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CHRIST PRE-EMINENT IN ALL THINGS

Trinity Sermon No. 22

PROFESSOR M. A. JEEVES

A detailed illustration of a Gothic church tower, likely a bell tower or steeple, with multiple levels of arched windows and decorative stonework. The tower is set against a background of stylized trees and a light sky. The illustration is in a classic, somewhat sketchy style, with fine lines and shading.

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"CHRIST PRE-EMINENT IN ALL THINGS"

An Address given by
PROFESSOR M.A. JEEVES, M.A., Ph.D.

at

HOLY TRINITY CHURCH, ADELAIDE

Trinity Sermon No. 22

"CHRIST PRE-EMINENT IN ALL THINGS"

It was raining gently on the tarmac outside. We were already five minutes overdue for take-off and, as always on such occasions, one begins to get a little bit itchy and wonder why one hasn't taken off. Then, all of a sudden, we saw a man running across the tarmac, and breathlessly he climbed into the 'plane. The seat beside me being apparently the only empty one, he staggered down and flopped into it. A moment or two later we took off, and were on our way to Adelaide.

As we flew, he regained his breath and discovered that I was, by origin, English, and it was obvious from his accent that he was a Scot, and so jokingly he began to be rude to me, and I was politely rude back, in this way we very soon got on fairly intimate terms. We talked away for awhile, and I discovered that he was a ship-building magnate, with large interests in different parts of Australia. He was very talkative, and as we talked on and on I discovered that five years previously his wife had died, and since then, although he had everything he wished for in terms of material possessions - he had a flat in Glasgow, and another home in the countryside of Scotland - yet he

was troubled for he was searching for something but he did not know what.

What else could I do? The time was short. What else could I tell him about? It was no good me talking to him about the Christian religion, or about leading an upright life. There was nothing I could do but tell him about Christ, and I told him as simply as I could what Christ meant to me. What it meant to have a Christian family; what it means to know that one day we shall see the Lord who now we serve. And as I talked to him in these simple terms, this man of 55 was moved to the very depths of his being, and asked me more and more and plied me with further questions. When we landed in Adelaide, as we walked towards the Airport lounge, he paused on the tarmac. I said, "Look, you'd better get on. There are people waiting for you." He had his local representatives all standing and waiting. He said, "Oh, no. They can wait. I've not heard enough yet." And so, as we stood out there on the tarmac, I told him more of what it meant to be a Christian, and what the Lord Jesus Christ could mean to him.

And that's the theme of my Sermon

tonight. What else could I talk about on this last Sermon of the series on the Reformation. Above all else at the Reformation, Christ was put back into the centre of the Christian Faith. He, who had been pushed aside by everything but himself, was again given the pre-eminence in all things. And so tonight we must put Him central in our worship.

In his commentary of St. Paul's epistle to the Colossians, Bishop Handley Moule tells the story of how the Rev. Charles Simeon, Rector of Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge, stood in his pulpit in the year 1835, and as he preached on the text we read this evening "that in all things He might have the pre-eminence," said, "And He must have it; and He will have it; and He shall have it." And he goes on to record how one person present at that sermon reported that as he heard the impassioned words, he saw the form of the aged preacher actually rise in height as the soul erected the body to bear witness to the Redeemer's glory. The effect, he says, was strong and thrilling, but the words and action were after all only the just utterance of a faithful servant, consenting from his

heart to the fact, of his Lord's glory, and of His Father's purpose for the Son of His love. Bishop Moule goes on "So let our hearts take them up today. For the Universe, for the Church, Christ is, and must be "pre-eminently" the First, the Head." It has often been said that the theme of this letter to the Colossian Christians is "Christianity is Christ", and we cannot too often remind ourselves of this fact, and seek to understand what it means for our daily living as Christians. For this reason I should like this evening to focus our thoughts upon part of the first chapter of this Letter. In verses 14 to 20 the Apostle sets out the pre-eminence of Christ, His pre-eminence in His life, who He is, His pre-eminence in creation, His pre-eminence in the Church. Christ, he says, is God incarnate. Christ is the Lord of creation. Christ is the Lord of the Church. Let us consider these aspects now of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In verse 15 we read that Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (New English Bible) and in verse 19 we read, "For in Him the complete being of God, by God's own choice, came to dwell".

In chapter 2 and verse 9, we read, "For it is in Christ that the complete being of the God-head dwells embodied, and in Him you have been brought to completion."

Now why is the Apostle so insistent that Jesus Christ is God? The answer to this question is that already by the end of the first century of the Christian era there was heresy abroad in the Christian Church, distortions of the Christian faith, and what was true at the beginning of the first century is, of course, equally true today. On every side there are still counterfeit forms of Christianity. Some offer Christianity plus, others Christianity minus; and men are always tempted to depart from the simplicity of just plain Christianity. In the church at Colosse there was a heresy which was a mixture of Judaism and Gnosticism; of trying to still observe and submit new Christian converts to a form of Judaism, and a form of intellectualism. The result was that there were some who said you can't really be a Christian unless you submit yourselves again to the ordinances and practices of the Jewish religion; whilst there were others who said that you cannot really be a Christian unless you have a very specialised

knowledge of some very difficult philosophical and theological doctrines. To both these influences the Apostle's answer was clear and unequivocal, namely, "Christianity is Christ." And to-day there are still those who say you can't really be a Christian unless you submit yourselves to certain religious practices. They say that you become a Christian by doing certain things, or having certain things done to you, whilst there are others who say that in order to be a Christian you must have certain mystical experiences which are only given to a very select few. But still our answer must be the same as that summarised in verse 4 of this same chapter, when the Apostle says that we become Christians through "faith in Christ Jesus", not faith in the supposed effects of something done to us, nor faith in the sense of solving intellectual and doctrinal riddles, but faith which means trust. Trust in a person who is seen and received, received as the only One Who can forgive us, because He has redeemed us by His death. Have you got faith in this simple sense?

But not only is the Apostle reminding us that Christianity is Christ so that we may avoid error, but also so that we

may positively benefit from this realisation. Because Jesus Christ was God made flesh, because "in Him the complete being of God, by God's own choice came to dwell" He is able to save to the uttermost all who come to Him in faith. In His life upon earth men and women of every kind flocked to see Him, to speak to Him, to talk with Him. They came to Him for help and for succour. The woman of the streets shamed by her sin and with a load of guilt, came to Him: so did the rich young man dissatisfied with his life, and the intellectual academic, Nicodemus. All came to Him, and saw themselves for the first time as they really were. So it is today, so it is in this Church this evening. Some there are who burdened with the guilt of sins of which only they are aware; some there are who are weighed down with anxiety and worry about a loved one, about a home or marriage relationship which seems to be subject to constant stress and strain, others are worried about their future, and others beset with myriads of problems. And it is just because "in Christ the complete being of the Godhead dwells embodied" that He, and He alone, can meet your need.

This is no simple panacea for all your ills, this is no road of escape from your difficulties, but this is to re-enter those same difficulties, to face the same anxieties, but now with Christ within, with One beside you, Who sticks closer than a brother, and in this new relationship despair gives way to hope, guilt to the joy of sins forgiven, hate to love, and weakness to strength. Have you met this gracious Lord and loving Saviour? If not, seek Him tonight, and you will surely find Him, and so find what it means, as the Apostle says in this same Letter, to be "strengthened with all might, according to his power, unto all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness."

The very next verse, verse 16, goes on to remind us of the Lordship of Christ in creation. The Apostle writes "In Him everything in heaven and on earth was created, not only things visible, but also things invisible; the invisible order of thrones, sovereignties, authorities and powers; the whole universe has been created through Him and for Him. And He exists before everything and all things are held together in Him". In short, Christ is the Creator and Sustainer of the Uni-

verse. I do not intend to dwell on this aspect of the Lordship of Christ this evening, apart from saying a word to those who may be thinking of becoming scientists, or who are already scientists. To you I would say simply, "think about what this means for you in your work today". The created order which you study is the handiwork of the same Lord who redeemed you and gave Himself for you. You may, therefore, go about your task with a sense of joy, and a light heart, knowing that no truth that you discover by scientific research can ever ultimately be at variance with any truth set forth in the Word of God, for the Creator of the Universe that you study, is also the author of the revelation which you accept on trust from Him. Go then and fulfil your Lord's command to "replenish the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth".

Thirdly, in this passage the Apostle reminds us that the One who is Lord of Creation is Lord also of the Church. Thus we read in verses 18-21 "Christ is, moreover, the head of the body, the

Church. He is its origin, the first to return from the dead, to be in all things alone supreme. For in Him the complete being of God, by God's own choice, came to dwell. Through Him God chose to reconcile the whole universe to himself, making peace through the shedding of His blood upon the cross - to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, through Him alone".

Christ then is the Head of the Body - the Church shares His very life, just as the limbs share a common life with the Head. Let us be reminded by this that true unity and effective endeavour in the body of Christ are due not to a reorganisation of its members, but to a renewed obedience to the divine Head. These verses also remind us that not only are we Christ's by creation, as the previous verse has told us, but that we are also His by redemption. And in a nutshell the Apostle summarises the work of Christ our Redeemer when he writes in verse 20 "making peace through the shedding of his blood upon the cross". Here, we are at the heart of the Apostolic message of the Cross; that Christ, by offering himself through death, accepted the penalty which was

our due.

The Christ who was pre-eminent in His life, was pre-eminent also in His death, for He alone could reconcile sinful men to a thrice holy and righteous God. As the hymn puts it, "There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin; He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in". Little wonder then that we find that the cross is the symbol of the Church, the theme of her sacraments, the key to her Scriptures, and the heart of her message to the world. But we must follow the Apostle further, for as always he immediately follows the proclamation of a great truth with its personal application, and thus he says at once "AND YOU"; you can almost imagine him in his thoughts as he writes thinking of a Christian congregation. He says, "Christ has reconciled the world, but now what about you, are you reconciled? God has reconciled all things, you are reconciled".

For them, for those early Christians at Colosse, the full meaning of their reconciliation can only be grasped when they consider what they were and what they have become.

Formerly, he tells them "you were alienated"

"you were actively hostile with self-centred and rebellious minds and this made you spiritual outcasts".

But now, he says "you are restored". But as the next verse indicates that although they are restored, this is a continuing work so that one day each of them will be presented before God, as he says in the Verses here,

holy, with a separation from sin, which throughout their life has been a growing experience, and will then be complete;

unblameable with a spotless purity that is theirs only because they are now in Christ, the spotless Lamb of God;

unreprovable, because, having been justified by the death of Christ, no accusation may henceforth be laid against them.

What a glorious prospect - but this must not lull them, he says, into complacency, but into an attitude of steady

continuance. They are founded upon an unshakeable foundation, the Rock, Jesus Christ. The hope of glory which has come to them in the gospel is the strongpoint from which they must never be moved. This same hope has been proclaimed and grasped by countless thousands far and wide. They must not think of themselves as a small, solitary group, waging a losing battle for survival, but as part of a mighty army moving to ultimate victory, for the victory is assured because it has been won already on the Cross of Calvary.

This, then, was the application which the Apostle sought to bring home to the hearts and consciences of those early Christians at Colosse. And surely no one can doubt but that we, in our day, need to make a similar application to ourselves as individuals, and as a local congregation of Christians. We need to remind ourselves continually that we also were once enemies of the Gospel - that we ignored God, or thought to satisfy His standards through our own good works. Indeed, there may still be some who think in this way, for it may take a long time in the lives of some before they really get to the point of saying,

"Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to thy Cross I cling."

The pride of man is still the most effective barrier to his entering in to the joy of sins forgiven, and the gladness of a heart from sin set free. Only when Christ alone is seen and accepted as the Saviour of the world, and as a man's personal Saviour, can he know peace with God. In short, only when we recognise and act upon His pre-eminence, His supremacy, His uniqueness, as the One who alone can bring us back to God, as the One who alone has, once and for all time, paid the price of our sin, then only can we know what it means to walk in fellowship with Him day by day.

You see, I believe there are marked similarities between the Church at Colosse and the Church here at Holy Trinity. The Colossian Church was going well, it was active and alive, but still there were some who were accommodating their beliefs to the spirit of the age. We face this same danger of accommodating the Gospel to the spirit of our age. Just as the heresy of Gnosticism in the first century embraced beliefs which took away from

supremacy of Christ in the Church, and cast doubt upon the completeness of what He had accomplished through His life, death, and resurrection, so, to-day, as we face similar temptations we must consciously and deliberately avoid a similar error, and this we shall do only as we make Him Lord of our lives, acknowledge Him as Lord of creation, and constantly recall that He alone is the door of the Church of which also He alone must remain the Lord and the King.

In one of his books, "The Country of the Blind", H.G. Wells tells the story of a blind native who, receiving his sight during the night, first sees a star, and this being the brightest thing he has ever seen, he worships it. Shortly afterwards, however, the moon rises, and this being larger and brighter than the star, he worships it instead. But, finally the day dawns and the source of all the reflected light of the star and the moon become apparent, and this then becomes his object of worship. So it is with some men to-day; some put their trust for final acceptance with God in seeking to lead moral lives, others put their trust in religion and religious ordinances, but

until such men come to a personal knowledge of God in Christ, they are not in touch with the only source of true light and life. And this is surely what the Apostle is saying to us today - the supreme, the pre-eminent, the thing above all else that we should concentrate our energies upon is not the leading of a moral life, though this will follow as we follow Him who was without sin, not the practice of religion or the fulfilment of observances, though these will have their place, but, the daily deepening of our personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so it is that the Apostle sums up all he has been saying by reminding us, as he does in verses 26 and 27, that the message of God in a nutshell is this, "Christ in you, the hope of a glory to come". Have you acknowledged Christ as the only One who can forgive your sin and reconcile you to a holy God? Have you received Christ as your Saviour, and crowned Him as the Lord of your life? If so, you will go on, as you obey His will day by day, to know His still small voice, His indwelling power in every circumstance and every difficulty of your life, for the same Lord whose command is "Go ye into all

the world", also promises "Lo, I am with you alway, even to the end of the world". God grant that we may know more and more of the love of Christ as we give Him the pre-eminence in all things in our lives.

* * * * *

PRAYER

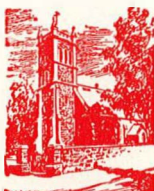
Lord Jesus Christ, we thank Thee for showing us how to live, and we thank Thee for dying that we might be forgiven our sins and have life, life eternal, and life abundant. We pray that as we go forth, we may go forth with the knowledge of Thine indwelling power, and daily know more and more of Thy wondrous love. For Thy sake.

Amen.

* * * * *

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