

Reformation 1: Christ Alone

Colossians 1:15-20

John 14: 1-7

In one of the churches I served my Curacy there was a wall painting of Jesus' Ascension at the East end of the nave. This large picture, framing the top end/chancel, had only recently been rediscovered, because for many, many years, successive layers of grime and dirt had covered it over. And so this fresco had been forgotten about. Then about 20 years ago, a church cleaner noticed something under the wall, and gave it a little wipe, noticed something bright... so they got it properly cleaned. And this fresco had been there the whole time. 500 years ago, something like this happened to our ideas about God, Jesus, and the Gospel. Truths that had been there right from the beginning of the Christian story were uncovered again after years of neglect and confusion. The people who re-discovered this had hoped that the whole of the church might embrace them- but they didn't, or at least not entirely. And so began a complex, often bloody period of European history. There'll be more of that during the lecture on November 3rd... Sunday mornings are about the difference these truths make to our lives today.

The legacy of the Reformation is not simple, but we can be grateful for the gifts that it brings us. Over these next few weeks we'll be looking at some of them, with these five 'Solas' – alones. We'll be looking at how we are saved by Grace alone, through faith alone, to live to the Glory of God alone. We'll also see how the Reformation rediscovered the value and accessibility of Holy Scripture. Before then, the foundation piece. Our hope is in Christ Alone.

John 14:1-7

Let's turn to our Bible reading. This is Jesus' last supper, the night of his arrest. He's about to enter hell but he's concerned with his disciples, because he knows they are about to have a tough time of it as well. Jesus explains to those gathered around him that he's going away, but it's for their good- he's going to prepare a place for them in his Father's house (see verse 3) and that he'll be back to take them with him. Thomas asks a very practical question- if you're going to prepare a heavenly home for us, how will we know the way? What's the postcode?

Jesus' response is breathtaking- verse 6. **'I am the way, the truth and the life. Nobody comes to the Father except through me'**. Grammatically odd. Anybody else would say 'I know the way'. Thinkers, philosophers, politicians, religious leaders, prophets, poets, pastors might say 'I know the way', I can show you the way. Jesus alone stands and says **'I AM the way, I AM the truth, I AM the life.'** Jesus made claims like this on a regular basis. I am the bread of life- without me you'll go hungry. I am the light of the world- without me you're in darkness. I'm the one good shepherd- without me you're lost. I am God's Kingdom come on earth. I am the beginning and the end. I am the deepest level of reality.

Just as today, some people rejected this claim. This is why they killed Jesus- for being who he is. If we reduce Jesus to just someone nice- who came to teach us something about the brotherhood of man and fatherhood of God, and encouraged us to be kind- that doesn't explain why he was killed. As the trials of Jesus in front of the various courts progressed, the charges failed to stick, and the case against Christ boiled down to the one unforgivable thing for the Romans and the religious establishment. It wasn't Jesus' moral teaching, or the miracles, or anything else he did. It was who he was.

St Paul was another who hated this claim, hated the message of the early Christians with a passion. Until he met Jesus- He had a powerful experience meeting him in a vision, and calling him Lord. In our Colossians reading, Paul writes that Christ is the *'image of the invisible God'*- The unknowable, perfect, infinite, Holy God. **An Important distinction to make here.** In Genesis 1, we read of all people as being made in the image of God- much as a painting can have elements of the personality of the artist in it. God creates his world and

says 'it is good. I like it.' We're all reflections of God, in the way that the Mona Lisa is a reflection of Leonardo Da Vinci. Jesus is totally different- in him we meet the artist, not another picture. To quote a book I read recently, '*Jesus is God-sized and God is Jesus-shaped*'. Jesus is before all things, all things hold together in him. Through him, there can be reconciliation between God and mankind, between mankind and God. **If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on you do know him, and have seen him.** (vs 7)

To say that '**Jesus is Lord**' is to say that Jesus is at the centre of everything. It is to say that whatever God is like, we see in Jesus his perfect image. It means that Jesus is the true ruler of the world- that he has gone through and come out of everything that heaven and earth can throw at him, and is raised up gloriously on the other side of death and is now supreme over all.

This is controversial

This is high-stakes. Each of us will have friends, family, loved ones, who cannot or will not say that Jesus is Lord. But if it is true that Jesus alone is Lord, then it follows that eternal life is not a mountain with many routes up, and that believing something sincerely isn't in itself enough. We're capable of being sincerely wrong in all manner of things, and eternal life is no exception. Left to our own devices, we strive *against* the truth of Christ, not for it. I'm aware that this sounds arrogant, and challenges common ideas about tolerance. Bernie Sanders (would-be Democrat nomination for president) recently said of people professing this- basic Christian orthodoxy, held by the majority of Christians for twenty centuries- '*your views are indefensibly hateful*'. Jesus is radically exclusive. (*world of Jesus' day much like ours- many opinions, many Gods etc*)

But Jesus is radically inclusive as well. This was a big controversy for him. He welcomes all. He welcomes people from all walks of life- poor, rich, respectable, outcasts, prostitutes, priests, pagans, and countless millions of otherwise anonymous people who don't live lives that outwardly look particularly bad *or* good. Across all racial, political, gender, economic boundaries- Christ welcomes all.

God's grace as wide as the whole universe, as narrow as one person asking us to trust him.

This is controversial, but it will bring deep comfort

And to say 'Jesus is Lord' means that Jesus is not just a Lord for the world- he is 'my Lord'. The one who directs my life, my friend, my master, and my rescuer. To say 'Jesus is Lord' is to say that in all things, however grim or challenging or miserable life might get, that Jesus is enough for me. To say 'Jesus is Lord' means that we build our lives around him, we treasure him, we love him. *Can you say that?*

Can you say with the theologian John Calvin that '*whoever is not satisfied with Christ alone strives after something beyond perfection*'?

Christ brings us deep comfort. Let's go back to the John reading- *I go to prepare a place for you*. You are safe with him. Your past forgiven, his presence today, and the guarantee of a place with him. If you are in Christ, the universe is, deep down, a safe place for you. There is no tragedy, no heartbreak, no injustice, no misfortune that can pull you from his love.

When Jesus says 'I am the way' it doesn't make him merely a trailblazer, a heroic example, someone to emulate. He isn't on the road to life, jogging ahead of us, telling us we can make it if we just keep going. He is life itself. He is the grace of God reaching down into our lives and giving us more than we can imagine or deserve. I'll say more in the next couple of weeks about **how** Jesus is able to be life for us, and how we are able to grasp this. For now, I want to finish with a prayer I've adapted from Thomas a Kempis...

Gracious Christ, you are the way and the truth and the life. Without your way there is no going; without your truth there is no knowing; without your life there is no living. You are the way which we must follow; the truth which we must believe; the life for which we must hope. You are the inviolable way; the infallible truth, the never-ending life. You are the straightest way; the sovereign truth; life true, life blessed, life uncreated'

Might we put our trust in him today. Amen.

