see every ministry unit and every individual grow in their confidence in Christ.

So it was a particular delight to discover the New Testament reading for tonight's service was so apt with a focus on the incomparable Jesus as the supreme Lord and our sufficient Saviour who has reconciled us God and will radically transform our universe.

2. Jesus is the Supreme Lord (verses 15-18)

- **Jesus alone reveals God (15a)**

Jesus is the image of the invisible God. The very nature and being of God has been revealed in him. It is not just that he is like God in the same way as a child might particularly resemble one parent or simply that he brings a message from God like a postman, but that he is God (God in the flesh, truly divine and truly human). He therefore perfectly reveals God in a form we can see, know and understand. Jesus is the perfect

portrait or photograph of God. Art Linkletter once saw a small boy drawing a picture and asked him what he was sketching. The child replied he was drawing a picture of God. When Linkletter told him that no one knows what God looks like, the boy confidently replied: "They will when I get through!"

We laugh but that is precisely the human problem. We construct God from our own imaginations, when in fact he has shown himself once and for all in the person of Jesus.

- **Jesus alone controls creation (15b-17)**

He is the *first born over all creation* (15b). This is a favourite text of Jehovah's Witnesses who use it to argue Jesus was just a man, merely the eldest of a family of created things. But they read the verse in total disregard for its context and other uses in Scripture. It is clearly not a time metaphor, but just another way of saying he is supreme, supreme in honour, supreme over everything. As one Bible version puts it: *his is the primacy over all created things*. We note at least three things in these verses –

In the first place, he made everything (16a). The things we can see and the things we cannot see are his workmanship. The totality of the universe was made by Jesus, God's Son. Even the angels (that the false teachers in Colossae wrongly elevated to equality with Jesus as other mediators between God and humans) were created by him. Paul says Jesus was *before all things* (17a). There was never a time when he was not. He created all things.

In the second place, he made everything for himself (16b). This is the prerogative of any artist. To put it personally, we each have been made to be his and give him the glory, honour and worship that is his due. In fact, the whole universe was made by him and for him so that he would be its master and receive its praise.

In the third place, he now sustains it (17). The universe does not disintegrate because Jesus' powerful word functions like a cosmic super glue. He did not wind up the universe like a clockwork toy,

setting it to run in its own dizzy way until it ran out of power. Nor did he blow the whistle for the creation game to begin and retire to the sidelines to hope his team might win in the end. No, he upholds it, supervises and animates it by his word and in such an orderly fashion that scientific endeavour is possible. The world is therefore not held together by chance or fate or so called natural laws, but by Jesus its creator. As Handley Moule quaintly put it *he keeps the cosmos from becoming a chaos*.

Moreover when it disappears to be replaced by the new heaven and earth, it will not be at the whim of some human crazy but because of the sovereign, loving and gracious will of Jesus, its creator and sustainer.

- **Jesus alone rules the church (18)**

The head of the church, God's new creation or his new community, is not the Pope or the Archbishop of Canterbury. It is not the Bishop of a diocese or even the Rector of the local parish! Every now and then we get it all wrong. One of my sons was once being rightly reprimanded for inappropriate behaviour in Sunday School but left his teacher somewhat speechless when he said '*don't you realise my Dad is in charge round here!*' Of course he was wrong because

Jesus is the head of the body. He exercises control and direction over his members who are his limbs and organs. He is the ruling Lord of his church, and those like me, who are commissioned to serve in the body must do so under his direction in accordance with his word. Notice two other things in this text. He is *the beginning* (18b) in the sense that he is the originating power, the source from which we have come. We are living examples of his new creative initiative as the community of the redeemed. Furthermore he is the conqueror of death, the one who guarantees we will share in his victory (18c). Easter is our great celebration of the defeat of sin, Satan and death. Elsewhere the New Testament tells

us he is the first born of many sisters and brothers (Romans 8:29) or the first fruits of a great resurrection harvest (1 Corinthians 15:20). In his risen life he is a life giving Spirit who promises resurrection life to all those united to him by faith.

In summary, he is the supreme Lord in revelation, creation and redemption. By his resurrection he has shown he has conquered every enemy and every opposing power. There is nothing in life or death which can bind him or hold him. He is the supreme Lord over all things.

3. Jesus is the Sufficient Saviour (verses 18-20)

Since Jesus is the supreme Lord we should not doubt his ability to restore us to friendship and fellowship with God. It is no good having a weak lifesaver, who swims to where you are in difficulty in the surf and then asks your advice about how to best extricate you from your perilous predicament! Jesus as the supreme Lord is the only one able to save because he is perfectly qualified and knew how to deal with our real problem namely our estrangement from God because of our sin (14).

- **Jesus is fully divine (19)**

Jesus is the only mediator or go-between because he is fully divine. Paul does not say some of God's fullness dwelt in Jesus and some in someone else (whether the angels as the false teachers claimed, the numerous gradations of spiritual beings which were thought necessary to span the all but infinite gulf between God and humans or other religious leaders as others have claimed). He says **all** God's fullness dwelt permanently and once and for all in Jesus. In

other words Jesus contains and represents all that God is, in both essence and power. Because of this he is the one and only mediator between heaven and earth. All human attempts to build a bridge to God are useless. We needed God in Jesus to reach down to us to successfully connect us to him.

- **Jesus is the reconciler (20)**

While in the beginning God created all things through Christ, in the end he will reconcile all things through Christ. The word *reconcile* reminds us that things are at odds in the universe. It is not just that things are out of sorts, but that there is enmity or hostility between human beings and God and between human beings. As a result the very created order is dislocated and broken; given to corruption, futility and decay because of sin and rebellion in both the heavenly and earthly realms. Since Jesus is fully God, he has the power to rectify this fundamental problem. This was no band aid solution to just patch up the symptoms. In any sickness there is no point in just treating the outward symptoms without dealing with the cause (unless of course it is viral and it must run its course like the common cold).

Paul says Jesus the supreme Lord has made *peace* and guaranteed cosmic reconciliation not as a result of long hours of negotiation at a conference table, but by his sacrificial death or as it is expressed in the text *by making peace through the blood of the cross*.

It is no surprise that the cross is the symbol of our faith because it is at the heart of the Christian message and faith. God in his love became a man in order to die. Only a human can pay for human sin, but only God could save us. To put it crudely God dies (as it were) so we and the whole creation can be liberated. By dying the death he died he not only bore the penalty of our sins to forgive us, he also disarmed the principalities and powers to deliver us from sin's ongoing power and bondage (Colossians 2:14-15). So on the last day when everything is restored to harmony and God finally ushers in the new heaven and earth, there will be those like us (who have put our trust in the crucified and risen Jesus and enjoy God's peace now) who will joyfully welcome the returning Jesus as our Lord and saviour. But regrettably there will be others who have not accepted the offered peace terms (like

the devil and his minions or perhaps even the so called new atheists). They will be forced to submit against their wills to a power they cannot resist. They will finally recognise Jesus as Lord because every knee will bow but very sadly will never know him as saviour.

4. Conclusion

This beautiful hymnic passage very powerfully reminds us that the Jesus we rightly worship and trust is both the supreme Lord and our only sufficient saviour. It is therefore incumbent on us as a Synod to remain absolutely Christ-centred in all we say and do. We need to keep him, his concerns, his interests and above all his reconciling mission at the centre of all our deliberations and decisions. And when we return to our ministry units we must go with a continuing determination to play our part to ensure that all our congregations remain Christ-centred by living and sharing his good news in word and deed in their communities and networks.

May it be that as a result of our focus on Jesus many others across this large Diocese will come to share our confidence in him, our supreme Lord and sufficient Saviour.

In the name of Christ. **Amen**

+ *Trevor Edwards*

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