

Message for October 23, 2022

Colossians 1:13-20

Not very often but every once in a while, I play a game on the computer called, "Caesar's Build a Better Rome". The point of the game is to build an ancient city from scratch. You start with an empty landscape and a certain amount of money, and then go on from there building roads, houses, farms, establishing industries and so on. The game is very challenging too. If there is not enough food for example, the people will starve, and if there isn't enough work then they will riot. There are so many variables that need to be kept in balance in order to build the city and keep it running smoothly, but the one that is especially challenging are the gods.

There are five gods in the game. There is Ceres who is the goddess of agriculture, and Neptune who is the god of the sea and natural disasters. There is also Mercury who is the god of trade, and Mars who is the god of war. Last but certainly not least, there is also Venus who is the goddess of health. All five of these gods have to be kept happy by either building them expensive temples or else by having expensive festivals in their honour. And if you ignore them, then you pay the price. Ceres for example will devastate the crops while Mars will let the barbarians in to destroy the city. For her part, Venus will send an epidemic, and on it goes. This can be so frustrating. Everything will be going well and then one of the gods for no apparent reason will mess everything up! And yet as frustrating as it may be, this aspect of the game certainly reflects how people in the ancient world perceived their gods and the world around them.

People in the ancient world always felt as if they lived at the mercy of both the gods and powers beyond their control. This is however perfectly understandable. By our standards for example, agriculture was very primitive and mass starvation was always just one crop failure away. The sea was so large and ships were so small, that trade and travel were very dangerous. The barbarians were always lurking at the gates waiting to break in and destroy everything. And as for medicine? By our modern standards it virtually didn't exist. By and large people in the ancient world felt powerless and at the mercy of forces beyond their control. But while most people felt this way, this was especially true of those who lived in the Greek city of Colossae.

Colossae had been a thriving port and commercial centre but then the city had been devastated by a major earthquake. As if that wasn't enough, the harbour that they depended upon for trade began to silt up. It almost seemed as if the city was cursed, and it was at about this time that Paul sent the small Christian congregation there a letter.

In his letter Paul sought to reassure them. To be sure, they had good reason to be scared, and to be sure they felt helpless and at the mercy of forces beyond their control. Even so, they could and even should still have hope. They could and they should, said Paul, because they were *not* at the mercy of the 'powers' as Paul called them. They weren't because they had been transferred from the dominion of darkness to the kingdom of God's beloved son. The powers that they feared weren't in control; Jesus is! And who and what is Jesus?

"He is", said Paul, "the image of the invisible God, the first born over all creation. For by him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together."

Wow! All things were created by and for Jesus! What this means is that contrary to what the Colossians thought, the gods, the 'powers', and the dominion of darkness that they feared were not in charge. Christ is and because he is, ultimately everything is going to be okay. But we might wonder though, what does all of this have to do with us? After all we know that the ancient gods aren't for real. We don't have to worry about the 'powers' or the dominion of darkness; or do we?

The gods of the ancient world of course never existed but even so, the powers they represent certainly do. We can take Ceres, the goddess of agriculture, for example. Even with all of our pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers and the like, we can't take a good harvest for granted. A farmer sows the crop and does his or her best to ensure a good harvest, but they are at the mercy of forces beyond their control such as the rainfall. Will the weather be too dry or too wet? Neptune, the god of the sea and destructive storms doesn't exist, but we are all at the mercy of such as hurricanes, tornadoes, and flooding. All we have to do is think of the people in the Maritimes or Florida. They were powerless to stop either Hurricane Fiona or Ian. Mercury, the god of commerce

certainly doesn't exist but how much control do we really have over the economic forces that govern our lives? A person can faithfully work for a company for years and then be laid off. It's nothing to do with how he or she did their job; rather it's the global economy or market forces that are responsible. Mars, the god of war isn't real but war and conflict certainly are; all we have to do is think of what is happening in Ukraine right now. Venus isn't real either but concern over health and our health care system certainly is as our hospitals still cope with the effects of the pandemic. Indeed, it sometimes seems as if we have so little control over our own personal health. We can try and live right, exercise and eat well but that does not guarantee that our bodies won't betray us.

No, the ancient gods do not and did not ever exist but we, like the people of Colossae so long ago, are seemingly at the mercy of the powers that they represent. In the words of one writer:

“Before you dismiss this talk about principalities and powers, ask the question, ‘Who runs our world?’ The politicians who parade about on the evening news? We think of them as powerful people. But they say that they are victims of ‘forces beyond our control’. When we complain about the fix we’re in, we’re told ‘The economy is to blame’. Ever seen ‘the economy’? It is the power that determines our well-being, pulls our strings, gives us happiness or misery, even though you can’t see it. We can’t touch and see ‘the economy’, we can’t touch ‘terrorism’ or the ‘global market’ but these ‘powers’ call the shots.”

Or do they? Paul's message to the Colossians is still God's promise to us. We may sometimes feel weak, powerless, and defenseless but the powers, whatever they may be, are not in charge. Christ is, and perhaps this is something that we need to remember right now. As we all well know, our church family is entering a new stage in its journey with my retirement next week. Without being dramatic about it, things are going to change and some of you may well find this intimidating and perhaps even a little bit frightening. What we must never forget though is that the powers and forces in life that may sometimes upset or even frighten us, are not in control. Christ is! To return to the writer I quoted a moment ago:

“There is now only one power we are to obey. That power has a human face, a face crowned with thorns. The battle has been fought and won. Victory is assured. Now, let’s get on and live it.”

The battle with the ‘powers’ has been fought and won; victory over all that would scare us and hurt us has been won. Christ, God himself in the flesh, the one who died for us, was raised for us, and even now is praying for us, is the one who is in charge. Truly there is no need to fear either the future or the powers and forces that seem to threaten or even overwhelm us. There isn’t because in the end? They really have no power at all, thanks be to God.

Pastoral Prayer

We thank you for the gift of this autumn morning and this very season itself, so different from the other three.

We thank you for all that makes this season so special, and we thank you too for the special people in our lives; for all that they have meant, mean, and always will mean to us.

We thank you for this land and nation in which we live, and for the freedoms we have including the right to vote. As we prepare once again to go to the polls to choose those men and women who will play such an important role in the life of our community, grant us the wisdom to choose wisely and well.

We thank you for the peace and security that we have, remembering all the places, including Ukraine, where both seem to be such a distant hope.

We thank you for our homes, our health, and our medical care, praying for all for whom such things are so far removed from their daily lives.

We pray this day for all who hunger, both physically and spiritually, that they may be fed. To this end we pray for the ministry of your church, that she may truly live as what she is, your Son’s body here on earth.

As we look at the world around us it oftentimes seems so dark and threatening. We are sometimes tempted to think that sin, darkness and evil are so strong that they must surely prevail. When we feel this way, help us to remember who and what your Son is. Help us to put our faith, hope and confidence in him, remembering that ultimately you are in charge and that all shall be well.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen