

Christ

With what Paul wrote about Christ in Colossians 1:15-23 we could end our reflections on the story we find ourselves in; it would be a good ending, but we have a little more to do. I begin looking at the text through the lens of a poem by W.B. Yeats called “The Second Coming,” written in the aftermath of World War I and serving as a keynote for the entire twentieth century.

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.”

For all of us there is sooner or later a sense of things falling apart, things we deeply care about. People we deeply care about are gone. Families break up. Friendships end; sometimes they’re just discarded. Jobs are lost. Cities fall apart. Nations decline. Sometimes we feel that our very souls are falling apart.

But even then, especially then, good news is found in words written to a small group of Christians in a backwater city 1900 years ago, in Paul’s letter to the Colossians, specifically in 1:17, “[Christ] is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” The longer I live, the more confident I am that this is true, that in Christ all things hold together, and in no one else, and nothing else.

The text is addressed first to a church in the city of Colossae, a small town in central Turkey in a river valley 100 miles east of Ephesus. The Greek historian Herodotus tells us that in the fifth century BC Colossae was a great city, but by Roman times it was considerably smaller; it was a city in decline. The first-century geographer Strabo calls it “a small village.” It was probably the least important of all the cities to which Paul wrote a letter. And yet Paul wrote to this church in AD 60 or 61, we believe from Roman imprisonment, one of the most important documents ever written by anyone. He was addressing a very large spiritual problem in the Colossian church, a problem that concerned him so much that he would write from house arrest in Rome to a church he had apparently never personally visited. He describes their religion as “forced piety” (2:23 in the words of the New English Bible). It had a sense of coercion to it. Leaders were telling people what they had to do and insisting that they do it. It confused the simple, heartfelt message of Jesus with the enforcing of externals (2:16-17, 20-22), what you eat or drink, or what day you celebrate. Its slogans were: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” And Paul warns his readers that this approach to religion lacks any value in making us better people. It doesn’t change behavior. It has no real power. The Colossian church is still plagued by lust, greed, anger and slander (3:5-8) because the power of the gospel is not found in all these prohibitions. It’s found in Christ, in this story, in this person. Christ is the center, not “issues,” or even worship habits or externals,

which brings us back to our text, that 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 (1:15-16) the firstborn (that is, pre-eminent) over all creation. For by him all things were created. 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 (1:17) 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. Moreover, he is (1:18) the head of the body, the church, the guiding spirit, the light, of the church, the mind that directs, the will that governs, the heart that beats within the life of the church. And in him (1:19) God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell, or as Paul writes in 2:9, "In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form." Here is the fully human, visible revelation of God, here in Jesus of Nazareth! In him God became human and lived out life in the midst of us.

We learn from Jesus' life and teaching that God is the friend of tax-collectors and sinners! God is like a shepherd who will leave the ninety-nine sheep and go after the one lost sheep until he finds her! We learn that God is a father who runs to meet us when we are still a long way off, passionately embraces us, and throws a feast in our honor. God is one who goes home with the despised Zacchaeuses of the world, and he is one who forgives the very ones who crucify him. And all this Paul tells us in verse 23 is the gospel, the Good News. At the heart of God is this irrepressible, never-quitting, never-failing love so evident in Jesus of Nazareth.

But what I most want to do with our text is to focus on the implications of verse 17, "In [Christ] all things hold together," all things, or in the words of Ephesians 1:10, "all things in heaven and on earth." And I want to suggest an idea to think about. Christ is the story we find ourselves in. In our brightest days and darkest nights, it was always Christ. When we never guessed it, when we never expected it, when we thought our lives were about something else, it was still Christ. The story is always Christ. But might not his story also have room for all the other stories of the world? The story of Moses, and Mohammed, and Buddha, the Vedas and the Mahabharata and Ramayana, the genius of that great spiritual classic, the Tao Te Ching, and the timeless wisdom of Native American spirituality. Instead of dismissing and ridiculing all the other stories, perhaps we could respect them and as we have time listen to them and see that just maybe they all somehow point to Christ. The star has always shone in the east.

So maybe we could dare to tell the story we find ourselves in for Jews, for Muslims, for the East, and for tribal faiths. Maybe we could speak of Christ as the Eternal Tao. Maybe more and more people will find that the story we find ourselves in is large enough for all the other stories of the world; that it might be very good for Christians to deeply respect the Qur'an so that one day Muslims will deeply respect the ways of Jesus; that it might be good to realize that there are spiritual people everywhere who aspire to a sense of the sacred, to overcoming self-centeredness and cravings, to seeing things as they are, to mindfulness and meditative practice, to letting go of unthinking judgments—those likes and dislikes—that distort our ability to see connections clearly, to letting go and

approaching life with trust and gratitude and compassion, to a generosity that is all-embracing and leaves no one behind, to personal rebirth, to being reborn, to experiencing forgiveness and discovering within themselves the Spirit of God.

That's for times ahead. For now, let's just accept that it is in Christ that all things hold together. Churches that focus primarily 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 primarily 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 primarily on career, on lands and real estate, on lifestyle and education and entertainment, will not hold together. 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. Go back to Christ, to his spirit (which the church gets right sometimes and, oh, so wrong, others), to the way he treated people, the way he understood and cared about them, to the love he feels for you, the way he understands you, the way he seeks only to inspire and raise you up, how he wants you to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is his love, how he desires to spare you from the Hell that rages in your own soul, how he wants to liberate you and release you into abundant joy, the way he wraps you up in a love that never, never lets you go. May you trust this. May you let go of the pain, and trust this—that in Christ all things hold together, and all is well, and all shall be well.

—Dale Pauls