

Colossians 3:12-17 Christ Is All, and Is In All

Every year after Christmas and before the New year it becomes compelling to ask, “what next?” For a time there may be the hope that the coming year will be different than the previous year, and not just different if something bad happened recently, hoping for something good, but realizing that our past has some disappointing tendencies that we hope to change, some goals that have not been achieved, some tasks yet to be performed.

Perhaps *this* year, unlike all the rest, will be the year we change the status quo, lose the weight, forgive the wrongs done and let go of grudges, save the money, quit the bad habit, read more, spend more time volunteering, give more. . . . etc., you get the idea. This year.

Christmas points to Easter and Easter happened 2,000 years ago and the claim made for it is that *it changed the world*; it changed the status quo and made things different. So when we observe Advent and Christmas, and then look forward to the ministry of Jesus, and then to its tragic end and its triumph, it is natural to ask, “what next?”

Luke's Next

In the Gospel of Luke, the story of what happened next for Jesus is told quite differently than in the other

gospels. Among other things, rather than jumping ahead 30 years to the story about John the Baptist, Luke stops off for a brief rest about 12 years in, and is the only evangelist that tells about the time Jesus was taken by his parents to Jerusalem and the Temple for a Passover feast.

The story is that Joseph and Mary were annual visitors to Jerusalem so that undoubtedly this was not the first time Jesus had been to the Temple. It was his 12th year and that suggests something like a bar mitzvah celebration, that Jesus may have been old enough to join with the adult men in their traditions. Whatever the case something came to life in him during this visit.

He is said to have engaged in conversations with the teachers and amazed them with advanced understanding. He found himself at home among them, so much that he failed to leave with his parents when the time came and they had to cut their journey home by a day to return to Jerusalem to look for him. He said, “why were you searching for me, didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?”

The implication is that it was an important part of his development, becoming aware of his self-identity that would eventually lead him towards the movement of John the Baptist, his own ministry, and his death. It was a foretelling of things to come.

What Is Next?

Any way one looks at it, Christmas is only the beginning of a long journey; and what is more, the childhood visit, the life and teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus, all taken together are seen as just a beginning to a much more involved history, a history that after 2,000 years is still in many ways only just begun. So in a way we are always left with the question, what next?

What is next in our personal lives? What new relationship is to begin; or what old one is to be reconciled? What attitude of the heart or opinion of the mind is to be discarded or opened up and given new life? What behavior will be weeded out or new habit broken acquired?

And what about the world's life? We are always aware of its beauty and wonder, its injustices and contradictions; of its pain and its glory. Are we to be as concerned about the life of the world as we are about our personal lives? What is next for the world? Lord knows we will come to disagree about it, but perhaps we could at least agree that as long we are here, we should care:

Care about the poor; about those who are suffering, who have no place, who have experienced loss, grief, hunger, unfairness. Certainly there is enough in the bible and in the life of Jesus to compel us towards compassion and sacrifice. And to care about the spiritually lost, those whose experience of life is

characterized by guilt and confusion, doubt and despair.

This question should be asked, and not just because Christmas is recent and the New Year at hand; not just because the earth has revolved around the sun one more time.

Paul In Colossians

Our text in Paul's Letter to the Colossians is no small help. It tells us that there are some general features to our common life that we should be always on the alert to nurture. It has been read aloud once, but there is no reason not to read it aloud once more.

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs of the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it

all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

There is too much packed into that text for one sermon, and at each line I am struck by something, as I know you are, perhaps by the three times Paul mentions gratitude, even more than love and forgiveness.

Let me suggest that the affect of contemplating texts like this one is that by doing so one becomes more likely to find an experience like Jesus did at the Temple when he was 12 years old; an experience in which you feel at home, like you have found your place, if only just for a time, in this complex and sometimes forbidding world.

All In All, and In All

This text begins with a therefore, which bids us look with some intentionality at what came before it. Let us listen to that too, it forms quite a contrast to the kind of life that it describes after the therefore.

“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.

Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.”

Think of that, that no matter where you look or who you see, it is possible to look past the world’s pain in them and see Christ who is all, and very much in all.

So you can see the right and wrong, good and bad, the life to pursue and the one to discard. And that is not a bad way to celebrate Christmas. That is not a bad way to start the new year.

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