



Sermon for the Last Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 29: Christ the King
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A preacher was determined to scare his congregation straight one Sunday and he decided to preach about the end of the world and judgment day. At the height of his hellfire and brimstone sermon he shouted, “every member of this church is going to end up in hell if you don’t repent of all your evil ways!” Just as he said this line he noticed one man on the front row smiling. Hoping to wipe the smile off the man’s face he repeated the line again, even louder, “every member of this church is in danger of hell!” This time the man just smiled even more broadly, so the preacher said it for the third time “you’re all facing God’s judgment!” And this time the man straight up laughed at the preacher.

The pastor couldn’t take it anymore, he paused and looked right at the man and said, “friend, what are you laughing at? I said every member of this church is in danger of hell.” And the man laughed and said, “I’m not a member of this church!”

I’ll return to that thought in just a moment, but first I’d like for us to take a moment to look at our text from Colossians this morning. I have a personal affinity for this passage because it relates closely to the Thesis I wrote for my Masters in Anglican Studies at Sewanee. I wrote about the process that surrounded the development of what we know today as the Nicene Creed, and specifically how St. Athanasius of Alexandria was involved in that process.

This all took place in the 300s, in the years just after Christianity was no longer illegal in the Roman Empire. A debate arose among Christians as to what it meant to say that Jesus is the Son of God and the meaning of this passage we hear today from Colossians was a key part of that debate. Among the many aspects of the passage they debated was the line that says Jesus is “the image of the invisible God.” What does it mean to say that Jesus is the image of God?

One way to read the metaphor would be to interpret image as something like a painting. As you might look at a painting of me and recognize it as an image of me, so when we look at Jesus we might recognize him as an image of what God looks like. But there's another way to use the image metaphor. If you look at Lewis you might say he's the spitting image of me, his father. Those are two different kinds of imagery. The imagery of a painting captures my likeness but a painting isn't a human being – it's something less than human, it's colors on a canvas. It's not alive. But a father's son is the same kind of being as his father – I'm human and Lewis is human, he's an image of me in the flesh – and unlike a painting he's alive.

The ancient Christians were debating which kind of image Jesus is: is he something created to look like God, like a painting, or is he actually divine, being God as his father is God, the way a human son is human like his father? St. Athanasius and others pointed out that this text from Colossians goes on from saying that Jesus is the image of God to use other descriptions of Jesus that help us better understand what kind of image he is. The passage says that “in him all things in heaven and on earth were created” and “all things have been created through him and for him.” It also says that “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell . . .”

God is the one who creates all things, therefore, the Christians reasoned that if all things were created in Christ then he must be divine, that he must be the image of God the way a son is the image of his father. It was on this basis that they wrote the words that we say every Sunday in the Creed: “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God . . . of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.” That's straight out of Colossians 1 – “through him all things were made.”

Now, here's a question that you might be wondering about at this point: why would it matter? Why would it matter whether Jesus is the image of God like a painting or like a son? The reason that it matters is actually also found here in our Colossians text, because of what it says next: “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.”

If the only purpose of Jesus' life was to tell us about God and tell us what rules God wants us to follow, it *wouldn't* matter. He could be God's image the way a painting is an image of someone and we would get the picture – pun intended. But that isn't the only purpose for Jesus' existence. It's part of the purpose, but the larger mission of Christ is to bring about a relationship of intimate communion between God and humanity. St. Athanasius called it “theosis” in Greek – a word that means Christ came to make us not just obedient to God's rules but actual participants in God's life. Christ came to reconcile us as Colossians says, Christ came to bring

us into the heart of God's life as God's children. In order for Christ to bring us all into participation in God's life he must be of one being with his Father. He can only give us the life of God if he has the life of God to give.

Now, at last, we can return to the joke with which we began. Because there's one last aspect of the Colossians text that I want you to notice: the scripture says that all things were created through Christ and it says that all things were reconciled to God through Christ. Our preacher in the joke wants to emphasize insiders vs. outsiders – the repentant and unrepentant, the obedient and the disobedient. And our bemused listener in the joke also wants to emphasize insiders vs. outsiders – in his case he wants to emphasize church members vs. non-members.

But the gospel – the good news of God in Christ – doesn't emphasize insiders vs. outsiders, the gospel emphasizes how all things exist in Christ and all things are reconciled in Christ. The good news of God's love is the good news that the same Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who created us all have, through the Son's life as the man Jesus Christ, brought us all into the divine life as participants in God's life. Our repentance doesn't make us God's children, Christ has made us God's children, and our repentance is the process by which we stop doubting this truth about ourselves and begin to believe it.

We read passages such as Colossians 1 on this last Sunday before Advent – the Sunday we call Christ the King Sunday – because they help us understand what kind of king Christ is and what kind of kingdom he rules. He is the king of all creation, the one through whom all things were created, but he is also a humble and suffering king who endures the cross for our sakes. And his kingdom is a universal kingdom. It is not a kingdom of elite insiders who happen to have found the magic formula to get on God's good side – it is a kingdom that embraces all things, things in heaven and things on earth, and reconciles all things to God through Christ's cross.

I'll finish with this metaphor. Imagine that Lewis invites several friends over to our home for the weekend. Beth and I want them to feel at home there and to feel welcomed into our life. For that weekend our family opens up to receive them as our own. Why? Because Lewis, our Son, welcomes them in, bridging the gap between us so that through Lewis we are able to accept these strangers into our life and through Lewis these strangers are able to enter into our life. It works because Lewis is one of us and he is one of them.

So, it is with Jesus: he is one with God and he is one with humanity. He is the bridge between the created and the divine. In him we who were strangers to God have been welcomed into the life of God and found our true home in the life of the one who created us to be forever at home in his life.

Amen.