

Jesus Christ, His Only Son, Our Lord

Romans 1:1-6

The Apostles Creed

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When the President goes to Capitol Hill to address a joint session of congress, he is preceded down the aisle by the Sergeant at Arms who calls out in a clear and commanding voice, "The President of the United States!" The sergeant at arms then gets out of the way so the President may enter and occupy center stage.

When Paul opens his letter to the Romans, he does much the same thing. He quickly introduces himself and then gets out of the way. If his readers don't quite catch his name, that's okay. Paul is eager that they will catch Jesus' name so that Jesus may enter their lives and occupy center stage.

The same thing occurs in the Apostles' Creed. The Creed begins with a brief glance at God and then launches into a long portrayal of Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord. That's a tip-off to the paramount role Jesus plays in our faith. Without Jesus, we would have no clear view of God. When, for example, we look at creation we can see God's fingerprints everywhere but we cannot see God's face. Is God smiling on us or glaring at us? We cannot tell by looking at nature. Even when we read the Old Testament, God seems distant and unapproachable, except for the favored few. At Sinai, for instance, only Moses, Aaron, and a few other leaders receive invitations to penetrate the thick cloud that keeps God hidden from the ordinary people.

But with the coming of Jesus all that changes. When we confess on Sundays, "I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord," we assert that God is no longer hidden. God has shown his face in the man from Nazareth, and each succeeding phrase in the Creed adds a caring feature to the expression on that face.

Let's begin with THE RELEVANCE OF HIS NAME. Every name has relevance. Your name has meaning because names are simply words or combinations of words taken out of everyday vocabulary. The meaning of some names is obvious. If your name is Carpenter, one of your ancestors worked with wood. If your name is Farmer, someone in your past tilled the soil. If your name is Smith, one of your forebears operated a forge. The name "Jesus" is a composite of two words. "Je" comes from "Jehovah" or "God." "Sus" comes from a word meaning "to save." So the name "Jesus" means "The God who saves." The Jesus in whom we confess our belief is none other than God who has come to save us.

And what about "Christ?" Contrary to my childhood belief, "Christ" is not Jesus' last name. Rather, like mayor, or governor, or president, "Christ" is a title. "Christ" literally means "the anointed one," like the kings in the Old Testament who were anointed by God to rule over Israel. So when I confess that Jesus is the Christ, I credit Jesus with authority far beyond that of mayor, governor, or president. Christ has been anointed by God to rule not only my little life and yours, but the history of the world and the destiny of the universe.

So much for the relevance of his name. Think with me now about HIS RELATION TO THE FATHER as expressed in the words, "his only Son." We in the West can be excused for thinking of biological childbirth when we recite that phrase in the Creed. We may even fall to wondering at what point in eternity past God the Father gave birth to the Son. But that is not the meaning of the phrase, "His only Son."

In the Hebrew mind, to be a son of someone has far more to do with common ideals than with common ancestry. Even in our culture, when someone says, "He is a son to me" they are not talking about matching blood types but about kindred spirits. Winston Churchill had a son, Randolph, but the two never got along very well. The same blood coursed through their veins, but not the same ideals. According to William Manchester there were long periods when they would not speak to each other, and when they did speak, more often than not their conversation erupted in fireworks. But in parliament, Churchill had an admiring

young colleague named Brendon Bracken. Bracken followed Churchill through thick and thin, even to the point of bailing Churchill out of financial difficulty just before the Second World War. Rumor had it that Bracken was Churchill's illegitimate son. It wasn't true, but Churchill was amused by the rumor and Bracken didn't deny it. In any case, it could be said that Bracken was more a son to Churchill than Randolph, because Churchill and Bracken were cut from the same cloth.

We Christians confess that Jesus Christ is God's only Son in precisely that sense. Not that the Son is the physical descendent of God the Father, for they are co-eternal members of the Trinity; but that Jesus alone reflects with perfect clarity the glory of the Father, and performs with absolute faithfulness the Father's will.

Finally, the Creed speaks of HIS ROLE IN OUR LIVES: "Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord." To put it bluntly, Jesus rules! And if you ask how his rule takes shape concretely, Paul answers in two words: "grace" and "apostleship." Let me tackle the second word first.

Because Jesus is Lord, Paul writes, "We have received apostleship." (vs. 5) An apostle is one who is sent out on a mission, and Paul leaves no doubt as to the motive for that mission. It is, he writes, "to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations." We at National Church consider ourselves to be a part of the apostolic church and that means not only that we trace our lineage back to the apostles, but that we broadcast far and wide the good news about Jesus Christ so that all people in all nations will be brought under the Lordship of Jesus the Christ.

Of all the hats I wear as a minister, this is the one I want to wear most often. I want to convince you that the best news ever published is this: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." (John 3:16) I want you to accept God's love personally, to receive God's gift of eternal life for yourself, and to place your life under his lordship, for as paradoxical as it may seem, it is in the service of the Lord Jesus that we find true freedom to become all that God meant us to be.

Amid the frightful scenes of war in Iraq, I was thrilled to see that shallow foxhole filled with water in which several Marines were baptized out on the battlefield. Obviously their chaplain is also an apostle of Jesus Christ. He too is broadcasting the Good News in a place where the bad news of injury and death is so prominent. Prominent, but not preeminent, for to live under the lordship of Jesus Christ is also to live under the canopy of "grace." Grace: that's the other word Paul uses in vs. 5 to describe the Lordship of Jesus, and grace is nothing less than the assurance that we belong to a Lord who overrules and overcomes every enemy.

The battle may rage in Iraq but those Marines belong to the Lord Jesus and are therefore under the canopy of grace. Fear may seize them, injury may incapacitate them, death may overtake them, but they belong in life and in death to their faithful Lord Jesus, from whom nothing in heaven or on earth can ever separate them.

You too live under the canopy of grace, and grace means that come what may in this life<injury, surgery, divorce, the loss of job, the loss of a loved one, death itself<our lives will someday begin afresh in the God's kingdom, a kingdom whose joy and beauty and color and harmony we can only begin to glimpse in our highest and holiest moments.

"I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord." And I invite you to believe. Because when you join up with Jesus, you put yourself in the company of one who will never leave or forsake you, and whose solemn pledge is, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall pluck them out of my hand."