

THE APOSTLES CREED

Session 3

I. “JESUS CHRIST HIS ONLY SON, OUR LORD”

A. Jesus Christ is the center of the Gospel because in him the one true God is revealed (John 17:1-5) and in him God the Creator personally enters the world which he made to redeem it (John 3:16-19). The Church confesses that “Jesus Christ is the eternal Word and Son of God, the second Person of the Holy Trinity. He took on human flesh to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world, the only Mediator between God and fallen mankind” (TBC, 49).

B. In speaking of Jesus Christ we are speaking simultaneously about the eternal Son of God and about a human historical figure whom we confess to be united in the same Person (John 1:14). The humanity of Jesus, through the Incarnation, is quite literally the humanity of God. For Christians, speaking of the humanity of God is not a contradiction or impossibility for two fundamental reasons.

1. First, because God created human beings in his image (Genesis 1:27) and this means that there is a correspondence between Creator and creature.
2. Second, because God is the Creator, all of creation is fundamentally open to him and to his purposes. In Christian thinking, God and creation are not considered to be opposites but covenant partners.

C. Jesus’ name points to his identity and reveals his very nature. Jesus is confessed to be “Christ” or “Anointed One”. This title reflects the fact that Israel’s kings, prophets and priests were anointed as a sign of their office. When we say that Jesus is the Christ we are saying that Jesus is the Messiah/King (“Anointed One”) promised to Israel and that in him Israel’s offices of prophet, priest and king find their fulfillment (TBC, 51). The name Jesus Christ indicates that the man Jesus does not simply fulfill a God-given role in the plan of salvation but that he himself is God’s salvation in person.

D. We confess Jesus to be the Father’s “only Son” because this designates Jesus’ unique relationship to the Father. In Jesus, we encounter God’s eternal Son incarnate, through whom we are reborn and enabled to become children of God (John 1:12). Jesus is God’s eternal Son by nature while we are God’s children by adoption (Ephesians 1:5). We can become God’s children through rebirth and adoption because Jesus is God’s Son by nature.

E. In confessing Jesus to be Lord, the first Christians were confessing the fact that Jesus shares fully in the Father’s sovereignty over all creation. To say that Jesus is Lord is to say that “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name” which is, of course, God’s Name (Philippians 2:9; cf. Isaiah 45:23). All of Christian thinking about Jesus begins with a fundamental fact: the Name of God can be applied to him.

II. “HE WAS CONCEIVED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT AND BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY”

A. This affirmation concerns the Incarnation, the action by which the eternal Son joined himself to a human nature. While it is common to speak of the “virgin birth” it is more precise and correct to speak of Jesus’ virginal conception. This means that “through the creative power of the Holy Spirit, the eternal Son assumed a fully human nature from his mother, the Virgin Mary, into personal union with his fully divine nature at the moment of conception in Mary’s womb” (TBC, 54). This means that the child to whom Mary gave birth was God incarnate.

B. The Virgin Mary is told that her son will be conceived in a way that is unparalleled: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1:35). It is important to realize that the unique manner of Jesus’ conception signifies that his humanity is a work of new creation. In Jesus, God brings old, sinful human nature to an end and begins a new, redeemed human nature (note Luke 1:35.) It is for this reason that Paul says that whoever is “in Christ” is a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

C. Jesus’ status as fully divine and fully human is essential to the Gospel since “all that he does as a human being, he also does as God” (TBC, 56). Because he acts as both a human being (on our behalf) and as God, Jesus’s actions are both redemptive and have a “once for all character” (Hebrews 9:11-28).

III. “HE SUFFERED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE”

A. Jesus’ suffering on the Cross was not simply a matter of experiencing the pain or humiliation of crucifixion (great as both were). His suffering was both vicarious and redemptive. To say that Jesus’ suffering was vicarious is to say that it was on our behalf and to say that it was redemptive is to say that it resulted in our reconciliation with God.

B. While Jesus died a violent, unjust and degrading death, his death was interpreted within the context of Old Testament promises and expectations. Among the most important of these was Isaiah 52:13-53:12. This text speaks of a mysterious “servant” whose rejection, suffering and death will bring purification to Israel. The consequences of Israel’s sin will be taken on by this “servant” and so removed from Israel. The Servant has both a vicarious and a redemptive ministry.

C. The vicarious and redemptive nature of Christ’s suffering is affirmed in 1 Peter 3:18: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God”. In Romans 3:25, Paul likens Christ to the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant which was the place (literally) where God and Israel met and were, thus, reconciled (Exodus 25:21-22). Jesus’ suffering is significant because he is the incarnate Son of God and this means that his suffering and death are events in the life of God: “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

D. When we say that Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate” we are saying two things of importance.

- 1.** First, we are saying that Jesus’ death took place during the period in which Pontius Pilate was procurator of the Roman province of Judea and is, thus, a datable, historical event.
- 2.** Second, we are saying that Pilate was responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion. Here, (sinful) human intentionality and (righteous) divine purpose converge perfectly. God allows evil only because he can bring good from it.

IV. “WAS CRUCIFIED, DIED, AND WAS BURIED. HE DESCENDED TO THE DEAD”

A. Jesus was put to death in the most violent, degrading and painful way the Roman state had at its disposal. The primary purpose of crucifixion was not merely to kill but to shame and degrade publically. The first Christians declared that God had brought about the salvation of humankind through this shameful death.

B. The shameful and humiliating nature of Jesus’ death was prefigured in the Old Testament, especially in such texts as Psalm 22:6-8 (cf. Matthew 27:38-43) and Isaiah 53:3. Jesus came to take the shame and condemnation of sin upon himself so that we might be freed from it (TBC, 60).

C. In addition to bearing the shame and suffering of the Cross, Jesus also experienced the full reality of death. Jesus really died on the Cross and was buried. The affirmation that Jesus “descended to the dead” means that for our sake Jesus endured death as the ultimate consequence of sin. Through Jesus’ death, death itself has been redeemed (Romans 6:5). The redemption of death opens the door to the resurrection of the dead.

D. While the affirmation that Jesus “descended to the dead” is a metaphorical expression (note I Peter 3:19), it states an essential truth. Namely, Jesus’ suffering and death were part of God’s work to free us from sin and death. “That Jesus descended to the dead means that he truly died; his spirit did not remain with his body, but entered the realm of death” (TBC, 63). While there is a great deal of controversy about the implications of this statement, we may confidently affirm that because of his resurrection Jesus is Lord of both life and death (Revelation 1:18) and, thus, our future is securely in his hands.

V. “ON THE THIRD DAY HE ROSE AGAIN”

A. It is important to recognize that the resurrection of the dead is fundamentally different than the resuscitation of a corpse. To say that Jesus was raised from the dead is not to say that he was simply restored to his former mode of life. There is an important difference between the resurrection of Jesus and the raising of Lazarus in John 11:38-44. Lazarus was restored to his former mode of life and, therefore, eventually died again. Resurrection life is life beyond sin and beyond death. Resurrection life is life freed completely from sin and death (note I Corinthians 15:50-57).

B. When we say that Jesus was raised from the dead we are saying that he was raised out of death into a life beyond death. We are saying that in the resurrection of Jesus, God overcame death itself (I Corinthians 15:20-28). Jesus’ resurrection makes our resurrection possible in that the resurrection of the dead involves our sharing in Jesus’ victory over death (Romans 6:9-10).

C. Because Jesus’ body was raised from death, we are given the hope that “the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). The resurrection of Jesus is a promise from God that no part of creation will simply be left to sin and death.

D. Belief in the resurrection is a consequence of belief in God as the Creator, the One from whom all life comes and the One through whom it is continually sustained. The resurrection of Jesus inaugurates God’s new creation and is the foundation of Christian hope. Creation comes into being through God and is sustained in existence by God. But creation also exists to God, meaning that its true purpose is the purpose that God has given it.

VI. “HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN”

A. Jesus’ complete triumph over sin and death is sealed and made permanently effective through his Ascension. The Ascension of Jesus means that he “was taken up out of human sight, and returned in his humanity to the glory he had shared with the Father before his incarnation” (TBC, 66; John 17:7). Jesus has taken his glorified body and his perfect humanity into the very Presence of God where he is our Representative (Hebrews 9:24). In doing this, he has opened up a way for us into the Presence of God (Hebrews 10:19-22).

B. The Ascension means that while he is not physically present, Jesus is present to all times and places by sharing in the Father’s sovereignty over creation.

C. The doctrine of Jesus’ Ascension is organically connected with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. “Jesus ascended into heaven so that, through him, his Father might send us the gift of the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit, Christians are united as Christ’s Body on earth to Jesus, our ascended and living Head, and in him to one another” (TBC, 67). Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus the King exercises his royal authority over his dominion—creation.

VII. “AND IS SEATED AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE FATHER”

A. The Resurrection not only means that Jesus has overcome death, it also means that he is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in one

to come” (Ephesians 1:21).

B. Jesus’ Resurrection and Ascension are the foundations of Christian hope. In affirming that Jesus is seated at the Father’s right hand, we are affirming that “Jesus is Lord over the Church and all creation, with authority to equip his Church, advance his Kingdom, bring sinners into saving fellowship with God the Father, and finally to establish justice and peace upon the earth” (TBC, 68; Philippians 2:5-11).

C. By virtue of his Ascension, Christ serves as our High Priest, both interceding for us and receiving our intercessions. Through Christ, our High Priest who is in the Presence of God, we have access to God (TBC, 69; Hebrews 7:23-25; 8:1-2). Christian worship is not simply a human activity. It is ultimately made possible by Christ, who is the Head of the Body, and by the Holy Spirit who animates that Body.

D. Jesus’ Ascension is the foundation of our hope as Christians. He is the Head of his Body the Church and in him the fullness of human salvation already exists. The grace of Christ enables the members of his Body to participate more and more in the salvation that already exist in him (Ephesians 4:1-16).

VIII. “HE WILL COME AGAIN TO JUDGE THE LIVING AND THE DEAD”

A. The affirmation that Jesus will “come again” makes use of a visual metaphor to designate the full manifestation of Christ’s present rule as Lord. The language of Christ “coming again” or “returning” does not imply that he has been absent. It proclaims that what we know by faith now will become completely manifest in the future.

B. Jesus made it clear that the public manifestation of his glory would both reveal his victory to the world and bring the current phase of history to its completion (Luke 21:27-28). This event will involve the final passing away of the present order of the world, marred by sin and evil, and by the coming of a new creation, a creation completely free from sin and evil and fully restored to God (2 Peter 3:12-13; Revelation 21:1-4). With this event, creation will finally fully reflect the reign of its King.

C. This event cannot be known or calculated in advance for it is known only to God (Matthew 24:36). Jesus makes it clear that in the time between now and the consummation of history the mission of Christians should be that of faithfully bearing witness.

D. Living in anticipation of Christ’s return is cause for joy. “I should anticipate with joy the return of Jesus as the completion of my salvation. The promise of his return encourages me to seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to live a holy life, and to share the hope of new life in Christ with others (TBC, 73).

E. It is more than unfortunate that many regard Judgment as something to be avoided, dreaded or dismissed. This perspective misses the fact that the prospect of God judging the world is the foundation of biblical hope (See Psalm 98).

F. God’s judgment is part of the Gospel. God will judge his creation with perfect justice and with perfect mercy. God’s righteousness indicates his complete opposition to sin and evil; these are excluded from the New Creation (Revelation 21:4). God’s mercy indicates his generous action of doing good for his creatures; all of God’s merciful actions are based on his own goodness and not upon the merit of his creatures.

G. God’s judgment holds no peril for those who have turned to God in faith and who desire that their lives be conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29). Those who are in Christ can genuinely look forward to the final Judgment. “I have no reason to fear the coming judgment, for my Judge is my Savior Jesus Christ, who loves me, died for me, and intercedes for me” (TBC, 76; Romans 8:1).

