

## Colossians 1:15-20

The passage from Colossians is quite clearly a piece of poetry, that probably had a life of its own before it was quoted in this letter. And in scholarly circles, there is all sorts of debate about the nature and meaning of the poem. About who wrote it! About where the different lines should be drawn and about what its original purpose was. And interesting, yeh – even important – as such questions are, if that’s where we stop – then we haven’t heard the poem as we were meant to hear it.

It seems a bit silly to try to explain the meaning of a poem, because to me – the more explanation a poem needs – the less poetic it is. A poem is not simply a way of communicating a bunch of facts through a group of words that happen to rhyme. The word ‘Poem’ is from a Greek word, which means ‘to make’. A poetry, though, is not simply something that a poet ‘makes’. It is not that the poet makes a poem. It is the poem that makes something – the poem creates a new world. It is a process, Poesis, that brings a world to life, draws you into a different way of seeing the world, gives you a new worldview.

And the words are put together not just to impart a set of facts from person a to person b, but to draw people towards a different way of encountering life, the universe and everything. Now, that stuff to me seems fairly basic, but most of the highly-sophisticated, over-educated, linguistically-super-competent Biblical Scholars, still treat this poem as though Paul simply included it to communicate some nuggets of theological fact. Because, after all, Paul is serious theologian...

Because of the poetic structure of these verses, it is usually assumed that Paul is quoting not only from a psalm, but a hymn, with which his readers would already be familiar. We can’t know for sure, but it seems likely enough. But whether it was written by Paul, or by someone else, I wonder how we imagine this poetic hymn being written?

I found some guidelines recently on how to write worship songs: and tried to imagine if this is what we imagine Paul doing: According to Ehow – there are six steps to writing a good worship song.

*Writing a worship song is very similar to writing a secular song except for one very important difference: Your intended audience happens to include God.  
(Because God doesn’t enjoy secular music?)*

*1 – The first step is to pray, because many people can write lyrics, but not many people can write lyrics that are powerful, moving and anointed!*

*2 – Write the melody*

*3 – Write the lyrics! Your lyrics should encourage people to worship God. Writing about personal experiences can be very powerful, but only if it ends with the attention being brought back to Jesus. A good worship song will touch people in a way that causes them to think about how awesome God is and, as a result, worship Him.*

*4 - Add some scripture. Many worship songs are inspired by scripture. Using scripture when writing a worship song can help to encourage scripture memorization. Reading the Bible is a great way to get inspiration for your next worship song.*

5 – *Write your song down*

6 – *Record your song.*

I have some difficulty imagining that this is what the author was up to! There were not just some inspired words to draw people to picture God. But neither was the author dumping some theological correctness into a melodious form of words.

The poem does do something extremely novel, from a theological perspective. But it worked as a poem for Jewish listeners at least, because it went straight to their heart-strings – straight to the Covenant. The structure is the same as the structure of Genesis: It begins by declaring that God created the world, and it ends with the story of how God has involved himself in saving that world. The two parts of the poem work in precisely this way. But there is something more happening here.

Again, it may seem obvious, but the Christians living in Colossae, did not have a copy of the New Testament, they did not have theology books written about the Trinity, they did not have preachers who were schooled in long traditions of Christian teaching. They had hardly anything to go on! They had a basic belief in a Messiah who had fulfilled Jewish expectations, who had subverted the Roman Empire, who had been crucified, who had been resurrected, and who was having a personal impact on you.

If you believe in God's covenant with his people, and then you hear about a Messiah, where does he fit into the big picture of all that this God had promised to do? The covenant is with Israel, not with the Messiah. When this poem was first heard, when this hymn was first sung – it was creating a new world. It was creating a reality in which this Messiah takes on the function of the true Israel. Israel is who it is, only in relation to this Messiah. The church is the church only under the authority of this Messiah. The coming of Jesus is not some bizarre blip in the history of Israel – the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth are in deep continuity with what God has been doing all along!

So much for the hymn. Some great bits of truth their. We are all theologically enlightened, and a bit happier about the roots of our faith. Three cheers for Paul... So what! What most of the scholars tend to miss, is the question of why Paul quotes this poem, this hymn, to these people in this place and at this time.

Last week, we looked briefly at the context of Colossae – in the Roman Empire, and in a part of the Empire where the emperor cult had grown to the point where Caesar himself was worshipped as a divinity. In that setting, anyone who sings this hymn, or says this poem, are deliberately making a statement of rebellion! These are not just nice worship songs to draw people to see how awesome God is – these are a call to insurrection, they are a defiant, life-threatening set of beliefs that are being signed up to by anyone who dares to take this hymn and make it their own. You don't tend to have that as part of the six-steps of how to write a worship song.

But equally, at the same as being defiant – more than that, and before that, they are deeply encouraging. If you are struggling to be a Christian in a culture of Caesar worship – singing this song, hearing this poem, is a way of you learning in your bones that Caesar is not ultimately in charge – the true Lord is the Creator God who is lovingly reconciling the world to himself in the person of Jesus.

If we are compliant to the Caesar of our age, if we are subservient to the cult of Caesar worship that shapes our generation, if we are obedient to the rules of the world that maintain our luxuries so long as we don't ask questions about justice, then this little passage in Colossians is nothing more than correct theological fact for us. But if we are paying serious personal, moral, relational costs because of the God that we worship – then this hymn sinks itself into our fibre.

I can remember in Basic Training for the armed forces years ago – it seemed to be one of the few places where, in modern traditional Britain, you could be persecuted for being a Christian. I don't just mean people gossip about stuff you do, or poke a bit of fun at you. I had friends who were beaten every day until they renounced Christ. That, I guess, is straight forward persecution. And I knew this was the environment I entered. And it wasn't that I wasn't scared by this – it just didn't feature as a serious concern for me.

And then one evening, late December, I found myself sat with three or four guys around my bed in the barrack room, with my Bible open, explaining stuff to them. I'm not sure how I ended up in that situation. I certainly didn't plan to lead a bible study, and have some prayer group praying for me to be able to fulfil that kind of a mission. It just happened. I don't know how – or why – and it must only have lasted ten, maybe twenty minutes. Not some great virtuous goal – and I'm pretty sure there were no conversions. No courage involved, no boldness or strong Christian presence. But I guess, there was a little defiance that said – who cares if Christianity isn't allowed here! I wasn't in that setting for my whole life. I had no family to worry about – so in many ways I suppose it was easy.

Well, in Colossae, young Christians were in a potentially hostile environment for their whole lives, with no way out. The Imperial Worship Cult was strong, so Paul follows up his quotation of this defiant hymn with an exhortation to continue in the faith – to be shaped by the God who actually is in charge, rather than by the Caesar who is not. The hymn, in other words, is a source of encouragement to those who

