Colossians is the final epistle we’re going to look at here in “Sunday School” for 2019 (before taking a break for Advent and Christmas). We have nine verses before us; they’ve been “lifted” from the middle of a chapter. And six of them we already heard back in July. Next week, the Epistle will be some Romans, then, after that, there’ll be a few sentences of James. Is this an odd way to approach; to apprehend the New Testament? Well, for those who perhaps aren’t familiar with how we, in the Anglican tradition – that is to say, how, in this room, us “Episcopalian[s]” – “handle” the Holy Scriptures – ‘for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness’, [2 Tim. 3:16] we do so principally – since the early 1990s – by use of a reading-plan called, “the Revised Common Lectionary;” which divides material from the Bible – not evenly from every one of its books, mind – across a three year (repeating) “cycle”: “A,” (which begins again this December), where the focus is on Matthew’s gospel; “B” where the focus is Mark (to begin at the end of 2020); and, finally, “C,” where it is on Luke. (John is used throughout the entire sequence, interspersing the other Evangelists’ (three) narratives – filling their “plot-holes,” if you like – with his peculiar reconstruction of Christ’s ministry, which ‘draws both on the Beloved Disciple’s own direct autopsy and also on traditions he had directly from individual disciples whose specific traditions did not enter the [pre-]Synoptic [corpus of source-material].’)

It was prepared – the R. C. L. – by a mixed denominational committee – facing, as it must, all of the disadvantages of such an awkward system; and the thinking behind some of their decisions are, I confess, a mystery. In regard to this morning’s portion, however, their choice was evidently governed by an interest in finding sentiments that would speak to today’s feast – a medieval Catholic relic, the final one of the ecclesial year, called, “Christ the King.” (If the reason for their choice isn’t “evident” to you, I hope it will momentarily be so.)

Now, since, as I just said, much of the ground has been recently covered (in the summer), I hope you’ll forgive me if I largely quote myself on these matters: Colossians was a letter sent not to a single congregation but to a “triangle” of them – one in each of Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis: Three towns situated near each other ‘in a minor valley of the system of the river Mænder’, on the banks of a tributary called “The Lycus,” in the highlands of south-central Anatolia, (now modern Turkey). [Show on map.] ‘Th[is] whole

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4 Moule, Handley Carr Glyn (1893), The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: With Introduction and Notes, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 11.
region is volcanic,\textsuperscript{5} and, in consequence(?), the pasturage is well attested in the literature as being ‘rich’\textsuperscript{6} and ‘lush’.\textsuperscript{7}

For Colossae, Richard Melick tell us, a \textit{very} ancient city, this \textit{mountainous} fertility meant \textit{lots} of sheep, an ‘abundance of wool’, and ‘a flourishing garment industry.’\textsuperscript{8} But it peaked early, and by the first century it was ‘an insignificant village’ in comparison with its younger neighbors:\textsuperscript{9} Laodicea was a wealthy banking and political center. It had been founded by the Seleucid dynasty, Antiochus II, in 250 B. C. as a military stronghold on the northern border of his realm, and he ‘named it for his sister-wife Laodice’.\textsuperscript{10} The area – “Phrygia” – you see, was inclined to “pull” away from his family’s control. And his grandson, Antiochus III, sent in 2,000 Jewish mercenaries and their families to help maintain the status quo:\textsuperscript{11} a development which had profound ramifications for the future and the spread of the Gospel, because those Jews – whoever they were – built synagogues where they settled, and Paul’s ‘custom’ was to travel \textit{wherever} there was one to exploit it – if only initially – as a “launchpad” for evangelism; this was his ‘pattern’.\textsuperscript{12} (They were the logical choice after all. Here is ‘where he would find those who had a knowledge of God and a working knowledge of the Scriptures.’\textsuperscript{13})

This measure – Jewish colonization – was not nearly sufficient to stifle the anti-imperialist pressure felt in this far-flung periphery though, and war erupted. The local princelings, to help them secede from the Seleucid empire, invited participation from the Roman \textit{Republic} – the Caesars had not yet arisen. And [at] the Battle of Magnesia [190 B. C.] …the loyalist forces of Antiochus III – including the newly arrived Gauls\textsuperscript{14} – were brutally beaten, and Latin came to the Middle East to stay: In the crippling peace treaty that followed, he was obliged to hand over territory far larger in size than the whole of Great Britain to Rome’s allies;\textsuperscript{15} who later became her proxies – “puppets,” and, later still, provinces, administered directly by officials sent from Italy. They made Laodicea one of their headquarters for governing the entire subcontinent.\textsuperscript{16}

Hierapolis – the location for the other church Paul references in \textit{Colossians} [4:13] – was equally successful as Laodicea under the Romans, but

\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Ibid.}, 12.
\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Supra}.
\textsuperscript{7} Melick (1991), 163.
\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Supra}.
\textsuperscript{9} Kirkland (1995), 109.
\textsuperscript{16} Dunn (1996), 20.
for a very different reason: it was situated ‘directly above an active fault’\textsuperscript{17} – ‘the Denizli Graben, …a geological disturbance zone’,\textsuperscript{18} from which issued ‘very impressive springs’\textsuperscript{19} and sulphurous vapours. And ‘[t]he site was a well-known tourist attraction within the ancient world, …mentioned by several writers of antiquity…”\textsuperscript{20} Not only were there luxurious hot mineral baths; but over the largest ground-opening was built “The Plutonium” – a temple to the Roman god of the underworld. Believed to be an actual “Gate to Hell,” inside ‘highly poisonous gases’ became concentrated to lethal levels,\textsuperscript{21} and castrated priests would demonstrate their supernatural “powers” by ‘ushering animals like goats and bulls into [the shrine]…where[,] after a short time[,] [they] showed signs of suffocation, finally dying after several minutes…’\textsuperscript{22} A riveting spectacle for spiritually-hungry, doubt-filled souls.’\textsuperscript{23}

‘[T]here has been some scepticism about Paul having wrote Colossians – exclusively in the modern era… despite the author explicitly naming himself as such [[in its salutation]]. And, principally, much of this doubt seems to have stemmed from an idea that the theology contained in the epistle is – as James Dunn claims – ‘significantly developed beyond what we find in the undisputed Paulines.’\textsuperscript{24} … But, more precisely still, the doubt of the sceptics is born out of an incredulity that a pious Jewish man such as the Apostle – a man who said of himself that he was ‘zealous’[Gal. 1:14] – so, to be clear, a strict monotheist – should equate Christ – a famous young, crucified rabbi from the Galilee – with ‘the invisible [that is immaterial and deathless] God’: [Col. 1:15], (Jesus, you’ll have noticed, is called His ‘image’, which, explains Wayne House, ‘means more than mere likeness or similarity; it includes the ideas of representation and manifestation.’\textsuperscript{25} As becomes clear in the subsequent verses, as ‘the divine attributes and functions which [once] belonged [exclusively] to the God of the


Old Testament are by ["[Paul"]] given to Christ [too]. Such as creation of the universe: see verse 16.)

Thus, for example, the prominent – and prolific(!), late nineteenth-century Unitarian author, Orello Cone, having asserted that `[t]he absolute aloneness of God’ will have been ‘a fundamental principle in [Paul’s] theology’, 27 weaponizes this notion to argue that the “high” Christology – the nature and status of the Savior – in Colossians ‘surpasses’, therefore, what he would have ever taught: it is ‘remote from the Pauline conception of Christ’, he says. 28 It is too ‘speculative’. 29 The letter, then, Cone concludes, must be “deutero-Pauline.” That is, from an imitator working at a more “advanced” stage ‘in the development’ of Christian thought. 30 Others, however, thinking along similar lines – that the “Christology” is too divine for the former Pharisee, Paul – but taking seriously the author’s self-identification, have concluded ‘that Col. 1:15-20 was a later addition to what Paul had written.’ 31 An ‘interpolation’. 32

The problem, however, for any of these scholars is, fundamentally, a reluctance to accept that Jesus in reality was the person being described in the astonishing sentences we’re considering this morning. It seems too far-fetched. (That any historical man could also have been God incarnate.) And so, having presumed against that as an actual possibility, they disbelieve anyone who suggests the contrary, irrespective of the evidence. And this is a growing problem that we face in ‘an age of disillusionment, cynicism and uncertainty’. 33 Perhaps some of us in our own [[families and friendship-circles]]? 34

And yet, as Church of England bishop, “Tom” Wright observes: The Christology fits well with [what we find elsewhere in the N. T.]. 35 Thus, ‘as the scholar Larry Hurtado points out, ‘Luke also projects a very high view of Jesus’ transcendent significance. For example,…[t]he reverence that the disciples give the risen Jesus in the final verses of Luke (24:52), ‘they worshipped [proskynōsantes] Him’) is certainly intended by the author as the full reverence

29 Cone, Orello (1901), The Epistles to the Hebrews, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon, the Pastoral Epistles, the Epistles of James, Peter, and Jude together with a Sketch of the History of the Canon of the New Testament, London; New York, N. Y.: The Knickerbocker Press / G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 179.
30 Cone (1898), 299.
32 Supra.
given to a figure of *divine* status...’

Furthermore, outside of the Scriptural “data,” Peter Schäfer argues that the rabbis – critics hostile to the Church – also appear to be under the impression that ‘it was...not just some crazy Christian theologians’ who regarded Jesus as equivalent with God, ‘but Jesus himself who [had] laid claim to this scandalous privilege.’ Accordingly, ‘Jesus was widely regarded as truly divine in earliest Christianity’. And all of the most primitive hymns sung in the first churches treat Him as such. Actually, Ralph Martin, in the *Evangelical Quarterly*, concludes ‘that Colossians 1:15-20 embodies an early Christian tribute, *set in hymnic form*, to the Church’s Lord, which the writer borrows from the liturgical praxis which was familiar both to himself and his readers.’ In other words, ‘Paul was not attempting to “reinvent the wheel”...’ He was *merely* echoing – and so reinforcing – what was taken for granted by those closest in time and place to the Savior, that ‘all things have been created through him and for him.’[Col. 1:16] But how...“comfortable” are you with this idea? Is it the bedrock of your beliefs as it should be? And do you see how it may be concerning that, as the surveyists over at Barna Group report, the younger a Christian is, the less likely they believe Jesus was God?

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