

Not in Service to Empire (Part Two)

“The image of the invisible God”

Reflection 62 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Scripture then from Genesis to Revelation is written under the shadow of empire and consistently and powerfully resists imperial ideology. At first it seems strange that it's only in the last several generations that biblical scholars have recognized this. But it's really not so strange. Until the mid-twentieth century, in our blindness and arrogance, we valorized vast colonial empires as the structures of civilization itself. Even here in America.

Nevertheless the writers of Scripture were always more realistic, and in this light we now come to Colossians 1:15-20 which is, in fact, a poem:

He [Christ] is the image
of the invisible God
the firstborn of all creation
for in him were created all things
in heaven and earth
things visible and invisible
whether thrones or dominions
whether rulers or powers
all things have been created through him and for him

And he is before all things
and in him all things hold together
And he 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
for in him all the fullness
was pleased to dwell
and 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

[As translated by N.T. Wright cited in *Colossians Remixed*, 83]

Now, in a world filled with images of Caesar who is taken to be the son of God, where he is proclaimed pre-eminent over all things, where he is considered “equal to the beginning of all things,” where he is viewed as the head of the body politic, where he is said to bring all things together, this poem is subversive to the point of treason. Its Colossian readers or listeners would have known the thrones, powers, rulers and authorities referred to the empire, referred to imperial thrones, imperial powers, imperial rulers and imperial authorities.

So that was the context then. That is what readers would have been heard then. What are we to hear today? Many things, but first this –

Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth, at first sight a village carpenter, is (1:15) the image of the invisible God. To see what God is like look at Jesus.

He is (verses 15b-16) the firstborn (that is, pre-eminent) over all creation. For by him all things were created, including thrones, powers, rulers and authorities, including nations, corporations, religious institutions, economic systems, hospitals and universities, and sports empires, all the things we just might be tempted to give our ultimate allegiance to. All things were created by him and for him. He is not only the agent of creation, but also the reason for creation and the goal. He is the goal toward which all creation – knowingly or unknowingly – seeks to rise.

He is (verse 17) before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is life's unifying principle. Whatever coherence, whatever real connectedness we experience in life, we will find in him, not in Caesar, and not in any imperial pretensions of our own day.

So Scripture says a lot about EMPIRE. Empires by their very nature try to control everything. To use a contemporary word, they are always totalizing. They are built upon centralized power. They are run by gender, race and class hierarchies. They are sustained by economic and military control. They are legitimated by powerful cultural myths. And they indoctrinate their subjects by innumerable images that capture the public imagination. In Paul's day, images of Caesar were everywhere: in the market, the city square, the public baths, the theater, the gymnasium and the temples, on the coins, even in affluent households, in the atrium, on jewelry, on utensils, even on paintings on the wall. The whole rhythm of life was shaped by the empire, by its feasts and festivals, by its athletic games and gladiatorial fights.

But empires are, as Paul says in Colossians 1:13, also dominions of darkness. They are always built on the backs of exploited labor, in Paul's day, slaves who made up, it's estimated, 25% of the empire's population. They rob their subjects of personal initiative. They silence voices of dissent. They stifle creativity. And so they drive many of their subjects into the darkness of misplaced sexuality and addiction. Empires are where "powers and authorities" reign.

The alternative Paul says is "the kingdom of the beloved Son" which rescues us from the dominion of darkness. It's nothing less than a comprehensive vision for the reconciliation of the whole world, the kingdom of light, a whole new world. It accomplished this by death on a cross when Jesus took evil upon himself until it had totally exhausted itself.

This kingdom of the beloved Son refuses to engage the empire on its own terms. It refuses to let enemies be enemies, to let debtors be debtors. It's a kingdom established on the principle of forgiveness where violence is not defeated by yet more violence but by sacrificial love. It's a kingdom of loving inclusion where victory is won not by imposing violence on others, but by the beloved Son absorbing the violence of others. Instead of aping the enemy, Christ loves and forgives.

In this kingdom we trust God and the life that he gives us. We make amends when we have done wrong. We forgive and we quit judging others. We love others as ourselves. We live simply so that we might give generously. We put our life on the line for others. We learn gratitude and we celebrate with overwhelming joy.

We are called then to THE ONE in whom all things hold together. And it is only in Christ that all things hold together.

Churches that focus on themselves, on their own power structures, on their own self-preservation, on their own “perfect” doctrine and practice, will not hold together.

Nations that rely on force of arms, on the power of their economy, on their patriotic mythology, on the cult of national superiority, will not hold together.

Lives focused on career, on lands and real estate, on lifestyle and education and entertainment, will not hold together.

Marriages will break up. Friendships will fade. Dreams will die. Corporations will collapse, sometimes with astonishing speed, devalued to almost nothing overnight. Nations will come and go. And empires are emphatically no way to a new world in the morning.

But in Christ all things really do hold together. However confusing and complicated things are, however painful your memories, however deep your feelings run, however dark your fears, in Christ all things hold together. And if we get this right, then , then we will be part of God’s ever-new creation.

– Dale Pauls