

The Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Deuteronomy 30:10-14
<i>Response</i>	Turn to the Lord in your need, and you will live.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 69:14, 17, 30-31, 33-34, 36, 37
<i>Second Reading</i>	Colossians 1:15-20
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Your words, Lord, are Spirit and life; you have the words of everlasting life.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 10:25-37

The 15th Sunday for Ordinary Time for Year C brings us to a new epistle of Paul that the Church begins to journey through in its second readings, and that's Paul's letter to the Colossians. Now the letter to the Colossians is a brief epistle, but it's very significant. It's very powerful. And it's significant in a number of ways or for a number of reasons. The first point I would like to make, just by way of introduction to it, is that Colossians is one of the so-called prison epistles. So it's one of the Pauline letters in the New Testament that Paul writes while he is in prison. So for example, the letter to the Philippians, letter to the Ephesians and Philemon are also certain letters of Paul that are written during his imprisonments, while he's got some free time on his hands, but he also wants to reach out to various churches, various local churches, like the church at Colossae or the church at Ephesus in order to give them teaching in order to give them instruction.

So Colossians is one of those privileged set known as the prison epistles of Paul. You could also describe Colossians as one of the polemical epistles of Paul. So certain epistles of Paul are written to correct errors of Paul's opponents. So for example, the most polemical epistle of Paul is the letter to the Galatians, where Paul's writing against this group known as the circumcision party, which is insisting that Gentiles have to be circumcised in order to be saved. And Paul doesn't mince words with his opponents. He corrects that error and gives us as a correction to that error, the six chapters of the letter to the Galatians, which is also clearly his angriest out of all his letters. You can really feel the passion with which he is responding to and correcting this particular error. In the letter to the Colossians, there are some definite errors among Paul's opponents regarding both

the person of Christ, as well as the nature and the role of the angels in creation and in redemption.

So in this case, though, the third aspect of the letter to the Colossians that I'd want to highlight is its cosmic character. So if you look at each of the letters of Paul, there's something distinctive about each one of them. So for example, if Philippians is Paul's most joyful letter or Second Corinthians is Paul's most personal letter or Romans is Paul's most theologically sophisticated letter, you could say that Colossians is Paul's most cosmic letter. It's the one most focused on the cosmic mystery of Jesus in his relation to all of creation, and not just the visible creation, but the invisible creation as well, the principalities, the powers, the rulers, the angelic forces that are part of the created world and which apparently some of Paul's opponents, who were leading the people of Colossae astray, had errors in their thought about the nature of Christ, the nature of creation, the role of the angels. So if you've ever wondered about the mystery of Christ and creation, the role that the cosmos, the universe plays, the role that angels in particular play in creation and redemption and salvation, then the letter to the Colossians is definitely a great place to start if you want to hear what Paul has to say about those matters.

So just a little quick introduction there, but with that in mind, the Church spends just a few weeks on the letter to the Colossians in year C. It is one of the more brief epistles of Paul, but it is rich. It's actually quite dense in its contents. And so there's some powerful and wonderful passages that the Church gives us during year C from Paul's letter to the Colossians. And the first of those is arguably the most famous and significant passage in Colossians, Colossians 1:15-20, which is known as the Christ hymn. This passage that I'm about to read, that's the second reading for today, is hypothesized by some scholars to not just be a kind of free composition of Paul himself, but to actually reflect a hymn about Christ that was sung in the early Church that Paul is writing down. Now we can't prove that with any certainty, but it is true when you look at the text of Colossians 1:15-20 in Greek, there is a rhythmic even hymnic quality to it, that lends credence to the suggestion that it's a song that was sung by the early Church that Paul here is writing down and using to illustrate the doctrine of the Church involving Christ and the redemption and creation and salvation. And there have been a number of books, whole books published, just looking at that hypothesis that this is one of the early Christian hymns.

And we know from Colossians itself and from Ephesians, for example, that Paul exhorts Christians to sing hymns. So in addition to the Psalms, which were part of the book of the psalter that was sung by Jews, early Christians began very early on composing their own hymns to Christ and exalting him, that they were sung in both devotional settings, but also eventually in the liturgy as well. So with that in mind that some scholars suggest that this is a hymn to Christ sung by the early Church, let's read these words:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.¹

Beautiful hymn to Christ in Colossians chapter one. And even if it's not a hymn that was sung by the early Church before Paul wrote this letter, it certainly is a powerful and poetic hymn to Christ written by Paul himself. So there is a lot going on in this hymn, a lot of theology that's actually implicit in it. I'd just like to take a few minutes to focus on a few areas of the theological content of this particular hymn.

The first thing you'll notice is that the hymn is very focused on the theology of creation, and not just on creation in the abstract, but on Christ's role in creation in particular. So what does it say about him? It says that all things were created in Christ, all things were created through Christ, all things were created for Christ, and all things hold together in him or in Christ. So in Greek, whenever you see that expression, all things, the Greek expression is *ta panta*. It means everything or all things. That's an accurate translation. But in the New Testament, it's frequently a technical term for what we would call the universe. So it means all created things.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

And not just all visible things that are created, like we tend to think of the visible material universe when we talk about the universe. But in a first century, Jewish context from a biblical worldview, *ta panta*, all things doesn't just mean everything we can see. It also means everything that's created that we can't see, especially the angels, the angelic powers, whether the holy angels or the not so holy angels. Whether the angels or demonic forces, all those things are part of *ta panta*, all things.

So notice here that Christ's relationship to the creation is not that of a mere creature. So in Judaism, you have this dividing line between creator and creature. You have the God who makes everything and then the everything that's made. So when we're speaking here about Christ as the son of the Father, as the eternal Son, he stands on the creator side of the creator creature divide, because all things are created through him, that means he precedes them. All things are created for him, that means he's their ultimate end. All things hold together in him, that means he sustains the cosmos. Something we don't often think about...like the entire cosmos is sustained by the son, by Christ, not just by God the Father, but by the son.

So the imagery of Christ as creator is something that's very important, but frequently gets lost in contemporary times. There's a tendency in modern times to put a lot of emphasis on the fullness of Jesus' humanity, and that's important. And in fact, in Catholic theology, this is actually quite crucial to recognize, that Christ's human nature is a created human nature. He receives his flesh and his blood and his bones from Mary, who is also a creature. So to the extent that he is fully human, he has a created human nature. But as a divine person, as the son, he is also the creator of everything that is. He's on the creator side of the creator creature divide. And that's really what the hymn of Colossians here is getting at, it's unpacking Christ, the creator or the son as creator, properly speaking.

Second, in addition to theology of creation, there's also, or we're already getting into this, a theology of Christ, a Christology that's implicit in this hymn, and that's really in a sense the center of it. So on the one hand, you'll see that the hymn depicts Christ as human. Now, it doesn't use the word human, but it implies it when it refers to him as the image of the invisible God. The Greek word there for image is icon. It's the same imagery that's used in the book of Genesis, the Greek translation of the book of Genesis, to describe Adam and Eve. So Adam and Eve in

Genesis 1:27-28 are created in the image and likeness of God. They are icons of God. In other words, what an icon does, it's a visible material image that allows you to see beyond it to some invisible reality. So if we have an icon of the risen Christ, the icon itself is not the Christ, but it points to Christ. Or if you have an icon of a Saint, like Saint Augustine or Saint Luke or something, those visible icons point to the invisible, glorified immortal souls of the saints in heaven. So the same thing's true about Christ. In his humanity, he's an icon of the invisible God. He makes visible the invisible reality of God. He reveals him. But it also means that he's human. He's the new Adam. And you can actually see this when it calls him the first born of all creation. Sometimes people who want to deny the divinity of Jesus will say, "Aha, look, it calls him the first born of all creation. That means he's not God. He's part of the creation." And the answer is yes and no. Yes, it is true that his human nature is part of creation. It's a created nature. But that doesn't mean he's not God, because the whole point of the incarnation is the union of his human nature that he assumes with his divine nature in the one person of the eternal Son.

So what the Colossians hymn here is doing is revealing a very powerful Christology in which Christ is fully human, he's the image of the invisible God, just like Adam was the image of the invisible God. But he's also the creator, the one through whom and for whom and in whom all things have been made. So it's a both/and not an either/or. And you can see this when it says that he is before all things, very important. Chapter one, verse 17, he is before all things. That refers to the preexistence of the son. If God creates all things and yet the son is before all things, that means that he is divine. He's preexistent. He's on the creator side of the creator creature divide, the line between the two. That's why it can go on to say, he's the beginning. He's preeminent in everything. He is above all things. And why? Here's the key line, verse 19, "For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell."

Now there's a little trick here. Some translations are going to say all the fullness of God. The Greek word there for fullness is *plērōma*. And the words of God aren't actually in the Greek of verse 19. So if you actually skip down to chapter two, verse nine of Colossians, Paul uses the exact same expression, but he makes it explicit here. "For in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily." The Greek there is *to plērōma tēs theotētos*. You hear the word Theo in there, theology. Theos means God. So in chapter two, verse nine, Paul makes it explicit when he refers to

the fullness, he means the fullness of divinity or fullness of deity, fullness of Godhead. So what the translators have done there is add the word of God to chapter one, verse 19, to make clear what Paul means when he speaks about the fullness. So when he says the fullness was dwelling in him bodily, he's implicitly referring to the fullness of divinity. He'll make that explicit a few verses later. So Christ is both, this is important, both fully human. He's adamic. He's a man. But he's also fully God, because the fullness of deity dwells in him bodily. We'll come back to that a little bit later.

But it's not just that theology of creation or theology of Christ. It's not just protology or Christology. It's also soteriology that's dealt with in this hymn, because it describes the fact that the creation, all things are reconciled to God. How? Through the blood of the cross, through the blood of Christ's cross. And in that, it describes two final mysteries, the mystery of the Church and the mystery of the end, what we call ecclesiology and eschatology. So Christ is the head of the body, the Church, the hymn says, and he's the first born not just of creation which goes back to the beginning, but he's also the first born of the dead. So he's not just the new Adam pointing back to the old creation, he's the one who points forward to the beginning of the new creation with his resurrection.

So look at this, all in this one little hymn, what do we have? Protology, theology of creation, Christology, theology of Christ. We have soteriology, a theology of how we're saved. We have ecclesiology, the mystery of the church, and then eschatology, the mystery of the end. And this is kind of a testament to the fact of just how important sacred music is. People don't often stop to think about this.

If this text is indeed a hymn that was sung by the early Church, one reason you would sing this kind of hymn was that through song, you would teach theology. The book of Psalms is a perfect example of this. If you pray through the Psalms, you read through the book of Psalms over and over again, like those of you who pray the liturgy of the hours will know, you're going to learn that God is omnipotent. He's all powerful. He's omnipresent. He's the creator of the world. He's the savior of Israel. He's the Redeemer. He's full of loving kindness and steadfast love, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, full of mercy. All those characteristics of God, you get that theology from praying the psalter. So the same thing's going to be true about Christian hymns. You're going to teach Christology through the music, through the hymns that are sung, through the words that are composed. This is why in the early Church, for example, the heretics they

knew this well. So Arias during the Aryan crisis in the fourth century, composed songs that denied the fullness of Jesus's divinity, that suggested that he was a creature and not the uncreated eternal son. Because they knew that if they could get the laity to sing the songs, they would imbibe the heresy. So the heretics frequently go after sacred music before they compose long theological treatises. Because the reality of the fact is, whether we theologians like it or not, most people don't read long theological treatises, but everybody sings a hymn at mass. Everyone sings a hymn. Well, not everyone, some people don't sing at all. But you know what I mean, they all have to listen to them. So the same thing was true in early Christian worship and in ancient Jewish worship. Music, sacred music was a principle vehicle for communicating true Christology, true ecclesiology, true protology, true eschatology, true soteriology. Likewise, the songs of the heretics, like Arias, were mechanisms and means to lead people into error about who Jesus was and how he saved and what the world was about and all those kind of things. The same thing's true today.

So in closing then, let's talk about heresy for just a minute. Because this text from Colossians 1 was one of the principle texts that the Council of Ephesus relied on in order to correct the heresy known as Nestorianism. Now Nestorianism was a heresy that spread in the early church in the fifth century AD. Nestorius was the Archbishop of Constantinople. And what he did was in order to kind of try to understand the mystery of the incarnation, he divided Christ into two persons. He hypothesized that there were two persons in the one Christ. There was a divine person, the son, who had been united to a human person, the Christ, Jesus and his humanity. And these two persons existed in one. Now the Council of Ephesus responded to that heresy, which came to be known as Nestorianism after Nestorius, by quoting from the text of Colossians.

So let's listen to what the council says. Here I'm going to be drawing on, this is a book called the *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*. It's two volume set by Father Norman Tanner, a wonderful translation, very expensive, so it's hard to get your hands on it these days, but it's extremely valuable for theologians to give us the actual texts of the ecumenical councils, the 21 ecumenical councils throughout the centuries. And this is the passage from the council of Ephesus in 451, the fifth century AD, about what Colossians, Paul's letter to the Colossians and the reading for today says to the heresy of Nestorianism:

We confess the Word to have been made one with the flesh hypostatically, and we adore one Son and Lord, Jesus Christ. We do not divide him into parts and separate man and God in him, as though the two natures were mutually united only through a unity of dignity and authority; that would be an empty expression and nothing more... But we do not say that the Word of God dwelt as in an ordinary man born of the holy virgin, in order that Christ may not be thought of as a God-bearing man. For even though “the Word dwelt among us” [John 1:14], and it is also said that in Christ dwelt “all the fullness of the godhead bodily” [Col 2:9], we understand that, having become flesh, the manner of his indwelling is not defined in the same ways as he is said to dwell among the saints, he was united by nature (Greek *henōtheis kata physin*) and not turned into flesh and he made his indwelling in such a way as we may say that the soul of man does in his own body. There is therefore one Christ and Son and Lord...²

Now as you can see from that, one of the reasons translations of the ecumenical councils aren't very popular is because they can be very technical, very sophisticated and very difficult to follow. The language is often dense and it can often be very philosophical, very theological. But if I can sum up for you what that passage is saying, it's this: in contrast to the theory of Nestorius, the Council of Ephesus said, "We don't believe in two Christs. There's only one Christ. We don't separate the man and Godhead. We make a distinction between the human nature and the divine nature, but those two natures are united in one person, the one Lord and savior Jesus Christ.”

So in other videos I've talked about the meaning of person and nature, so just a quick reminder. A very simple definition of a person is that it answers the question who? So who am I? I'm Brant Pitre. A very simple definition of the word nature is that it answers the question what? What am I? I'm a man. I'm a human being. So when the Council of Ephesus responds to the Nestorius, what Nestorius was saying is that there were two whos in Christ. There was the divine son and the human Christ. And what the Council of Ephesus said is, "No, no, no. There are two whats, two natures, a human nature and a divine nature. But there's only one who. There's only one person, because those two natures have been united in the one person of

² Council of Ephesus, “Third Letter of Cyril to Nestorius.” In in Norman P. Tanner, S.J., ed. *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (2 vols.; Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 1:51-52.

Jesus Christ, the one savior." So we don't have a schizophrenic Jesus. We don't have a divine Jesus talking to a human Jesus, the two persons dwelling in one man. Instead, there's one divine person with two natures. And this will eventually go on to be clarified at the Council of Chalcedon.

For our purposes, the most important point is this, when the Council of Ephesus wanted to make clear against Nestorius that there is only one divine person, the person of the son who assumes a human nature and unites that human nature to his divine nature in the incarnation, it doesn't just appeal to the Gospel of John, "the word became flesh and dwell among us." It also appeals to the letter to the Colossians where Paul professes that in him "the fullness of God dwells bodily."