

“When We Centre on Christ . . . We See the World Differently”

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Second in an Advent Series

Colossians 1.15-20

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What sort of world is this we live in?

The New Testament part of our Bible was written in Greek. The Greek word for “world” is *kosmos*. The *kosmos* is everything.

- It’s the faint flicker of radiation left over from the Big Bang, which reaches us only after travelling some thirteen billion years.
- The *kosmos* is the microscopic bacteria that make their home within a ridge on my fingertip.
- It’s the Himalayas, pushing up with a snowy slow reach into the sky.
- The *kosmos* is you and me here today, wondering at it all.

What sort of *kosmos* is this? Listen to some possible answers.

II

One answer, from the ancients, says the *kosmos* is God, divinity itself. The trees outside and us in here, my dog and my neighbour’s cat, the stars and the seas . . . the whole *kosmos* is God. God is the *kosmos*. They call this *pantheism*.

A bit differently, some say the *kosmos* is like God’s body, with God as the mind the dwells both in and beyond it all? Everything is in God? God is in everything. They call this *panentheism*.¹

But I wonder, then, is God the creator? How can God make Godself?

Does God love? If God is the *kosmos*, and God loves the *kosmos*, is that simply God loving Godself? Is that love?

Is God gracious? If everything is God, what can God give to, except Godself? Is that grace?

¹ Briefly, pantheism is the belief that God is everything. Panentheism asserts that everything is part of God, yet there is more to God than the *kosmos*. For a contemporary example of panentheism within the Christian tradition, see Sallie McFague’s chapter, in William C. Placher, ed, Essentials of Christian Theology (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003): 101-115. I wrote a critique of McFague’s panentheism “Sallie McFague’s Care for Creation, and her God Who Cannot” for a course at Conrad Grebel University College (October 2011).

And what do we make of evil? If everything is God or in God, then can anything be evil? Or, does evil become part of who God is? Can I trust a God who has evil within God's very being?

III

Sticking with evil for a moment . . . another answer, also from the ancients, is extremely different. The *kosmos* is not God, at all! It is evil. Everything, including us, is a wreck.

It's not just that we made it this way. Or that it's become this way. In this view, the *kosmos* has always been like this.

God has nothing to do with this sorry mess. We hope God will get us out of it, rescue our souls from these mortal prisons and this hopeless world.

Is that right, this dualism which cuts the *kosmos* off from God?²

If the *kosmos* is fundamentally evil, then why care about it, or care for it? Just plan to get out, whenever God takes you. That seems wrong.

IV

Here's another possible response to our question, What sort of *kosmos* is this?

This one says that the *kosmos* is all alone. There is no God, and never was. Everything that is — all we can sense and study, discover and understand; all that is matter and energy, space and time — everything that is, is all there is.

It might have had a beginning, but probably not.

God? We have no need of that theory.³ Or, hope for it.

It all has no meaning, no purpose, no design. Except, perhaps, for any meanings, any purposes, any designs we ourselves come up with, if we want to.

This is materialism. It denies any existence to God?

² Dualistic theology within the Christian tradition can be seen in Marcionism, Catharism, and Gnosticism. These have been judged by mainstream Christianity to be in error.

³ Echoing a quip attributed to French scholar Pierre-Simon Laplace who, when asked by Napoleon how he could write a book about the universe, is reputed to have said, "I have no need of that hypothesis." en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pierre-Simon_Laplace#I_had_no_need_of_that_hypothesis

We think of it as a modern thing, and it is, though we can also find it in ancient Greek and Hindu philosophy.

We think of it as something scientific, though the methods of science can never prove or disprove it. Many scientists are materialists, but many others are not.

V

What sort of world is this *kosmos*?

We Christians, along with Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and many others, say this.

With *pantheism* and *panentheism* we agree that, yes, God has everything to do with the *kosmos*, but no, the *kosmos* is not God, nor part of God.

With *dualism* we agree that, yes, the *kosmos* is in quite a mess—especially the parts we humans have touched— but no, it is not evil.

With *materialism* we agree that, yes, the *kosmos* is something for us to study and understand with the best science possible, but no, it is not an accident. In fact, we study it with awe because it is not an accident.

The *kosmos* is God's creation. It is not God.

The *kosmos* is God's creation. It is not evil.

The *kosmos* is God's creation. It is not meaningless.

God makes it with grace and delight.

God makes it with meaning, purpose and hope.

God makes it, and says it is very good.

VI

The Advent season began last week. It's about the coming of Jesus into the *kosmos*, and into our lives. I started digging into what happens when we find Jesus is at the centre of our lives, our beliefs, our faith, our world. When Christ is at the centre, I think we start seeing things differently. Last week was about how Jesus leads us to see God differently. Today, I am suggesting that when we are centred on Jesus Christ, we see the world, the *kosmos*, differently.

Last week, some of you will remember I asked you to picture being inside a room. You've been in there as long as you know. It's dingy dark. No light comes in from outside. Then,

someone puts in a window. Now, looking at it, you see an outside that you had only imagined possible. You see as you have never seen before.

In this scene, God is that outside world, and Jesus is the window. God comes in person, in Jesus, so by looking at Jesus, we can see who God is. When we see Jesus—what he cares about, how he acts, what he does—we see God.

Today, let's stay with that scene. What else happens when that window goes into the wall?

We not only see out. We also see inside the room, much better. Light comes in. Jesus, the window, shines light on this room we live in, the *kosmos*, and we can see what we have never seen before.

VII

What do we see in Jesus, that leads us to see the *kosmos* differently? Listen to this, from the Bible, the 1st letter to the Christians in the Turkish city of Colossae.

The Son is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation.
For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,
things visible and invisible,
whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers
— all things have been created through him and for him.
He himself 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 firstborn from the dead,
so that he might come to have first place in everything.
For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,
and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things,
whether on earth or in heaven,
by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Colossians 1.15-20

(New Revised Standard Version; alt)

What does this tell us?

God the Son, with God the Father and God the Spirit, is the One God by whom and for whom the whole *kosmos* was and continues to be made.

The *kosmos* is not God. The *kosmos* has become broken, torn, twisted, and sometimes terrible.

Yet it is still good, and beloved by God. Jesus, God the Son, holds the *kosmos* together. Jesus, God the Son, has come into it. Jesus, in whom God's fullness delights to dwell, brings all things together in himself. Not to rescue us by taking us away from an evil world. No, Jesus heals, restores, forgives, reconciles and resurrects all things to new life.

Maybe that is too heady for us. So look at this.

A baby, newly born, still wet with amniotic fluid, his cord just cut; the stuff of birth, which he designed. Wrapped snugly against the sudden chill by frail and frightened human hands, he had crafted. Laying on a padding of dried grass, to which he had given the growth. Sniffed by wet noses as animals push close to see and smell, creatures to whom he gives every heartbeat.

Into his newly-filled lungs comes the same air you are breathing now. Through his body, as with ours, pass unnoticed billions of super-tiny neutrinos every second. They are cast-offs of our sun and every other star in the *kosmos*. We never notice them. Does he? I think not, not now, for he has now become part of the *kosmos*.

Behold him, your Creator, your God.

What sort of *kosmos* is this?

It's his.