

Apostles Creed - Part 2

Lord, you have blessed us with a rich tradition, and the opportunity to appreciate and understand it. Bless our Lenten journey as we look more deeply into the story that you have invited us to enter, to live by, and to share. Amen.

After last week's small interruption due to my being away, today we will continue our Lenten stroll through the Apostle's Creed. In Part 1 of this exercise we started by taking a look at what the Creed expresses about God, and gained some insight into the competing second century belief system called **Gnosticism**, which as you may recall was the belief in salvation by knowledge. And we learned that the Creed was written in an attempt to clarify Christian belief as differentiated from Gnostic belief. So as we now turn to the second section of the Creed which states some basic things about Jesus, predictably we come across more attempts to deflate the Gnostic balloon. As we keep in mind the principle that the words which follow represent a **distillation** of complex concepts, and only a **starting point** for further rumination, here is the section we're looking at today, in the traditional language.

And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell. The third day he rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

Jesus. The name literally means "God saves" ... and Christ, as we know, is not a surname, but a *title* - meaning Messiah, Anointed One, the fulfilment of ancient prophecy through whom and in whom we believe we witness the essence of God. The traditionally accepted Christian claim (what we might call the party line) is to say that Jesus had two natures, being at the same time human and divine - fully God, yet fully a member of the human race. But opinion on this tricky theological concept has been inconsistent, and at the time the Apostle's Creed was written, opinion was in fact quite diverse about that very issue (and, I daresay, still is in some quarters).

Two weeks ago, I mentioned one of the key beliefs of Gnosticism, which is that the material world is evil, and that therefore God, whose essence is good, could not have created it. The logical extension of this is the belief that God would **not** therefore have come to earth in human form, because God would not willingly have become part of what was at its essence evil. So - the Gnostics developed some interesting ways of understanding just who and what Jesus was. Some Gnostics believed that Jesus **was** a real man who walked the earth, but that he was simply an instrument through whom the voice of the Messiah spoke, beginning when the Spirit descended on him at time of his baptism in the Jordan, and ending before his crucifixion. Still other Gnostics believed that the man Jesus did not exist at all, only that he

was a kind of mirage, or pure spirit, through whom God gave wise teaching to the first disciples. Against these and other rather unusual beliefs, the Christians of the 2nd century, from whom our faith is descended, stated in the creed that Jesus was **God's only Son** - describing in human terms what they understood in theological terms: that there was a transfer of the divine essence between God and Jesus; that he was conceived through the action of the **Holy Spirit** - which was a way of affirming his essential divinity from the moment of his conception, and thereby denying the Gnostic position that the Spirit had nothing to do with Jesus until his Baptism; that he was **born** - which meant that he was human and had a real physical body, not just the appearance of one; of the **Virgin Mary** - well, here things can start to get a bit more complex, but I don't believe this phrase was intended to distract us into contemplating God's reproductive gymnastics, but rather to express in a descriptive way the conviction that Jesus was unique throughout his entire life, and not just from his baptism on. To think about it another way, by choosing to come into physical worldly existence the way we all do, through a human mother, God affirmed the holiness of physical existence for all humankind - which is something the **Gnostics** would never have accepted - but which we do. So, taken together, these statements calling Jesus God's Son, by the action of the Holy Spirit, through a human mother - all worked together to underscore the human and divine natures of Christ against all contenders.

The Creed now recounts a series of events that establish Jesus as a real human being, a person who lived and died at a particular time in the history of the world: *suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; he descended into hell*. What is being established here is that Jesus was not an illusion: he lived, died, and his lifeless flesh was buried in a tomb. His spirit left his body and went to the realm of the dead. Against those who suggested that Jesus was just unconscious or comatose and revived after his experience on the cross, the Creed says, "Make no mistake, he suffered death in every sense of the word, even so far as having his spirit go to the abode of the dead." Probably of all the sections of the Creed, this one connects our humanity to Jesus most graphically. As we say in one of our Eucharistic prayers, *he lived and died as one of us* - meaning that he shared our joys, sorrows, and ultimately, sufferings. He truly understood the human condition and is therefore a worthy and welcome companion on our own sometimes difficult human journey.

The third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven; and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. It amazes me how such a profound event as the resurrection can be summed up in so few words. And yet, there it is, breathtaking in its simplicity - the central message of our faith - that out of the ashes of death, God breathes new life. Jesus' death and resurrection is our promise that though we die with our healing and our work on earth incomplete, they ultimately **will** be completed in the fullness of God's time. Nothing ends, but everything is made available to the healing, restorative power of God. When we say we

believe in the resurrection, we are really stating our belief that God the Creator makes all things new, both here and beyond the grave.

Ascension is another concept that for some defies comprehension. Ascension, I think, is best thought of as another *spiritual* concept described in *physical* terms. We started this second part of the Creed describing how Jesus *started* life on earth; ascension simply identifies the fact that Jesus' life physically among us had an end as well as a beginning. So what ascension means *theologically* is that Jesus, who was available only to a select few in a certain time and place in history, **now** is a universal presence accessible *anywhere anytime to anyone* who calls upon him. Second, and no less important, is the understanding that when Jesus became incarnate, he took on our human nature; therefore when he ascended, he took our nature with him to be substantially present in the mystery that is God. It is belief in the *ascension* that makes it possible for us to say that *God is in us, and we are in God*. In the ascension we celebrate the actual continuing presence of Jesus operating powerfully within us and society, infusing life with a holiness that we in turn celebrate in the sacraments of the Church.

In the second century, to be seated at the right hand of a dignitary was a sign of special favour, and so to say that Jesus sits at God's right hand was to confirm his unique status as God's Son - and to reaffirm his divine nature. The reference to Jesus' role as judge of the living and the dead reflects the deeply held Christian belief that embedded in the complex cycles of life is an expectation of a final reckoning, when all that is now hidden shall be made known. The doctrine of final judgement contains the affirmation that our lives have a finite conclusion, but an *infinite* importance a perspective that moves us to live in daily awareness not only of who we are, but also in constant discernment of who God wants us to become.

Thus ends our second leg of the journey through the Apostle's Creed. As before, when you pray and reflect this week, I invite you to create your own answer to the question, "Who is Jesus Christ"? keeping in mind that Jesus himself encouraged his followers to think beyond the literal and engage instead with mystery.

For the opportunity to reflect, to think, and to examine our shared faith, we give thanks to you, God our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.

The Ven. Nancy Adams
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