**21st July 2019**

**Colossians 1.15-28**

One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the Apollo 11 moon landing and the glimpse of the universe that accompanied it, we reflect on the glimpses we have of the creator of that universe through Jesus Christ (Colossians 1.15-28).

Saturday 20 July 2019 was the 50th anniversary of [the moment two men set foot on the moon](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-r--A3MKFkM). [[1]](#endnote-1)Coming to power in 1961 and spurred on by the Soviet Union’s space programme (which had succeeded in putting Yuri Gagarin into orbit), John F Kennedy announced that he had even greater ambitions: to put a man on the moon. In his now famous 1962 speech to a packed football stadium, [Kennedy announced to America and the world](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kwFvJog2dMw): ‘we choose to go to the moon.’  By 1969, they had done it. Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the surface of the moon, marking an epoch in space technology and the possibilities of human endeavour. Both men gave the world a glimpse of what lay beyond.

In many ways the Apollo 11 mission expanded the world’s horizons. The grainy images coming from the surface of the moon allowed human beings back on earth to look more closely at something that had only ever been viewed in the sky at night. At a time in the UK when only half the population owned cars and 40% of people had outside loos, putting a man on the moon was the stuff of science fiction. The moon-landing fired imaginations, 600 million people tuned in to watch the Eagle landing, and this glimpse of another part of our solar system has continued to inspire many of those who will forever stay earthbound. [Songs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPwMdZOlPo8), [novels](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jun/26/boy-climbed-moon-david-almond), and [films](https://www.universalpictures.co.uk/micro/first-man) keep the Apollo project alive in popular culture. But to this day, only 12 men – no women! – have ever actually been to the moon, and no one has yet set foot on any other planet in our solar system. Even counting up the probes, robots and rovers that have landed on Mercury, Venus and Mars, as a human species we still have only glimpses of outer space. The full collection of video footage, telescope images and satellite pictures allows humankind to look at just a small corner of the universe that we are part of.

Before Armstrong and Aldrin stepped out of the lunar module on July 20, 1969, Aldrin unstowed a small plastic container of wine and some bread. [[2]](#endnote-2)He had brought them to the moon from Webster Presbyterian church near Houston, where he was an elder. Aldrin had received permission from the Presbyterian church's general assembly to administer it to himself. In his book Magnificent Desolation, named after the first words he said as he stepped onto the moon’s surface, he shares the message he then radioed to Nasa: "I would like to request a few moments of silence … and to invite each person listening in, wherever and whomever they may be, to pause for a moment and contemplate the events of the past few hours, and to give thanks in his or her own way."

He then ate and drank the elements. The surreal ceremony is described in an article by Aldrin in a 1970 copy of Guideposts magazine: "I poured the wine into the chalice our church had given me. In the one-sixth gravity of the moon the wine curled slowly and gracefully up the side of the cup. It was interesting to think that the very first liquid ever poured on the moon, and the first food eaten there, were communion elements."

He also read a section of the gospel of John from chapter 15: ‘You are the vine; we are the branches. ‘During it all, Neil Armstrong, reportedly a deist, someone who believes there is a God behind all things but not a personal interventionist God, is said to have watched respectfully but without making any comment.

The story of the secret communion service only emerged after the mission. Aldrin had originally planned to share the event with the world over the radio. However, at the time Nasa was still reeling from a lawsuit filed by the firebrand atheist [Madalyn Murray O'Hair](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madalyn_Murray_O%27Hair), resulting in the ceremony never being broadcast. The founder of American Atheists and self-titled "most hated woman in America" had taken on Nasa, as well as many other public organizations. Most famously, she successfully fought mandatory school prayer and bible recitation in US public schools.

After the Apollo 8 crew had [read out the Genesis creation account in orbit](http://nssdc.gsfc.nasa.gov/planetary/lunar/apollo8_xmas.html), O'Hair wanted a ban on Nasa astronauts practicing religion on earth, in space or "around and about the moon" while on duty. She believed it violated the constitutional separation between church and state. In Magnificent Desolation, Aldrin explains how astronaut Deke Slayton, who ran the Apollo 11 flight crew operations, told him to tone down his lunar communiqué. "Go ahead and have communion, but keep your comments more general," he advised. Looking back Aldrin writes that the communion was his way of thanking God for the success of the mission. Yet, later he hinted that he could have been more inclusive:

*"Perhaps, if I had it to do over again, I would not choose to celebrate communion.
Although it was a deeply meaningful experience for me, it was a Christian sacrament, and we had come to the moon in the name of all mankind – be they Christians, Jews, Muslims, animists, agnostics, or atheists."*

O'Hair's case against Nasa eventually fizzled out, but it dramatically changed the tone of the [Apollo 11](https://www.theguardian.com/science/apollo-11-moon-landing) landing. Aldrin had originally intended a much more pioneering Christopher Columbus-style ceremony on the moon. That was never to be.

But at Webster Presbyterian church – the spiritual home of many astronauts – Aldrin's communion service is still celebrated every July, known as Lunar Communion Sunday. They replay the tape of Aldrin on the moon and recite Psalm eight, which he had quoted on his return trip to Earth ("'When I consider the heavens, the work of Thy fingers and the moon and the stars which Thou hast ordained, what is man that Thou art mindful of him?'). The church still holds the chalice that Aldrin brought back with him.

Though conquering space certainly marked a triumph for science and mankind, God kept coming up in conversations on these missions to the moon.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Nine months later, when an accident occurred on board Apollo 13 that might have doomed its three astronauts to die in space, much of the planet turned to God.

President Nixon called the nation to pray. Their prayers were answered and after many trials, the crew of Apollo 13 was saved.

One of the last Apollo flights featured Mission Control's Charles Duke getting to walk on the moon. He spoke of it later. 'I used to think that going to the moon would be my greatest achievement. But my walk with Jesus is more memorable because it's an everyday affair'."

Jim Irwin – Apollo 15 – became an evangelical minister.  And Apollo 14 left a microfilm copy of the King James Bible on the moon."

It's interesting to note how many of those men who flew far into the heavens couldn't get the God of heaven out of their thoughts.

The poem in the opening passage of Colossians offers the reader another glimpse of something beyond. This lyrical, powerful description of Jesus, God incarnate, a man who dwelt among us, allows humankind to glimpse for themselves the invisible God. Colossians 1 draws us into the creation story, highlights the power Jesus has over rulers and authorities, and reveals his authority to reconcile and make peace through the mighty work completed on the cross. The poem reveals Jesus, and by looking at him we are offered glimpse after glimpse of what God is like: the invisible divine being made visible, the unknowable made knowable.

Like the universe we inhabit, there is so much about its creator that earthbound humanity can’t know; so much that we don’t understand this side of heaven. But in his compassion for us, God allowed us a glimpse of himself. The incarnate Jesus walked among us, God with us. And this revelation of God inspires us, not just in words, songs and films, but in our real and living faith in the God who holds the moon, stars and the whole universe together.

the Christian claim is that in Jesus we s glimpse God. It is hugely controversial because many people in our society see this claim as exclusive and arrogant. They say there can’t be just one true religion. What about other good people who hold to different faiths, surely, they can’t be wrong. To insist that one faith has a better grasp of the truth than others is intolerant. Ultimately it leads to conflict and even war as you battle for supremacy. It erodes peace on earth. Many therefore try to address the divisiveness of religion by either outlawing it, condemning or ridiculing religion, or trying to privatize religion. If you want to discuss these issues, then come along to the first of my sessions on Reasons for God this Thursday. I will also throw in the hot potato of why a good God allows suffering as an extra bonus.

All I will say at this point is that everyone has an agenda. [Madalyn Murray O'Hair](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madalyn_Murray_O%27Hair), had an agenda in stopping Buzz Aldrin publicly celebrating communion on the moon. Alistair McGrath in his history of atheism writes: ‘The 20th century gave rise to one of the greatest and most distressing paradoxes of human history: that the greatest intolerance and violence of that century were practiced by those who believed that religion caused intolerance and violence.’ [[4]](#endnote-4) To say Jesus is not the supreme image of the invisible God is as ‘arrogant’ as saying he is!

My agenda in this Christian act of worship, is to use today’s poetic passage from Colossians 1 as a way to reflect on Jesus as the embodied image of God.

I said last week that one reason the letter was written was to discourage the Christians in Colossae from mistaken belief in fasting and festivals, or visions and angels (2.16-18). They were attracted to mystery religions and all sorts of eclectic beliefs. The letter builds faith in Christ as the centre of all things. When Christ’s place at the heart of creation is recognized, everything else makes sense.

The reading begins with a poem celebrating who Christ is. The NIV sets these words out as prose; it is helpful to look at other versions that better reveal how the ideas fit together in poetic form. It is likely that Paul borrowed this poem from Christian tradition, and it is possible that the church used it as a hymn (cf. Philippians 2.6-11). In other words, it predates Paul – probably quite early after Jesus lived on this earth, these beliefs were being formulated.

Like the prologue to John’s Gospel (John 1.1-3), this poem focuses first on Jesus’ relationship to God, as God’s firstborn, God’s image (cf. Genesis 1.26). Then it turns to his role as the channel and goal of creation – once again, the invisible mysteries of Colossian folk-religion and the rulers and powers of the Roman Empire are subordinate to Jesus.

 So, Paul writes:

*The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him.*

Think about your own relationship with Jesus.

* What do you see in him?
* How does he reflect God?

I’ve had nearly forty years of fascination with Jesus. I never grow tired of reading about him, reflecting on his nature and character, talking to him, praying, seeking to follow in his footsteps, It is an awesome adventure – like Charles Duke, going to the moon would be a great achievement, but walking with Jesus is more memorable because it's an everyday affair.

The Colossians were caught up in all sorts of beliefs. They believed the elemental forces of the universe and the local spirits controlled their destiny. Paul is trying to say that Jesus is above all this. He is supreme. I remember when I went out to see the Presbyterian Church in Ghana. Out in the countryside the church was faced with a real dilemma. The animistic indigenous tribal religion all had ancestor worship at the heart: the belief that those who had died and gone to the spirit world, controlled your destiny and success. A regular act of deference, in order to keep in favour with the ancestors, was to pour out libations to them. You took some expensive wine or spirit and poured it out into the ground as an offering. Waste of good whisky I thought. But it was a serious issue for many Presbyterian Christian minsters. Should they participate with this local, cultural activity or should they risk the anger and ostracization of their community by refusing to take part in the ceremonies. It was interesting to be part of those missional conversations. One of the creative ways forward that one of the Ghanaian theologians were suggesting was to see Jesus as the head of the ancestors, the supreme ancestor, the one who had authority and control of the spirit realm and acknowledging his superiority in these ceremonies.

*He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

* What does it mean in your life that Jesus is before all things?

*And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy*.

Christ is the firstborn. Often, the one who goes first faces the hardest challenge – for example, the lead cyclist in the peloton in the Tour de France, or the lead goose in the V-shaped formations as they fly. Christ has already faced the hardest challenge on our behalf; trailblazing and demonstrating the way of life that God calls us to – that of self-sacrificial love. But this way of self-sacrificial love leads ultimately to the resurrection, to salvation, to the vision of the glory of God

As we think about our church - Is Jesus reigning supreme?

*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

Think about the cross.

* How do you understand this act?
* What impact has it had on your life?
* How does the cross speak to you about God?

One of the things I will share on Thursday night at the Reasons for God is whatever the mystery of suffering what we can say is that god through Jesus entered into our suffering. The Catholic church has a crucifix – a depiction of Jesus suffering on the cross – and for our broken suffering world, that can be a powerful sign of solidarity and hope in the midst of the world’s pain.

*Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour.* *But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.*

The language of reconciliation (v.20) reminds readers of the covenant tradition through which God heals the broken relationship with the people, making peace with them. There is sharp irony in these words. The Romans claimed to be peacemakers, but their peace arose from the destruction of opponents, often through crucifixion. A Roman might have described Jesus’ execution as ‘making peace’ through the elimination of yet another opponent. Paul takes this language and gives it far deeper meaning as he helps his hearers see that Jesus’ death reconciles them to God and so brings peace.

And into this mix of creation and covenant, Paul adds the church (v.18), where Jesus is acknowledged as head. He returns to this theme (vv.21-23), helping the Colossians to understand that they have become insiders, part of this reconciled group for whom Jesus died. This is why it matters so much that they remain rooted in the firm foundations of gospel faith that they received from Epaphras, with the goal of maturity (v.28) and the aim of revealing the glory of Christ and the hope of sharing that glory with him (v.27).

This famous poem illustrates some of the struggles of theology. We often seem to want to read Scripture as if it is an instruction manual, or a scientific treatise, or even a ‘Dummies’ Guide’ to life. But we get the most from Scripture when we read it as poetry, as something that needs wrestling with, and something through which God can speak to us in different ways, and at different levels at different times. That is one of its beauties. This passage, like so many others, can appear confusing and complex when we first read it. But it is worth persisting with – like much of Scripture, we are always journeying and discovering and learning.

Fly me to the moon
Let me play among the stars
Let me see what spring is like
On Jupiter and Mars

In other words, hold my hand
In other words, please be with me

Fill my heart with song
and let me sing forever more
You are all I long for
All I worship and adore
In other words, you’re the Truth, In other words, I love you

1. *Fiona Dorman is Education Officer at Bristol Cathedral and a freelance education consultant* <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2019/102-july-august-2019-c/proper-11/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2012/sep/13/buzz-aldrin-communion-moon> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2019/july/let-there-be-light-how-god-kept-appearing-over-and-over-during-americas-missions-to-the-moon> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. A McGrath, The Twilight of Atheism, Oxford 2004 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)