

## Second before Lent: God wants relationship with us

I don't know about you, but for me the Christian life can be tough to live. It's hard work being daily aware of how far short I fall in Christian character: other drivers on the road! Vitriolic debates in church. Misogyny. All bring out less than Christian attitudes! I also struggle with my wealth. I don't feel wealthy and I can worry about retirement, but I am wealthy compared with most people in the world. Then I'm overwhelmed by the sense of what the church could and should be and how little we resemble that healing, life-giving, gentle, fun, world changing community: my part in wanting a comfortable rather than radical church.

The hymn of praise to God in Colossians cuts across our collective, human overwhelm as we're tossed hither and thither in the crosscurrents of life. It's all about him! It's all about Jesus! When we begin with God, everything else begins to gain perspective. It's what Ps 73, my favourite, reminds us.

In Colossae, a cosmopolitan city of many cultures and faiths, Christians were face to face with powerful, established religions which challenged their faith in the God-human Jesus. They were face to face with exciting new religions which challenged their faith in Jesus. The hymn of praise to Jesus, which Paul quotes in his letter, is a hymn which somehow managed to muddy the waters enough to permit a comfortable mixing of some of these ideas with the Christian faith so that followers of Jesus don't stand out so much, don't suffer the consequences of their unequivocal commitment to Jesus, the God-human Son of God, who was crucified, died and buried but who rose again on the third day so that all humanity may be in relationship with God.

Ever feel that temptation? To want to downplay aspects of our Christian faith that seem strange, unbelievable, offensive to others? We keep quiet when people are railing on about race, gender in ways that offend us, but we don't say anything. We don't put our heads above the parapet. We keep quiet when people criticise the Bible as a sacred text, because we too have questions about aspects of it. We keep quiet when we hear people too literally applying biblical texts in ways which lack compassion and love.

There is a strong argument that Paul has edited the contemporary hymn adding in words and phrases which define the core of the Christian understanding of Jesus in the face of local temptations to fudge. His editions are on the nature and work of Jesus: Jesus is the image of the invisible God, Jesus was at the beginning before all things and Jesus is the first born from the dead. There is no one or nothing which can compare. God is fully Jesus and Jesus fully God.

God's intention is relationship. God's nature is relationship – loving, supportive, uncompetitive, perfect working together relationship. A commentator said that creation was made as a place for relationship with God. A relational God out of love and joy *made* in order to share wonderful relationship. Creation is a place where that happens. Humanity bears that relational image of God to share the joy of relating with God, with others, with all creation. But God is spirit and to relate to flesh and blood God had to share that flesh and blood nature, in Jesus. God, in Jesus, became human, to share fully in God's creation theatre of relationship.

I can glimpse that divine conversation: "If we make so that what we make can share our life, our love, our joy, what we make will be different from us, separate from us. It will be made and we

are not made. How will they join our life and love and joy? One of us will have to become one of them to make a way for them into the centre of our life...” and the conversation would go on as to when and where they might do this.

All creation exists because God generously wanted to share relationship. Jesus came as God and flesh and blood ‘to reconcile all things to himself (to God).’

It is important that we understand that ‘all things’ will be reconciled to God in Christ. The hymn expands this to ‘all things whether things on earth or in heaven.’ All those ancient and other religions and philosophies are not God. God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, is prior to all things and all things will be reconciled to God through Jesus, God-human. That is a sure foundation for us when the waves and currents of broken politics and economics, of psychology and sociology and religion pull us down and threaten to overwhelm us. God came to us, in Christ, to reconcile all things to relationship with God. The root of that word ‘reconcile’ is to make different. God has come in Christ to make things different from how they are now. Now they are adrift from God. God coming into the world in Christ will anchor all things back to the Source.

Paul adds to the hymn these words: ‘so effecting peace by the blood of his cross.’

Here was another stumbling block. God became human and God was killed!?! This was repugnant to many philosophies and faiths. Philosophies and faiths formed around ideas about power. Here was God motivated by love and desire for all things to enjoy relationship, relationship with God and loving relationship among all things. It is love that motivates God in Christ to submit to death. God was prepared to share even death, that flesh and blood experience, in order to transcend it.

Jesus’ life was given up by the shedding of his blood on an instrument of torture. His mission and life were not understood; were perceived as a threat by the religious leaders of his time; and a minor provincial nuisance by the political powers. That God should die was inconceivable. But God had to die to share our flesh and blood experience. The truly astounding thing is that God raised Jesus from that death to new life thus shattering all barriers to relationship and making a way for us and all creation to share in the life of God.

We the church, the body of Christ, embody in our life hope for relationship. We live together and remind one another that God was among us, sharing our created experience in Christ; that in Christ, death, all that separated us from relationship, was swept away; and that by our baptism we share in Christ’s resurrection: we are connected to the divine life of God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer through Christ the head of the body the church (that word Church is another of the author’s additions, but no time to explore that today!)

Being lifted out of the cross currents of life by this hymn of praise to Christ Jesus can restore perspective and hope. Perhaps that’s what we need to build into our lockdown lives, moments of gathering together to be reminded of God’s perspective: that from God’s perspective all things make sense; all things are restored to relationship, in Christ who is our life and our salvation. How about making space and time for thinking about relationship as God’s longing and desire. How about making space for relationship with God, with each other and with God’s world this Lent?

God longs for relationship with us and with all things, so much so that Jesus has drawn us by his life and death and resurrection into the life of God. Let’s enjoy the journey of discovery!