

Christ Church Vienna, Col 1

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

As many of you will know, I'm not employed by Christ Church and for my job, I work as an academic in historical theology at the University of Innsbruck. As part of that job, last week I was at a conference in Edinburgh in Scotland, talking with academics from many different institutions about the history of the church and the history of theology. I met a Hungarian colleague there, who's an expert on an early Christian leader and theologian called Amphilocius of Iconium. My Hungarian colleague told me a story about Amphilocius.

Amphilocius was summoned to meet the Roman Emperor and his son and heir. Amphilocius accepted the invitation, but he was suspicious of the emperor, because the emperor had a theology with a low view of Jesus. The Emperor believed that Jesus was just a normal created being, like you or me. The Emperor believed that Jesus was no doubt a good teacher and a miracle worker, but ultimately part of God's creation. Amphilocius was shown into the Emperor's presence. A line of guests was queuing up to pay homage. As each guest got to the front of the queue, they bowed low to the Emperor and turned and bowed low to the son. Eventually Amphilocius got to the front of the queue. He bowed low to the Emperor, then turned and walked back to the door.

"Stop!" shouted the Emperor. "Turn round, come back and bow before my son. Whoever dishonours my son dishonours me!"

Amphilocius replied, "Your Majesty, high Emperor, that is exactly how God feels when you think little of Jesus."

God is dishonoured, God is insulted, when we think little of Jesus. So, let's let the epistle reading tell us a bit more about Jesus. It's where Paul tells us in glorious detail what he thinks of Jesus. It's where Paul tells us who Jesus is. I hope when we've finished looking at this passage, we will see the enormity of Jesus. We will see that although it may seem that Jesus is small, squat and silly looking compared to so much else in our lives, actually Jesus is bigger than everything.

Paul begins by telling us that Jesus is the creator

*vv. 15-16*: "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."

Everything was made in and through Jesus. Everything. We perhaps think often of God the Father as creator and of course he is, but everything is created in and through the Son. God the Son is intimately involved in the work of creation. Everything was made through Jesus. The highest mountain, stretching into the atmosphere, dwarfing towns and cities, was made through Jesus. The smallest subatomic particle, imperceptible to our knowledge, except as part of a physicist's equation, was made through Jesus. The cry of a new-born child and the parents' flooding tears of love and joy were made through Jesus. The enormous, awe-inspiring stars and galaxies, bigger and farther away than we can imagine, were made through Jesus. The beautiful flowers of the Belvedere in summer sunshine were made through Jesus. Everything was made through Jesus. He is the creator.

Also he is the sustainer.

v.17: "in him all things hold together"

In other words, not only did Jesus make the world, but Jesus keeps the world going. It is Jesus who is keeping everything going, everything working.

*Pick up glass.*

Right now, I am sustaining this glass. If I let it go, it will fall to the floor and break. It only stays intact because I'm holding it. Paul says that is what Jesus is doing, invisibly, to the whole universe. If Jesus didn't do that, the whole universe would shatter like this glass. As the Biblical scholar J. B. Lightfoot put it: "He impresses upon creation that unity and solidarity which makes it a cosmos instead of a chaos." We can't see him do it, but he does.

Incidentally, that's why Christians have always been passionate about science – because science depends on an ordered universe, where things happen repeatably in the same way. Why does water always boil at a hundred degrees? Why not ninety one day and a hundred the next? Because Jesus is ensuring the universe stays ordered, like I was ensuring the glass doesn't break. Jesus sustains everything.

Then, in v.18, he's the head of the church, the one to whom Patrick and I must ultimately answer and the one who stands behind every bishop, archbishop, patriarch and Pope. It's exciting to think about what the new Pope, Leo, will be like. It's also interesting to speculate on who the new Archbishop of Canterbury will be. More importantly for us than either of those, we're all anxious to get a good new Chaplain for this church. But more important than any of those is the head of the Church, that is, Christ.

Later in v.18, he is first born from among the dead, which I think means that he is both the first person to rise permanently from the dead and first in charge of all who rise from the dead. Jesus does not only rule this world, he rules the world to come. He doesn't just rule over what we can see, but he rules over all who have died and all that is gone. When Jesus rose from the dead, he showed his authority over death. He shows that he is bigger and stronger than death, which means that we can look at death with great sadness, but also great confidence. Our own death remains a scary prospect, but ultimately a safe one. The death of those we love remains a painful loss, but not permanent one. We need to pray and support those we know in this congregation who have lost those they love, knowing that Christ is firstborn from the dead and king even over death.

Finally and perhaps most excitingly, v.20, he is the reconciler, or restorer.

v. 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."

When you hear the word reconcile, you perhaps think of a quarrelling married couple who make up or a friendship turned sour that is restored. Of course, reconciliation includes those things, but this verse talks about God reconciling all things to himself through Jesus. In other words, everything in this world, that is not as God wants it will be restored to how God wants it. Everything in this world that is not as God wants it will be made as God wants it and that will happen through Jesus. Because of Jesus, all that is wrong will be put right. Sickness will be gone; hunger will be gone; hatred will be gone. All that is not good will be changed, so it is good. This beautiful sunny weather will still be there, but the rising sea levels and suffering caused by climate change will not be. Our bodies will still allow us to walk and run and sing and dance, but they won't break down and get sick. Our cars will carry us wherever they need to go, but they won't claim the lives of young children. God is going to create a fully reconciled world through Jesus.

God creates through Jesus. God sustains through Jesus. Jesus is head of the Church and firstborn of the dead and God will reconcile all things to himself through Jesus. It is so easy to think of Jesus as a figure of children's stories, a pale faced teacher of pale platitudes about good behaviour, but this passage does not allow that. Jesus is not only so much bigger than our images of him, he is bigger than any image of him could ever be, because he is bigger than anything and everything that exists.

Preachers often end sermons by asking what the sermon means for us today, by making the sermon practical. But I actually think that misses the point of this passage completely. The point of this passage is to make us stop and think how great is Jesus, to stop and realise that the Lord Jesus is bigger than all the power, all the money, all the relationships, all the prestige in the universe. This passage doesn't so much call us to do something, it calls us to stop doing things, look at Jesus and say "wow!". It calls

us to be like Mary, not Martha, in the Gospel reading. Whatever you're worried about, Jesus is bigger. Jesus made the world in which we exist, he sustains it and will reconcile it. Whatever you're afraid of – it's a footnote to his story. Whatever you really, desperately want, Jesus is bigger. Deep down what you really want is Jesus instead. Whatever your hopes, whatever your fears, they can so easily tower over your faith like a skyscraper. Well, they do not tower over the Lord Jesus. He made, sustains and will save not only the church, but the whole world.

Glory to his name.