

If you hear someone say, 'This is the head,' what do you think they might be talking about?

This is the head.

If you were visiting the natural history museum, then you might think the head was part of a skeleton. Maybe that of a small animal, or insect.

If you were visiting a school or college, then you might be being introduced to the principal.

If you were a musician, then you might be looking at the scroll and peg-box of a violin.

If you were interested in coins, then you might be examining the side of the coin where the monarch's head appears.

If you were walking along a river, then you would expect to be approaching its source.

If you were in a pub, then you might be admiring a foaming pint of beer.

Our reading from Colossians this morning is an ancient poem, which is based on the different meanings of the word for 'head.'

It's not so obvious in our translation but all of these phrases play on the Greek word for 'head:'

Jesus Christ is the firstborn. (v. 15, 18)

Jesus Christ is before all things. (v. 17)

Jesus Christ is the head of the body, which is the church. (v. 18)

Jesus Christ is the beginning. (v. 18)

This is a very cleverly constructed poem. But it wasn't written to show off literary prowess, it was written to tell us about Jesus. It was composed to tell us about the centrality and the supremacy of Jesus Christ. The person who wrote it believed that the more we know about Jesus, the more we will understand about God, who he is, what he has done, and what it means for us to live with him. Christianity isn't simply about a particular way of being religious. Christianity isn't about a particular system for how to be saved and live forever. Christianity isn't simply a different way of holiness. Christianity is about Jesus Christ. And this poem, one of the earliest Christian poems ever written, is a good place to begin exploring Christianity.

The poem begins, 'Christ is the image of the invisible God.' Nobody has ever seen God, but in Jesus God has come near to us and God has become one of us. John writes in his gospel, just a few verses after this morning's reading, 'No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.'

If I am sitting at home and there is someone sitting in the next room, I can't see them because there's a wall in the way. But if there is a mirror out in the hallway, I may be able to look out of my door and see, in the mirror, the mirror-image of the person in the next room.

In the same way, Jesus is the mirror-image of the God who is there but who we normally cannot see. We may be aware of God's presence; many people, of various religions and none, have admitted that there is 'something or somebody there.' But with Jesus Christians believe that we find ourselves looking at God himself.

The wonderful thing is that the more we look at Jesus, the more we realize that God is the God of utter self-giving. When you realize that Jesus reveals who God is, then gratitude is the first and most appropriate reaction, overwhelming gratitude for who God is and what God has done.

The poem in Colossians declares that Jesus holds all things together, both the first creation and the new creation.

Sometimes people talk as if Christianity wants to do away with the world in which we live, as if this world is worthless, dirty and even evil. Some groups, like the Amish, separate themselves from this world so that they won't be contaminated by it. Some people talk as if we need to be rescued from our lives into a new brighter, purer world. The Bible describes the new creation as being full of light and peace. The Book of Revelation describes it as the home of God among mortals, living in harmony together, where, 'Death will be no more; mourning, crying and pain will be no more.'

This world is full of beauty, power and wonder alongside the dirt, the pain, the bitterness and evil. We struggle to get the balance right between the first creation and the new creation, but this poem in Colossians does it brilliantly.

The poem says that Jesus Christ is the one through whom and for whom the whole creation was made in the first place. The gospel reading echoes this, 'All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.' This is a remarkable thing to say about an individual person. Just think about it for a moment: the early Christians said that Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, was responsible for the creation of this world; that all things came into being through him and for him.

It is a remarkable thing to say about the 'natural' world. This world was Jesus' idea, it was his workmanship. It is beautiful, powerful and wonderful because Jesus made it like that. When the stunning beauty of the world causes you to catch your breath, when you see an amazing sunrise or sunset, when you watch *The Perfect Planet*, remember that that perfection comes from Jesus.

But this world is full of pain, ugliness and evil too. And they are summed up in death itself. Across the world species are being wiped out due to humanity's greed and self-centredness.

That wasn't the original intention. God has acted to heal the world of the wickedness and corruption, which have so radically infected it. As the gospel puts it, 'What has come into being through him was life, and the life was the light of all people.' God has brought life through the same one through whom the world was made in the first place.

This is the central point of the poem in Colossians. The very same Jesus through whom the world was made in the first place, is the same Jesus through whom the world has now been redeemed. He is the firstborn of all creation, and the firstborn from the dead.

Jesus is therefore the blueprint for life in all its fullness, which is on offer through the gospel. Jesus Christ is the head of the body, the head of the church. Jesus Christ is the first person to rise from the dead. Jesus Christ is the one through whose cruel death on the cross God has dealt with our greed and self-centredness and brought us peace and reconciliation. And above all, Jesus Christ is the one through whom the new creation has now begun.

Jesus is the blueprint for life in all its fullness. Jesus Christ is the one in whom we are called to discover what it means to be truly human. So often we settle for a life that is good enough; we settle for second best in life. Jesus summons us to life in all its fullness, a life full of grace and truth, enabling all species to flourish.

Jesus Christ is the head of the church, and through the words of the liturgy we are regularly reminded that we are the body of Christ. The purpose of the church, the body of Christ, is not to be a place of entertainment. The purpose of the church is not to be a refuge for its members. The purpose of the church is not to be a cosy social club. The church, the body of Christ, exists for one reason: to proclaim Jesus Christ the image of the invisible God and the firstborn of all creation. Thanks be to God! Amen.