

Scripture Readings for June 5, 2022

Hebrews 2:14-18

¹⁴ Since God's children have flesh and blood, Jesus too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. ¹⁷ For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Galatians 4:4-7

⁴ But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. ⁶ Because you are his children, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

1 Corinthians 15:1-4

¹ Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

1 John 4: 9-10

⁹ This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. ¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Excerpt from the Nicene Creed:

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures;

he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

Sermon – “We Believe in . . . Jesus” (Part 2)

Today we continue with this tour of the Creed and again I will try my best to explain its dense wording. Last week I spoke about the scandal of the *divinity* of Jesus; this week we look briefly at his *humanity* - as summarized in the Nicene Creed - and even this creates controversy! I'll get to that later. I also mentioned that a pivotal line in the Creed explains *why* God came down in the person of Jesus the Messiah; it was “*For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven.*” We may be surprised by that emphasis: Jesus' coming was *for us* – for *our* benefit, for *our* rescue.¹ Nevertheless, remember Matthew reports that the angel said to Joseph, “You are to give him the name Jesus, because *he will save his people from their sins.*”² Luke is equally explicit in the angel's message to the shepherds: “Today in the town of David, a *Savior* has been born to you; he is the *Messiah*, the *Lord.*”³ This role of Savior is therefore flagged up for their Gospel readers with reference to Jesus' birth. This context leads us to the next line in the Creed: “*By the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man.*” Both Matthew and Luke make it clear that they believe the Holy Spirit was mysteriously at work in the conception of Jesus.⁴ And Matthew is the only New Testament writer to make the connection to Isaiah 7:14 with its mention of the word “*virgin,*”⁵ but even there I suggest the focus should be on *who* is being born, namely: “*Immanuel,*” which means “*God with us.*”⁶ I have spoken about the “*virgin birth*” before, and so won't be sidetracked by it here, suffice to say that “*virgin*” means “*a young woman of marriageable age*” and it's therefore a mistake to see it in terms of sexual status.⁷ The important stress here is that Jesus was *truly human*, as Paul says in Galatians 4:4, “*When the appropriate time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman,*” which of course means he had human genes and carries the imprint of human evolution. Jesus, God-in-the-flesh, arrived in the form of a vulnerable baby, *not* an adult who parachuted down from above!

The next line of the Creed states, “*For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.*” Again notice the emphasis on the crucifixion being “*for us.*” But also notice, it doesn't attempt to explain how or why Jesus' death is for *our* benefit. I'll come back to that later too. Pontius Pilate is specifically mentioned and, among other things, that's a historical information which points to *when* Jesus lived. Again, the fact that Jesus was *born* and later *died* underlines his *humanity*. But I suggest there is also an implied contrast between Mary and Pilate. Mary was young, female, poor, and

¹ Put differently, the good shepherd came to find, rescue, and protect the lost sheep. See Reddish, *The Jesus I Didn't Know I Didn't Know* (Wipf & Stock, 2021), 47-52, and Ezek 34:11-12, 15-16; John 10:14, 16.

² See Matt 1:21. Recall the name “Jesus” is a variant of Joshua whose name means “the *Lord* (YHWH) *saves.*” (Regardless on one's views of angels, the words Matthew places on the lips of this angel informs his readers – at the very beginning of his Gospel – of his own understanding of Jesus' purpose/role; Jesus is a *savior*. See also Luke 2:11.)

³ See Luke 2:11; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Savior-Messiah-Lord.pdf> .

⁴ See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Joseph%E2%80%99s-Crisis-of-Conscience.pdf> ; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-Worries-and-Joys-of-Mary.pdf> .

⁵ See Matt 1:22-23. (That Mary was unmarried at the time of Jesus birth is a 'given'!)

⁶ We don't know if Matthew meant “*Immanuel*” to *literally* mean “*God with us,*” but the church later took it *incarnationally*.

⁷ See [3, 4] and this article by N. T. Wright: <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/suspending-scepticism-history-and-the-virgin-birth/10100888> .

Jewish; she was also pregnant outside of marriage and so socially and religiously suspect. On the other hand, Pontius Pilate was a mature, male, wealthy, Roman, and he had married well.⁸ Through Mary's faithfulness and obedience, she gives birth to the embodiment of God's presence in Jesus the Messiah at the cost of "a sword piercing her own soul."⁹ Pilate, through political expediency and moral weakness, sets a known murderer free and sentences a righteous man to death on a cross.¹⁰

Moving on, notice how the Creed says Jesus "suffered death and was buried." Again, no critic contests that Jesus was killed by Pilate by crucifixion. But I mentioned at the beginning that what the Creed says about Jesus' *humanity* is controversial; why is that? Here are two reasons.

First, most people today *don't* find the humanity of Jesus a problem, rather they wrestle with his divinity. The problem some critics therefore have is what's they see as *missing* from the Creed. They would prefer to have a Jesus Creed that says something like this:

"We believe that Jesus was born of Mary and later baptized by John. We believe Jesus was a charismatic, itinerant, Jewish rabbi who had followers and blessed children. We believe he had a reputation for miracles and telling parables. We believe that he tried to reform Jewish faith and practice, and consequently upset the status quo. We believe Jesus dabbled in politics and failed, for he was crucified under the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate."

Full stop, end of story! The *lack* of detail about Jesus' *life* in the Nicene Creed is therefore offensive to some. They want a *purely human* Jesus, who was – effectively - a nice guy but who was out of his depth. This *kind* of Jesus makes no claim on our lives, our ethics, etc., and can be ignored without consequence if we want to. His death was tragic, but of no lasting significance. Such critics know the kind of "Jesus" they want and, accordingly, tailor Jesus to fit.¹¹ As I said a few weeks ago, the Creed *doesn't replace* the Scriptures but *points* to them and *shapes* how we read them.

The second group who found Jesus' humanity to be offensive was those who rejected that he *suffered* and *died*.¹² Such people – prominent in the 2nd and 3rd centuries - accepted his divinity but thought it *unthinkable* that God *could* suffer pain, let alone die. Jesus therefore only *appeared* to be human; he wasn't *fully* human. The person who died on the cross was not, in their minds, the earlier divine Jesus; there *had* to have been as last-minute switch with a look-alike! The Creed, alluding to various New Testament texts, rejects *both* options and insists Jesus was both fully human and fully divine.

The Creed then states, "On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures." In other words, we believe in the resurrection of Jesus and claim that this was predicted or alluded to in the Old

⁸ See Matt 27:19.

⁹ See Luke 2:35.

¹⁰ See Acts 3:13-14.

¹¹ You will also notice the (surprising) lack of reference to the sacraments in the Creed (i.e., baptism and Holy Communion). This would not trouble those who only want a human Jesus because they would reject the symbolism of the sacraments.

¹² Docetism; cf. 1 John 4:1-2, 10, 14; 2 John 7; 1 Pet 4:1.

Testament, without giving specific references. On one level that's frustrating, on another, it's freeing. It also corresponds to Luke's account of the post-resurrection appearance to the two people on the road to Emmaus. They told Jesus, although they didn't realize it was him, the events of Easter week and the confused rumors that Jesus was somehow alive again. Luke writes, "[Jesus] said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should *suffer* these things and then enter into his glory?' Then beginning with *Moses and all the prophets*, he interpreted to them the things about himself *in all the scriptures*.'"¹³

The Creed continues, "He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." Only Luke tells us about the ascension, and his two versions of events are inconsistent.¹⁴ His accounts of the ascension are an explanation for *absence* of the risen Jesus following a number of resurrection appearances. He mysteriously returned to God's domain after which the Holy Spirit was generously bestowed to his followers at Pentecost.¹⁵ Where is Jesus now? The Creed states: "He is seated at the right hand of the Father." This expression suggests a sharing of divine power and authority; 1 Peter 3:22 states this explicitly: "He has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him."¹⁶ While only Luke relates the ascension, the *conviction* that Jesus is now with God and is exalted and glorified and enthroned is found everywhere in the New Testament.

The final thing the Creed says about Jesus is this: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." First, note that the Creed begins with creation and ends in a time of reckoning with Jesus as judge and that his reign, his kingdom, will never cease. In the middle is the incarnation and the cross. That's the overall picture; let's not lose sight of that. Second, throughout the Old Testament there is mention of God as a just judge; that is – after all – the right of the Creator who has "maker's knowledge" of all things. Distinctive to the New Testament though is the conviction that Jesus is not only the agent of God's salvation but also shares God's role as judge.¹⁷ That being the case, this is one of the earliest Christian allusions to the divinity of Jesus. Note that the details as to *how* Jesus "will come again in glory" are unspecified. Too many Christians focus too much energy on speculating about that matter. The point is that because we believe this to be true, we are to live in confidence of that reality. That one day, *justice* will somehow be realized – for judgement implies justice. And remember, if we trust in the wisdom of Jesus, there is nothing to fear. Moreover, the final clause "and his kingdom will have no end" represents our belief that evil *will not* ultimately triumph. Let's be honest, it's hard to believe this in the face of world history. If Jesus was just a social and religious

¹³ Luke 24:25-27, and: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/How-Can-We-Encounter-The-Risen-Jesus-Today.pdf> . Furthermore, the synoptic Gospels each have Jesus predict his death *three* times and he makes it clear to expect him to be raised "*on the third day*." What is less clear is the reference to "third day" within the Old Testament; it is suggested this alludes to Hos 6:1-2 or the story of Jonah (Jonah 1:17).

¹⁴ See Luke 24:50-53 and Acts 1:6-11. (The ascension is also mentioned in passing in John 20:17, see also John 16:7.)

¹⁵ See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/What-Does-This-Mean.pdf> ; <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/God%E2%80%99s-Spirit-is-Given-Lavishly-to-His-People.pdf> ; John 16:7.

¹⁶ See also Phil 2:9-11 and recall the great hymn: "At the Name of Jesus." (See also Mark 16:19.)

¹⁷ See Rom 2:16; 14:10; 2 Cor 5:10; Acts 10:42; 17:31; John 5:27-30; Matt 7:21-23; 16:27; 2 Tim 4:1, 8.

reformer, *simply* human – like Moses and Isaiah – this is laughable. These bold claims only make sense if we also believe in his resurrection, ascension, and Lordship of Jesus the Messiah.

We have covered a great deal today, and I appreciate some of it may seem complicated, but I hope it is a little clearer at least. Before ending, let's go back and briefly consider *why* the Creed considers Christ's tragic death to be for *our* benefit. Without the resurrection we would never have heard about Jesus. But the early church was left wondering about the *significance* of his death given God raised Jesus and later exalted him. Several brief explanations are mentioned by the various New Testament writers.¹⁸ For example, Mark tells us that [Jesus said] "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."¹⁹ The notion of a ransom in this context is the price paid to release a slave in the marketplace. John puts it this way: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins."²⁰ At that time Jews had to offer a sacrifice to God in the temple to obtain the forgiveness of sin. As the early church recalled the words of Jesus and pondered the meaning of his death and resurrection, they quickly came to the radical conclusion that Jesus was somehow the last sacrifice. John the Baptist said of Jesus, "Here is the *Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*"²¹ Remember Jesus died at the time of the annual Passover celebrations, when Jews recalled the night before the exodus from Egypt.²² Following Moses' instructions, the people killed a lamb and put some of its blood on the two doorposts and the lintel of their houses. When the angel of death passed over the land, all those houses with the lamb's blood were preserved from harm; they were literally saved by "the blood of the lamb." John's Gospel and the Book of Hebrews²³ in particular make the connection with our salvation and the death of Jesus. Put differently, Jesus is the ultimate scapegoat. On one level all this seems barbaric, but the way I see it is this: Jesus, the Son of God, came to the world to reveal God's love for us through his teachings and actions. And we humans killed him. In the resurrection, God brings good out of evil. That's the *good* news. And if we embrace it, we also participate in God's life and mission right now, one that continues after we die. We will talk more about that in coming weeks as we consider the life of the church empowered by the Holy Spirit. (Mention *Living Faith*)

Finally, another thing that's surprisingly omitted from the Creed is mention of Holy Communion. That sacrament reminds us that *Jesus died for us*. His death wasn't merely a tragic end to a well-meaning rabbi, it was full of life-giving significance.

We believe in Jesus! Amen. Let us pray.

¹⁸ The writers of the Creed wisely didn't specify a particular "theory of atonement," again providing freedom to explore all models mentioned in the New Testament.

¹⁹ Mark 10:45, see also 1 Tim 2:5-6.

²⁰ 1 John 4:10.

²¹ John 1:29, not forgetting that Jesus died at Passover time, rich with significance of sacrifice and God's salvation.

²² See Exod 12.

²³ See Heb 10:1-18.