

3. In Jesus Christ, His only Son our Lord

Series: I Believe - The Apostle's Creed

Date: 9 October 2022, 17th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: John 1:1-18; Colossians 1:15-20; Psalm 2; Luke 1:26-38

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. John 1.14

At the heart of the Christian faith is not a set of beliefs or a moral code, important though those things are. The heart of Christianity is a person - Jesus Christ. This is true when it comes to the Apostles' Creed as well. Yes, the creed is a summary of Christian doctrine. But at its heart is the person of Jesus. Today we're looking at the statement, "I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary." When we say that we're not just saying something we think is true, we're saying Jesus is a person whom I trust. We saw in our first week that belief means trust, and trust is something we can't live without. Pope Benedict in his *Introduction to Christianity*, says that belief or faith is taking your stand upon something, and for the Christian, "faith in God appears as a holding on to God through which [a person] gains a firm foothold for [their] life."¹ Who then is this person, Jesus, whom, as we trust, gives us a firm foothold for life?

Last week we looked at what it means to say we believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth. We saw that to speak of God as Father means that we also have in mind the Son. With this we enter into the mystery of the Trinity, one God, three persons, the Father and the Son eternally one in the unity of the Spirit. This week we look at the second central doctrine of the Christian faith, the Incarnation - God the Son, becoming a human being. *In Carne* - in the flesh. As John puts it, *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us*. This is who Jesus is, God and man, God in the flesh. But what does this mean and why is it important?

That Jesus is both God and man was held and confessed quite easily by the apostles. John speaks of the eternal Word who was with God and was God, becoming flesh and dwelling with us. The writer of Hebrews says that, "in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son, ... through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of Gods' glory and the exact representation of his being."² In Colossians Paul writes that "in Christ all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form".³ It was their experience with Jesus and their witnessing his

¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, Ignatius Press, 2004: 69

² Hebrews 1.2-3

³ Colossians 2.9

resurrection from the dead that led them to this conclusion. So when he encounters the risen Jesus, Thomas worships him saying “My Lord and my God.”⁴

Over the coming 4 centuries, the church sought to articulate what it meant that the one true God of Israel had come in the man Jesus of Nazareth. Over this early period in the church there were many false trails, but they can generally be summed up in two equal and opposite errors: emphasising Jesus’ divinity at the expense of his humanity, or emphasising Jesus’ humanity at the expense of his divinity. That Jesus is really God, but not really human, or that Jesus is really human but not really God. The former view looks like variations on the idea that Jesus only appeared to be human, but was really God. He may not have had a human body, or maybe he had a human body, but not a human mind and so on. The alternative view is that Jesus was just a human being, albeit a very special human being. And at some point, usually his baptism, he was chosen by God for a special relationship and work. This view rejects an internal relation of one being with the Father, in favour of an external moral relation by which he lived out his calling as Messiah.⁵

We still wrestle with these two options. I remember a very robust discussion in a Bible study on Colossians here at St George’s, where we were puzzling over how Paul could say that “in him, [that is the Son], all things were created ... all things have been created through him and for him.”⁶ How could this be said about the man Jesus, who walked the streets of Jerusalem 2000 years ago? As you know, I don’t like using labels, but you could say that the tendency of the theological liberals is to downplay Jesus’ divinity, and the tendency of evangelicals is to downplay his humanity. The reality is that they are both true. Jesus is 100% God and 100% human.

I’ve called not holding on to Christ as both fully God and fully human as a false trail. The technical term is heresy. This comes from the Greek word for choice, which has interesting connotations for our contemporary fixation on personal autonomy and freedom of choice. The opposite of heresy is orthodoxy, which means “right belief”. The great heresy in the early church was Arianism. Arius was a priest and theologian from North Africa. He taught that if the Word was begotten of the Father that must mean that there was a time when he did not exist. Arius picked up Paul’s words from Colossians, that the Son is the “firstborn” of all creation. He said that God the Father created the Son and then through him created everything else. Jesus in this sense is the great cosmic middle manager. He stands in

⁴ John 20.28

⁵ Cf. T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, Bloomsbury, 2016: 112-113

⁶ Colossians 1.16

between God and the rest of creation, neither God, but also something different from the rest of creation.

Arius' teaching led to great confusion. Was Jesus God? Was he human? Was he something else? The council of Nicea was called by the Emperor Constantine in 325 in large part to sort out the theological mess that Arius had left the church in. The council landed upon two phrases that helped clarify the relationship between the Father and the Son. The first we looked at last week, adding "eternally" to the apostle John's phrase, "begotten of the Father". The second was the word *homoousion*, in English, of "one being" with the Father. These clarified the unity and distinction between the Father and the Son. The Son is of one being with the Father. All that can be said of the Father can be said of him, except that he is the Son and not the Father. As you can tell, this is pretty heady stuff, and it took nearly the next 70 years of debate for the church to finally put to bed Arianism and reaffirm the teaching of Nicea at the council of Constantinople in 381.

Arianism is still with us. The Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses teach a form of Arianism, that is that Jesus is not fully God, but a heavenly intermediary. When Islam arose in the 7th century the first Christian response to it suggested that it was also a form of Arianism, because it wanted to preserve the dignity of the one God, but also because it taught that the prophets, including Jesus but culminating in Mohammed were special intermediaries between God and humanity.

Ok, so that's a little church history for us. But why does it matter that Jesus is fully God and fully man? The answer is that Jesus is both the revealer and reconciler. Let's consider each in turn.

Revealer. Jesus reveals God to us. This is John's point when he says,

No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. (1.18)

On Friday I conducted a funeral. In the service we read from John 14 where Jesus says,

'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.'

And he goes on to say, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me."⁷ To know Jesus is to know God. To see Jesus is to see God. He reveals to us who God truly is. Apart from Jesus there is no true knowledge of God. But he can only reveal God because he himself is God. If he were

⁷ John 14.6-7, 10

not God, then behind whatever he did and said there would be an unknown God, mysterious, impenetrable, remote and in the end, untrustworthy. But because Jesus is himself one with the Father, true God from true God, he makes God known to us.

The key metaphor for this that the Nicene fathers landed upon was “Light from Light”. This picks up on Psalm 36.9 - “In your light we see light”, and Hebrews 1 - “the Son is the radiance of God’s glory.” The idea here is that you can distinguish between light and radiance, but you never have one without the other, in fact they are one and the same. So also the Father is never without the Son, but of one and the same being. Just as God is eternal light, so the Son of God as eternal radiance of God is himself eternally light without beginning and end.⁸ In him, the Light of the world, we see the true Light - God the Father.

Jesus however also reveals humanity for what we truly are and what we were always meant to be. We are made in the image of God, but we have broken and defaced that image through our pride and disobedience. Jesus, as we read in Colossians, is the true image of the invisible God. Through his humility and obedience he has demonstrated what it means to be truly human to embody the image of God. But he could not do this if he was not truly human. Hebrews says that he shared our flesh and blood, he was made fully human in every way. Indeed he was tempted in every way, just as we are, yet he did not sin.⁹ And so we don’t look to our father Adam for guidance, but we look to our Saviour Jesus, the second Adam, to learn how to live as God’s children.

Second, Jesus is the **Reconciler**. He reconciles humanity to God and God to humanity. Again, he could not do this if he was not both fully God and fully human. If he were not fully God, he would not be able to save us. Only God has the power to rescue us from sin and death and make us new. Apart from him we are spiritually dead, and dead people can do nothing. But likewise, if he were not fully human, like us in every way, except he did not sin, he would not be able to redeem the whole of our humanity. We live in an age of soundbites and slogans. While they often iron out nuance and complexity, their power is that they can distil a truth to it to an easily digestible sentence. The theological debates of the early church did this too. Here’s a cracker from Gregory Nazianzus: “The unassumed is the unhealed.” What Gregory means by this is that if there was some part of our humanity that the eternal Son did not take on when he became human, that would remain unredeemed. The truth is that he took on our humanity, all the way down, in order to save us in every part, every aspect, every nook and

⁸ Torrance, 121

⁹ Hebrews 2.14, 17; 4.15

cranny of who we are. And that is very good news for you and me! We'll explore more of this next week when we look at Jesus' death.

Who God is, that is to say, the Trinity and the Incarnation were the focus of the debates in the early Christian centuries, and they produced the creeds that all Christians now confess - the most important being the Nicene creed. The debates of the Reformation period were an internal argument over the mechanics of salvation. As vital as this is, it is secondary to who we worship. As the Western culture drifts further from its metaphysical moorings in Christainity our society and we as individuals will unravel. If for nothing else this is why it's vital for us to do the hard work of grappling with the Trinity and Incarnation. This is who we worship, this is how God interacts with the world.

We've focussed on what it means that Jesus is both fully God and fully man, but I want to finish by just touching on how this is captured in the words "Christ", "Lord", "conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary".

Christ. This is the Greek term for the Hebrew Messiah, which means anointed. It's not Jesus' surname. It's a title. It's what the kings of Israel were called. Christ then is a window into the historical reality of Jesus. He came into a particular time and place, among a particular people with a particular history. We cannot understand Jesus apart from the Jewish Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. Jesus is the King, God's chosen king, through whom God reigns on earth. That leads us to the word Lord.

Like Christ, the word **Lord** is full of meaning. Yes it's a term of respect, like master. But lord, *kyrios*, in Greek, is a translation of the Hebrew *adonai*. Adonai was how Jews referred to God's personal name, written with the consonants Y-H-W-H, which they would not say lest they broke the command to not take God's name in vain. The earliest Christian confession was "Jesus is Lord". This was to say that the man Jesus shared in the identity of the God of Israel, with all his authority and power. It was also a political statement. Jesus was Lord, and not the emperor of Rome. These meanings remain. To confess Jesus as Lord is to recognise that all the powers of this world will one day bow before him. Only Jesus has the ultimate claim on your life. He is the one you and I are called to worship and serve.

Conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.

This phrase clearly points to the divinity and humanity of Jesus. But it also invites us to see the cosmic and concrete work of God. Just like the Holy Spirit hovered over the waters at the dawn of creation, so the Holy Spirit hovers over Mary to bring about the start of a new creation in her womb, a young woman in a backwater of the Roman empire. Jesus is the

firstborn of creation as Paul writes, sharing in the old, but also bringing in the new. Mary herself stands in a long line of faithful women to whom God miraculously grants a child of promise through whom God will bring salvation. The meaning for each is the same. The salvation of the world does not come through human power, even specifically man's power, but from above. We can only receive it as a pure gift. Pope Benedict writes, "In Jesus, God has placed, in the midst of barren, hopeless mankind, a new beginning that is not a product of human history but a gift from above."¹⁰ In the virgin birth there is the promise of hope for each of us. That Jesus has taken on our flesh means every human life is dignified and hallowed. It means that none of us are beyond the reach of God's grace. And Mary stands for us as the great example of faith. "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."¹¹ May we, like her, trust God's word and find the life and power of his Son our Lord take root and grow within us.

¹⁰ Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 278

¹¹ Luke 1.38