

The difference Christ makes (Colossians 1:11-20)

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Early in my ministry I worked my way through Stephen Hawking's book *A Brief History of Time*. This was Hawking's first book for average people (like me!), and in it he attempts to explain in relatively simple terms the origin and fate of the universe.

Hawking caught my attention because he addresses some of the questions I raised as a child when I visited Griffith Park Observatory in Los Angeles, gazing up at that artificial sky in awe. Where did the universe come from? What was here before it was? Will time flow backward one day? Hawking pursues these childhood questions of mine without apology and with a passion and a genius that are captivating. What continues to intrigue me about this book is that his motives stretch farther than the frontiers of physics, astronomy, and mathematics. Hawking is attempting, as he explicitly says, to understand the mind of God.

The Apostle Paul, as he writes to the fractured community of believers at Colossae, is, I believe, on a similar journey of understanding, though following a different path. For Paul, the mind of God, which stretches to the far reaches of the universe, is imagined most completely in the finite person of Jesus Christ. The person of Jesus is so decisive, so all encompassing, that not only you and I are different people because of it, not only has our world and human history been changed forever because of it, but the entire universe has been transformed because of it.

The only way Paul can express this cosmic significance of Christ, to capture its overwhelming power and awe, is through a song that he quotes in this text. A song the Colossians no doubt already knew by heart, for each of them had intoned its words when new believers were baptized into the household of faith. A song which reminded them of the cosmic supremacy of Christ who is the beginning of creation, the end of creation, and the glue which holds it together in time as we know it. A finite human being whose power now permeates the whole universe.

I must confess that to sing of Jesus Christ in these terms seems strange and grandiose and a bit out of touch with the lives of ordinary people right now. After all, we have more important things to worry about than the laws of physics that order the universe and reveal the mind of God. But let's not let Paul's soaring language blind us to the central message of this earliest Christian hymn: in Jesus Christ, something decisive has happened of cosmic proportions.

For all of its grandiosity, I think the most profound implications of this text are deeply personal. I remember hearing Tom Gillespie, the retired president of Princeton Seminary, speak to a week-long conference of 800 ministers who were all grappling with the meaning of evangelism in our changing world.

"For years, when I got on an airplane," he said, "I could rest assured that I would not be bothered by my seatmate when he asked me what I did for a living and I told him I was a Presbyterian minister. That would usually end the conversation, and I could settle down to read a good book for the duration of the flight.

"I have always been frightened about sharing my faith story with strangers," Gillespie continued, "because, I suppose it leaves me feeling exposed and vulnerable. What it all comes down to is this: it doesn't matter if I am a conservative or a liberal Christian. It doesn't matter if I have Ph.D. in New Testament studies or drive a truck for a living. It doesn't matter if I can quote from the Bible chapter and verse or can't read at all. All that matters is if Christ has made a difference in my life, and if I am able to share that difference with authenticity."

This gets to the essence of the hymn Paul tells the Colossians to sing again: Christian faith makes the outrageous claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ have changed the universe. Does Jesus make a difference in my life?

If he does, if the world is changed, if the universe indeed rests at his feet, if Jesus is Christ of the cosmos Stephen Hawking does his best to describe, then with the Colossians we, too, have something to sing about on this Reign of Christ Sunday.