

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
Year C July 14, 2013
Theme: Paul's Colossian's Hymn

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Jesus, Mohamed, Confucius, Ghandi, Mother Theresa: all awesome, inspirational people with so much to teach us.

But what's the difference among them?

In a time of "buffet line religion", what's to separate us as Christians from Muslims or Buddhists or Jews?

Isn't one just as good as another?

A huge resounding "no" to that question from our patron, St. Paul in a letter he wrote to a group of Christians in the city named Colossae in what we now know as west central Turkey about 61 ACE.

St. Paul had heard from a colleague they were having a problem understanding who Jesus was in relationship to other heavenly beings like angels; since Jesus was human, they said, he could not possibly be greater than archangels and cherubim and other heavenly beings.

Apparently some even advocated worship of these angelic beings along with Christ.

Paul wrote this letter to address their concern and to assert the superior heavenly and earthly status of Jesus Christ.

Today's liturgy offers us an opening part of the Letter to the Colossian and what is often called a Hymn because it is a sort of poem in which Paul sings the praises of Christ.

In fact this hymn or poem may even predate Paul and even be from an early Christian liturgy that he borrowed and inserted into his Letter to the Colossians.

If this passage is right then we should not just respect and admire Jesus as a great teacher, philosopher, and guide; no, we should get on our face before him in utmost worship and adoration.

Our view of Jesus is what separates us from every other religion:

---Muslims agree with us that Jesus is a great prophet – and they honor him as such -- but they would never agree that he is also God;

---Buddhists would regard him as a wise teacher, but hardly as the creator of the universe.

I have printed out for you a copy of this great Colossians hymn with an image of St. Paul on the reverse.

You may want to take it up now as I offer a bit of commentary on what Paul wrote about the Lord.

1. Jesus Christ the image of the invisible God

Paul wasted no time in getting right to the point: Jesus is an exact reflection or presentation of God, a perfect “icon,” the original Greek word says, of who God is.

---In John’s Gospel, Jesus himself told his Apostles **“he who has seen me has seen the Father”**

---thus, the Colossians should have no doubt about who Jesus Christ is: not on the same par as angels, certainly not on the same level as other human being; **“Jesus Christ makes the invisible God visible to us.”**

2. He is the first born of all Creation

If Jesus is first-born of all creation that means he was around before anything else was created!

He pre-existed with God before all else that is.

He has priority in time or supremacy in rank over everything and everyone else: begotten before time and thus ahead of angels and archangels, before and ahead of any super-beings and clearly over Buddha (583 BCE) and Mohammed (632ACE).

3. St. Paul continued with his claims for Jesus Christ with even more sweeping claims related to creation:

"For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers (these by the way are the names of ranks of angelic beings some of the Colossians were so enamored with) **all things were created through him and for him."**

Wow! You really can't make a higher claim than to say that **"All things were made through him and for him"** can you?

So much for what some of the Colossians claim for their angels or what other religions claims for their founders - they don't come close to what we Christian believe about Jesus.

"He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

4. After these soaring claims for the cosmic Christ, the hymn now turns to his place within the community of believers: **"he is the head of the body, the church."**

We are already quite familiar with this imagery of the church as the body of Christ from other of Paul's writings and it rings of the Eucharist for us.

To call Christ the head acknowledges his clear place of leadership and authority over the church.

5. **"He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead."**

Allow me a personal reference to explain this one: sixty-four years ago I was the beginning of my dad and mother's family; their first born child; at the time they didn't know there would be eight more children to follow.

Christ Jesus was the beginning, the first, of those to be raised from the dead, the firstborn from the dead; we are all to be reborn after him.

Thus he is preeminent as the first and honored among us as the first to be raised.

6. Finally the hymn ends with assertion that complete and total fullness is in Christ as he reconciled all things -- those on earth or those in heaven -- (and note this powerful phrase encompassing his life giving death) **"making peace through the blood of his cross".**

"Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God"

"the firstborn of creation"

"the head of the body the church"

"The firstborn of the dead"

who "made peace with humanity through the blood of his cross."

Could anyone or anything in heaven or on earth ever compete with that?