



(St. Mark A.M.E.Z Church in Chicago)

CHURCH ANNIVERSARY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, March 11, 2012

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Lection – Colossians 1:15-20 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 15) He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; (v. 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. (v. 17) He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (v. 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. (v. 19) For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, (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.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

In 1903 noted scholar W. E. B. Du Bois wrote: “The Negro Church is the only social institution of the Negroes which started in the African forest and survived slavery; under the leadership of priest or medicine man, afterward of the Christian pastor, the Church preserved in itself the remnants of African tribal life and became after emancipation the center of Negro social life. Today the Negro population of the United States is virtually divided into church congregations which are the real units of race life.”¹

The African American church is like unto no other worship experience. It is seamlessly tied to heaven, earth, and Africa. African American worship did and does much to instill a sense of “somebodiness” in its worshippers. An extraordinary preacher, the late Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor puts it this way: “We lived behind a high wall of racial limits . . . Every day we lived with reminders of what our place was—what not to say, where it was safe to be, and how to make life a little smoother . . . Any gesture that bespoke our desire for equality was saved for the black church.”² One of the Special Days in the life of the church that affirmed that “somebodiness” was “the church anniversary Sunday.”

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Colossians 1:15-20

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

One of the most celebrated days in the life and function of the African American church is the Church Anniversary. The church in which I grew up was in rural South Louisiana, and the church anniversary was an exciting time of year. A “Godly pride” was on dress parade. Ministries, auxiliaries, church clubs, and singers all prepared for that day with an enthusiasm that had an electric-like energy about it. It was a time for remembering and affirming who the congregation was, from whence they had come, and what they planned to be and do in the future through her founder Jesus Christ. It was an acknowledgment of their survival against all odds. Guest preachers and choirs were invited. A special theme was chosen. There were special colors selected and worn by the members. Friends and former members were in attendance. All of this was done in thanksgiving to God and to show to all worshippers “what the Lord had done in the life of the congregation.” For sure, it was a time for celebration.

The church of my youth, the Zion Travelers Baptist Church, Reserve, LA, like most African American churches, was birthed out of oppression and discrimination. Living founders of the church would talk of their struggle, how they had once been allowed to worship in a place granted to them by their masters. However, after Emancipation, these former masters regularly disrupted their worship services. Men rode into the Sunday services on horseback reminding them in very graphic and explicit terms that they had to be in the sugar cane fields on Monday morning. Tired of that kind of mistreatment, in 1910 they purchased their own church house so they could worship under their “own vine and fig tree.” It is out of this kind of oppression that the church anniversary became and remains a time of grand celebration and remembrance.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The city of Colossae may have never been mentioned in the New Testament had it not been for the Christian church there. It is not mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. The Apostle Paul did not start the Colossian church, nor did he ever visit it. However, he had heard of the faith and

witness of the Colossian Christians.³ Paul writes from a Roman prison to this church of unknown Christians, in a small town as they are experiencing a crisis.

It was a crisis that, if not dealt with, would have destroyed the ministry of the Colossian church. There was a heresy that threatened the harmony and purity of the church. This heresy combined various components of Eastern philosophy and Jewish legalism with elements of Christianity. Bible scholars call this idea Gnosticism. This term comes from the Greek word *gnosis* (KNOW-sis) which means “to know.” So Gnostics were those “in the know” when it came to God, Jesus, and the Christian faith.⁴ As biblical scholar Warren Wiersbe puts it, “they were the spiritual aristocracy in the church.”⁵ The Gnostics contended that they had achieved a spiritual perfection and that anyone who did not embrace what they believed was spiritually imperfect. They taught that spiritual fullness could only be realized through prescribed teachings and ceremonies.

The Gnostics believed that circumcision was needed for spiritual perfection⁶ and the Law, especially the dietary laws, would lead one to spiritual excellence. A system of rules taught them what was good and what was evil. Paul realized that these teachings would damage the very bedrock of the Christian faith.⁷ This Colossian Heresy, as some New Testament scholars have come to describe it, attacked the sovereignty and sufficiency of Jesus Christ and taught that salvation through faith was not enough.

A study of Colossians will show that Paul does not attack these false teachers and their doctrinal stance. He exalts Jesus Christ and shows his preeminence in four areas of the message of the Gospel: redemption, Creation, the Church, and his own ministry. The Colossians had become Christians because of the gospel message. If this message was wrong they were all lost in their sins.

Many biblical scholars have concluded that the Epistle to the Colossians is the most powerful letter Paul wrote. In this short epistle, the Apostle proves himself to be a master debater. When making his argument, Paul uses the vocabulary of those he considers false teachers. Yet, he does not use *their* definitions. He uses *their* words, but what he believes are the *true* Christian definitions. As we study Colossians we find words such as fullness, perfect, and complete, all of which were commonly used by the Gnostics. Over 30 times Paul uses the word “all.” He writes about wisdom, which was a key term in the Gnostic vocabulary; he has a great deal to say about angels and spirit powers also.

From its birth the church has had to battle erroneous doctrine. The first-century Colossian church was one that had to endure this battle. In the African American Church, there have always those who came forward presenting a gospel that minimizes Jesus’ role as the leader, head, and power source of the Church. There has always been the danger of having persons attempt to add or subtract something from the power or personhood of Christ. As King Solomon said, there is “nothing new under the sun.”⁸ The church must stand boldly and state that Christianity is not a mathematical equation; one cannot add or subtract from the gospel: *Christianity is Christ*. “For in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily”—in him dwells all the “pleroma.” All you need is to be found in Christ Jesus.⁹

To introduce the heart of his teachings about Jesus Christ, Paul uses the language of worship. He draws upon the fragments of a hymn that may have been familiar to the Christians at Colossae.

Paul reworked an existing hymn in order to emphasize the inarguable role of Jesus Christ in creation (Colossians 1:16-17) and the place of Christ in the church.

The hymn makes the following declarations. First, in all of creation Christ is and was and will be the first (1:15-17) because he is the image (*eikon*) of God, the creator of all things. Bishop William Rufus Nicholson of the Reformed Episcopal Church, in his notes on Colossians, suggests that “three ideas combine in this one word—*derivation, representation, and manifestation*; that is Christ comes from God, represents God, unveils God.” He is chief and sovereign of all creation. Therefore, to see Jesus Christ is to see God. He is the ‘One who was in being before creation.’ The terms first stress uniqueness rather than priority of birth order or time.¹⁰ Jesus is not only the image of God but also the agent of God in creation.

The Apostle also offers these captivating word pictures in Colossians:

1:15—“*Image*”—The word means “a likeness.” It involves two ideas. One is that of representation. Jesus Christ is the “icon” of God. He is the character, impression, and precise reproduction of God, a derived image.

1:15—“*The firstborn of every creature*”—Translated means ‘One who was in being before creation’; it stresses the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.¹¹ The Greek word used here is “protostokos.” The word implies two things: priority to all creation and sovereignty over all creation. The first meaning shows the pre-existence of Jesus. He existed before all of creation. Since he is God, he cannot be as the Gnostics saw him. In the second meaning he is the eternal ruler, the head of God’s household. Jesus Christ is supreme over all creation, including the “spirit world.” The Christian must believe that Jesus is God or Christian faith is hallow, misdirected, and meaningless. This is the eternal truth of the Christian faith.

1:16—“for,” “because”—justifies the title given the Son in verse 15, “the firstborn of every creature.”

1:16—“for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created”—“All things” whether material or immaterial were created by him; visible and invisible. The words “thrones or dominions or rulers, or powers” refer to both holy and fallen angels, to demons and humankind. “This passage is aimed at the angel-worship of the Colossians; showing that while they have been discussing the various grades of angels which fill the space between God and men, and depending on them as mediums of communion with God, they have degraded Christ who is above them all, and is the sole mediator.”¹²

1:16—“all things have been created through him and for him”—addresses Christ’s active role in creation. All things had their beginning in him. All things serve him. Creation is dependent on him. The Gnostics contended that the universe proceeded from God indirectly and that Jesus was only one of many of God’s emanations. Because the Gnostics believed that the physical world was evil, they contended that he could not have created it. According to them if Christ was God, he would be in charge only of the spiritual world. The Apostle explained that all the rulers, powers, kingdoms and authorizes of both the spiritual and physical worlds were created by and under the authority of Christ Jesus himself. Christ has no equal and no rival. He is the Lord of all.

1:17—“before all things”—that is prior to, whether in time or rank.

1:17—“all things hold together”—The Lord Jesus not only creates but maintains all stability and productiveness. As the all-powerful and all-holy, he spreads his power over all things everywhere. Nothing is left empty in his presence. He is the giver and sustainer of life. He moves all things according to his own appointment. God is not only the Creator of the world but God is also its Sustainer, and because God is the Sustainer of all life no one is independent from the Creator. We are all servants of the Divine and must trust God to protect us, care for us, and sustain us.

1:18—“he is the head of the body, the Church”—As Jesus is the head of his Church, he inspires, rules, and guides. He is the “center of unity and the seat of life.”

1:18—“The first born from the dead”—Already described as chief or sovereign of all creation (v. 15), Jesus Christ is now portrayed as chief and head of the new creation, the redeemed. This phrase has to do with priority in time. He was the first to rise from the dead never to die again. Paul shows how Christ is the beginning of the new spiritual life in the Church through his resurrection. The Death of Jesus on the cross exalts and elevates him to the status that was rightfully his, “Lord of all.” Because Christ is supreme in the universe we should give him first place in our thought and activities.

1:19—“For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell”—Paul now offers a grand climax to the previous statements—image of God, first-born of all creation, Creator, the eternally preexistent, the head of the Church, the victor over death, and the first in all things. In Christ dwells all the fullness of God as deity. The word dwell (*katoikeo*) is translated to mean “to be at home permanently.” All the divine fullness is at home permanently is the Lord Jesus, at home in the sense that this divine fullness was not something added to Christ. It was a part of his very constitution, and that permanently. In this verse, Paul is proving false the Gnostic idea that Jesus could not be human and divine at the same time. Christ is fully divine and fully human at the same time. When we have Christ we have all of God in human form. As Christians, we should not allow anyone to diminish any aspect of Christ, whether human or divine.

1:20—“reconcile”—not only were all things created “through him” (v. 16), but all things are reconciled (exchanged, transformed) through him. The term describes what happens when broken or hostile relationships between two parties are repaired, put right, or restored.

1:20—“All things”—as in verses 16, 17, 18, “all things” speaks to the whole universe including demons and fallen angels. The potency of Paul’s words should not be taken lightly. There is something cosmic about the cross of Jesus Christ. The universe has not been the same universe since Jesus died and rose again.

The Epistle to the Colossians is a challenge to the Church. Heretics still exist in the 21st century church. As D. L. Foster states in his article “Taking a Stand for Righteousness,” “The church cannot become so tolerant, relevant and ‘next-leveled’ that we forget that on the surface Satan and his ministers are attractive, engaging and persuasive.” It is the duty of the church to speak out against any kind heresy and exalt the “sole sufficiency” of Jesus Christ. There is no need for any other mediators. God sent Jesus Christ to die for us. His death purchased our salvation.

Every person who believes on Jesus Christ is saved and is a part of his body, the Church, of which he is the head. So, our celebrating and remembering on this grand occasion is two-fold: we celebrate the Great head of the Church now and forever and we remember all that each member of the body (each church) has done to stand with Christ and to uplift His Church.

Celebration

Christ is all. He is all we need. In Colossians, Paul uses the word “all” nearly 30 times to show Jesus’ superior greatness. It is a complete picture of the excellence of Jesus Christ found in Scripture. Paul declares that Christ is the Creator of all things, first-born of all, in precedence of all, in the preeminence of all, the fullness of all, the Reconciler of all, and the forgiver of all sin; Christ is all, and in all.

Christ is all in all. All reconciliation. All adoption. All authority. All assurance and in all else beside. Christ is the All.

Descriptive Details:

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: The invisible God; the firstborn of all creation; all things that God created (this is quite a list, be sure to take advantage of this fact); God being reconciled to all things because of the blood of the cross; and

Sounds: God creating all things; and the Church worshipping its Savior and head.

III. Other Sermonic Comments

Illustrations:

Napoleon Bonaparte on Jesus:

Napoleon Bonaparte wrote, “Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and myself founded empires; but on what foundation did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded an empire upon love; and at this hour millions of men would die for Him.”¹³

Rev. Joseph H. Jackson¹⁴ on the sufficiency of Calvary:

We do not need two Calvarys—one is enough. We can hear what it says to us, and we know full well what it does for us. The One Calvary breaks down the middle wall of petition between the soul and the Savior. Its redemptive power is just as great in the ghettos as it is in the homes of suburbia, and the vitalities of Calvary is just as effective for the vileness of the poor as it is for the lust and the pride of the rich. We accept no compromise and we seek no substitute, for the one transaction of Calvary satisfied all the claims against humankind . . . One transaction on Calvary paid the whole debt, and from Immanuel’s veins enough blood was drawn to give the needed transfusions, and from the eternal Son of God an abiding copious and abundant stream gushed forth for all the

weary sons of men, and he opened a fountain not only in the House of David, but in every hovel, and in every clime. We can join with others in singing with hope of that fountain—the cleansing fountain, the flowing fountain, the full fountain. We too can sing with the poet:

There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins
And sinners plunge beneath that flood loose all their guilty stain
The dying thief rejoice to see
That fountain in his day
And there may I though vile as he,
Wash all my sins away.

IV. Other Resources

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Notes

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2. Proctor, Samuel DeWitt. The Substance of Things Hoped For. New York, NY: G. P. Putman's Sons, 1995.
3. Colossians 1:4, 9.
4. Wuest, Kenneth, S. Wuest's Word Studies from the Greek New Testament, Vol. 1. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953.
5. Wiersbe, Warren. The Bible Exposition Commentary, Vol. 2. Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1989.
6. Colossians 2:11.
7. Colossians 2:20-23.

8. Ecclesiastes 1:9.

9. Colossians 2:9.

10. cf. Psalm 89:27.

11. Ibid.

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13. Napoleon Bonaparte quoted in a sermon by Dean Guptill, "The Nature of Love," 2010.

14. Jackson, Joseph, H. "The Sufficiency of Calvary." Annual Address, National Baptist Convention USA, Inc., 1969.