

The Cosmic Christ (Colossians 1: 11-20)

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Today we celebrate the last Sunday of the church's year with the acclamation of the reign of Christ, the feast of Christ the King. I think it's significant that our liturgical calendar is structured so that this celebration culminates our year. It means we are people who acknowledge Christ as our rule for life.

We know, of course, that Jesus is no ordinary king. In the gospels, his reign is portrayed as both fulfillment of Israel's messianic hopes and as subversion of traditional expectations of kingship. Yes – Jesus is Lord. He's the one to whom all rightly owe their allegiance and he is the power of God active in the world. Yet Jesus exercises no dominion in the usual sense. He came 'not to be served but to serve', as the hymn puts it, and this has profound implications for how we imagine God and God's action, as well as our own. All this is familiar enough.

But there's another dimension to the proclamation of Jesus' kingship in the New Testament. It's the claim that Jesus is not only the summit of human being and exemplar of the human vocation. He is also somehow at the heart of creation itself, as both its source and fulfillment. '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 ... – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together'. This 'cosmic Christology' as it's called – this sense that 'the whole universe is caught up in the Christ event'¹, and is being reconciled and recreated in and through him – this ups the ante on the 'kingship' of Christ considerably. How are we to make sense of this language? Do we relate to it simply as first century hyperbole – an extravagant, anthropocentric metaphor? Or is there something more going on?

¹ Iliia Delio, *Christ in Evolution* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), p.47.

Well, it's not easy to know where to begin with all this, but let me offer two lines of reflection I've found helpful. The first is drawn from the work of theologian James Alison. Alison has pointed out that one of the early consequences of the disciples' experience of the resurrection of Jesus was that it recast their understanding of creation.² That is, it recast their understanding of the source and basic energy of the universe. How? It's to do with their experience of Jesus as the *forgiving* victim.

Jesus, remember, has been handed over to hostile authorities and crucified. He's been deserted or betrayed by most of his friends, becoming the victim of a community seeking to re-establish its own order and equilibrium by means of a lynching. He is the scapegoat, the innocent victim sacrificed to placate the anxiety of the many. It's an old, old human story – a certain kind of unity and community is created on the back of the one who is made to be 'other' and 'dangerous' and so justifiably disregarded, expelled, even killed.

The difference here is that this scapegoat does not stay dead, but returns alive to those who failed and deserted him. No wonder they are at first terrified. Yet when Jesus returns to his disciples in the resurrection, there is no hint of reciprocity or blame – no payback or recrimination. There is simply forgiveness and the invitation to renewed, authentically life-generating relationship.

In the light of this experience, Alison suggests, two realisations dawn for the apostolic group. The first is of Jesus' deliberateness in letting himself be handed over to the mechanism of the lynch mob. 'Jesus in the gospels', he writes, 'shows perfectly well by word and by action that he understands this mechanism, understands the religious and political structures which depend on it and shore it up ...'. In fact, he (as it were) deliberately lures it into behaving according to its usual pattern. 'But he does so in order to reveal that it is not necessary, that God is in no way involved in the mechanism, and that those who are of God are born again into a

² James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: fragments catholic and gay* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), p.154.

form of social gathering which is in no way dependent on this mechanism'.³

Henceforth is given the possibility of human communities founding their identity and belonging, not by being over against others, not by creating scapegoats and outsiders, but freely and without threat. This is why the church is necessarily 'universal', open to all.

The second realization for the apostles is that, if this is how God is, nothing to do with payback or reciprocity, totally giving and forgiving, then this is the same power at the heart of creation itself. Most mythical accounts of the creation of the world involve some sense of order being imposed on chaos, of life brought about by sacrifice or the violent suppression of conflict. These stories, Alison suggests, are a kind of projection onto the cosmos of the dynamic at work in the creation of human communities through the victim mechanism. But if, as Jesus' resurrection shows, God's creativity and power doesn't work like this, then what becomes visible is an understanding of creation not as over against chaos, but as the flowing out of a vast, peaceable, life-givingness. Creation out of nothing and for nothing. The self-giving of Jesus was also, Alison writes, 'the givenness of the Creator, making available the entirely peaceful, gratuitous nature of creation as an ongoing dynamic in which we can become involved'.⁴

This, I think is the sense in which we might understand Christ as both the beginning and the end of creation itself, the Alpha and the Omega. In the light of his life, death and resurrection, we see the life of God, the energy at the heart of all things, as Christic – self-giving love. And at the same time we see the movement of all things as a movement of reconciliation, a drawing of all into one, the fulfilment of love. Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit priest and paleontologist, believed that 'Christ is the purpose of this universe and, as exemplar of creation, the model of what is intended for this universe, that is, union and transformation in God'.⁵ Or, as the letter to the Colossians expresses it, 'in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things'.

³ Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, pp.152-153.

⁴ Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, p.156.

⁵ Cited in Delio, *Christ in Evolution*, p.72.

This is mind-bending stuff. It's not a vision of how the world is that can be demonstrated by argument or by appeal to empirical evidence. Indeed, when we think of nature 'red in tooth and claw', and of what looks like the waste and violence intrinsic to the process of natural selection and cosmic evolution, then the evidence that we live, at bottom, in a 'peaceable kingdom' seems stacked well against it.

And that brings me to the second line of reflection I've found helpful. It's that this vision of the cosmic Christ – crucified, reconciling love as the source, fulfilment and meaning of creation – is essentially a contemplative vision. We can't know it first by our intellects, but only as we're drawn into its energy through prayer and our own vulnerable openness to loving and being loved. In this sense it is revelation, 'the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages' (Col 1: 26) made known to us by grace.

I said earlier that it's significant our liturgical calendar is structured so that the celebration of Christ as our rule of life culminates our year. I've been suggesting that, for the New Testament writers, this Christ is not only the subversive servant king of human community but the cosmic Christ who enables the transformation and reconciliation of *all* things. All this feels particularly relevant this year, when there's so much anxiety about the energies at play and the trajectory of our life in the world.

To say that Christ is Alpha and Omega doesn't mean denying the reality of division and violence. Nor is it pretending that everything will be fine, no matter what we do or fail to. It is, though, daring to trust that the energy of reconciling love is *given* – it's *operative* in and through our world, the source of everything drawing things always deeper into communion and truth. And we are called to come to know this love and this movement for ourselves – not as an intellectual proposition but as the source, empowerment and transformation of our lives. We're invited to be open to this reality, to be ready to receive. How? By letting down the protective barriers we erect; by prayer; by radical desire for it. The more we practice responding in these ways, the more we participate in the realization and release of Christ's love in our bit of creation, and so become witnesses to its truth. I think this is what it means really to celebrate Christ as sovereign, and it's how Paul exhorts the Colossians also

to live – ‘As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving’ (Col: 2: 6-7).