

SERMON CHRIST'S EXPANSIVE PRESENCE

On the very first Vision Sunday that Gareth and I had after we became Co-Vicars (3 years ago last week) we deliberately chose 2 of the 3 passages you're about to hear from Colossians 1 and John 1.

The reason we did this, is because we wanted to establish from the 'get go' ... that our desire and passion, was to encourage, and cultivate a community in Christ, that had an **expansive** understanding of God ... as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The more expansive our understanding, the more we can see how this speaks meaning and purpose into our lives.

The more our faith is fully connected and fully integrated into every aspect of our lives.

As you listen to these remarkable words from Scripture that emphasise the **all-ness and everything-ness** of God and in the Eternal Christ, reflect on a significant question.

How should these words transform the way you see the world - live your life and trust into eternity?

READINGS

First New Testament Reading Ephesians 1:17-23

¹⁷ I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

²⁰ God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above **all rule and authority and power and dominion**, and **above every name** that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²² And he has put **all things** under Christ's feet and has made Christ the head over **all things** for the church, which is Christ's body, the fullness of him who fills **all in all**.

Second New Testament Reading: Colossians 1:15-20

The Supremacy of Christ

¹⁵ **Christ** is the exact image of the invisible God, the firstborn of creation, the eternal. ¹⁶ It was by **Christ** that **everything** was created: the heavens, the earth, **all things** within and upon them, **all things** seen and unseen, thrones and dominions, spiritual powers and authorities. Every detail was crafted through **Christ's** design, by His own hands, and for **Christ's** purposes. ¹⁷ **Christ** has **always** been! It is **Christ's** hand that holds **everything** together. ¹⁸ **Christ** is the head of this body, the church. **Christ** is the beginning, the first of those to be reborn from the dead, so that in **every aspect**, at **every view**, in **everything**—**Christ** is first. ¹⁹ God was pleased that **all His fullness** should **forever** dwell in the Son ²⁰ who, as predetermined by God, bled peace into the world by His death on the cross as God's means of reconciling to Himself **the whole creation**—**all things** in heaven and **all things** on earth.

The Holy Gospel: John 1:1-5

Prologue: Christ, the Eternal Word

¹ In the beginning the Word already existed.

The Word was with God, and the Word was God.

² He existed in the beginning with God.

³ God created **everything through him**, and **nothing was created** except through him.

⁴ The Word gave life to **everything that was created**, and his life brought light to everyone.

⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can **never** extinguish it.

Over the past week, I've been in a number of conversations where the same thought has been expressed by different people in different ways. It came up at our Youth envisioning night and yesterday at our Vestry Away Day.

The question of how we fully connect and fully integrate our faith into every single aspect of our lives, so that there's no area of existence in which we can't see the presence of God through Christ, at work.

As I've lived this past week, with these truly extraordinary passages of scripture and thought very deeply about the implications of them... this question has been turned up to maximum volume.

I have to say that I've found the themes of these passages, to be exhilarating, challenging and even confronting, all at the same time.

The sheer scope of the ALL-NESS and the EVERYTHING-NESS of the Eternal Christ confronts us with the deepest of questions. **How much do we truly believe these words in such a way, that should transform the way we see the world ... and then live our lives accordingly?**

If, as both St John and St Paul claim, that **4 Christ the Eternal Word gave *life* to everything that was created...** and that **16 all things were created THROUGH Christ and FOR Christ...** then we need to be sure of exactly what it is we're contemplating!

All things created ... means the universe, the galaxies, the sun and moon. All the quantum physic realms and the spiritual realms – visible and invisible.

The mountains, seas and rivers. All creatures great and small from Blue whale to butterfly. All plant life, flora and fauna. Music and art. All forms of biodiversity, right down to the microbiome that lives in your gut.

If we're taking this scripture seriously, this is what we're talking about.

All of these are somehow wrapped up in the mystery of Christ's expansive presence and our desire to live out our faith, **fully connected, fully integrated and fully embodied into every aspect of our lives?**

And all this, got me thinking very deeply about my own faith journey.

Most of you know (but not everyone) that many years ago I'd badly lost my way in life and was at rock bottom. I then had a profound spiritual experience of God and it turned my life around completely.

I now believed in a Creator God and that there was a higher purpose to things ... but I definitely didn't see Christianity as the framework to explore this more deeply. Which is the position of so many today. People are searching spiritually but not convinced by Christianity.

So, the big question I often ask myself is (especially in the light of today's passages, is ... **What difference did it make to my life, when I DID encounter Jesus Christ, at Alpha 18 years ago? How did I see and understand things differently?**

Well two quotes from 2 of the greatest minds of the last century have helped me articulate the difference. Firstly, this one from C.S Lewis.

"I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen:

not only because I see it - but because *by it*, I see *everything* else" C.S. LEWIS

Secondly these words from Albert Einstein.

"There are only two ways to live your life:

as though nothing is a miracle, or as though everything is a miracle" Einstein

This has been the difference in my life, after encountering Christ.

I believe in Christ because by Him, I now see the truth of everything else.

I now see more clearly the miracle and the beauty in ALL THINGS.

When Colossians 1 verse 15 tells that - **Christ is the image of the invisible God.** To see Jesus Christ is to see God. This truth alone, made me see the world in a completely different way. To live my life believing that in the teaching and life of Christ we are seeing the essence and nature of God in action gave a whole new meaning and purpose to life.

My faith went from being just a more spiritual experience - to a more connected, integrated faith. because this meant that God was involved in the fullness of our humanity. The blood, the sweat and the tears. The joy and hurts.

When these passages tell us that **16 Christ the Eternal Word was there at the very beginning of time** and that **"All things have been created through Christ and for Christ.**

What this tells us... is Christ is not only the agent of creation but in Christ, we can see God's original purpose for everything created.

Which means that our lives have a meaning and purpose. Both in the here and now and into eternity. This for me, was essence of what it means to have HOPE.

It also means that every part of our lives can be fully *connected, integrated and embodied*, in this meaning, this purpose and this destiny.

And what is this purpose and what is this destiny?

In Colossians 1 verses 19-20 Paul tells us.

19. Christ bled peace into the world by His death on the cross, as God's means of reconciling to Himself the **whole of creation. God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in the Son.**

The saving purpose of the Cross, is to reconcile the whole of Creation back to God. Note just how expansive this saving purpose is. Salvation isn't just for you and me, just for humans ... it's for the **whole of Creation**.

I love the way Eugene Peterson puts this reconciling purpose. He says ... ***“ALL the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies.”***

Have we always fully understood this?

I'm not sure we always have. Even though Jesus said right at the very beginning in Mark 4:15 ... **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.**

The more we understand the fullness of this good news, the more connected, integrated it is in our lives. Maybe that's why living in harmony with God's good creation hasn't always been as important as it should have been for Christianity.

Finally, in Colossians 1 verse 18 Paul tells us that **18 Christ is the head of this body, the church. We the church are called to be the presence of Christ in the world.**

This was another biggie for me when I first came to church.

I loved being part of this thing called fellowship and community and it's incredibly important ... but by looking at Christ, I could see that we also had a bigger purpose and a greater mission calling.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, **WE** can be the Word made flesh in our lives. **WE** can live a fully connected, fully integrated and fully embodied faith.

Back to that insightful quote by C.S Lewis... “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it - but because *by it*, I see *everything else*”

What's been exhilarating for me, is having my eyes opened up to see the truth and the miraculous that occurs daily. From the unfathomable mysteries of the universe, to simply waking up and drawing breath. The sheer beauty of Creation to the precious gift of family and friends, and even the unconditional love and devotion of our dog Tilly. Our much-loved pets are part of the ***all things*** created.

But none of this is easy. As the conversations I have this week have shown.

Connecting and integrating Christ's expansive presence into all areas of our lives is not an easy thing to do.

It's why Paul's prayer to the Ephesians for spiritual wisdom is so powerful.

Paul is praying that we can all experience the truth and the miracle of **a deeper seeing and a deeper knowing**, that will lead us into a way of living that's more fully human more fully alive.

And not just in the joyful parts but also the hurting parts of life.

AND I WANT TO BEGIN TO CONCLUDE BY LOCATING THESE HUGE CONCEPTS INTO THE VERY REAL LIVES of two Christians who passed away this week.



Two inspirational Christian people, who've enriched the world and their Christian faith so much in recent years, passed away. Jean Varnier and Rachel held Evans.

In both their lives we see 2 people who aspired to live a faith that was connected and integrated into their lives.

In both their lives we see the living presence of Christ. We see the exhilarating but also the challenging.

And the nature of their passing brings into sharp focus how we try to make sense of the Christ in **all things**.

Jean Varnier was aged 90 and had lived a full and long life.

For those who may not know, this is his story.

He set up his first L'Arche community in 1964 to create welcome and belonging to those who suffer with disabilities. Today, L'Arche has grown into an international organisation of 147 communities in 35 countries.

Varnier's profound insights into the value of community - human relationships and his core belief that everyone is precious in the eyes of God, clearly radiates the presence of Christ.

Probably the most well-known member of this community was Henri Nouwen, who gave up a celebrated life of academic prestige to go and work among the community.

Anyone who's read Nouwen's writings will see how his experiences of serving the disabled of the community had a profound effect on him. The main point Nouwen makes over and over, is that HE was the one who was most enriched by his engagement with the community.

And the presence of Christ lives on because so many have been the beneficiaries of the deep wisdom formed in Henri Nouwen through this experience.

The lasting legacy of Jean Varnier is that in communities of Christ's compassion **he made the invisible God visible for all to see.**

Rachel held Evans gives us the different challenge of finding Christ's presence in the hurting and the painful. She was just 37 with a husband and 2 small children aged 3 and 1yrs when she dies last week.

She developed an infection and the antibiotics she was given induced a reaction that killed her. The sudden death of Rachel Held Evans left many asking the questions that most of us have asked at some point. Why God?

This is the young woman who'd helped so many disillusioned Christians back to faith. Her insightful writings had helped them re-discover the Christ, who they'd always loved but had lost in their burnout from religion.

Her husband updated her condition as the doctors battled to save her and you could see by FBOOK postings, that thousands around the world were praying for her recovery. So surely these prayers for healing would be answered by the Christ who heals.

But it wasn't to be. And I heard the news just after I'd finished the 10.45 service last week.

So where do we find the expansive presence of Christ in these contradictions of life?

But like Varnier, she's left a beautiful kingdom legacy. She will have sown, seeds of Christ in the hearts of many and will probably touch other generations.

I choose to believe that in the grief and suffering of her family, the suffering Christ will be alongside them. That nothing can separate them from the Love of Christ and the love they shared with each other.

The kingdom qualities of kindness and compassion are always a sign that Christ is present in the pain and flesh of life. And in the outpouring of love and support that has reached out across the world to them... including raising money to help with a \$100,000 medical bill for time in American hospitals... we've seen the kindness and compassion of Christ in abundance.

Albert Einstein once again gave humanity another provocative insight with these words. He said that [“the most important decision we will ever make, is whether we believe we live in a friendly or hostile universe.”](#)

This question, is why I believe the most important decision we will ever make is about belief in the Eternal Christ.

Because if Jesus is the face of God – the exact representation of His essence and nature. Then the only answer we can give to that question, is that despite all the brokenness, division, hurt and suffering that still bedevils humanity... at the centre of the universe, has to be mercy and love. The whole of Creation may still be groaning but it's groaning towards restoration, healing and wholeness.

Jean Varnier – Rachel Held Evans and countless others like them, remind all us that there is a large choir of voices in the world, all in their own small way, singing this

eternal hymn of Christ. Their faith **fully connected - fully integrated - fully embodied into their lives.**

So how do these remarkable passages of scripture speak to you this morning?

How and why do they exhilarate you?

How and why do they challenge you?

Do you struggle to fully connect and integrate your faith into every aspect of your life and how can these words of scripture encourage you?