

“Christlikeness”

Col. 1:11-2

Today we crown the church’s year of worship by crowning again the Christ that rules our lives as King of kings and Lord of lords. The whole cycle of our worship across the year tracks the key markers in the life of Jesus the Christ. Advent looks forward to his coming—his first coming by remembrance and his second coming by hope. Christmas is the shortest season of all—12 days of Christmas, right? Epiphany celebrates Christ being made known to all the world. Lent invites us to follow Jesus on his way to the cross to learn again how and why love led him to suffering and death. Easter opens not only Christ’s grave but also our grave hearts. The weight of sin and death is lifted and we can laugh again, even breathe again. And speaking of breath, Pentecost tells us that Christ has put the life back into us by the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the wind of God that renews all things, including those of us that have had the wind knocked out of us by all the blows of the world. Then through the dog days of summer and cool nights of fall we find Christ reigning in the church and ordering our lives during what we call Ordinary Time, when nothing much special is happening—except of course the very miracles of life right under noses every day.

In his opening lines of greeting to the church at Colossae, St. Paul prays that they (and we) will joyfully give thanks to God the Father for the beloved Son, who is the agent of our salvation and hope of eternal life. And then he proceeds to compose or to quote a lovely poem to Christ, which may even have been an early Christian hymn. I want us to consider the beauty of those words about Christ today as a way of offering gratitude to God on this weekend of Thanksgiving. Preaching always has to do with the head, the heart, and the hands—with thinking, feeling, and doing; with the True, the Beautiful, and the Good—sometimes one more than the others. Most times in church we focus on the True and the Good, on what is right and what should be done about it. Today, I want us simply to enjoy and meditate upon the beauty of Christ by turning our thoughts of him like a diamond in the sun.

Christ is the image of the invisible God, Paul says. Whatever God is like, Christ is. In Christ the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. The word for image in the Greek is *eikon*, which we transliterate into English as icon. Now, Baptists aren’t big on icons, although we’ve make a preacher or two into icons from time to time. We’ve done that in Dallas more than once, don’t you know?! We have always been

afraid of turning icons into idols, worshipping the thing itself instead of the thing signified. But the Orthodox Church—whether Greek or Russian or some other national version of it—has a rich history of seeing through the surface of an icon to a deeper realm. If you meditate upon the face of Christ in a painting, for instance, you are being drawn not to the visible oil and canvass but through it to the invisible experience of the living Christ.

We have a powerful modern example of icons now with the advent of computers. If you go to your computer desktop, you will find an array of icons. Each one invites you to click on it and enter a whole new world that you would not have been able to access if you did not go through the icon. Click on the icon and an extraordinary program opens up before you that has been organized for you databases and photo shops and word processors that will help you make sense of numbers or pictures or words.

To say that Christ is the image of the invisible God is to say that by entering into relationship with him, you are going beyond him to God. You enter into the wondrous world of God's creative life. You become part of what God is doing behind the scenes in what we call the kingdom of God.¹

We are fond of saying as Paul does later that God was in Christ, that the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in Christ. But the converse is also true: if Christ is the perfect image of God, then Christ is not only like God; God is like Christ. The late Bishop of Durham, England, Michael Ramsay, put it this way: *God is Christlike and in [God] there is no unChristlikeness at all.* Nice. Big thought there. And the reason it's so big is that each of us to some degree or another fear that Jesus is one thing and God another.

Like the little boy who came home from Sunday school. His mother asked what he learned. He learned about God and Jesus, he said. And when mother asked what he thought of God and Jesus, he replied: *I think I like Jesus a lot, but I'm not so sure about his Father.* Well, if you worry at all about that, St. Paul and Bishop Ramsay (not to mention St. John and the others) want to assure you that if you have seen one, you have seen the other. If Jesus is love personified, if Jesus is forgiving and gracious, if Jesus is patient and merciful, then God is nothing else. God is not angry and vengeful and demanding, as if Jesus and God play good cop, bad cop. They have the selfsame character. So whatever beauty you see in Christ, you can celebrate the beauty of God at the same time.

But why should it be so that in this one man, Jesus, all of the beauty of God should

show forth? Many people in the world object to the idea that one human being should be elevated above all others. The whole idea of Paul's is objectionable that the whole created world was made in and through Christ and that even now it holds together only by his powerful presence. But let's look a little deeper.

When the Hebrews thought about how the world was put together, they believed it had to be God's doing, which meant there must have been personal agency. But in order to protect against God being trapped in the creation with us, they personified the Word of God and the Wisdom of God as if they were God's two hands making the world. God spoke and God shaped the world through God's Word and God's Wisdom. Similarly, when the Greeks came to see how orderly and rational the world appears to be, they spoke of the Logos, the logic or reason of the natural world that can be observed. This *logos* is also in every person, making it possible to comprehend the world.

And when physicists today contemplate the remarkable dependability of the universe, they use words like the LAW of gravity or the LAW of thermodynamics. Although many scientists want to say that things simply are as they are without going into why they are as they are, many admit that the odds of having such a beautiful universe in which human beings would be able to evolve enough not only to exist but also to grasp the world as it is—well, that's just too unlikely to conceive if it were not supposed to be this way. This is called the Anthropic Principle: the idea that the world has developed in a certain way for the purpose of being fit for human beings.

Now, whether you are talking about the Hebrews or the Greeks or modern science, can you see that if one human being came along that embodied fully the order and beauty of creation, if one human being were to have come on the scene of history that by his life and death seemed to bring order out of chaos, peace out of conflict, and meaning out of meaninglessness, wouldn't that suggest that perhaps the whole of the purpose of creation is met in this one man? If the world is made in such a way that human beings might develop, why not one man who perfectly embodies what is possible? This is what Paul is saying, I think. God's idea of creation in the beginning finds perfection in Christ. He is the true image of God and the firstborn of creation.

It's too weak to say as we often do that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Something is beautiful because it matches up closely with the deep structure of reality. A sculpture is beautiful not because a critic says it is, but rather a critic says it is because it is beautiful—that is, because its proportions are somehow right. Its

line and symmetry and perspective are accurate. It matches the way the world really is. A film is beautiful, or a novel, because the story makes sense and the characters are lifelike. Likewise, Christ is beautiful because we see in his words and deeds that he matches the way God intended the world and made it. He fulfills is all.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins captures why such truth means that we can go back beyond the way a person acts to whom the person is. In his poem *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, he says that all living things act according to their nature. They cry out *What I do is me: for that I came*. And he gives the example of a righteous person. Listen. *The just man justifies;/ Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;/ Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is--/ Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,/ Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his/ To the Father through the features of men's faces.*

The first place he played in our understanding was through his own face in his earthly life. And because Hopkins is right that we can know who he is though what he does, it drives us backward all the way to God and the beginning of creation, so that we can say that he stands at the head of creation even before he showed up in Bethlehem two millennia ago. This is like celebrating the Queen's birthday: she wasn't the queen when she was born, but because she was destined to become queen, we count her so from the beginning. We can go forward, too, and see that he is in charge of the future because he is the firstborn of the dead. He is the head of the new creation, also. He is living among us still. So now in every person that acts according to the manner of Christ, he may be seen. And he may be seen because the beauty of creation shines through the face of that person. Thus Christ plays in a thousand places.

The sweet, almost fable-like new movie *August Rush* gives us a picture of this. An orphan boy is the product of the union of two musical parents. Neither parent knows he is alive for the first 12 years of his life, since the mother's father secretly forged her signature without her consent after his birth in order to protect her career. She thought the baby had died. The father never knew he had a son. The boy always felt like he heard the music of the spheres in his head, as if the world was alive in song through every sound. He believed that if he could someday, somehow learn to play and compose music so that others could hear what he heard, somehow would hear, too, and they would find him. He succeeds in ways beyond his imagining, and in the process he brings people joy and brings people together at the same time—his parents included. At one point in the film, August is asked what he wants to be when he grows up. *Found*, he says.

And I wonder if that isn't what Christ wants more than anything else—to be found. And not just in the church, but everywhere and in everything and by everyone.

Jesus heard the music of creation to the point where those who knew him could not help but say that he himself is the music, the music was made by him and continues through him even now. All that is beautiful, then, is beautiful because of its Christlikeness. Christ is beautiful. Christ is Beauty. And that is the greatest thing to be thankful for.

ⁱ Thanks for this analogy to Fred Anderson in his sermon *Image of the Invisible*, Day 1 (<http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=speakers&sid=189>).