

22 September 2018

Mercy (Colossians 1: 15-20)
Season of Creation 4 (Pentecost XVIII)
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The passage we've just read has always been, for me, one of the most mind-boggling bits of Scripture. In fact, I've mostly found it not just mind-boggling but frankly incomprehensible. It appears to claim that Jesus of Nazareth, a single human person born at a particular historical time and in a particular geographical space, is the source of the very creation into which he himself is born. According to the text, he pre-exists and is the source of creation: he is 'before all things' and 'in him all things in heaven and on earth were created'. *And*, what's more, he's the meaning and the end of creation: 'all things have been created through him and for him' and 'in him all things hold together'. And this just seems to be a kind of category mistake. What can it possibly mean to claim that a human being *within* creation is the beginning and end of all the rest of creation? And how can it possibly be that a bunch of events within the human world has anything to do with the basic meaning of the cosmos itself, and with the life of insects, plants, volcanoes, stars and the magpie nesting in the tree next door? In our continuing exploration of the Christian doctrine of creation, our task this week is to have a go at these questions!

It's not easy to know how to proceed. I'm going to begin by outlining what I take to be the basic theological argument at work in and flowing from this text. You might struggle to accept it as 'the truth' of things, but I ask you to suspend disbelief until we've unpacked its logic a bit more. Later, we'll consider what it could mean to inhabit this way of seeing things and how it could affect *our* relationship to the life of the world. So – to the structure of the argument, such as it is.

Step 1: Jesus is 'the image of the invisible God' and 'in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell'. That is, his was a human life so 'shot through with the

purposes of God, so transparent to the action of God', that people came to speak of him as having incarnated God's very being. It's as if in him God's life is 'translated' into the medium of human flesh.¹ 'If you have seen me, you have seen the Father', says the Jesus of John's gospel. This is clearly an extraordinary claim to make of anyone, but it appears very early in the New Testament witness. Jesus is not simply spoken of as a great teacher, a messenger of God's word, but as someone in and by whom the presence and action, the energy and purpose of the Creator is embodied.

Step 2: If we buy this, if Jesus is the 'image of the invisible God', this has implications for our image of God. Jesus is experienced by those who knew him not simply as embodying God's power to heal, forgive and call into new life, but also as someone dependent upon, given *his* life by the one he calls Father. Jesus prays to God and practises obedience in all things. He 'empties himself' (Phil. 2: 7). Rowan Williams writes: 'In him there is divine purpose, power and action; but there is also humility, responsiveness, receptivity. Somehow, the divine presence in Jesus ... is working itself out in this humility and responsiveness, not just in power as we understand it'. If that's so, Williams goes on, we begin to glimpse that the reality we call "God" can't just be power and initiative'; it also includes receiving and giving back.² In other words, if you look at the life of Jesus as the manifestation of the life of God, you see there is both giving and receiving, there's relationality and responsivity. Here lie the origins of the doctrine of the Trinity – the gradual realisation that the life of God itself is intrinsically relational; God does not just have relationships, but God *is* relationship. The being of God is communion.

Step 3: if this is who God is, if this is what the word 'God' means, then the Creator's very nature is an endless flow of life being given, received and given back. And here's where it connects to creation. In Christian understanding, it is because of this everlastingly generative and self-sharing nature of God that the world exists. God did not have to create anything – creation is pure gift. But it's completely 'in

¹ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2007), p.57.

² Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, pp.65-66.

character' for the outpouring love that is God to make a universe in which there can be more sharers in love, more gifts and gift-givers, more grateful and joyful reception – it's an 'expanding vision'. In this sense, 'God's outpouring of love into the world in the life and death of Jesus' can be seen to be 'completely continuous with the creation itself'.³ It's the same love, manifest in different forms.

Step 4: This is how it's possible to say that Jesus Christ is both the beginning and the end of creation. The living love that makes the world is the energy embodied in the person of Jesus and it was before the world was; and his way of being in the world reveals the meaning and enables the consummation of creation, which is fully to fully receive and return God's love, participating eternally in love's generation. In Christian theology, the doctrine of creation isn't just a story about how things got underway, a myth of origins. It's a proclamation, an insight, a transforming vision that sees God in and through all things. Everything that exists is an expression of the being of the Creator which is 'the outpouring and returning of self-less love'.

Well, that's quite a vision. Is it true? What could it mean to inhabit it?

For the disciples and the early church, it seems this way of seeing things was a slowly unfolding consequence of what Jesus had done and enabled among them. In a whole bunch of ways, he'd led them to experience the essential and creative dynamic of life as gratuitous and ever-expanding love. Just think of some of the gospel vignettes: his practice of releasing people for life whatever burdened them or cut them off, and so enabling something new in and through them; think of how he insists that intimacy with this energy of love is available for all – how he refuses to play along with the religious game that says God isn't freely given (but we religious folk just happen to have access and so if you play by our rules we'll dole God out to you in small quantities). After his death, there's the breathing out of his Spirit which enables those who receive it to live in the world as he did, pouring out love, liberating people for life, breaking down the barriers to intimacy with the source of

³ Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, p.71.

things. All this, this whole way of being, is what gives the disciples the clue that the heart of reality, the heart of God is outpouring, gratuitous, creative and reconciling love.

We can experience this reality too. Sometimes, it's directly glimpsed in mystical experience – a sudden deep seeing of the luminous love at the heart of the ordinary. There are many such accounts. I recently read one by Eileen O'Hea, an American nun, psychotherapist and teacher in the World Community for Christian Meditation, who wrote of such an experience while waiting to cross at traffic lights: 'As I looked for the light to change to green I was swept up into a pure white light. Or so it seems as I write of it. However, the whole experience might have been one or two seconds and there was no visible, earthly light at all'. Nor was there a vision or voice or anything. Afterwards, life just went on, with all its vicissitudes, darkness and call to continuing growth. And yet, as she wrote at the end of her life, this one experience, 'the experience of knowing that God is and that I am and that I am held in love is the ground on which I stand'.⁴ Once glimpsed, the truth is undeniable. Thomas Merton experienced something similar though he also said 'I have no program for this seeing. It is only given'. But what he now knew is 'the gate of heaven of everywhere'.

It might not happen like this for us. In fact, mostly, our experience of this underlying reality of love comes, not in mystical moments but simply in and through our relationships with one another and the rest of creation – just as Jesus showed. I'm thinking of those times we let ourselves be fully present to another and discover that, when everything else falls away – our impatience, our judgement, our defendedness – what's just there is love. The more we yield to that love, the more we feel ourselves touched, expanded, re-created, and the more we're able to bear that love to others in ways that touch, expand and re-create them. It's as if we start

⁴ Eileen O'Hea, *Manifesting in Form* (London: Medio Media, 2011), pp.14-17.

participating in something that's larger than us all, and we know this is the truth of life, the root energy more real than anything else.

The modern Sufi master Kabir Helminski speaks of the whole universe as 'the electromagnetic field of love' – this is what Richard Rohr calls 'the unified field' and Thomas Merton 'the hidden wholeness'. I particularly love Cynthia Bourgeault's characterisation of this matrix of being. She calls it 'the Mercy', 'the very heartbeat of God resonant in creation; the warmth that pulses through all things as the divine Mystery flows out into created form'.⁵ The invitation of Christian life is to become more and more conscious of dwelling in this Mercy, letting it nourish us and so participating in its outpouring, generative love of the world, strengthening the life not only of our human neighbours but of our non-human neighbours as well – insects, plants, volcanoes, stars and the magpie nesting in the tree next door. And of this, we'll hear more next week.

⁵ Cynthia Bourgeault, *Mystical Hope: Trusting in the Mercy of God* (Lanham, MY: Cowley Publications, 2001), p.31.