

“The image of the invisible God”
Jeremiah 23:1-6 and Colossians 1:11-20
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Christ the King
Douglas J. Brouwer

Our New Testament reading for today requires a bit of an introduction.

Today, as you might have noticed on your worship bulletin, although I suspect that no one pays attention to this except me – today is a day on the church calendar known as Christ the King.

Briefly, what that means is that the church calendar has come to an end (as of today) and that we start over again next week with the beginning of Advent.

Not exactly earth-shaking news, is it? But I’ll tell you why I love this day.

First of all, there is so much great music written especially for this day. Every year on this day we get sing hymns like Crown Him with Many Crowns, All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name, Jesus Shall Reign Where’re the Sun, At the Name of Jesus Every Knee Shall Bow, O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing (thank you, Randal), and then a more contemporary song ... Lord, I Lift Your Name on High.

What all of those songs have in common is a particular way of thinking about Jesus – not as a great teacher (there have been lots of great teachers in history), not as a miracle worker (there have been a few of those too), not as a friend (though we do have a good song about that subject too). What all of those songs I mentioned have common is this idea that Jesus is **lord or king or ruler**.

And not just any ruler, but Ruler of all, above all, before all, all in all. On this day, the superlatives just keep adding up. Poets and song writers don’t even try to be modest. They give Jesus title they can think of.

And that leads me to the second reason I love this day.

What happens when we celebrate or observe a day like this is that we celebrate Jesus’ victory in advance. The game isn’t even over, so to speak. The votes have not yet been counted (sorry to bring up that subject). History is still not yet at an end (on my way in this morning it wasn’t over).

And yet – this is astonishing when you think about it, audacious, bold, cheeky, fearless – we are celebrating the final victory **in advance**, in spite of all the evidence that seems to suggest he won’t be victorious, after all.

So confident are we about how this is going to turn out – as a result of what happened on Easter morning – that we allow ourselves to imagine the day when Jesus Christ is finally acknowledged as Lord of all, on his throne.

And that’s why I like this day. And for more than 35 years, I have arranged the preaching schedule so that I could preach on this day. I have always wanted to be the one to say what needs to be said about Jesus.

Let's listen to these words of the apostle Paul in his letter to the Colossians, and I invite you to hear the power and sheer wonder of what he is claiming here:

¹¹ 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 ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³ He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. ¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ 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.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

What has always astonished me about the first days of the church in Jerusalem – in addition to the fact that everyone got along each other and that they shared all their possessions in common and that they ate all of their meals together – okay, all of that is pretty astonishing.

But what has always astonished me even more than that is how quickly they got it, how quickly the followers of Jesus went from being kind of dense, thick-headed, slow to understand, not really grasping the teachings of Jesus to ... these incredible theologians.

You read the opening verses of John's gospel – **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.**

So, you read those opening verses of John's gospel, and you think, **“Oh my, they get it. They grasp the significance of who Jesus was. They haven't invented the word ‘trinity’, but they are close. What they are describing, what John is describing here, is the Trinity. They are starting to understand. The church will not put this in confessional language for another 200 years, but they are already grasping the significance of Jesus' life.”**

But John's gospel was more than likely the last of the four gospels to be written, and estimates vary, as you can imagine, scholars love to debate this sort of thing, but these pieces of papyrus did not come to us with a publication date, so let's say the fourth gospel was written in the 70s, 80s, or even 90s. 90 A.D. Most bible scholars seem to prefer a later date.

And then, when you hear that, you think, well, maybe it's not surprising then that they were so theologically sophisticated. They had time to think about it, and to reflect, and to put the pieces together.

Right? So, think about this. The apostle Paul is writing this letter to the Colossians in the 50s, while he was in prison waiting for his trial. That's 20 years or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus. And he is writing very sophisticated theology: Jesus, Paul writes, **“is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”**

And I read those words, and I think: where does that come from? We believe Paul was inspired, of course. He wasn't working on his own. God's Spirit was upon him. Plus, he was a very bright and well trained theologian before he became a follower of Christ. But this is astonishing.

I can't emphasize this strongly enough – the words we heard today are extraordinary. Our jaws should drop, not just because of the beauty of the words, although they are beautiful, but because of the understanding and depth we find here.

I want to go through some of this with you, and if I can, I want to communicate some of the wonder of what we have here.

Let's start with what Paul says about Jesus' *divinity*. See, I don't even think this is the most astonishing truth contained here. I'm saving that for the second point I want to make. So, let's start with Jesus as God.

Paul doesn't begin with Jesus being a great teacher, as I mentioned. He doesn't begin by describing Jesus as a miracle worker. Instead, Paul writes that Jesus is the One with supremacy over heaven and earth, all of the power and might that there ever was or ever will be.

The Greek that Paul uses here – *ta panta* – meaning “everything” – could not be more encompassing. There isn't any part of creation that does not come under his rule. A to Z, top to bottom. He rules all of it.

Then, Paul uses a little word here that has become very popular in the computer age. And that word is “icon.” Previously, the only time Christians ever thought about icons was when we thought about those images that we find in an Orthodox church or home. To us, those are icons.

But Paul uses the Greek word *eikon* here, and he gives it a very particular meaning. And if you think only of those little images on the computer screen that we tap on to open an application, you're going to miss what Paul means here.

Jesus, Paul writes, is the *eikon* of God.

Now, an *eikon* can be either a representation of something or a manifestation, and Paul uses this word in that second sense. Please stay with me. This is big.

If Jesus were a representation of God, he would be like the image on the computer screen. The image is not iTunes, and it's not Skype, and it's not whatever program you want to open, but clicking on the image leads you to the real thing. So, what Paul is saying – and this is what leads me to say he is astonishing – what Paul is saying is that Jesus is the manifestation of God. He is the *perfect* manifestation of God.

Do you want to know what God is like? Do you want to get close to God? Then, look at Jesus. Everything we would want to know about God, everything that is important to know about God, is present in Jesus.

Jesus Christ, Paul is saying, perfectly manifests God to us.

If someone were to say to you – and I hear this all the time, in different ways, of course, though it always amounts to the same thing – **“I can believe that there is a God. I can believe that there was a creator. And maybe God even cares for creation. I can accept that. [It always sounds so generous and open-minded when people say this.] But Jesus. No. [These people say.] I have a problem with him. I find it hard to believe that he is God.”**

What Paul would say to that – because he wasn't as worried as I usually am about being nice to people, he never took a course in pastoral care at seminary, so he always said exactly what he was thinking, direct and blunt – what Paul would say to that, and what he does say here in this lesson, is, **“No. Nein. You can't know God, you can't really know God, until you look at Jesus. He is the way we understand who God is.”**

One more Greek word. Paul uses the word *pleroma* here to say that in Jesus Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. So, *pleroma* is fullness or completeness. Paul is saying you don't need any more. You don't click on Jesus to get to the God program. He is the God you are searching for.

I hear people say, and I'm sure you have heard this too – it was considered to be a heresy in the early church, as a matter of fact – I hear people say that the God of the Old Testament is so different from the God of the New Testament. The God of the Old Testament seems angry a lot of the time. He's always punishing people. And Jesus – I don't know – Jesus seems so full of mercy, compassion, and love.

And I would love to hear what Paul would say to that. He would be direct and blunt. He would say, I think, that we should take a harder look at Jesus. Yes, there was mercy and compassion and love.

But wasn't there also a deep concern for justice. Weren't there flashes of anger when people gamed the system, when people took advantage of others and exploited them. I think Paul would say to us that the God of the Old Testament is very much present in the person of Jesus Christ.

I want to move at this point to my other point. Not only was Jesus a perfect manifestation of God, which ought to be startling enough; the Bible also teaches us that Jesus was the perfect manifestation of a human being.

In other words, do you want to know what it means to be human? Do you want to know what human beings are capable of when they are at their very best? Do you want to see the best example of humanity that we have ever known? Then look at Jesus.

Jesus had a mother and a father. We even know their names. Joseph disappears early in the story, and legend has it that he died before Jesus became an adult. But Jesus had a mother and a father. His mother was with him to the end of his life. So, he was born, he had a childhood, and he became an adult.

And not only that, he had a hometown and a place of birth. Yes, he came to us with a gender. There was no mystery about that. He came to us with an ethnic group and a skin color, probably different from my own. The Bible doesn't disguise that either. He came to us as a person who had friendships, life-giving friendships.

He came to us, as I said, as someone who had mercy and compassion and love. In other words, he was fully human, except (as the letter to the Hebrews puts it) he was without sin.

And that, of course, is quite a big exception!

We try to love other people, and we fail. Often spectacularly, just to be honest about it. We try to have friendships, and we fail. Often spectacularly. We try to live exemplary lives, to put the needs of others ahead of our own, to look out for those who cannot care for themselves. And we fail. Often spectacularly.

And that's the thing, isn't it?

Jesus came us among us. Eyes, ears, nose, hair, skin, bones, a mother and a father who were not perfect, who nevertheless did their best to raise him. And he did not fail. He succeeded. And not only that, he succeeded spectacularly. No one else has ever come close to what he was able to do.

I want to mention one important characteristic about this perfect manifestation of a human being: He could be hurt. He was hurt, more deeply and more profoundly than any of us will ever be hurt. He was disappointed. He experienced grief. He was sad. He wept. He was letdown. He knew pain – the physical kind, but also the emotional kind.

And that too is one of the characteristics of our humanity.

We sometimes think – tell me if you think I have this wrong – but we sometimes think that we should be better than we often are.

When we hurt, when we are wounded, which is inevitable in life, we sometimes think that we should be better than that.

To be hurt, to our way of thinking, is a sign of weakness.

Or worse yet, it's failure.

We think we should be stronger than that. If we only had stronger faith, or if only we had more trust in God, if only my parents had only done a better job of raising me, I would not be hurt as much as I am or as deeply as I have been.

So, let me say something to all of the perfectionists here this morning, and I am guessing that we have a lot of them. Churches are usually filled with people who are ashamed of themselves for one reason or another.

If you are hurting today, or if you have been wounded along the way, if you have failed at something, to me what that means is that you are a human being. You were born with this capability. You were created in the image and the likeness of God. There's that word *eikon* again. You were created to be a reflection of God, to reflect his glory.

When I look closely, I should be able to see God's reflection in you. And you should be able to see it in me.

Something happened along the way, of course, and that perfect mirror was distorted and scratched and broken. But you and I still bear something of the image of God, no matter how difficult it is to see.

God made you and me like himself. God made us or put us together in such a way that we could be hurt. And far from an imperfection, that is a sign of our humanity. When we cease to feel pain, it's then we should worry.

I am a perfectionist, I was raised by perfectionist parents, and I regret to say that I have passed perfectionism on to my children. It was not a gene, as I thought, it was a way of looking at life. And I gave it them. And I have apologized to them.

And what happens if you are a perfectionist? Then you feel like a failure a lot of the time. You can appear confident and successful to other people, but inside you know the truth about yourself. That's how perfectionists think.

The good news I have for you this morning is that God created you to be a human being, and along with your humanity is going to come disappointment, sadness, letdown, pain, hurt, grief, tears.

And far from evidence of your imperfection, I would say that those things are evidence of something else entirely. They are evidence of your humanity.

And the promise we have – just to complete this picture – is that our image will one day be restored. The mirror doesn't reflect very well right now, but one day we will shine as brightly as the sun. Our reflection will be restored. And I don't know about you, but I can't wait for.

One day Jesus, the lamb of God, will be on the throne. And we will be made perfect. We will be made perfect human beings.

I don't know about you, but I think that is something worth celebrating.

Let us pray...Lord, we thank you for these words of Paul and for their power. They remind us that Jesus has become for us the way we know you. When we see him, when we listen to him, when we get close to him, we are getting close to you. Thank you for creating us to be human, to be able to experience all that life offers to us. And of course help us to become the people you created us to be – restored, whole, shining brightly with your love.