

The modern world through Christian eyes
THIRDWAY

————— Colossians 1.15-20 (NIV) —————

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Taking on the Empire

Just as the Roman Empire overflowed with ‘graven’ images which served ultimately to legitimate the imperial captivity of the collective imagination, so our culture is preoccupied with images, which change constantly to create and sustain an insatiable desire for more.

The church countered the pervasiveness of the empire through richly evocative and culturally subversive poetry, which dared to speak of Jesus as the image of the invisible God.

This passage is such a poem. It proposes a vision and fires the imagination in a way as radically all-encompassing now as it was nearly 20 centuries ago. If we allow it, it could be a charter for our Christian cultural and political lives.

It is a poem about Jesus, who is the incarnate image of the invisible God – philosophical foolishness to the Greeks, blasphemy to the Jews, and just an arrogant Christian claim to the Romans.

The enthusiasm of the church for its image poses no immediate threat to the imperial regime. That is, until this poem starts to use the language of ‘all things’.

This is a direct challenge to a system that presumes sovereignty over ‘all things’. The empire – its aspirations, goals and ethos – is what gives life coherence and meaning.

Moreover, it maintains control by so captivating the imagination of its subjects that they believe it to be a force for salvation in history, creating order out of chaos.

Those were the pretentious claims of the Roman Empire, and they are mirrored today by many multinational companies, along with the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation.

This poem resists such imperial and idolatrous forces. While it is rich in its poetic allusiveness, it is not subtle in its conflict with the empire. Note that when the poem proclaims that all things were created in, through and for Christ, the author is at pains to ensure that the comprehensiveness of his claims are clear.

Paul is saying that Jesus, as the image-bearer of God, is sovereign over every manifestation of political, economic, scientific, technological or military rule – which are created in, through and for him.

In the context of Rome, to confess that Jesus is Lord is to confess that Caesar is not, and that we are not ultimately subservient to the structures, practices and ethos of the empire because we are subjects of an alternative kingdom.

In our contemporary context, this means that the ideology of economic growth does not rule our lives. We are not subservient to the demands of consumerism, ecological despoliation and every technological innovation.

We are committed to submitting all of our lives – including our economic aspirations, consumer habits, ecological practice and political involvement – to the One in whom, through whom and for whom all things

were created.

If we want to have liberated imaginations, we must allow the scope of this poem to set them free.

It counters the mute materialism of the modernist worldview with a profound personal cosmology. All things cohere in Jesus of Nazareth, a real, historical person, who is here identified as nothing less than the lynchpin of creation.

All things – every last particle – has a *telos*, a goal, a purpose. And that purpose is found in him.

No empire will tolerate such claims and what they entail. But why is the Christian community today not seen as much of a threat? This question leads to the second way the poem is pitted against empire.

Structurally, its centre consists of two loosely paralleled couplets: ‘He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church.’ We have already seen how the first – attributing pre-eminence to Christ – is subversive.

The second is an audacious and politically dangerous confrontation with the imperial ideology. It is one thing to say that Christ is pre-eminent where Rome is not, but it is another thing altogether to identify the locus of that pre-eminence with the church.

Paul subverts the rhetoric which claimed that Rome was ‘the head **the source and site of sovereignty** of the body’ (the empire itself) by proclaiming that Christ was. And the body is not the empire but the church.

The real sovereignty in creation is socially manifest in the Body of Christ, because this community is in touch with, subject to and nourished by the Head. Against all of the empirical and imperial evidence, Paul provocatively identifies the Church with the very reconciliation of the cosmos.

This leads to a third and final point. Christian hope for the transformation of culture is rooted in the comprehensiveness of salvation as it is evoked in this poem and throughout scripture.

If the gospel was not about the reconciliation of ‘all things’ in Christ, there would be little biblical basis for the transformation of cultural life. It is precisely such comprehensiveness that we meet in this poem.

But how is reconciliation accomplished? Note how the poem ends: God was ‘pleased ... to reconcile to himself all things ... by making peace through **Jesus’** blood, shed on the cross.’

The irony of these words is deep. Jesus brings peace – one that goes infinitely beyond the Pax Romana – but does so through crucifixion at the hands of the imperial powers.

This is the ultimate subversion. It is not imperial political, economic and military power that brings about reconciliation but suffering love.

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