

For Christmas 1 Diocesan Service
Archbishop Lynne McNaughton
December 26, 2021

Colossians 1: 9-20

9 For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. ¹¹May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and 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.

We move from story to a prayer and a poem.

A bit jarring, this first Sunday of Christmas season, to move from the intimate focus of familiar story, baby in a manger, warmth of animals in the stall, rough shepherds, angels singing, expected songs, beloved images of baby Jesus, the next day to suddenly Jesus is 12 years old and in the temple, and very shortly into January Jesus begins his adult ministry at his Baptism. And the Colossians reading pushes us out, like a wide-angle lens, panning out wider and wider, to the scope of Eternity, from baby Jesus to Cosmic Christ, startling. It's a bit like the beginning

of ‘Horton hears a Who’, moving from a microscopic world on a speck of dust out to the edges of the galaxy.

Our text for this day is a letter to the Colossians, early Christians in what is today the country of Turkey; A PRAYER and a POEM:

First, the poem:

What we’re hearing is an early hymn, a celebratory hymn pondering the meaning of Jesus, who is this who came to live as a human in our midst? What is the significance of this Christmas event for us, not only for new first century Christians in Turkey but for us here, on December 26, 2021. In the Christmas story it says Mary “pondered all these things in her heart”; today we hear the results of the heart ponderings of early followers of Jesus and we are invited to ponder in our own hearts, the meaning of this baby.

It’s not about dusty doctrine, or dry theological explanations. This is an exuberant poem about holiness and mystery and joyful wonder. It is praise of Jesus that shapes who we are, that leads us to think about what God is up to in our lives now.

What we hear in this hymn is what we know from experience, as Richard Rohr says “Jesus and Christ are not exactly the same. Early Church theologians such as Origen of Alexandria noticed that the Christ was clearly historically older, larger, and different than Jesus himself.”¹ In the early Church as people tried to express the experienced reality that the human Jesus was present to them in their community after resurrection, they started to talk about the Word of God (capital W), or they used the intimate relationship metaphor of Father and Son, or they began to speak of Christ as the “Wisdom of God”. They used mystical language in the creed we will say in a few minutes:

“God from God, Light from Light, begotten not made....”

¹ This is a quote from Richard Rohr’s blog, which I had copied into my “commonplace book” a few years ago, so don’t have a specific reference for it

“Jesus, (the baby) was the union of human and divine in a physical person, in space and time. Christ was eternal union of human and divine” ²: Christ, the “second person of the Trinity”, existed *before* earthly Jesus, and *in* the earthly Jesus, and *after* earthly Jesus, Eternal. (therefore now); available to us Now.

Christmas stretch: the most ancient, timeless things of God are here in this baby.

The early church, as they were figuring out the meaning of who Jesus was, turned to the Wisdom figure of Hebrew Scripture, the personified Wisdom, a feminine aspect of the Divine – the earthly Jesus himself identified with Her,³ and this celebratory hymn that is our reading today uses to describe Christ is drawn from, and directly quotes several Wisdom passages from Hebrew Scripture: the Image of the Invisible God⁴, the Firstborn of Creation ⁵. Wisdom holds all things together.⁶

Gender-bending is not a new thing! Many early theologians did it, taking the feminine figure of Wisdom and applying it to Christ. The earthly Jesus was a man; the Cosmic Christ is beyond gender.

Jesus was bound to a place and a time, Judea in an era of Roman occupation. Christ is eternal. Recognizing this is to keep the Christmas story from being a past event- simply a commemoration, a nice memory; instead it becomes an invitation to relationship with God that affects our present and our future.

Christ is the “Image of the invisible God”; paradoxical poetry – helps us envision God who is beyond our imagination. As John’s Gospel prologue says: no one has ever seen God; it is Jesus

² *ibid.*

³ See for example: Mt. 11:19; Lk 7:35. Ecclesiasticus 6: 24-28.

⁴ Wisdom 7:26-27

⁵ Proverbs 8:22-23; Ecclesiasticus 24:9

⁶ Wisdom 8

who has made God known to us. Jesus is a window into the face of God, his birth as a human being is a demonstration of God's self-giving love and presence "in our midst".

This hymn also says "In Christ all things hold together." I find this a deeply comforting thought as so much in the world feels like it is coming apart.

The Wisdom hymn has a Cosmic scope: all, all, all, seven times in this passage the word "all". "In Christ *all* things in heaven and on earth were created, "Christ is before *all* things, and in Christ *all* things hold together". "In Christ *all* the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."

In Christ, God was pleased to reconcile *all* things to God. It is a poem of wonder, meant to be sung. The hymn piles up image upon image of the Cosmic Christ.

First, Christ is Liberation. In Christ, God "rescued us from the powers of darkness", repeat: the word "rescued" here is the same word as in Exodus – God frees slaves from captivity. Christ does the same work for us. It is part of the Human condition: we are enslaved to an alien lord – Whatever the current Pharaoh is.

To what are we captive? Where are we in bondage? Where do we long for freedom? Both personal and systemic. How are we enslaved to fear. To an old image of self? Or other's images of us? What cultural bondage? Perhaps a definition of "success" that enslaves us? Pressure of consumerism and spending power and gross national product? We're captive to a system that drives a costly exploitation of the earth. We're captive to a system where our wealth is at expense of the poverty of others. We are caught in those things and long for freedom. So what does it mean to say Christ rescues us from enslavement. Christ rescues us from the "Powers of Darkness" - powers of the universe beyond our individual control. This is lifelong work, of living into the transformation that God is working at to free us. Christ *has* set us free, Christ *is* setting us free, Christ *will* set us free.

And as this reality takes shape within us, as we live into that freedom; we have freedom for responsiveness, an energy which comes from hope. It is not a passive waiting to be rescued, but an active participation in the liberation that God longs for, that God has given us, a cooperation with God in this holy freedom: in the Exodus the people risked wandering off into the desert in order to escape slavery, and in the process, learned to trust God; so we also work against the powers that enslave human beings and the Earth, we collaborate with God in this work of freedom.

To live into the relationship with Jesus is to be rescued from the powers of darkness. We are no longer subject to the powers of darkness. We are free to be fearless. What does that look like in our lives?

The Colossians hymn goes on to say:

God has “Transferred us into the Kingdom of Christ.” Language in the Greek actually means “Deported us”! We already have new citizenship, new identity of Baptism, belonging to the Realm of Christ, we travel on a different passport. We are Beloved, and freed, and joyful.

The poem: meanings of Christ to ponder as we think about the meaning of Christmas.

And then this Prayer: (to be honest I’m not sure I’ve ever really heard this prayer before)

“May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from Christ, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, joyfully giving thanks to God.” The Greek grammatical structure here is both every *kind* of strength, endurance and patience and infinite *amounts* of strength, endurance and patience.

It is not something we drum up ourselves but a resource drawn from God in Christ, an abundant reservoir available to us.

These words have caught me, because these are qualities we need in this time! I have added this line to my prayers: strength, endurance and patience. The language of endurance

resonates for us, as we hear news of omicron variant rising, as we face the frightening effects of climate change, as we stare into the uncertainty of our future.

To endure: What does it mean to be people of endurance?

Dictionary: "Endurance is the ability of an organism to exert itself and remain active for a long period of time, as well as its ability to resist, withstand, recover from, and have immunity to trauma, wounds, or fatigue.

That kind of stamina, staying power, fortitude, a gift from God, from the God who knows what it is like to be human, because God came as the baby Jesus.

How are we to be people of hope acting out God's love for this world? The Source of our needed strength, and patience and endurance is God in Christ, the power of the Incarnation, God with us. As F.D. Maurice, one of my favourite Anglican Theologians put it: the Abyss of Love is greater than the abyss of Death.

God-in-our-midst, that Good News of Christmas, is a Bottomless reservoir of endurance. May this poetry and this prayer expand our imaginations about this baby Jesus, that God becoming Human is a mind-blowing, life altering source of strength for us. May God in our midst, the baby Jesus, shape us in Hope. May the joy of Christmas be a well of endurance.

I end with this prayer:

"May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from Christ, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, joyfully giving thanks to God."

Amen.

References:

Wisdom 7: 14, 27 Those who get Wisdom obtain friendship with God! John's gospel chapter 1

References: The Christ Hymn of Colossians 1:15-20: Drawing from the Wisdom Tradition in Hellenistic-Judaism [Leonard W. Andrie, University of St. Thomas, Minnesota](#)

Online from Luther Seminary Preach this week Commentary on Colossians 1:11-20

- 1 Sally Brown
- 2 Timothy L. Adkins-Jones
- 3 Mariam Kamell
- 4 Frank L. Crouch

Marcus J. Borg *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith*

The idea that one of the saving actions of Jesus is the Exodus paradigm of liberation from slavery, which fits the Colossians hymn.

Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, Hal Taussig *Wisdom's feast: Sophia in Study and Celebration*

Richard Rohr; various on-line reflections on **Teilhard de Chardin** on the **Cosmic Christ**

Walter Wink *The Powers that Be*

Elizabeth Barrington Forney: quoted in *Feasting on the Word* Year C Volume 4 page 329

Solstice Wisdom of Solomon chapter 7: 15