



Hazelbank Presbyterian Church



Rev Alan Johnston

You've just received an envelope that tells you – “please spend the enclosed £100 in any way you wish”. How should the Bible shape your thinking and spending?

Your local newspaper has announced plans to build hostel for asylum seekers to be built close to your home. Does the Bible have anything that might shape your response?

You are in the market for a new car. How could the Bible influence your decision?

Actually, if Jesus is Lord of your life then the message of Jesus affects every part of our lives from shopping to washing up, from our attitudes to our neighbours to recycling empty bottles and so on!

Abraham Kuyper, was at one time prime minister of the Netherlands. He was also a theologian and pastor. He was then uniquely qualified when he wrote, **“There is no square inch of creation over which Jesus Christ does not shout, ‘This is mine!’”**

This sermon is an adapted one given to clergy from the Bible society for today, Bible Sunday. Its purpose is to help us see that the Bible works not by giving us a set of rules we must slavishly obey but it works in a much more creative and maturing way. Through the Bible, God invites us to become actors, if you like in his cosmic drama – this means we are invited to make a difference to our world and his. This makes the Bible both essential and exciting! It is through knowing the Bible that we can attune ourselves to God's purposes. If we see the Bible as a drama, not in a real sense but in a figurative one, where God's plans and goals for the world advance through human's playing their part, cooperating with him and seeing how his words can best be applied in their situations, we can see that we too can be part of this drama today.

This drama is not to be understood in a flippant way where we are all part-time actors just having a bit of fun, but rather what it is meant to show is that creation has a beginning and an end and is very purposeful in its direction. But what we also need to take in is the fact that it also has someone directing it all and someone in charge. This someone is God and as such he has a role for each of us to play. We will look at this Drama in three dimensions, which are seen in the letter to the Colossians.

1. The Cosmic Drama: Colossians 1.15–20

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸And 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.

For Paul, Christ is not been properly understood, if we forget his life before birth and his life after the resurrection!

The whole creation and the whole development of the universe revolves around Jesus Christ:

¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰and 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.

What an amazing claim. Nothing falls outside the scope of God's project, God's plan. Here we have God's *Mission Statement* – you cannot be more comprehensive than this. The whole Bible backs up this view.

Evangelical Anglican Bishop of Durham, Tom Wright describes it as a drama in 5 acts:

THE BIBLE – A DRAMA IN FIVE ACTS

1. The Creation – God creates the scene (Genesis 1-2)
2. The Fall – The tragic consequences of human sin distort the world (Genesis 3-11)
3. Israel – God begins the process of redemption (The Old Testament)
4. Jesus – God brings redemption to a focus in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus (The Gospels)
5. The time of the Church – God's redemption is brought to the whole world (Acts – Revelation).

Scene 1 – the birth of the church

Scenes 2 & 3 - Church history so far

Scene 4 – in which we are called to live faithfully and creatively

Scene 5 – Redemption completed

We are invited to play our part in this developing drama.

Looked at in this way, the Bible provides us with a “big story” in which to live out our lives – a dynamic framework which helps us to make sense of the meaning of life, to explore its difficulties and to discover a sense of purpose for our selves.

David Wilkinson a respected astrophysicist and theologian tells us that physicists have calculated that the probability of the universe ever getting started under its own steam is 1/1x fifty seven zeros – in other words so improbable as to be impossible as a chance event. This should give us just a glimpse of the scale of the “big story” God is directing and that we have a part in. More than this, it offers us : a new beginning – with resources for living and an invitation to friendship with God agreeing to live in this story. We also see that is far more than a moral code – the Bible presents us with a vision of the world as coming from God, belonging to God and mattering deeply to God. Our privilege is to share in all of this with God, even the very ordinary “bits” of everyday life begin to count. So how does this work? Remember the surprise gift of £100?

If we decide to live our lives according to God's play, then not only what we buy (**including where it came from and how the people who produce it are treated**) but why we buy, what we do with it and how we treat those in the shop affect God's drama. So also does the amount of time, energy and money we put into shopping!

Contributing to God's play means that we have many more issues to work through but also that shopping (or not shopping) becomes part of our adventure with God. So the whole of life becomes an exciting challenge to live as part of God's story, creatively and faithfully. In Colossians 3:16 Paul writes : “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly”.

Part of the “richness of the word of Christ” is that through him God creates and restores the whole universe! But an equally important part of this richness is that he has invited us to be part of his dramatic rescue.

2. The Local Drama: Colossians 1.21–22; 2.12–15; 3.11; 3.23; 4.5–6

So, this grand narrative of God’s eternal purposes has local implications – that too is part of its richness. Christ’s death turns enemies into God’s friends and overcomes all the divisions that people create. It leads to transformed people who then transform the locality in which they live. There are all kinds of hints to this effect in the letter. Old divisions are being overcome – whether they are religious/ethnic ones or social ones. How we treat people from other countries (or even other parts of these islands!), our attitudes to asylum seekers, and how we respect people of other faiths might be challenges today. Old attitudes and destructive patterns of behaviour are being transformed so that anger is replaced with compassion, hate with forgiveness, insults with kindness and so forth. Old-style relations in home and workplace are being replaced with ones that more fully reflect the model of Jesus – loving respect for all. We can see in these how the yeast of the Kingdom is beginning to change the whole loaf! So, another aspect of the richness is that through Christ, God is redeeming his people for holiness. God’s Word has always worked like this. Our context is very different, so **completing** the drama does not mean **copying** but being stimulated by this story.

One church I heard of is requiring very sacrificial giving from its congregation – they are refurbishing their buildings so it can be better used by the community around them. Others are challenging each other about fair trade goods or living in a more eco-friendly way. Others look after the street people in their town, or provide after-school clubs for children whose parents are at work. These are just some ways we can seek “to set ourselves” apart for God and demonstrate how the message of Jesus transforms communities. Some of us face the challenge to work out how we can demonstrate God’s kingdom in the workplace or in a difficult family situation. As Christians we need each other to help us to work these things through and to support one another – it is easy to forget we are in God’s play when we are “out there “on our own!

Odette Mukakabera is someone who is creatively acting out the Bible in one of the world’s most challenging situations. Odette, who lives in Rwanda, lost many family members in the country’s genocide. Her husband died of AIDS. Then when Odette herself tested positive, many remaining family members withdrew from her, while she continued to care for her three children and a foster daughter. But rather than embitter her, Odette’s experiences drove her to study and campaign on the rights of HIV-positive people. One way has been through setting up a Christian HIV/AIDS association to support infected people. The Bible’s description of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 has special meaning for her and explains the motivation for all she does. “Christ is the one who suffered for us all,” she says. “He has compassion and love.”

“Where is the Good Samaritan Today?” - is a Bible Society Scripture and training programme that Odette works with and which is being widely used in parts of Africa. Part of the programme is a poignant drama of the Good Samaritan parable in which no Good Samaritan arrives. “We need to create Good Samaritans to help each other,” Odette says. “Christ is our best example: his constant love gives me strength.”

3. The Personal Drama:

But this richness affects individual people – the details about various believers in Colossians chapter 4 remind us of this.

Within this list, there are many dramatic personal stories. Fortunately, we know a little about a couple of them. We can tell the stories of: We read of Mark – Barnabas' cousin, who earlier had opted out of missionary journeys with Paul and was barred by Paul on a subsequent journey (See Acts 12. 25; 16. 36 – 40). But in Colossians chapter 4 we read that Mark is restored as a companion of Paul. Paul says he is one of three people who have “been a great help to me”(4.11). Mark goes on to provide us with one of our Gospels. Clearly, he had allowed Christ's word to live richly in him.

We read of one called Onesimus – a runaway slave, whose master Philemon probably lived in Colossae – so in hearing this letter read Philemon would have heard about the change in Onesimus! We just have to read Paul's letter to Philemon which provides indications of an amazing conversion story note particularly verses 15–16: “Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—¹⁶no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord”.

Here are individuals profoundly influenced by the richness of Christ's message, who have become part of its unfolding drama. And there are the others, known to us only by name, but whose own parts in the drama would have been well-known to Paul and the churches in that region. And that's where we all come in – we are invited to construct scene 4 in the final act of the Bible's continuing drama!

How can we do this? Only by soaking ourselves in the richness of Christ's message, so that all our ways of looking at the world are Christ-like and all our ways of living will affirm Christ.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly

Now we need to beware! “***Dwell in you richly...***”, doesn't mean keep it hidden, locked away, inside us! It means to take it so much to heart that it reshapes who we are and what we do from the inside out! The Colossians are encouraged to encounter the word of Christ in many ways.

Colossians 3.16b as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.

- Through teaching with wisdom - which may imply practical application in daily living.
- Through setting biblical truth to music and expressing it in worship
- And singing “with thanksgiving”, encouraging us to be receptive for the changes God wants to make in us

These are some of the ways we can get inside God's drama and, with the Holy Spirit's help, work out our part in our own situations. But like the Colossians, we are also called to make these riches known. This is what Bible Society, in partnership with nearly 140 other Bible Societies worldwide, is all about – translating the Bible, making it heard in the languages and formats that people need if they are to fully receive and act on its message and play their parts too, in the drama, of the Bible.

LET US PRAY