

## Scripture Readings for May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2022

### Philippians 2:5b-11

<sup>5b</sup> Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; <sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

<sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

### Colossians 1:15-20

<sup>15</sup> The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. <sup>16</sup> For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> And 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. <sup>19</sup> For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, <sup>20</sup> and 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.

### Hebrews 1:1-4

<sup>1</sup> In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. <sup>3</sup> The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. <sup>4</sup> So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

### John 1:1-3, 14

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup> Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

<sup>14</sup> The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

## Sermon: “We Believe in . . . Jesus”

Today in the church calendar we celebrate the ascension of Jesus. What a happy coincidence it is that we are looking at the first part of the Nicene Creed as it pertains to Jesus. This is what it says:

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father.  
Through him all things were made.*

This part of the Creed was controversial when it was first written in 325 and remains so. Many who call themselves Christians today, don’t believe this to be true. It’s also the most confusing part of the Creed, so I will do my best to try and explain it this morning. First, we need to stand back a little to see the bigger picture.

In the Greco-Roman world there was a great variety of things a person had to do in order to join the gods, or to gain “salvation” as we might say. What the many different gods and paths to God had in common was that whatever one thought had to be done, human beings had to do it *themselves*.<sup>1</sup> Many people still think this today; for example, we get to be with God after we die by doing good deeds. Salvation is therefore thought to be *earned* by our ethical and moral behavior, and not just the observance of various rituals – such as baptism. In sharp contrast, Christianity affirms that what is necessary for people to be united with the true *God is not something human beings can do for themselves. If we are to be saved, God must come to us.* As it says in Ephesians, “For by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.”<sup>2</sup> God takes the initiative just as he did with the calling of Abraham, Moses, and leading the people out of Egypt to establish a nation. But those events are precursors to two main *descents*: the incarnation of the Son of God to live *among us* and the coming of the Holy Spirit *to indwell* believers, which we celebrate next Sunday - Pentecost. Two things follow from this logic:

1. The Son and the Spirit *have to be just as fully and equally God as the Father is,*
2. The Son really had to *come down*, as it were, through the incarnation.

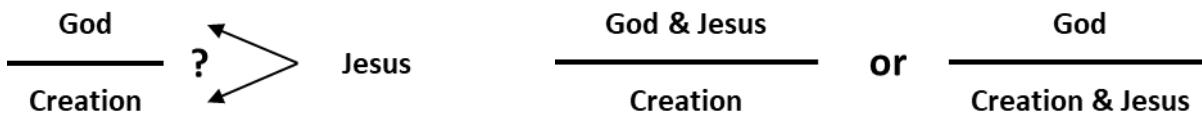
Both are *necessary* otherwise it wouldn’t be God who came down to save us, and we would be left with what Christians believe is the impossible task of trying to save ourselves. All this is made explicit in the later, *pivotal* point of the Creed’s statement about Jesus, which simply says: “**For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven.**”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One of the most influential Greek philosophies was Platonism, which affirmed the existence of a high god to which human souls sought to be united. Implicitly, this means platonic thought affirms that human beings were *able* to rise up to god, and perhaps be helped along the way by lesser gods (cf. Jesus). In this regard Platonism is not markedly different from any other Greco-Roman religion. it was *unthinkable* that God would have any thought of descending to the human realm!

<sup>2</sup> Eph 2:8-9.

<sup>3</sup> See also Eph 4:9; John 1:14; 3:13; 6:38 (Matt 1:28 describes Jesus as Emmanuel, “God with us.”).



What is common in all these religious perspectives is a distinct line or boundary between the Creator and Creation. As we heard last week,<sup>4</sup> the Creed states “God made *all* that is, seen and unseen.” Now, in light of the early church’s experience of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, they had to grapple with the critical question: “*Who*, then, is Jesus?” It *wasn’t* the writers of the Creed who placed Jesus above the line alongside of God, it was the Paul, John, and the author of Hebrews, as we heard in our readings. *This we too believe by faith*. However, as I mentioned earlier, many struggle with this uniquely Christian claim and would insist that Jesus is below the boundary separating God from Creation. Jesus is a good man, a holy man, an inspirational teacher – even a healer, but *purely* human, nonetheless. This view is nothing new.<sup>5</sup> Arius of Antioch (c. 256-356 CE) believed that the Son *had* to be created and was therefore lower than the Father and part of the created order.<sup>6</sup> He cherry-picked Colossians 1:15 to support his argument, which says: “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the *firstborn* over all creation,” Arius took the word “firstborn” *literally* and claimed it to be biblical evidence for Jesus not being co-eternal with God. In other words, Jesus was created—like an archangel. But “firstborn” can also mean of preeminent rank or supreme.<sup>7</sup> In Psalm 89:27 we read, with reference to King David: “I will appoint him to be my *firstborn*,” says God, “*the most exalted of the kings of the earth*.” Firstborn therefore doesn’t always refer to birth order. An influential Church Father, Athanasius (c. 296–373 CE), was quick to point that out that Arius’ narrow and literal interpretation was logically inconsistent with what followed on in Colossians. Moreover, Arius’ view was inconsistent with *other* New Testament texts by different authors – and we heard those this morning. At the time of Nicaea and, indeed, afterwards, the debate was intense and contentious. The nuanced meaning of words in Greek and Latin added to the confusion, along with cultural differences around the Roman Empire.<sup>8</sup> In the end, the majority rejected Arius’ view because it implied that humans could *save* themselves by their behavior and so join God – just as Jesus did.<sup>9</sup> The Nicene Creed insists we *cannot* save ourselves; God has to take the initiative and revealed Godself through the incarnation – by becoming human - and rescue us because we cannot do that for ourselves. This part of the Creed, with its repetitive clauses, makes it crystal clear<sup>10</sup> that Jesus is *fully* divine. And in the next section, which we will consider next week, it stresses

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/We-Believe-in-God.pdf> .

<sup>5</sup> Of course, once you rule out the resurrection, you can understand how this can follow. But creedal Christians affirm the claim that God is fully present in the human Jesus in a manner and fullness not realized in any other creature.

<sup>6</sup> Arius’ believed that “there was once when there was no Son.” Time is not mentioned, as such. He was merging Christian ideas with platonic thought, and Jesus was someone who could lead others to God, and because Jesus himself rose up then others could too. (This is a subtle yet logical distortion and was also rejected at Nicaea.)

<sup>7</sup> It is therefore simply a mistake to think firstborn can only mean eldest child! (Furthermore, it is unlikely that the subtleties of such temporal logic were in the writer of Colossians’ thinking; such issues arose later.)

<sup>8</sup> See Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants?* (Cascade, 2018), 20-23, and Reddish, *The Jesus I Didn’t Know I Didn’t Know* (Wipf & Stock, 2021), chapter 8; HiDonald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith*. (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2019), 50-79.

<sup>9</sup> See [1] and [6].

<sup>10</sup> The repetitive structure ensures the nuances of the words used are clear in their intent; it removes any ambiguity.

Jesus became *fully* human. The Creed writers were not making this up three centuries later, rather they were reiterating an early Christian hymn from Philipians. There Paul writes, “Christ Jesus, who, *being in very nature God*, did not consider *equality with God* something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking *the very nature of a servant*, being made in *human likeness*.”<sup>11</sup> The Creed does not *explain how* Jesus can be fully human and fully divine; nor does Paul for that matter. It’s a statement of faith that we believe it to be true. The key point for this morning is, as we have seen, the Creed’s insistence Jesus was *not* created, rather, “*through him all things were made*” – a phrase that comes straight from John 1:3 and reiterated in Colossians 1:16. Put another way, Jesus *co-creates* with God the Father. As I said earlier, this unapologetic profession of Jesus as divine scandalizes many who call themselves Christian today. Like Arius, people read the New Testament selectively and they use reason to reduce the mystery of Christ to his humanity alone.<sup>12</sup> Please beware!

But let’s backtrack for a moment and see how this Creed would also offend Jews. First recall that the name “Jesus” is a variant of Joshua whose name means “the *Lord* (YHWH) *saves*.”<sup>13</sup> That ties in with what the angel to Joseph, “You are to give him the name Jesus, because *he will save his people from their sins*.”<sup>14</sup> That’s already pretty shocking for Jews as it challenges the role of sacrifices in the temple. The Creed simply reiterates that point: “*For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven*.” Furthermore, *all* the New Testament writers proclaim Jesus as the *Messiah*, which is the Greek word for “Christ,” meaning “God’s Anointed One.” Indeed, at one point Peter confessed Jesus as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God,”<sup>15</sup> and in so doing he proclaimed that Jesus is the One the prophets spoke about. Nevertheless, these unique titles don’t mean that Jesus is divine. Such names, along with “prophet” and ‘Son of Man,” were understood within the context of Old Testament imagery and Jewish expectations of a Messiah.

However, now recall that the Creed begins, “We believe in *one God*”; Jews would be perfectly happy with that, but it then goes on to say, “We believe in *one Lord*, Jesus Christ.” These words come from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians: “For us there is but *one God*, the Father, *from* whom all things came and *for* whom we live; and there is but *one Lord*, *Jesus Christ*, *through* whom all things came and *through* whom we live.”<sup>16</sup> Now prior to the resurrection, no one among Jesus followers - and certainly *not* his opponents - fully appreciated who he was. The resurrection of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of his followers forced them to ponder exactly *who* it was that had been exalted to God’s right hand. Paul’s statement reveals *his* conclusions some 25 years after the resurrection and ascension

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<sup>11</sup> Phil 2:5b-7.

<sup>12</sup> This is certainly true of “the quest for the historical Jesus” and the so-called “Jesus seminar.”

<sup>13</sup> This differentiates Christianity from Judaism and Islam, along with the distinctive Christian understanding of the Trinity. See also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-Supremacy-of-Jesus-Christ.pdf> ; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Three-in-One-and-One-in-Three.pdf> ; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/The-Trinity-The-God-We-Didnt-Want.pdf> .

<sup>14</sup> See Matt 1:21 (and 2 Cor 5:19; 1 Tim 2:5; ).

<sup>15</sup> Matt 16:16; Mark 8:29.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Cor 8:6, again the Creed’s writers are simply quoting from Scripture. (Paul clearly is adapting the *Shema* here.)

of Jesus. Significantly, the word “Lord” is the Greek translation of “YHWH,” the personal name of God in the Old Testament.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Paul is deliberately connecting the Jewish name for God with Jesus as “Lord.”<sup>18</sup> As Peter proclaimed in his first sermon at Pentecost,<sup>19</sup> Jesus was not merely the Messiah, or a Son of David, but by virtue of his resurrection he *is* “both Messiah *and* Lord” who God exalted, and who shares the power and authority of God.<sup>20</sup> And Peter got into trouble with the Jewish religious leaders for saying such things because it was considered blasphemy to claim Jesus as “Lord.”<sup>21</sup>

The words of the Creed concerning the *identity* of Jesus are challenging for every generation. Many today are *unhappy* to say Jesus is co-eternal with God, and that “through him all things were made.” Critics claim that this is too improbable to be true or that it’s simply irrational. Yet physicists are happy to accept the quantum world can be understood as both particles and as a wave, two *very* different experiential phenomena. If we are willing to embrace paradox as a feature of quantum reality, why not extend that to Jesus as both fully God and fully human? Moving on to the notion of salvation, many don’t think they need rescuing! Life is generally pretty good, and we believe our future is in our own hands.<sup>22</sup> That being the case, God is often deemed an irrelevance. I suggest those who have a sense of their own frailty and brokenness are more open to welcoming divine rescue because they know they can’t save themselves. Jesus says such people are “not far from the kingdom of God.”<sup>23</sup> Why? Because they recognize the need to God to save them and, as the Creed goes on to explain - and we will study this next week - that Jesus came down *for us* and *our salvation*, and that he *suffered for us*.

Let me conclude with one of the best loved verses in the Bible from John’s Gospel: “For God so loved the world that he *gave his one and only Son*, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”<sup>24</sup> Luke would have replaced “eternal life” with “are members of the kingdom of God.” Paul would say that we are “saved by God’s grace and by believing in the faithfulness of Jesus.”<sup>25</sup> It was out of divine love for creation that God crossed the line between God’s domain and Creation and *became* human in form of Jesus the Son. John goes on, “God did not *send the Son into the world* to condemn the world, but in order that the *world might be saved* through him.”<sup>26</sup> This summary verse of the fundamental *reason* for the incarnation comes back to *salvation* once again. If we proclaim that verse, then – along with Peter - we can proclaim this aspect of the Nicene Creed by faith concerning the identity of Jesus as “both Messiah and Lord.” Amen. Let us pray.

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<sup>17</sup> In the widely used LXX translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. (This name was given to Moses in the burning bush; Exod 3).

<sup>18</sup> See also Rom 10:9; Phil 2:11.

<sup>19</sup> See Acts 2:32-33, 36.

<sup>20</sup> See Heb 1:8 and Ezek 34.

<sup>21</sup> Various NT writers make it clear that Jesus is actually worthy of *worship*—which is blasphemous for Jews, for God alone is praiseworthy (e.g., Matt 14:33; 28:9, 17; John 9:38). Moreover, the same Greek word for “Lord” was also commonly used for the Roman Emperor. Consequently, using this term with reference to Jesus raises the issue of patriotism to non-Jews.

<sup>22</sup> COVID and suffering in general perhaps makes the entitled think twice.

<sup>23</sup> See Mark 12:34.

<sup>24</sup> John 3:16.

<sup>25</sup> See Eph 2:8-9; Rom 3:34; 5:15; Titus 2:11; 3:7. (And see Gal 2:16, 20; Rom 3:22; Eph 3:12; Phil 3:9 all in NET Bible.)

<sup>26</sup> John 3:17.