

**THE APOSTLES' CREED:  
A LIVELY TEXT IN A WORLD  
MADE STRANGE**

*A Commentary on the historic faith  
of the Christian Church  
for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Enquirers*

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ILLUMINATING FAITH



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## PREFACE

This commentary on the Apostles' Creed, considerably revised and expanded, was first offered forty years ago as individual addresses at the monthly services of Holy Communion in the North Melbourne Methodist Mission. In this form, they established a basis for subsequent congregational discussion, following which requests were made to have the material available to the congregation in written form. They were then first formally published by Forum Booklets in 1991. A second edition by the same publisher was undertaken in 1994. The opportunity to offer a third edition of a commentary on the Apostles' Creed at first suggested that only minor changes for greater clarity and a sensitivity to more inclusive language might be sufficient. However, the conviction has grown that nothing short of a major rewrite at various points is now required for two main reasons.

First, few who offer a text for a wider public could rest happily in reproducing one which first saw the light of day forty years in the past. An author would like to think that a text first produced in comparative youth no longer adequately expresses what was first spoken and written. In my case, the opportunity to teach in the former United Faculty of Theology soon after the original composition of the first text led to considerably deeper exposure to the faith of the Church encapsulated in its creeds. If a certain immaturity in the composition of the first edition was inevitable, the hope is, though no guarantee can be certain, that old age might have conferred a little more wisdom in these matters.

Second, a major addition to the former text has become imperative. An extended introduction is offered, outlining the sorts of issues that have come much more to the surface in the popular mind than appeared to be the case when these addresses were first compiled. Over the last forty years, social apathy if not actual hostility, not only to any credal confession but to the very existence of the Church itself, has created the situation whereby an explicit *apologia* for the faith of the Church must be more sharply stated. While there is little expectation that the openness of the larger culture to the reception of that faith is likely to increase in the coming days, what appears below is intended to respond openly to the misunderstandings of that culture. My intention in what follows is to demonstrate that what the early Church has given us has its own integrity and even beauty. More significant would be the recognition that the Creed today is able to direct its own even more pertinent questions to us who, in varying degrees, may feel that the latest 'insight' is necessarily the most relevant to the troubled times in which we live. To this end, the Creed is not seeking to draw attention to itself as 'a badge of acceptance', but more to be a means of understanding biblical faith in ways that can be practised.

Bruce Barber

October, 2019

## **The Apostles' Creed**

I believe in God, the Father almighty,  
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died, and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again;  
he ascended into heaven,  
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,  
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the holy catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
the resurrection of the body,  
and the life everlasting. Amen.

'To have to subscribe to a creed .... all sorts of questions would arise, it's against one's inner convictions.'

Sir Mark Oliphant, Governor of South Australia  
*The Age*, Thursday June 3, 1976

'In its proper sphere, private life, a religion ...is free to protect its own sources of spiritual nourishment against the fatal obligation to make them universally intelligible'

Clive James, *Cultural Amnesia*,  
(London: Picador, 2007) p.490

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## HISTORICAL NOTE

In the ancient Church there were many different creeds or, more accurately, forms of the Creed. Each local church at first had its own particular form. The Apostles' Creed was probably based upon the creed of the church at Rome. In its present form it is at least as old as the fourth century CE, but basically it is much older than that. Each of its clauses may be said to possess Scriptural warrant, and in that sense the Creed is 'Apostolic'. It is not certain how the title 'Apostles' Creed' was attached to it, since there is no evidence of its existence in the first century CE. Perhaps it was drawn up as a convenient summary of the teaching of the Apostles. In any case, the age of the New Testament knows of no creed in the sense of a fixed formula, but there is a body of teaching common to the New Testament which in the form of 'confessions of faith' is the raw material of the creeds to come later; see, for example, 1 Corinthians 8.6, 11.23 and 15.3-18; 2 Corinthians 13.14; Philippians 2.5-11 and Matthew 28.19.

The second and third centuries saw the development of baptismal creeds, beginning with a question and answer form. Three questions were asked and the person was baptised three times, once after responding to each question.

Do you believe in the Father and Lord God of the universe?

Do you believe in Jesus Christ our Saviour, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate?

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, who spoke by the prophets?

So it is with the service of baptism that Christian creeds in the strict sense first appeared, when all Christians were required to give individual evidence in public of their personal belief. As time went on, this basic form was expanded by additions, primarily to the confession of faith in Christ. The earliest text containing the Apostles' Creed in the form we now use it dates from the eighth century.

Finally, though not a creed of the universal church (it is not used in eastern Orthodoxy) it has been the standard of Christian teaching in Roman and Protestant churches



# INTRODUCTION

*Two fundamental issues to think about before approaching the Creed: Conflicting worldviews and Language prejudices.*

It has become a truism to assert that we live in a time of cultural conflict. This conflict is by no means a novelty in the history of ideas in the Western world. In the larger frame of reference, opinions differ as to how best to describe Western culture: is it to be thought of as modern, late modern, hypermodern or postmodern? More particularly, what is new is that this conflict is being experienced on so many fronts. We see it expressed in such academic disciplines as ethics, economics, literary theory, or language studies; these are but some human endeavours bearing witness to competing ideologies. To this list may be added religious belief. Tied as it is unequivocally to pre-modern foundational texts millennia old, the theological task requires encyclopaedic awareness of historical, cultural, lexical, and epistemological (how we know things) traditions, to name but some. The conclusions we arrive at, or perhaps usually hold unconsciously, may be thought of as revealing the tip of an iceberg, the real weight of which is concealed beneath. In this respect, the two quotations in the preface illustrate the unwavering opinions – for that is all that they are – of two influential figures, one a scientist, the other a literary critic. Both reveal an unashamed ignorance of the true nature of Christian discourse, if not of religious language in general.

Preparing to embark on an exposition of the Apostles' Creed requires acknowledgement that all the disciplines already referred to must inevitably be engaged, implicitly if not explicitly, if a potential reader is to find any illumination of a text like this. In this respect, perhaps the most fundamental divide between the time of the formulation of this text and the contemporary world is what we call the Copernican revolution of the sixteenth century. This revolution witnessed the replacement of a geocentric universe with a heliocentric, ushering in the cultural era designated 'Modernity'. In essence, an anthropocentric (human-centred) universe came to replace a hitherto theocentric (God-centred) universe: a transition from a universe where the centrality of God was assumed, the human being problematic, to one where the centrality of the human is assumed, 'God' increasingly becoming problematic.

This cultural transition is mirrored in the language of the churches. It is evident in the issue of how the Bible may be thought of as having authority in this 'new' world; whether there is the possibility of there being such a thing as 'revelation', or in the very plausibility of God-language. These issues and others carry with them the question of what sense can be made of theological 'authority' in general.

Behind these presenting disputes lie worldviews which to a large extent are unconscious. They function for most of us most of the time as unexamined presuppositions. As such they are, to use the description of C.S. Lewis, 'forms of enchantment' which cast their spell over us and shape our consciousness and identity at their deepest levels. One such enchantment is the requirement that truth must equal 'fact', with 'fact' being understood as essentially that which comports in the popular mind with purported current 'scientific' theory, even after this has frequently become outmoded. The fact (!) is that, together with wigs and snuff boxes, 'facts' were the invention of the eighteenth century, and look what has happened to the first two!

One might hope that the same demise when considering religious texts might also, sooner rather than later, be the fate of the current idolatry of 'the fact'. In any case, those who formulated the Creed would have no comprehension of what a 'fact' might be. They would, however, have rejoiced in being described as a people who believed in the essential truth of the 'myth' because, for them, and unlike for our contemporary culture, the word myth was understood to be the exact opposite of what is untrue. Myth, on the contrary, was the only way that truth could be apprehended, especially when it sought to give expression to historical events lying at the heart of Christian faith. This category of myth as a carrier for conveying truth provides a key to understanding more intelligibly what is contained within the credal statements of the church.

The point is that we cannot make any headway in resolving religious conflicts, nor of entering knowledgeably into the confessions of the Apostles' Creed, until we recognise the force of the worldviews which each of us has imbibed since birth, and which shape our convictions about what we refer to as 'reality' – this most abstract of words! These hidden presuppositions cause us endless problems in disputes with others, and within ourselves, as we seek to find our way about.

At the very beginning, then, we need to make ourselves aware of a variety of pitfalls that will impede a fruitful encounter with the confessions of the Creed. We need to ask ourselves whether we are likely to fall foul of one or more of the following three predicaments. First, have we misconceived the total framework of the Creed, in which case the whole of it will seem out of kilter, if not pointless? Second, have we grasped the import of some of the Creed's confessional statements, but misconceived others? Experience has shown that two confessional statements in particular might be of this kind; the so-called virgin birth of Jesus, and his resurrection from the dead. Third, have we succumbed to the cultural blind-spot of our day through inheriting a naïve understanding of language? Perhaps the most pernicious failure in this respect is the eclipse of an appreciation of the necessity for the literary character of metaphor in expressing religious truth.

To illustrate the force of these questions, it would not be too preposterous to claim that our current crisis is equalled in the history of religious thought only by the Gnostic crisis of the CE second and third centuries. Gnosticism is derived from the Greek word for 'knowledge'. Social and political upheavals somewhat similar to our own led then to cultural insecurities. A welter of religious possibilities required a need to relativise the particular claims of a religion, which issued in a difficulty to commit to any actual religion at all. The heart of the matter then, as now, was the fundamental experience of the language difficulty in understanding how God and the world may be related each to the other.

In essence, the conflict between Gnosticism and biblical faith was over the nature of the 'word'. For Judaism, as for Christianity, God's 'word' (*logos*, in Greek) *is* God's personal address to us. The 'word' establishes a meeting between God and human beings – not a 'glimpse' or a peering through a haze of metaphysical distance – but an exchange between 'persons'. God 'talks' to us, and solicits an answer, so that we become persons-in-community.

For Gnosticism in both ancient and modern forms, on the other hand, the 'word' (*logos*) is merely an image that *substitutes* for God's presence with us – an emanation or projection by which a 'channel' is opened up between God and ourselves seeking to provide 'glimpses' of the divine, although God 'itself' (the only English grammatical gender possible here) remains forever the unknown God.

In essence, then, for both Judaism and Christianity, language is 'given', and the word is 'performative'. For Gnosticism, language is fabricated (made up) in its intention to be 'informative'; in such a climate, the confessional, 'redemptive' word of Christian faith as we have it, for example, in the Apostles' Creed, has become impotent in what is essentially a fundamentalist and conceptually reductionist world view.

If a potential reader is prepared to pursue what follows, he or she is encouraged to return to this introduction as often as may be necessary, attempting as it does to clear the ground in proposing a method of approach appropriate to each of the individual confessional statements' of the Creed. In particular, so endemic in our time are Gnostic thought patterns that they must be clearly identified and strenuously resisted if any progress is to be made in confessing the Creed with a cheerful disposition, not to speak of a good conscience.

# STUDY 1: BELIEF, GOD, CREATION

*I believe*

*God, the Father Almighty*

*Maker of heaven and earth*

## I believe

If it is true, as is often said, that the answer of Christians to the question ‘What do you believe?’ has seldom if ever before been so hesitant and uncertain, it may seem strange to propose a series of studies on the Apostles’ Creed. On the other hand, it may be the very thing that is demanded of us, today especially.

We begin with two words which look quite straightforward, but which are considerably more elusive than is commonly imagined. What is meant by the invitation to say: ‘I believe’, as the creed does before going on to say some things which almost certainly appear to be problematic if ‘believe’ is understood in the ordinary sense of accepting some statement as being an accurate fact. Is the alternative then only to say ‘I do not believe this, but I can manage to believe that’, and so to set up something like a balance sheet with debits and credits, each side of which can be added up to see which has the most? This would be a fatal conclusion. So what is meant by these words, and what is not meant? The question requires that we decide what is at the heart of the life of the church, and how we see ourselves, both the way we have come and where we are now. That requires no small effort by all of us.

A useful image to help begin consideration of the words ‘I believe’ is that of a frame and a picture. ‘I believe’ at the beginning of the Creed, and ‘Amen’ at the end, constitute the frame; the confessions within are the picture. To remove the picture from the frame, that is to say, to detach the content of the Creed from the opening and ending key signatures would be to negate the possibility of understanding the Creed at all. For ‘I believe’ proposes that what follows is a witness not a catalogue. This is clear because what follows after ‘believe’ is the preposition ‘in’, not ‘that’. The personal character of ‘in’ is a timely reminder that Christian faith is first of all a claim about existence, not an intellectual hurdle race. My teacher once described his young son coming into the parental bedroom attempting to put his trousers on over his head. This, he said, is clearly a disaster – trousers are for standing up in. This is a striking analogy for understanding Christian faith. Many try to put on over their head what *first of all* is intended to be a gift of how to stand. In this respect, credal statements are second order statements clarifying what is primary, that is, of what it means to ‘stand up’ in the Christian life.

What do you understand  
‘believe’ to mean, and *not* to  
mean?

Terms like ‘the love of God’, ‘grace’, ‘truth’, ‘reconciliation’, ‘new life in Christ’, ‘joy’, ‘peace’, ‘hope’, ‘Spirit’- these are words answering to, and expressive of, the rich concrete reality of the Church’s life – at least that is their intention.

So, when we say: ‘*I believe ...*’ we are really saying: ‘I find myself at home within this community and its attempt to grasp this style of life and to be faithful to it’. It is saying: I want to share, and I do share, in this life of which this ancient Creed is a symbol, which word was the Creed’s earliest description. One is not asked to affirm any more than this. For example we say: ‘I believe in God’. Although in the same breath we will immediately be invited to make a substantial identification of this God, we are not here being asked to say anything about any particular *idea* of God. Here is the invitation first of all to confess a *name* for God – the Father (in this case, of the Son of the second article of the Creed as the clue to the meaning of what ‘Almighty’ might mean); only then, and second, do we confess the force that this name has as the source of our experience of the status of the world (Creator of Heaven and Earth). Hence, because there are no ‘explanatory ideas’ in the Creed – that is a task given to symbolic or systematic theology – the identification of a Christian is better thought of, not so much as one’s ability to create this language, as one’s inability to avoid using it when wanting to give expression to the felt certainties that Christian experience provokes.

So the point is not that there ought to be a creed, or ought not to be, but that there is and always has been a creed of a character which gathers up the distinctive existence both of Israel and of the Church in their respective richness. It is a case of Christian life giving meaning to the terms, and, in return, of the terms informing and giving meaning to that life. But if one were forced to say one thing or the other, it is more nearly true to say that we ‘believe’ because we know what it is to give thanks for Christian life, than to say that we worship and pray and give thanks and so on because we believe.

This means that it is important to recognise that the ancient creeds, though they may appear to us to be so positive, so final, so unrelenting, so stark, are really concerned with ruling out what is false than with stating everything one must believe. This is historically how they came into existence. A false understanding, *heresy*, or a misunderstanding, made it imperative to hammer out what truth needed to be safeguarded in return.

All that we have said means that it is crucial in our day to clarify the nuances attached to the words: ‘I believe’. In common parlance, belief and faith show themselves to be very slippery words. At stake is the important distinction between verbs and nouns. The primal meaning of ‘belief’ is always verbal. Hence ‘I believe’ (verb), ‘help my unbelief’ (noun) (Mark 9.24). Prior to the *momentary* miracle of believing, ever to be sought, the natural human condition is one of unbelief. As a verb, belief conveys the sense of an imminent trust or commitment, an ‘aha moment’ we might say, ever in principle to be renewed. True, there are other words also encompassed by ‘believe’, such as ‘assent’, or ‘knowledge’ or faith as a ‘compendium of belief’. In this respect, theologians in the Reformed tradition in the seventeenth century made a significant distinction between faith as *that which* is believed (*fides quae*), and the faith *by which* belief occurs (*fides qua*). In modern terms this is the distinction between faith as ‘objective’, and faith as ‘subjective’. The problem for us is that in the radical turn to the human subject which is the hallmark of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, the word ‘faith’ in its objective sense has virtually disappeared, leaving only faith understood as being a subjective (and increasingly in the wider culture, a non-rational, even irrational) private choice, frequently caricatured as believing without, or in the face of, concrete evidence. In short, ‘blind’ faith.

The statement: ‘I believe’, then, and the Creed as a whole, in this sense allows for some foundational beliefs about God, and of how it was, and is, that in Christ God acts ‘for us and for our salvation’ (as the Nicene Creed puts it). In so doing, it repudiates the possibility that

God is not. Or the terseness and minimalist statements of the Creed might permit, indeed encourage, elucidation of these primary confessions, but they refuse to let us say that such a divine action in history did not or could not take place. Or, the Creed is full of the hope of the life everlasting, although it is unable to express what that means in any definitive and final way; but it refuses to let us believe that there is no such thing.

As we move through it, the Creed will invite us to say many things. But, in fact, it will be saying only *one* thing, although from a number of different perspectives. That one thing is the centrality, indeed the finality, of Jesus Christ. Anyone for whom he is central in his or her life, therefore, ought to be able to say the whole Creed in confidence and joyfully. Something is surely wrong when one thinks oneself able to say one clause, but not perhaps another. Or to put it better, if we can say just one thing confidently in the Creed, in principle we can say the whole. If we think otherwise, we ought to examine first of all the way we are accustomed to think about the Creed and its content, rather than be critical of statements in the Creed itself.

Is this a challenge you wrestle with? Does it help that faith in Jesus enables you to say the whole Creed confidently, even if you have questions about parts of it?

All this means that when we say: 'I believe' we are endorsing the objectivity of the faith of the Church through the ages. In the liturgy, the congregation is asked to stand and affirm the faith of the *Church*. The corollary of that invitation is that, although in acceptance we go on to make a personal confession, remembering that in the beginning this was a baptismal creed, the liberating truth in our day is that as a particular individual, I do not have to carry that whole burden myself. We speak, but we also have permission to wait until our growing experience of Church and life points to words previously puzzling, filling them with meaning. We, as individuals, do not necessarily have to make a final assessment in this particular moment of every particular statement. But we are invited to confess the Creed today knowing that we take our place in a reality extending through times and places and experiences beyond our imagining. Knowing always in part what we are saying, we are always waiting with well-founded confidence to realise greater depths and larger dimensions lying dormant.

Which aspects of the Creed do you need to 'grow into'?

The whole creed, then, is contained in the two words: 'I believe', as we dare in humility to take upon ourselves the adventure of faith, surrounded as we are by such 'a cloud of witnesses' (Hebrews 12.1).

## In God, the Father Almighty

The two words: 'Father' and 'Almighty', distinguish what it is that Christians believe in when they confess faith in God. It is these words which give shape to that experience of ultimate reality which has become associated with the word God, since until we have given content to the word God, 'God' is not likely to mean anything more than this vague ascription. This is why the *name* of God is considered so important in the Bible, for a name implies the *character* which we give to things. So for the Christian, content is given to the word God by the two words which follow it in the Creed: I believe in God: 'the Father Almighty'.

It is, of course, true that many people today find difficulty in confessing that it is God which is ultimate reality. They can only make sense of ultimate reality as matter, or spirit, or atom or space-time, or else they find these two words not meshing with anything in their experience. It is worth noting, therefore, that up until quite recent times, God was not at all a difficult word in the Creed – if anything it was faith in Jesus

Which of the three articles of the Creed do you find most difficult?

Christ which seemed to be a disturbing addition to the simple belief in God taught by Jesus himself. Today the situation is practically the opposite. There appears to be little room left in the world for God. The only secure thing in the Christian tradition seems to be Jesus with his 'message of love', though even here his very historical existence is subject to unwarranted denial by those whose hostility to Christian belief is paramount.

In any case, the early Christians who formulated the Creed in the words: 'God, the Father Almighty', did not labour under our difficulties. To speak of the mystery of being as personal, and therefore as God, was no problem – rather the struggle was to maintain the uniqueness of God in the face of 'the many gods'. This is no problem for us today, for if our contemporaries accept at all a concept of divine reality, they have no objection to God being unique. What is at stake today is whether in fact we can be convinced of the *personal* character of our encounter with the mystery of life.

For that is what it means to call God 'Father' – that the mystery that we encounter in the everyday events of life is a personal power. To be sure, the widespread use of this name Father for the one or highest God is obviously bound up with the patriarchal structure of earlier societies. Increasingly many people would today hardly choose the word 'Father' to express the personal experience of the mystery of life. But still, Father is not arbitrarily replaceable, because it identifies the personal God as the God of Jesus, the One the 'Son' called Father. Therefore when we confess God, 'the Father', in the Apostles' Creed, we do not mean that we are endorsing what in former times seemed to be the most adequate, but today much more questionable, name of God. We mean that we confess the God of Jesus. It is because we know him that we can be confident that through the desolate as well as joyous experiences of life we encounter the essentially personal nature of reality – as its source and as its gift. Jesus' preferred name for God was *Abba* as the replacement for patriarchal, or in some cultures, matriarchal dominance. Both of these societies express perceived powers of *origin*, and so dominate the present by the past. *Abba*, on the other hand, proposes the *future* as the proper theological category in the present in which this personal character of existence awaits its fulfilment.

So it is significant that the first thing to be said of God is that God is personal: 'Father'; only then can an impersonal word like Almighty be appropriate. The ordering of the words in the Creed, then, is mandatory: not 'Almighty Father', but 'Father, Almighty'. There is a world of difference between the two. It may well reveal the defining difference between the present confrontation between the two major world religions of Islam and Christianity.

But what does it mean to say that the Father is almighty or omnipotent? This has never meant that God can contradict the laws of his own nature – for example, that he could make  $2+2=5$ . Much less does it mean that God can be called upon to rectify natural disasters or human atrocities committed against other human beings. It means, rather, that God is not subject to any power outside himself, except in so far as he himself has given authority to such a power. For this reason, it is the revelation of God as Father that demonstrates the meaning that is to be given to this otherwise abstract word: omnipotence. That is to say, almightiness is to be understood as a category of grace, not nature. In this respect, it was indeed a fateful choice for Roman culture, and therefore for us as its inheritors, to translate the Greek word *Pantocrator*, 'Ruler of all things' as *Omnipotens*, 'All powerful'. The former connotes a universal providence, the latter absolute power. In other words, the troubling understanding of God as 'almighty' will always be a problem when this attribute is separated from God's name.

What difference does it make that God's power is in grace (gift) and not in nature (an ability to 'do' things)?

Almightiness, then, is to be understood as the Father's power of constancy to remain God for us even in the face of our rejection.

So if we can say that the mystery of life is personal, we who have been given such authority as those made in the image of God know it also as personal *power*, that is, as freedom for life. God does not force us to see our life one particular way, for that would destroy our freedom to see life some other way. All truly human life must be freely chosen. That is, God's power is a power which is able consistently to remain within freely chosen limits. But what is more, the 'almightiness' of God is the power of his own being as the Father of the Son, which he will never contradict, to remain God for us, even when we choose our freedom to reject the source and gift of our life.

This, too, we learn from Jesus, supremely in the Cross, for there we see demonstrated not only the personal mystery of life, and its rejection, but also the power of God to remain consistent, to accept the rejection that we human beings continually make in response to the demands of life. This is true almightiness – not to smash with an iron fist, not a naked display of ruthlessness, but the power to become small, to become apparently ineffective, to accept our human decree of death. That is, it is Easter which reveals so clearly what is meant by: 'I believe in God, the Father Almighty'. So, these words stand first before we say anything about Jesus Christ in our confession, despite the fact that we can make good sense of the words: 'mystery', 'personal', 'consistency' apart from him. But it is only when these words take on a human face, the face of the true Son, Jesus Christ, that we glimpse their true meaning, and their power, and their call.

Try to express how Easter – the cross, before the resurrection – demonstrates the 'almightiness' of God.

## Maker of heaven and earth

One of the first things that we might have learnt as children is that God is the Creator. For generations, from mothers' knees the question 'who made the world?' has received the answer, 'God'. So earlier generations sang: 'All things bright and beautiful, the Lord God made them all'. The question we continually face in later years is: what does this belief in God as Creator mean?

Perhaps no article of the Creed is thought to be so straightforward as this one. If one can believe in God, it is said, there is no apparent difficulty in believing God to be the creator of 'all things visible and invisible'. If one does not believe in God, the world is 'explained' by some other hypothesis. In either case, God is thought of as being an *explanation* for the origin of the world – an explanation that is either accepted or rejected. One is entitled to either conclusion, but equally one ought to know that such thinking does less than justice to what the Creed is seeking to say by 'maker of heaven and earth', informed as it is by the biblical confession of the *historical* creativity of Israel's God. It is, of course, still a question whether this biblical understanding of reality is valid for our experience of what is real. But to decide that question demands first of all an encounter with the biblical understanding.

In the Scriptures, the Christian confession of God as Creator is a consequence of Israel's consciousness of having a unique relationship with a unique God, specifically posed as the question how those who were 'nothing' (the experience of exile, both in Egypt and in Babylon) became 'something' (a people elected to a covenant in which something new was always happening). This newness was experienced as 'memory' and 'hope', as journey on the way to the promised land, so that fresh visions of meaning were continually being unfolded to those faithful to the 'silence that speaks' (I Kings 19.12). In other words, this is the question of how a singular people like Israel could be the bearer of divine grace.

The distinguishing characteristic of this God is that his action in bringing new things into being is identified as 'speech'. Whenever he chooses to reveal himself, it is as by his word. The first *historical* word in the Bible is not Genesis 1, but the call to Abraham: 'Go...' in Genesis 12. The considerably later reflection of speech as constituting the creation of the *natural* world is consistent with this historical word. God says, 'Let there be.... and it was so' (Genesis 1). The creation is the consequence of God's word, the power of which is the power to define a world of meaning contrary to the plethora of creation theologies of contemporary cultic societies.

At least three conclusions may be drawn from this.

First of all, it is by no means self-evident that God is the Creator of the heavens and the earth. God does not need to be Creator, but that there is something that we call the world or life is sheer grace on his part. He calls it forth 'out of nothing', as something quite other than himself, and therefore as something that can genuinely be loved for its own sake. In other words, the mystery of creation is not primarily, as we often express it, the problem of whether there is a God who is the originator of the world. Common sense has required us to make of first importance the fact of the reality of the world, and then ask whether there is also a God. But the biblical confession reverses the priority. It begins with the reality of God in the light of which it is a matter of wonder that there is a world at all, and that we ourselves exist along-side and apart from him. God has no need of us; he is rich in himself. How can there be something alongside God of which he has no need? That is the riddle of creation.

What is the answer to this question?

The second consequence is that there is nothing that is outside the grace of God. Nothing in the world is independent of God – where there is order, it is his gift; if there is chance or fate, these are still under his 'fatherly care'. To be sure, from our point of view, there are 'good' things and 'bad' things but, real as our judgment might be, it is impossible ever to say positively from the standpoint of the present what the enduring things are. That is to say, the meaning of history only becomes visible at the end of history, and it is only in the light of that end that it will be possible to decide at all what the thread of unity is which runs towards this end. The fact that God is Creator means that God himself, and his will for the world, will only be revealed in the light of the end, because his power and kingdom, even though already disclosed in Jesus Christ, are still to come. That God is Creator, then, is the guarantee that the world has a future, no matter how dark (or bright!) the path seems to us to be to that future.

What does this mean for our evaluation of our own actions, or for attempting to read historical events for God's presence?

And thirdly, that God is Creator means that the world is truly distinct from God. It is in no way divine, nor is it possible to read God off from the world. Who knows which 'god' it is that may be found in the world of nature, even if one arrives at any 'god' at all? The 'god of the stars and the springtime' is an innocuous god – a god who never becomes a crisis in my life, never blocks my life as an opponent, never makes me suffer, never frightens nor resists, nor holds nor calls me. But the Christian confession of God the Creator reminds us that we do not reach God through the world – quite the reverse, it is in the world that we seek to hide from God when God is lost to us (Genesis 3.8).

If we do not find God through the world, how do we find God? Or, how does God find us?

Can we say, then, that these three implications spell out for us the beginnings of what it means to say that God is 'maker of heaven and earth'? Have we not moved beyond the objection that what may well be true for the Bible can no longer be true for us since the idea of the human has today replaced the idea of God; that history can no longer be understood as what God does, but only what human beings do? The fact is that the truth and integrity

of Christian faith as it bears on the confession of God as Creator must not be made to rest on contemporary theories of causation for which 'man' is responsible, much less than on outmoded theories for which 'God' has been made responsible. Perhaps nowhere is the confusion of yesterday's and today's metaphysics with the Christian faith more apparent than here with this confession of God as 'the creator of heaven and earth'. For as the sixteenth century Reformer, John Calvin, made plain: 'To say that God is Creator means that we receive everything from his hands.' He was only echoing Paul when he declared 'for us there is one God the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist' (1 Corinthians 8: 6).

## STUDY 2: JESUS CHRIST – SON AND LORD

*And in Jesus Christ*

*His only Son our Lord*

### And in Jesus Christ

We come now to the beginning of what is known as the second article of the Creed, which is also the longest of the three, with the words 'And in Jesus Christ'. It is, however, important to observe that although it comes second, this confession is the very basis of the Creed. It is the presupposition of the first article about God the Father, while the third concerning the Holy Spirit, the Church, and the Christian life is its consequence. That is another way of saying that it is the basis for Christianity itself.

But Christianity itself, according to this second article, is not a whole series of things to be believed, but one thing only – the reality of Jesus Christ confessed by faith in the Church. For the words 'I believe' stand before this second article as they do that concerning God the Father and the Holy Spirit, so that we have them correctly in something like the form 'I believe in Jesus Christ the Father's only son, our Lord'. To be sure, many things are then said about this one, but they are not additions to Jesus – they are rather expressions of this primary significance.

How do you answer this question?

What does it mean to believe in Jesus Christ alone? That is *the* question, but it is not a question which can be answered without remainder in these brief paragraphs. It is this question which prompts, or should prompt, the church gathering week after week, as it is the question which is being answered one way or another every minute of our lives, whether we are conscious this is the question above all questions for Christians or not. For everything we think and say and do reflects, one way or another, what we make of this question.

So once again now we are doing in one particular way what we are always trying to do. Just as a kaleidoscope forms a new pattern with the same pieces, whenever it is taken up, so the coloured pieces we have here are the words, 'Jesus Christ'. For the early church the two words 'Jesus Christ' meant more than mentioning a name. Rather, the words said everything that was to be said. One of the oldest creeds contained only these three words – 'Jesus Christ, Lord'. Those who said them also thought them. This identification of the reality with a word is not natural for us. For us a name is only a name whereas, for example, in the Old Testament it is God's name, 'Yahweh', which distinguishes him from the heathen gods. His name is God's way of introducing himself. That is why Moses, for example, demands that the name of God be revealed to him, for the name *is* the reality (Exodus 3.13). The same holds for the name Jesus Christ – the name which the earliest Christians revered above every name (Philippians 2.10).

So it is that by taking the two words 'Jesus Christ' in turn, and looking at their meaning, we should find them helping us to answer this basic, ever-pressing question – 'What is it to believe in Jesus Christ?'

We take the first word 'Jesus'. Jesus is the Latin form of the Hebrew name Joshua which means 'to help or save'. There is, then, an obvious parallel between the Joshua who, after Moses, led the old Israel across the Jordan to the edge of the promised land, and the Lord Jesus who brings his New Israel through the waters of baptism into our new inheritance of the Kingdom of God already begun on earth.

But the name of Jesus was given to a great number of Jews, as indeed it still is in other societies, which means that the name Jesus as such is of no particular significance. It is, however, true that the gospels of Matthew and Luke witness to this name being given to the son of Mary and Joseph at the command of an angel in order to indicate that 'it is he that will save his people from their sins'.

At least two important conclusions follow from this. First, the name of Jesus signifies that the child who is to be born is truly a child of the Jewish people, amongst whom he will bear a personal name familiar to his contemporaries: he is a Jewish child among other Jewish children. That is to say, already in his name he is 'hidden' in the world, without ostentation, quite unremarkable, merely one of the crowd.

Second, the child who is to be born will not be, as he is so often made, an infant prodigy, a complete exception. Rather he is to be the last link in the long history of 'deliverances' granted by Yahweh to his people, but as such he will be something quite new. He will save not merely from hunger, oppression, or mockery of his people's opponents, but he will save them from 'their sins'. That is to say, what humanity needs most is shown in him not merely to be earthly, political or social salvation, but a new relationship at the very source of life with God. The name 'Jesus', then, is a constant reminder that the one whose gift is 'new creation' is not a mythical person, in the wrong sense of the word 'myth' (see P8). Nor is he a heavenly figure. He is a human being of flesh and blood as one of us.

This 'gift-like' character of Jesus is witnessed to in the name 'Christ' which is the English form of the Greek word 'Christos' which means 'anointed', and which from the first Christian generation was given to Jesus. Being 'the Christ' he is first and foremost understood as being the new David, the new 'anointed one' and hence the King expected at the end of time. As the new anointed one by the very spirit of God, he enhances and fulfils all that the kingship signified under the old covenant. And since priests and prophets were also anointed, so he fulfils all that they signified too.

The fact that the word 'Christ' came to lose its original meaning, becoming simply a proper name like 'Jesus', was all but inevitable among Greek speaking Gentile Christians who were not interested in a 'Christ' who should restore the Kingdom to *Israel* only, and who did not understand the literal meaning of the word. As their heirs we, too, use the words interchangeably. But since, as we have said, we know him only as the one who brings about God's new creation, it is helpful to observe the distinction and perhaps understand the words 'Jesus Christ' and speak as did Paul Tillich, a significant theologian last century, of Jesus *as* the Christ – if only to counter the understanding that 'Jesus Christ' equals 'John Brown'.

The two words 'Jesus Christ', therefore, help us to answer the question what it means to believe in him. They stand for a single event in history which claims finality, because in this

event the presence of God is to be found. It is this insistence which distinguishes Christian faith from every other commitment to what is claimed to be reality.

We do not have space to compare such claims in any detail. But if we take the religion of Islam as an example, it speaks of God but denies that he is really present in history. Mohammed is the final prophet, the author of the final 'book', and the one who speaks the final word *for* God, but in his person he does not account at all for the reality *of* God. Or again, Hinduism speaks of the reality of ultimate truth, but denies that it can be embodied anywhere in the world because the ultimate is too deep and still to enter the transitory life of history. But Christians can make Jesus Christ the source and form of their life because God is confessed to be *really present* in him.

'Jesus Christ', then, becomes the focus for both the understanding of God and the understanding of the human person. In the one name 'Jesus Christ' is God's call to take the gift of time and history with full seriousness; the name Jesus Christ is also God's sign in history that that call has his eternal benediction. But above all, the name Jesus Christ is the sign that God *gives* what he calls us to.

How is Jesus both end and new beginning?

This means that Christians can take quite seriously that Jesus Christ is the 'end', but always as a new beginning, of human searching after God, just as he is the 'end', but always as a new beginning, of human searching after what it means to be human. Everything that is said of him, and every title given to him, is so because of this fundamental conviction – whether it be the designation 'Only Son, Our Lord' or 'conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary' and so on – every statement expresses this fundamental certitude, if not certainty, that he is to be taken with full seriousness as the one in whom the reality of God and human reality are brought together.

For these reasons, everything hinges on what answer we give to the question: 'What is there in Jesus as the Christ, as he comes to us across the centuries, which promises us something we still really want?' If we do not know, or if we at bottom are forced to say 'nothing', then we wrap the Church in the shroud of a sect, standing guard over claims that can be venerated but which no longer give birth to ever new beginnings for us – claims which are essentially empty because they no longer quicken our imaginations and inform our actions. Many have come to just such a conclusion. Others know what it means, increasingly as the cultural climate grows colder, somewhat wistfully to ask: 'Lord, to whom shall we go?' (John 6.68). May it be that we all will be given to know in truth what it means to say: 'I believe in Jesus Christ' as the end of a search, and *therefore* as the beginning of life.

## His only Son our Lord

While it might seem that the phrase 'his only Son, our Lord' would be one of the more straightforward confessions, closer examination causes any confidence in such a conclusion to disappear rapidly. For here, if nowhere else, it is clear how artificial is our marking off of the various clauses of the creed. The description 'his only Son, our Lord', a statement about the person of Jesus Christ, cannot be isolated from the whole constellation of events that make up his life: from all those things that are to come in the Creed, his birth, suffering, death and resurrection, no less than his public ministry of word and act, which is passed over in apparent silence by the Creed. For just as the reality of God cannot be affirmed apart from his activity, just as *who* God is cannot be expressed apart from experiencing *what* he does, so also we cannot separate the person of Jesus Christ from those events which precisely have made him so significant in his person. That is why now it is rather like a motion picture

which has stopped, the action is frozen, and what is said: 'his only Son, our Lord' demands recalling what has gone before, and anticipating what will come after.

Before looking in more detail at these two fundamental affirmations – fundamental yet nevertheless only two of any number that could have been made – we can learn something from their order. Just as with regard to God two images from a whole list have been chosen in the Creed – namely, God, 'the Father, Almighty' – we noted that there is great significance in their ordering. For it is God's activity as 'Father' that enables us to understand the meaning of the word 'Almighty', not the other way round. Yet how common is this inversion? How many people think that the first to be said of God is that he is Almighty, based on our human notion of power, to which somewhat lamely is appended 'Father', so that his fatherhood is destroyed or made incomprehensible by that ordering. That, ultimately, is a pagan view of deity. On the contrary, faith insists that only in God's first name as 'Father' can the word 'Almighty' have its meaning.

And the same is true here with regard to Jesus Christ. It is as the only Son of God, the Father, that he is Lord. This means that we cannot know the true content of his Lordship apart from grasping what is entailed in his Sonship. And just as with the confession about God, the Father, how serious is the distortion when the lordship of Jesus Christ is divorced from his humanity as the true Son. Should this happen, the son then becomes a sort of superman, the special one apart from our humanity. He becomes the religious genius, high above us in every way, a 'god'. Here, if nowhere else, is revealed our apparent inability to change the popular sentimental view. Here of all places it is so difficult for Christian faith to destroy its own caricature. And that is surely the pathos of the Church's message in our own day. But here, as with everything else, we must always begin anew, with ourselves, if not with the compact majority, who doubtless regard with amazement that we should find this word play so significant.

Why, then, call Jesus the only Son, since the Gospel tells us we are all 'sons' of God? The answer is: precisely because we know ourselves to be such only in him. It has become the custom in recent times to substitute this apparent gender-specific designation with the neutral word 'children'. But we need to reckon with the fact that 'sonship' here has to do with being 'bound to Jesus Christ'. It is a statement about him, not us. As such, it may well be harder for males, rather than females, to take to themselves precisely this definition of sonship, rather than to assume some apparently natural confidence that this 'sonship' is about their own gender as males. To put it tersely: 'sonship' is about Christology, not anthropology. The conclusion, then, is this: apart from the Son, that is, apart from his presence in his words and deeds, we do not know ourselves to be in the presence of God 'the Father'. We experience only, perhaps, the presence of the mystery of the Universe, the ambiguity of life, the unpredictability of time and nature, the silence of civilization. In him, however, we know God as 'Father', and ourselves as 'sons'. What he *does* in life, he *is* in life, and that not only for himself but for us. The phrase 'the only Son of God', then, explains the mystery and the reality of Christian faith – the continual coming to birth of the life and reality of God as Father as the fellowship of humankind through the grace of Jesus Christ. That is to say, Christian faith is bold enough to proclaim that this life together with God and humankind is not natural to us but comes to us through the gift of 'the only Son'.

This means that in the last analysis we will never see the reality of God in the world – which is where one way or another we are always looking – if we look other than through the eyes of the Son. But equally, if we look by means of the gift of his sight, the reality of God breaks through – yet always a reality in the form of

What does it mean to see reality through the eyes of the Son?

question and not only an answer. This, at the very least, is why in the life of Jesus we see so clearly why no answers are given to those who for one reason or another have given up asking questions or, even worse, who persist in wanting to ask the wrong questions. It is also why as ‘the answer’ – or as the Creed has it, as God’s ‘only Son’ – he puts to everyone the question whether we will appropriate his Sonship as our own.

Those for whom that happens – for whom the question of Jesus Christ is at the same time an answer, for whom the end of the search is the beginning of life – can only acknowledge that the ‘only Son’ has indeed become our Lord. As the only God he is in truth *the* Lord, but he continually wants to become in fact *our* Lord.

When that happens it means that no part of life is removed from the authority of his Sonship.

This all-embracing reality has always to be fought for. The mantra of contemporary culture is relentless: ‘religion’ is a private matter, and must be excluded from ‘politics’. How this can in all conscience be entertained can only be attributed to wilful ignorance, given that the foundational texts of both Old and New Testaments know nothing other than politics as the sphere for the fate

of God in the world. The real issue here is the certainty that those who insist on separating ‘politics’ and ‘religion’ make it clear that, whether for or against him, this is in reality an attempt for us to become *his* Lord by enclosing him in our contemporary prejudices of what we would like to think is the truth.

The opposite of all such forms of wilfulness is not, of course, mere weak will, but rather surrendered will. That is to say, the effectual Lordship of Jesus Christ comes about not because we have achieved certain ends or goals that we set for ourselves, whether as individuals or as churches. Rather, the Lordship of Jesus Christ – Jesus Christ in truth as ‘our Lord’ – comes about when we live by nothing more than the mutual forgiveness of, and the fellowship with, those who know themselves to be ‘sons of God’, because God’s only Son has made us his own.

How does the analysis here help to contradict this common assumption?

# STUDY 3: JESUS CHRIST – CONCEIVED AND BORN

*Conceived by the Holy Spirit*

*Born of the Virgin Mary*

Almost certainly these are two of the most difficult statements for modern people to understand, let alone to give assent to. Because of the significance, and to the modern mind the problems, raised by each, we will first conflate the two and speak more accurately, and potentially more helpfully, as the ‘virginal conception’, not the ‘virgin birth’. We do this in the hope of greater clarity in this complex issue.

We start by making some general observations about their underlying significance. Essentially both confessions are concerned to state that Jesus is not, as it were, an historical accident. God did not wait until it ‘just happened’ that there was born a person who was good enough to reveal God to the world. On the contrary, both confessions are emphasising that the birth of Jesus comes with divine imprimatur, rather than by what might otherwise be assumed to be some natural anticipation; hence other than the normal expectation that he is born ‘of the will of the flesh’. In this respect, it is instructive by way of contrast to observe how the Gospel of John expresses this divine initiative, since neither of these confessions is either known or, if so, considered significant in the construction of that Gospel. Rather, the metaphor here is that of affirming that God ‘sent’ his Son into the world (3.16). Yet regardless of the language employed, the New Testament is of one mind that the birth of Jesus is ‘different’ from other human births. To stake such a claim certainly needs further investigation. That Jesus was ‘conceived by the Holy Spirit’ and ‘born of the Virgin Mary’ is but one way of making such a point.

At the outset there is an important distinction to be made having a significant bearing on these confessions that is known to scholars, but not more generally. This is the distinction between that which is said in the Bible and that which is subsequent reflection by the Church. The two have technical names. The first is called *exegesis* (the interpretation of the texts); the second we know as *doctrine* (the teaching of the Church). Although it looks at first sight that Scripture – the existence of texts – comes first, in fact the Church was faced by the necessity of teaching from the very beginning, before there were any written texts. That is to say, the Church had a faith before it had a text. In this respect, it is a matter of first importance that long ago scholars understood that, for example, the letters of Paul chronologically precede the gospels. Another way of putting the matter is to grasp that the gospels are later reflections on the earliest Christian preaching as that took place in different cultural and religious communities. This explains, for the otherwise uninformed, the much vaunted ‘contradictions’ purported to reside in the Gospels. Who they are written to, for example,

What does this fact – a faith before the text – do for the authority of Scripture?

whether to Palestinian Jews, or Hellenised Jews, or non-Jewish Gentiles, determines their presuppositions and their shape.

With regard to the conception and birth of Jesus, there are two reasons in the gospel of Matthew for believing that in the original Judean tradition Joseph was regarded as the father of Jesus. The first is that a Jew would not have understood the Spirit as a sexual deputy for a human father. In the Jewish Haggadah (the recital of scriptural stories to bring out their theological import) we read; 'There are three partners in the production of man; the Holy One (blessed be he), the father and the mother'. This manner of speech was easily open to misunderstanding by a Gentile. Second, we know that the notion of a virginal conception does, in fact, come from *Hellenistic* Jewish Christianity. How do we know this? Because the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) translates the pivotal text of Isaiah 7.14 as ('A *virgin* shall conceive and bear a Son...'). But the Hebrew word here is *almah*, which actually means: 'a young woman of marriageable age'. The decision to translate this word by the Greek *parthenos* (virgin) has had incalculable consequences.

Obviously, with these considerations we are in the presence of complex issues which only with real risk can be summarised. But here we are forced to offer some summary conclusions. First, this double confession, conception and birth, is not intended to be thought of as giving factual information about the physiological provenance of Jesus. Each seeks only to assert his significant 'origin' for the world into which he was born. On the factual side, we can hardly say more than that Jesus must have been born somewhere in Palestine around the end of the reign of Herod the Great. To put the point with some sharpness: we have to do in these statements with theological and not gynaecological information. This is the interpretative element which, with regard to Jesus' origin, is inevitably *retrospective* – that is, which looks back from his life and death and continuing presence, seeking to draw out the significance of his birth which, at the time it occurred, must have been an utterly obscure event. But considerably more can be said, so to this end we look more particularly at each formulation.

## Conceived by the Holy Spirit

The point of this confession is that a new humanity was coming into existence with the coming of Jesus; a new people, indeed a new world, had been born in him because God was now exercising a new history with his creation. If it could be said of him, as does the Gospel of John, that he was 'born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God' (1.13), then, in like manner, Christians have always understood *themselves* to have been 'conceived by the Holy Spirit'. It is not surprising, therefore, that the one who gives us new birth is himself supremely 'conceived by the Holy Spirit', since his whole life manifested 'life in Spirit'.

Today, especially, we need to know that originally what was confronting in this phrase of origin was the word 'conceived' and not, as it has become for us necessarily bizarrely, that the 'Holy Spirit' is the instrument of delivery. The point is that for the Hellenistic mind, 'Spirit' and 'flesh' are antithetical entities, not to be spoken of in the same breath. To be sure, divine agency was everywhere then, but what was so provocative in this confession was that God could be *conceived of* as being drawn so deeply into the flesh. Imagine, then, the *theological* 'impossibility' of this formulation for the first hearers. 'Conceived by the Holy

Spirit' meant then, as it continues so for us, that Jesus is totally human, born of a woman and in solidarity with all humankind, yet one in whom humanity has been raised to a new level, so that those who gather about him come to share in this new humanity. As such, the church confesses that this human being is from God in a unique and unprecedented manner.

The point is that this formulation, and that of 'born of the Virgin Mary', underscore how it is that the concern of God has become our human concern. Jesus is one of us, not a freak. So he has to be 'conceived' and 'born'. Of course it was no small order, then or now, to believe that God could enter the world by a birth canal. But it is just one of the ironies of our time that we have reversed the original emphasis of the New Testament. For 'in the beginning' they wanted to insist on 'incarnation' – the humanity of God – whereas we, two thousand years later, assume that both of these clauses express the *non-humanity* of Jesus. These affirmations, therefore, when held with greater or lesser conviction but questionable understanding, do a great disservice to the expression of Christian faith in our day. They lead us away from the astonishment and joy of the faith that the word has become *flesh*: a total identification as one of us experiencing everything pertinent to the human condition.

That is quite different from what the ancient myths tell us about Zeus or Apollo when they came down to have a look at us. The immortal gods risked nothing in taking the trouble to come down from Olympus. Like Olympian astronauts, they touched the world only as a tangent touches a circle before taking off for home. The early church had no desire for retelling the old myths as if the conception of Jesus entailed his being 'half God/half man'. God is no Greek Zeus who loves a woman and brings to birth the half-god, Hercules.

The Gospel is something quite other. It announces that God (Spirit) embraces the world (flesh). Not content with a friendly word of goodwill from somewhere else, instead God suffers the fate of a refugee with us, as the Creed will immediately explore: an escapee as a child, abandoned as an adult, constant to his call, our call, until it killed him. That is the extent to which God becomes human; as one of us yet, precisely in this nearness, 'other' than us. So we confess 'conceived', as we are conceived, with no head start over us but with the creativity of God. That is, 'conceived by the Holy Spirit'.

## Born of the Virgin Mary

We have stated that what is intended by the words: 'Conceived by the Holy Spirit' is the reality of the *humanity* of Jesus as expressing the life of God. The phrase 'born of the Virgin Mary' (again, let it not be said, 'the Virgin *Birth*') points in the same direction. 'Born of the Virgin Mary' cannot be contracted to the phrase, 'the Virgin Birth', without serious misunderstanding. This apparent shorthand deflects attention from the primary intention of this confession which, like the former, seeks to focus on the word 'born' rather than on 'virginity'. For this clause, too, is seeking to affirm the reality of the bodily incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. As such, in symbolic language, it tries to make clear that here something happens before which we can only keep silence and receive what is given to us.

Perhaps, however, the main source of confusion, bafflement and uncertainty, comes when the mistake is made of thinking that if one really does want to believe in the incarnation of God, one necessarily has to believe in 'the Virgin Birth' as a gynaecological fact. It is true that many who deny what they take to be 'the Virgin Birth', also deny the reality of God present in human life, but the one does not necessarily imply the other. Here the birth stories in the two Gospels of Matthew and Luke are quite clear as to what the issue is. The virginity of Mary is the confession that this human Jesus is 'eternally begotten of the Father'. We

recall how the Old Testament tradition is replete with ‘miraculous’ births: the laughable promise of the birth of Isaac to the elderly Sarah and Abraham is a case in point. Even more pertinent here is the ‘origin’ of the prophet Jeremiah: ‘Before *I* formed you in the womb, *I* knew you... (1.5). The imagery of the action of God in the tradition is continually expanding. Understandably, then, because of the nature of Jesus’ epochal significance, his birth must be even more ‘impossible’ by expected natural human agency.

What is not so obvious in all this is that wherever God is understood to be active it is because of the fundamental axiom of Christian theology that ‘God is what God does, and God does ‘who’ God is’. That is to say, the action of God is always an action of mission. So the birth of Isaac is the surety of the promise made to Abraham that ‘in you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed’ (Genesis 12.3). In the same way, the promise made to the prophet Joel (2.28) ‘that the days are coming when I will pour out my spirit on all flesh’ anticipated that the *entire* people of Israel would become a charismatic people, not merely individual prophets. It was, therefore, inevitable that the earliest Christians understood that this promise to incorporate Israel was coming into effect in the ‘spirit’ (pneumatological) birth of Jesus as the one in whom ‘all flesh’ was being comprehended, but *now* extending to the unimagined inclusion of the Gentiles. On this foundation, the later theologians of the early Church never tired of emphasising: ‘He became what we are that we might become what he is.’

In essence, then, in these two confessions we are being exposed to an essential Christological claim that is as bold a refutation as can be against a then current idea that was called ‘adoptionism’ – the notion that the Father simply adopted Jesus subsequent to his birth in later life because he had shown himself worthy. On the contrary, the confession ‘Born of the Virgin’ is the sign that God himself takes centre stage here from the very beginning as the Creator he always is. Other texts, of course, particularly the genealogical construction of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, confirm the unequivocal assurance that Joseph is the father of Jesus. But here the birth narratives are concerned to make the point that the husband – the symbol for Israel of, may we say, ‘the generative force that makes history’, of what creatively masters life – does not enter the *theological* picture. Man, the male, is to contribute nothing to what is beginning here. Rather, the focus is on the biblical, if not the contemporary symbol, of silence, listening, acquiescence. God did not, in other words, choose the man in his pride and defiance to renew the creation. In order to convey the creativity of God, the male as the hitherto responsible one in creating human life must now retire into the background as the powerless figure of Joseph. Yet God is not here to be understood as the sexual partner of Mary. Medieval Christian artists tried to express that this is no sexual event, that nothing sexual was involved in this conception and birth by God. They did so by portraying Mary receiving the creative word of God as brought by an angel through her ear. That is to say, the organ of perception, the ear, is shown to be the organ of conception: the origin of new birth. And what is true of Mary, the mother of the faithful, is also true of the Church, of ourselves; faith comes to birth through the ear, through the hearing of the word. Jesus is born through the hearing of Mary, and is born in us in the same way.

The demand for ‘factual accuracy’ that we modern people require as the criterion of truth – and, in this case, simply therefore cannot believe, or with varying degrees of embarrassment believe as part of the package – is countered by understanding the virginal conception as a ‘sign’. Both ‘conceived by the Holy Spirit’ and ‘born of the Virgin Mary’ are signs that point to the faith that Jesus’ birth was a creative act of God in a way that is not true of any other human birth. As signs, the confessions are analogous to the image of the shell of the prosaic nut – the shell is there to protect the reality inside. We do not eat the shell, we eat the nut.

To confuse the two leaves only a nasty taste in the mouth, and the goodness is contaminated. So 'born of the Virgin Mary' is the sign – the shell, as it were – that in the midst of the old, a new humanity comes to birth.

Given this background, we are entitled to conclude that what we have been attempting here means that there is little point in refusing to speak these words in a public recital, or of asking to erase these statements from the Creed. Rather, they must be interpreted according to their fundamental intention. In this sense, they are elucidatory, not primary statements. The Creed itself says the only thing necessary first of all: 'And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord'; that is all one who would like to be Christian needs to acknowledge. It is possible to think one believes the whole Creed 'just as it stands', though, as we have tried to show, that in itself is far from being a straight forward obvious thing; it is possible to believe 'everything', and yet not know him whom these confessions set forth. In the same way, one may claim that one doesn't know what to make of all this, that one 'doesn't believe the Creed' – though here too, we have seen that credal statements need not be the impediment that they are frequently taken to be. It is possible to say 'I simply cannot say this', and yet one really has the heart of the matter; one does 'know Jesus', one's heart already knows more than one's understanding; as is often the case in life, one's heart is one step ahead of one's head.

Does the account given here make it easier to say these words in the Creed? If not, why not?

So perhaps nowhere else is it more important than here, in these two confessions, for those whose heart is 'in the right place' to mark time with their heart, to allow time for their head to catch up. If that doesn't happen it may not be fatal, but it is a less than happy situation for Christians to find themselves in a society increasingly uncomprehending of the one thing the gospel is about, that 'the Word *became flesh*' (John 1.14).

Looking back over this study, try to summarise: What is the conception and birth of Jesus about, or *not* about?

## STUDY 4: JESUS CHRIST – DEAD AND BURIED

*Suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified dead and buried*

*He descended into hell*

### Suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified dead and buried

From the birth of Jesus, it seems at first sight that the Creed moves immediately to his death. Is it not strange that no mention is made of what, to many people, is the only meaning of Christianity, namely the teaching, preaching and good works of the ministry of Jesus? Think of the millions around us who, if asked what the Christian life is, have no hesitation in saying ‘trying to live the things that Jesus taught’, observing ‘Christian principles’, ‘being a Good Samaritan’, ‘helping one’s neighbour’ and so on. How irritating it must be to reflect that the Creed does not seem to be interested in what many regard as being the heart of it all.

But let us not move too quickly. For it may be that we see the word ‘suffered’ in much too narrow terms, particularly when it is linked immediately with the closing days of the life of Jesus, of his trial under Pontius Pilate and of his physical pain on the cross. That is altogether too limited a view. We are on a much more illuminating course when we are able to see that the whole of Jesus’ life is embraced by the word ‘suffered’. So, from the very beginning, we see in the history of Jesus that he is a stranger in the world, that he is disregarded and despised. The stable, Herod’s persecution and the flight into Egypt are signs of this suffering. And it does not stop there but grows even more intense – a stranger in his own family and among his own people. Lonely, despised and rejected he stands not only among the masses but among his own disciples, out of whom will come his betrayer. Forsaken at the very depths of life, it is a small thing to be forsaken to the point of physical death. So, we read that early in his ministry: ‘He set his face resolutely towards Jerusalem’ (Luke 9.15). His whole life is already lived in the shadow of the Cross, and thus qualifies as a life of suffering. It is only in this light that we can hope to understand his preaching, teaching and acts of healing. This means that it is not so much what he said and did to others that is important but that he himself embodied what he said and did, thus bearing the consequences – ‘suffering’ them, we might say. His ‘suffering and death’ only bring to the light of day something that for Jesus himself throughout his life in every place had been an ever present reality.

Let us pause here to take note of something of great importance. It is more often than not the case that the problem of evil and suffering is located in relation to God the Father and creation: ‘How can I believe in a good God given all the evil and suffering experienced in the world?’ Located here, the problem is insoluble. But the Creed proposes a more profound solution: the problem of evil and suffering are raised not in connection with God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, but only with reference to Jesus Christ. Here is where the nature of evil is exposed – in our human revolt against God. What are all our groans and sighs and complaints? What is all the ever-present inhumanity of human beings towards each other that we are so conscious of, and responsible

Is all suffering to do with revolt against God? Is suffering made worse by revolt against God?

for, in the light of our human attack on God? If we would know true suffering, let us not rush past this one word that separates the birth and death of Jesus – that ‘he suffered’. And let us learn from the Creed not to be too glib in our use of the word ‘suffering’. Let us not speak of it in general terms as we like to do – of the volatility, for example, of the world of nature – but let us speak of it in the specific sense that throws up in all its horror and mystery our human attack, our hate-filled ‘*no*’, to the very presence of God.

‘ ‘Tis I, whose sin now binds thee  
With anguish deep surrounds thee  
And nails thee to the Tree  
The torture thou art feeling  
Thy patient love revealing,  
‘Tis I should bear it, I alone.’

So sings the chorus in Bach’s St. Matthew passion.

But no – God himself bears our suffering. Let us take the full weight here of the conclusion of the apostle Paul, namely that, as the measure of real suffering, ‘He made him to be sin, who knew no sin...’ (2 Corinthians 5: 21). The man Jesus, in his unity with the Father, is the figure of the human suffering our fate. The striking revelation here is that Jesus experiences suffering not as some sort of charade, but as a real abandonment by God, and the profundity in this is not abandonment as the experience of distance, but rather that of closeness. The harsh reality for Jesus is that his death is the end of his cause. That is to say, his death is the end, not just of his personal existence, but the end, might we say, of his *theological* existence. Hence the pathos of the cry of abandonment from the Cross; not just: ‘Why have you abandoned me?’, but ‘Why have you abandoned yourself?’ This is a dimension of suffering way beyond our often banal assessment of suffering, and it is this which makes what comes next in the confession not surprising but inevitable. ‘Suffering’, in fact, points the way ahead: ‘crucified, dead and buried’. Only now can we take the full import of each word:

Is there suffering God does  
not bear?

*Crucified* – When a Jew was crucified, that meant he was cursed, expelled, not only from those still living, but from the covenant with God. Crucified means rejected, handed over to the death inflicted on the heathen. To be crucified is not merely an unpleasant form of death, nor one able to be exchanged for a death by hanging, or by poison, or by fire, as mere physical extinction. To be crucified is to be utterly rejected by God and humankind – to be crucified is to hear the divine curse on all that is separated from God. This is the agony of the Cross; this is what is at stake in being crucified.

*Dead* – To be dead means to be at the end of all present possibilities for life. Jesus really died. There is a type of thinking, still, as there was in the days of the formulation of the Creed, which cannot come to terms with this, and certainly not that the Son of God should himself suffer and die – that was thought to be intellectually impossible. Death for him, it was said, was only a phantom, since God cannot suffer and die. But the Gospel is not a charade. Jesus bore not only the curse of separation, but the judgement under which rebellious life stands. That this is the final and irreversible end of a life on earth is clearly expressed in the word, ‘buried’.

*Buried* – Being buried, there is no hope for Jesus in the world. His last place on earth is the grave. In this sense, too, Jesus Christ became human.

And all this took place ‘under Pontius Pilate’. Why is Pontius Pilate in the Creed? Why does Pilate, in company with Mary have such a place, but not Peter or James and John or Paul?

First of all, the importance of this clause makes it clear that Christian faith is rooted in history. The suffering of Jesus did not take place in heaven, as it were, nor in some remote planet nor even in some fantasy world. It took place in our time, in the centre of the stage in which human life is played out. Pilate’s name, then, first of all establishes that the death of Jesus is a fact of history.

But secondly, his name indicates that the death of Jesus was an event in which the authority of the world in the person of Pilate as Head of State stands revealed. He has, to be sure, quite an external role, since everything important is played out between Israel and Jesus in the Sanhedrin which accuses and rejects him. But Pilate stands by ‘in his uniform’, and is used as the one who hands Jesus over to an undeserved death. By ‘suffering under Pontius Pilate’, Jesus participates in the order of the world, albeit the world in rebellion, the world dictated to by ‘political considerations’ rather than the truth.

Let, then, those who say that the Church and politics are two different things and belong in different realms be warned by the clause ‘suffered under Pontius Pilate’: Jesus’ death was a ‘political’ event in a political city, Jerusalem. Indeed, the truth of God is always a political event, precisely because Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate.

It also means that Church and State will always find themselves in tension. Pilate reminds us that the political realm, although called to embody the reign of God, is likely more often to prefer its own kingdom. Pilate’s duty was to decide between right and wrong but, in order to stay in his position, he, ‘from fear of the Jews’, renounced doing the very thing he was bound to do; he gives way. Called on to witness to the truth, he prefers to lie; called to preserve the good, he in the last analysis agreed with Caiaphas, the High Priest’s, judgement in a superb irony: that it was ‘a *good* thing [expedient] that one man should die for the people’ (John 11.50).

Are ‘political realms’ capable of choosing God’s reign? When? How?

The irony here is this – that of all people, Pilate is the founder of the Church, for through him Jesus is delivered out of the narrow realm of the nation Israel into the Gentile world. Thus Jesus, though yet only in a hidden way, triumphs over him under whose frailty and folly he has to suffer.

Therefore, ‘under Pontius Pilate’ – so apparently trivial and out of keeping – is pure gospel. For it bears witness in the sharpest possible way to the humiliation of God, which yet is still secret, but already in its hiddenness in the world is supreme victory and triumph.

But could it really be anything else, if it be *God* who is really suffering, and who, as truly human, is crucified, dead and buried?

## He descended into hell

The Hell of Verdun.

The Hell of Auschwitz.

The Hell of Stalingrad.

The Hell of Hiroshima.

The Hell of Vietnam.

The Hell of Iraq and Syria.

With these figurative contemporary expressions it is clear that the notion of 'hell' cannot be prematurely dismissed as simply some lingering primitive image of an antiquated literal location. 'Hell' has clearly continued to live in popular imagination, albeit freed from some distant physical other world. It lives as a present reality, even complete with images of flames and permanent lostness, as these declarations bear witness. So we surely do not have to spend time with the idle question: 'Where is this place called hell?' given that the words 'heaven' and 'hell' have had to put up with being used to play on human imagination, either to comfort or to frighten, by standing only for places and times beyond and after this life and this world. Wherever there is human life we hear, if we listen, the cries of injustice, the scream of the tortured, the moans of the suffering, the gasps of the dying. We do not like to remember these things, but we know they are there surrounding us on all sides. But we do not have to go so far; we do not have to depend on some second-hand trivialisation: 'Hell is other people', the twentieth century philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre concluded. We say, or imply, the same thing to others: 'You make my life a hell'. So it is that whenever human beings live close together they can prepare for themselves a heaven on earth, but they can also turn life into a hell. We look for recognition and friendliness, and suddenly there is only contempt and resentment. This is the experience of hell; no legend this, as we see a warm hunger *for* life changed into a pitiful hatred *of* life.

Do you think hell to be more than this?

That we no longer believe in the then contemporary image of a three storied universe of heaven, earth and hell is neither here nor there. For it remains a theologically 'truthful' way of expressing the same claim to sovereignty over the totality of reality expressed in the first article of the Creed, that is, trust in 'the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth'.

What then, as Christians, do we mean when we say that the 'Lord' descended into hell?

By way of answer, we need to attempt to sketch something of the background for the inclusion of this article in the Creed. It was apparently added, not without some dissension, comparatively late in the third century, and first of all in the Eastern Church. There it was intended to mean that Jesus, the son of God, really died, as against those who could not believe in a suffering Messiah, claiming instead that the Spirit of Christ had been miraculously transported to heaven before he was crucified. Refuting this, Christ's descent into hell stands in the Creed to indicate the depth of his suffering. In his crucifixion and death, he actually experienced in himself the absolute pain of abandonment by God; 'suffered', 'crucified', 'died' we have already confessed. What really occurred in all this was Christ's entry into the hell of guilt, of pain, of death, and beyond. What is more he is 'divine', not because all this had no effect on him, but precisely because, despite all this, he became one with us. This was the original significance of the faith of Christ's descent into hell.

What does 'descent to hell' mean for us *now*?

The Latin Church of the West, however, soon interpreted it another way. Here the descent into hell came to mean the triumphal journey of the redeemer through the land of the dead as the victorious liberator of the captives from the old alliance of Adam and Eve. The descent into hell, therefore, became the first stage of his 'ascension' in which Jesus became Lord of all the living and the dead. That means: nothing is beyond the scope of his redeeming might. The fact that the confronting word 'hell' has also been translated as the 'realm of the dead' carries with it the answer to what is, for many people, a troubling question, 'What about all those who have died long before Christian faith entered the world?' The answer, strange as

it may seem, is to be found just here in this article of the Creed. For if the first act of the Word of God was to descend to the realm of the dead, *then all who have died become the first to hear the gospel of liberation*, long before it comes to those presently living. Death and 'hell' are no limits to his power which reaches out to all. As the first letter of Peter puts it: 'Christ preached to the imprisoned spirits who had been disobedient. And the good news was preached to the dead also and salvation came to them' (1 Peter 3.19; 4.6). All this because the Christ had mastered death in his own body, so that he had the key to death and hell in his hand.

Both these ideas then – the descent into hell as the suffering by Jesus on the cross of abandonment by God, and that of his ascension from the lowest depths as the beginning of his resurrection for the salvation of all – both run through the history of the Christian faith.

We can, therefore, put the meaning of the descent into hell into one sentence: *that God enters hell, and hell is consumed in him*. Not that we or others are spared the hells of which we have spoken, but with his faith we can pass through in freedom. For no one can be more abandoned than the One who was so at home with God. In his death Jesus experienced being abandoned by the very God whose nearness he had proclaimed in his life's ministry. That is why Christians have always taken courage from the fact that Jesus was the most tormented and abandoned of all those who have God and life, and who yet find hell and death. But precisely in his triumphant descent into hell, faith recognises that God brought back from the dead, and from hell, this most abandoned of all men. Because of him, therefore, a kingdom has appeared for all in the midst of hell, a kingdom of peace and joy and laughter. Hell is broken and mastered in him. Martin Luther, as usual, knows how best to put it. In one of his sermons he says: 'he went in and captured the colours like a conquering hero, flinging open the doors and rummaging around among the devils so that one fell out through the window and another through a hole in the wall'. Here, with that humour which is in itself an attitude of having overcome the powers of darkness, we enjoy the drama as that One takes control and dispels the deepest darkness.

The story is told of the eight year old who announced: 'I do not believe that there is a hell, and Mum and Dad do not believe it either'. Asked then, if there is no hell, where shall the bad people go, the youngster replied: 'The bad people go to paradise, too, but with sad hearts'. What may have sounded complicated can really be put that simply; the sad heart that has seen God, and can no longer of itself come to him – that, and only that, is hell. But such is not the end. The gospel is always for all the gift of a 'new beginning', to live 'in the acceptable time', 'in the hour of promise', 'before the open door', with the invitation 'to hear Moses and the prophets', as the call to repentance and the promise of the powerlessness of hell, which the New Moses has put behind us for good and all. This is why 'he descended to the dead' is surely the best news of all. It is the assurance that the reign of the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord is all encompassing: not only is this a promise, but it is also a gift: the gift of a universal new beginning.

Is the hell in this answer enough  
'punishment' for 'bad people'?

# STUDY 5: JESUS CHRIST – RISEN AND RETURNING

*The third day he rose again from the dead*

*He ascended to heaven and sits at the right hand of God*

*From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead*

## The third day he rose again from the dead

We begin with the sharpest sentence that brooks no refutation: the confession of Jesus Christ ‘risen from the dead’ is the point, and the only point, where it is decided whether there is anything that can be called Christianity at all. Every other confession of the Creed is subordinate to this, each without it becoming a more or less antiquarian anachronism. Therefore everything literally hinges on how this confession is to be understood. It simply is not good enough, as frequently happens, to wrest a verse (15.17) out of context from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians to use as some sort of weapon assumed to finish the matter: *‘If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins’*. Why, we might ask, is the preceding verse never quoted: *‘If the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised?’* We shall be returning to this crucial observation shortly. Sufficient here is to acknowledge that so complex are the issues with regard to this confession that, in order to assist greater clarity, inverted commas and italics will now be employed to an irritating degree. The justification for this way of proceeding is simply the recognition that we are here in much contested territory, which means that, if we are to get to the heart of the matter, we must subject over familiar or shorthand language to some sort of critique.

We start with the demonstrable fact that the formulation ‘risen from the dead’ doesn’t fit into the modern world of things that can be calculated and manipulated. This means that, for many – Christians and non-Christians alike – such talk is baffling. Many, in good conscience but frankly in all ignorance of the issues involved, simply refuse to acknowledge this avowal – and perhaps together with that of the ‘Virgin Birth’ – having concluded here that, unarguably, ‘dead people don’t come back to life’. Therefore, Christianity, at its very core, is judged as being ‘unbelievable’, ‘the teaching of Jesus’ customarily being its substitute. But if a person says that she believes everything about Jesus, except his being ‘raised’, then with that stroke she has substituted a religious hero who met an untimely end for the Lord of the Church. This may be inspiring, but it is not Christianity. For to be a witness of Jesus Christ is to be a witness of his continuing presence, not his dead memory.

How then, is ‘Jesus Christ risen from the dead’ to be understood? We may usefully begin by insisting that ‘the resurrection’ is the credal *vindication* of the life and death of Jesus. This is to say that to have faith in Jesus, and to have faith in him as the risen one, are one and the same. It means that he who died as a consequence of his life was vindicated in both his life

What kinds of actions does Jesus continue after the resurrection? Check the resurrection stories.

and death. It is instructive to learn that all the post crucifixion narratives in the gospels re-enact the sorts of actions which Jesus did *before* his death, and *in* his death, but now are re-enacted achieving only now their proper recognition – something that did not occur at the time of his ministry.

Easter faith, then, is not something *additional* to Jesus, but now, for the first time, is *the setting forth of Jesus himself*. The New Testament insists on this foundation by continually speaking of the crucified as being the risen one, and the risen one as being the crucified. However ‘the third day’ of the Creed reminds us that the fact of the cross is not the resurrection, and the resurrection is not simply the meaning of the cross. How can one hold to this unity and yet express the difference?

It can be put in different ways. We can say, for example, that the meaning of Easter is what takes place in the movement from the *Jesus* who belongs to the world’s history, to the *Christ* of the Church’s faith; or that it expresses how he who, in his life and death was *a witness of faith* in God, became the *very basis of such faith* in God; or how *he who proclaimed* the nearness of the Kingdom of God present in the world, himself became *the content* of that proclamation. Or, again, we can say that if, in our progression through this second article of the Creed from the birth to the death of Jesus, we have been involved with *the revelation of the Father by Jesus*, then the meaning of Easter Day is that now we are involved with *the revelation of Jesus by the Father*. That is to say, truth has been accomplished in the world.

All these are ways of getting at how Easter faith arose, and therefore of how Christian faith arose. But if this explains *how* it arose, it does not explain *what question* his resurrection from the dead answers.

The first helpful place to attempt such an answer is to understand that there are three significant metaphors central to the Old Testament, each of which becomes the raw material for setting out what it is that differentiates Christian faith from its parent Jewish faith. ‘Eschatological’ is the technical term for what we mean in more common language to be ‘filled’, ‘purposive’, time. Each of these three metaphors is employed in the New Testament to identify Jesus as just such an eschatological figure, that is, as the One who brings a future quality of time into the present time. The three metaphors are these: *the Day of the Lord*, (Daniel 7, *passim*), which on the lips of Jesus becomes the Kingdom of God; *Spirit* (Joel 2.28), which for the Church becomes Holy Spirit; and a quite late introduction to Jewish thought from the dualism of Persian religion, the conception of *Resurrection* (Daniel 12.2ff). This last is our present concern. We need to know that ‘resurrection’ language was central to at least part of the Jewish tradition long before it was applied to Jesus. More specifically, two hundred years later this pre-existing metaphor of a double predestination, ‘some to everlasting life and some to everlasting contempt’, becomes the vehicle for expressing the *present* experience of the Church *this side*, that is, ‘our’ side, of the death of Jesus. This is the Good News (Gospel) *par excellence*. Miraculously, precisely here, the dreaded *double* predestination formerly expected at an unknown future and awaiting every individual has been *unified* in the middle of history: namely, the *damned* One (‘crucified dead and buried’), has reached the goal of *everlasting life*, as we have it in the formula: ‘on the third day he rose from the dead’. This is the crucial significance of the foundational claim: ‘If the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised’. Without verse 16, the frequent citation of verse 17 is nothing but an assertion!

Why the third day? Because the earliest Christians saw its unifying potential. ‘The third day’ appears eleven times in the Old Testament. We cite only one reference here in Hosea 6.2, where it functions as a call to repentance to Israel. In this respect, the phrase ‘the third day’

is somewhat analogous to what we saw with the reference to 'Pontius Pilate'. As Pilate at first sight appears to be an apparent marginal gloss to 'suffered', so 'the third day' is to 'the risen One'.

Here is the full text of Hosea 6.1-2:

'Come let us return to the Lord; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; *on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him*'.

The first Jewish followers of Jesus would have known this text, and found it compelling as a vehicle for expressing their present experience of the fate of Jesus, but equally, for the unexpected realisation of his continued presence after his death. Indeed, the preferred language of the apostle Paul to express this experience is the phrase, 'he appeared'. It is instructive to read the whole fifteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, but especially his account of how, as the first one not to have known Jesus in the flesh, that: 'last of all, as to one untimely born, *he appeared* also to me' (v. 8). Paul is here substantiating the foundational assumption that 'if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised.' (v. 16). The point is that the primary metaphor Paul employs is that of 'appearance'. It is significant to note that the pre-existing concept of 'resurrection', adverted to in verse 16, was not entertained by the Sadducees (Matthew 22.23), for example, since they were the conservatives in doctrinal belief; it was the Pharisees, laymen not priests, who were the radicals, by espousing the quite recent introduction of resurrection language!

And Paul was a Pharisee. The fact is that 'resurrection' is really shorthand for accounting for the experience of 'appearance'. *It is appearance that is primary language, resurrection is secondary*. What is significant about 'appearance' is that it is an all-embracing concept. It means that what is now revealed is the meaning of Jesus' life *from birth to death*, now understood for the very first time.

What difference does this make (that resurrection language is secondary to the more basic notion of the 'appearance' or availability of Jesus after the crucifixion?)

In the Gospel, we are being invited into a sphere where it makes perfect sense to continue to use the language of 'appearance', one, twenty, two hundred, two thousand years later. He appears then, as now, as 'the body of Christ', that is, in the poor and the marginalised both actually and metaphorically, as 'Church': in word, sacrament and pastoral care.

So, to some concluding observations. Briefly stated, we can say that Easter faith is the answer to the question that is the fundamental human question called, technically, the question of theodicy – '*when will the righteousness (the victory) of God triumph over this world of evil and pain?*' Christian faith confesses that that victory is won in the faithfulness of Jesus, achieved through submission to the pain of the cross, and disclosed in 'the resurrection'. Jesus, 'risen from the dead', therefore, is recognised in the Church as the vindication of God's deity, and the victory of his cause in the world – a vindication which at present is hidden from every eye except the eye of faith, but which will be disclosed openly in a future that still awaits the world. This means that in and through Jesus we see and participate in a dawning, an anticipation, a hidden representation, of a future never possessed before. As such, Easter faith in the risen One is only a hint in history of what lies ahead for the whole creation in the new future which is already disclosed in the sufferings of the present. It is for this reason that the New Testament is unable to portray the act of the raising of Jesus from the dead as an historically observable event verifiable by our usual empirical tests. This is the significance of the barred entry to the tomb. To safeguard the proper appropriation of Easter faith, the New Testament speaks, modestly as usual, by establishing this truth in two ways – *positively* by speaking of the 'conversion' of unbelieving disciples through an encounter with the one that they had known the far side of his death, and *negatively* by

What would be the error in mistaking the resurrection as an 'event in time'?

safe-guarding this experience in the accounts of the empty tomb. No one in the New Testament witnesses the actual 'resurrection', in order that we do not mistake an event in time for the reality itself. The point is that the reality of the resurrection of Jesus is the opportunity to live proleptically – that is, 'anticipatorily' – in the new 'future' of God, and no longer in our present history dominated as it is by death in all its myriad forms.

Are you convinced that this is the case?

So what might initially have started off as a telling criticism of Christian faith namely, that at its heart lies something completely without analogy – the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead – now proves to be the only possible way for Christian faith to be true, not to speak of being utterly relevant. For within space and time occurs something that is otherwise 'impossible' in space and time, and that is experiencing *his appearance*, subsequent to his death but essentially prematurely, as the end of time occurring in the ever oncoming present. This is what we witness as his 'risen vindication of life from death on the third day'.

Is this good news for you?

If Christian faith merely told us what in principle we could already know from human experience of the world of what is possible and impossible – in this case, the incontrovertible conclusion that 'everything finishes with death' – then it would at bottom be 'useless', superfluous and trivial. That it dares to speak of impossibilities, of life from death, makes it qualify at the very least as 'good news', that the new is already present in the old, and that it is possible to live by it, now, today.

## He ascended to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father

Strictly speaking, this confession belongs as a unit with the previous confession 'risen from the dead'. Together they have formed the centre of the Church's preaching from the beginning as the dramatic movement from the depths of hell to the heights of the Father's almighty hand.

Indeed, at the very beginning, the resurrection of Jesus was originally thought of as itself an exaltation to God from the grave, so that the appearances of the risen Jesus were experienced as happenings 'sent from heaven'. In this sense, the ascension is best understood as being one of the resurrection appearances.

Why do you imagine the different scriptural authors have expressed the same convictions differently?

However, the distinction in time as we have it in the Creed between resurrection and ascension only seems to have come into being fairly late in the early Christian tradition, particularly in the thought of Luke (Acts) towards the end of the first century. For Paul, on the other hand, just as for Matthew and John and the New Testament as a whole, Jesus from the very moment of his post crucifixion appearance 'ascended into heaven', in effect constituting his 'enthronement', his establishment in power as the Son of God (Romans 8.34-35).

This 'elevation to the heavens', although in the Book of Acts a visible event, is not theologically to be thought of as if Jesus is the first cosmonaut. It points, rather, to the hidden, may we say, 'benediction' of God upon the completed work Jesus, of which truth those who witnessed his appearances are thereby convinced. Since he 'comes from heaven', that is, as having the imprimatur of the Father, it is understandable that, as a finale to the appearances, Jesus 'returned to heaven' as the Father's vindication.

Luke, and only he, has the risen Jesus ascend as the end of his earthly appearances. We can appreciate this specific purpose if we grasp what is the real intention of this two volume work, we know as Luke-Acts, the first volume The Book of the Lord, the second volume The Book of the Holy Spirit. For Luke 'the end' is already present in the establishment, and witness, of the Church: 'in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and away to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1.8). That is why the book of Acts finishes in Rome, for Rome is literally the end of the earth, being 'so far' theologically from Jerusalem. Therefore, Luke's was a tremendous and novel undertaking. Once we grasp this we can see why only he mentions the 40 days during which Jesus showed himself 'as living to his apostles and spoke to them of the Kingdom of God' (Acts 1.3). The '40 days' is not an exact measurement of time, but in accord with Scripture, an approximate and symbolic designation for a long interval. So, for example, Israel was 40 years in the wilderness, the flood lasted 40 days, Saul, David and Solomon reigned for 40 years, Jesus was in the desert for 40 days. By way of 'forty days', Luke wants to show how decisive is the time of the appearances for the founding of the Church.

Therefore, this was the time during which the disciples became convinced of the reality of Jesus' continuing presence in the commission to proclaim how it is that a new quality of time has burst upon the world, 'the reign of God'. Hence the significance of the departing words of the risen Lord (Acts 1.6-9), as his answer to his disciples' hope for a swift return. First must come a time of unknown length, the time of the Church, during which Jesus stays 'at the right hand of the Father', leaving the Church its present task, empowered as it is by the power of the Spirit.

This is why Luke combines the final resurrection appearance in one event – the departure, commission, and the ascension – the observable elements of which (cloud, angels, upturned faces), all already understood as theologically dramatic symbols, in order to reinforce his interpretation. Because he is writing the Book of the Church, for Luke the ascension therefore quite literally means 'back to work'. 'Why do you stand looking up?' (Acts 1.10). The real task, then and now, is to grasp that *now* is the time for the Church to bear witness to the completed obedience of the Son of the Father in the power of the Spirit.

How does Jesus' being at God's right hand lead to the commandment, 'Back to work'?

The possibility of this happening however, is the essential meaning of the ascension of Jesus:

*First*, that the Father has accepted the work of Jesus, and received him to himself.

*Second*, that as the crucified one, Christ has carried our broken humanity to the very presence of the Father.

Therefore, the Creed goes on to say: 'He is seated at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty'.

The symbolism here is that of an eastern Court in which the Grand Vizier or Prime Minister sits on the right hand of the King. This place of honour is now occupied by Jesus. He is the mediator between the King and his subjects. This means:

*First*, that the King's character is known by the kind of adviser he appoints – hence God is known in the character of Jesus.

*Second*, that the adviser represents the people and their needs before the King.

Such an image is important in connection with the question of judgement which we will consider next.

Meanwhile, the phrase ‘sits at the right hand of God the Father’, is an allusion to the saying in Psalm 110.1: ‘The Lord says to my Lord, *sit at my right hand* till I make your enemies your footstool’. This saying was originally understood as a word of Yahweh addressed to the Davidic kingship enthroned in Jerusalem. In it Yahweh promises the King dominion over the world. He is the one who himself will lay the King’s enemies at his feet. The early Church transferred this saying to Jesus, for as soon as Jesus was termed ‘the Lord of the Church’ it was the obvious thing to do. It meant that the world rule of Jesus, which is yet to be shown to be an already accomplished reality in time, is nevertheless already understood as being a reality ‘in heaven’, that is before the presence of the Father.

‘Seated at the right hand of God’, then, like the ascension, is not a statement about space where the risen Jesus is at the moment, nor how he got there. Both these confessions, on the contrary, are convictions that *Jesus is one with the Father*; that he participates fully in the power and presence of God. The significance of this identification will become apparent in the next clause of the Creed, where it is of first importance to understand that it is Jesus, the Son of the Father, and not some impersonal deity, who is given the power of final judgement.

## And he shall come to judge the living and the dead

If the Apostles’ Creed is an adequate summary of Christian faith, then this article concerning the last judgment must be one of the least satisfying, or even the most anxiety producing of all the statements in the Creed. For it does not say: ‘to judge the godless’, but ‘all’, Christian and non-Christian, living and dead, alike. So one could anticipate the response: ‘what good is faith if I have to go on trial just like everyone else, and if I do not know what the judgment on me is going to be?’

What is your understanding of the last judgement? On what basis do you expect to be judged?

When in addition to this, one remembers the many medieval, and later, paintings of judgment, heaven and hell – or Michelangelo’s ‘Last Judgment’, under which dozens of popes have been elected, which shows the return of Christ holding out his fist! – it is no wonder it all becomes rather threatening and anxiety provoking.

At any rate, it should at least be a relief that this historical legacy is essentially a pagan and not a Christian idea, because he who is to be our *judge* is already, by virtue of what we said about ascension, shown to be our *advocate*. There is only one who might be against us – Jesus Christ. And it is he, precisely, who is for us!

Because this whole question of judgement has become so confused and unchristian, let us spend a few minutes tracing how it developed. We start first with how it was that the expectation of the ‘second coming’ of Christ arose, noting that this is not how the Creed expresses the matter. We read only that ‘he shall come....’. The Greek word for coming in the New Testament is *parousia*, literally ‘being alongside’. That is the foundational understanding for the presence of God in the Bible as a whole. He who *has* come in the past *continues* to come in the present as Holy Spirit, and *will* come to vindicate everything that has taken place in history. The so-called ‘second coming’ leaves every present empty, stranded as it is between what effectively must now be designated as a ‘first’ and ‘second’ coming. What is more, because the word ‘judgement’ conjures up for us understandings that lead us away from the Gospel, the word ‘vindicate’ conveys for us now a more accurate and positive grasp of what this confession is seeking to affirm.

In any case, it is important to recognise that the idea of a divine judge who will descend from heaven to judge all mankind at the end of the world arises in pre-Christian times.

Behind it lies the idea of a judgement of the dead, a notion which can be found in many religions, even apart from the idea of an end of the world. In Judaism, this belief was tied to the role of the Son of Man who was thought of as being the judge of the end time, one who descends from God in the clouds of heaven. This figure of Jewish expectation was one of the metaphors identified with Jesus by the early Church in its expectation of his coming again for judgement. This happened because, after Easter, the distinction between the earthly person, Jesus, and the future world judge coming from heaven, disappeared. Jesus had himself become a heavenly figure, just like the Son of Man of Jewish ideas. The Christian future hope was now directed to the coming again of the risen Lord to fulfil the role of God which he had proclaimed; the two figures essentially became identical.

In so doing, what has tended to happen is that the one has been too strong for the other. That is, the concept of 'the judge' overshadowed what was central to the person and message of Jesus. Instead of letting him be the content of what judgement was to consist of, the opposite has happened. Starting with an abstract, pagan view of the judge and judgement, Jesus has been squeezed into that framework, and in so doing all that his life and death accomplished has been destroyed. So we have a two-faced God and a two-faced Jesus – One who in his life embodies, speaks, and acts out the love of God, yet who at the same time, or at the end, is likely to be one who acts in anger and wrath, and is to be feared. No wonder millions have come openly or secretly to fear and to hate such a capricious God and such a mercurial Jesus at his right hand. One never knows who is to be received or rejected. So arose the whole notion and ritual of appeasing an unpredictable, and probably angry, God.

That is why true understanding depends here on staking everything as the Creed does on the conviction that he who came, and who continues to come in the power of the life-giving Spirit, is the same one who *will* come. In other words, everything depends on giving up a notion of what the judgement of God is about, and then attempting to fit Jesus into that mould, in favour of starting with Jesus and not forsaking him until we have let him be the content of what it is that the word judgement is to mean.

This means starting with the conviction that the figure of Jesus – his teaching, his suffering, and the overcoming of death through him – is what humanity, *our* humanity is about. He provides the standard to which we and all others arrive at in what is truly human. No one escapes this standard whether one is confessedly Christian or not, or whether one's earthly time is completed or not. This means that the expectation of Christ's so-called, but unhelpful, 'second coming' to judgement is something that is directed to the future, because our present life is marked by the prosperity of the godless, and by conditions and events and behaviour which are a mockery of our humanity. But precisely because the future judge of the world is none other than the newly accomplished humanity of Jesus, his judgment is *already* known. Therefore anyone who rejects Jesus now, and his message of the reality of the new reign of God, is effectively being judged by Jesus' own word: 'The word that I *have spoken* will be his judge on the last day' (John 5.24). Yet, this judgement is already being exercised in the present, even though it will only become apparent with the full dawn of the Kingdom of God, as 'the judgement of the living and the dead', that is, as the completed vindication of all history being the very renewal of all creation.

In the light of this end, no assurance can be given in advance by some bland human judgement that 'everything will turn out for the best'. This is why the hard word of Scripture remains: many may well participate in the new life of the reign of God who do not in our human judgement appear to belong to it, whereas others who name the name of Christ may well find themselves separated from Jesus when they have to face the truth about themselves

in the light of our human destiny revealed in him (Matthew 25.31-46). This grave warning is nothing other than a warning about relying on 'cheap grace'. But it does not cancel the good news. As warning, it remains a reason for Christian confidence that the future judge is none other than Jesus on whom Christian faith *already* depends. For anyone who receives him, is 'conformed' to him, is already made truthful, now and for all eternity. This is the assurance of the Gospel of John: 'The one who hears my word and believes him who sent me *has* eternal life; that one does not come into judgement, but *has passed* from death to life' (John 5.25). That is to say, the relationship between God and ourselves, now and in the future, is governed by what is *already* known.

I recall a confronting story told of one of the founders, together with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, of the Confessing Church in Germany after the Second World War. Martin Niemöller, was a U-Boat Commander in the First World War, receiving the iron cross for bravery, and a public hero in Germany. Speaking out against Hitler, he was imprisoned in Dachau concentration camp. On his release in May, 1945, he went to newly liberated Holland to preach at a huge gathering. His sermon began: 'I have dreamt a dream. It was judgement day. Amongst those called to the seat of judgement was one named Adolf Hitler. It took six months, night and day, to read the list of the names of his victims. When the reading was finished, the voice from the throne said: What have you got to say for yourself? Hitler replied: My only defence is, no-one preached the Gospel to me. Stunned silence followed.

Then the voice from the throne said: Enter into the joy of your Lord'. The congregation, who had risen as one in greeting at Niemöller's entrance, at this broke down into abject wailing.

Why the wailing? What would it mean if Niemöller spoke the truth?

Much could be made of this literally shocking event, not least that only a German who had truly suffered as had the Dutch people could conceivably say such a thing. But it was, and is, as a Christian pastor that the awe-ful truth of the Gospel was spoken. We cannot ultimately rest in our all too human judgement of the status of those judged by us to be 'the good' and 'the evil'.

So we end by saying again: do not start with an image of judgement as the world judges, and try to put Jesus and God onto that scale of retribution. Rather, start with him and let him indicate what judgement consists of. Then we will know that God's judgement in Jesus Christ is the freedom to stand for the truth *now* in an otherwise unpredictable situation. It is the freedom to serve our fellow human beings without profit *now*; it is the freedom from the illusion of hiding the truth about myself from myself and others *now*; it is the freedom to meet death *now* in the knowledge, not so much of what awaits us, as of the knowledge of *who* awaits us.

What does Jesus indicate judgement to consist of?

'*And he will come to judge the living and the dead*' means simply this; that the riddle of the meaning of history has already been disclosed; that the end, the finality, the judgement is already known, no matter how long there is yet to be a future history for the world, even to an 'eternity'.

Properly to understand judgement, then, is not to be anxious about an unknown, but to live securely, without anxiety, confident of the known, or as the New Testament reminds us: 'I *know* whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him, until that day' (2 Timothy 1.12).

Is this good news for you?

# STUDY 6: THE HOLY SPIRIT – THE CHURCH OF SAINTS

*I believe in the Holy Spirit*

*The holy catholic church*

*The communion of saints*

## I believe in the Holy Spirit

The first edition of these studies published in 1976 began with these words:

‘Spirit talk is not our native language these days. If it is difficult in ‘the secular city’ for many to respond appreciatively to talk of God the Father, all the more difficult is it to be moved by speaking of God ‘the Holy Spirit’, much less the Holy ‘Ghost’.

Forty years later, ‘spirit’ is everywhere, usually in the garb of an ever-renewed enchanting quest for ‘spirituality’, now predictably, and virtually universally, aimed at eclipsing irrational, anachronistic, and untrustworthy ‘religion’.

Nevertheless, despite the rapid assault of ‘spirituality’ on the naked secularity of contemporary Western society, many still feel at a loss when confronted by a word like ‘spirit’. Perhaps this is due to its inevitable imprecise and inchoate character. ‘Spirituality’ is still too ephemeral to unseat foundational secularity. ‘Reality’ for a consumer society continues to mean the things around us, what is seen, what can be bought, what can be subdivided, weighed or analysed, what can be appreciated aesthetically or destroyed ecologically. Reality is tangible, it is ‘there for us’. Consequently it is hard to appreciate that ‘in the beginning’, reality was held to be different. Reality was indeed ‘spirit’. Nature was alive, and its powers distinguished as personal because human beings directly experienced them. Humankind lived in the realm of a throbbing personal nature, the kingdom of the holy gods, where it was not possible to distinguish between the ‘outer’ (nature) and the ‘inner’ (spirit). So in the storm, one met the god storm as spirit to be worshipped and served. From this beginning, religion by way of superstition, and science by way of magic, arose. Religion came to be identified with the world of spirit, and hence the ‘supernatural’; science had to do with the material world, and thus the ‘natural’. This fateful division of ‘reality’ lies at the heart of the crisis of Christian faith in the modern world; on the one hand it explains secularism, with its incomprehension of spirit language; on the other hand, and as a reaction against ‘scientism’, spirituality illustrates the renewal of interest in the supernatural in our own day with ghostly, and sometimes ghastrly, phenomena.

Does this division into spirit/nature, religious/secular seem natural to you?

It was the genius of biblical faith that it refused, once and for all, to fall for this fateful distinction in what is real. Here 'spirit' and 'matter' are not two separate things; they belong together, yet not in the same sense as for primitive culture. Two affirmations here become fundamental. First, the recognition that God is 'the Creator of all things' allows the world to be what it is, 'mere' world from which all 'ghosts', good and bad, are expelled. Second, the recognition that human beings are made in the image of the Creator Spirit as a special project in creation drives us again and again to search for ground that can bear the weight of our being, as our response to the encompassing mystery of life. The 'spiritual' question in this new world came to be understood as the question of the 'whence' and the 'whither' of human life. The answer to these questions proposed by Christian faith is that God, who is Spirit, is present to the creation shaping meanings which are large enough to support the conviction that life is fundamentally a personal and, therefore, a communal, reality.

That is why it is possible to say that from the beginning of Christianity there has been a protest at its very heart against this fateful fracturing of reality so grotesquely evidenced in our day – a protest which time and time again has been muffled, even silenced – namely, the desire to regard 'spirit' as something new or peculiar beside or beyond 'worldly' truth and life. What is that 'worldly' truth and that 'worldly' life? As we have heard, none other than Jesus Christ risen from the dead. The Spirit, then, is not something new beside, beyond, or above what has been given in Jesus Christ. Rather, the Spirit is that gift *itself*, actual and living between us, enabling us to participate in the new age of the reign of God already present in the midst of the old, yet only as the 'hint' of what awaits the whole creation.

What is the effect of such a split in reality, for individuals and for society?

Hence, the Church called the Spirit 'holy'. At its simplest, the Holy Spirit is the risen Lord's gift to us. That way of putting it suggests three essential characteristics of this confession of the Creed:

Before reading on, what do you understand 'holy' to mean?

*First* of all, the Holy Spirit is the *risen Lord's* gift to us. The Holy Spirit is not a 'third God' but the hidden presence of God through the way of 'the proper Man'. In our world, we hear in the New Testament that it is the risen Lord who breathes the Spirit on those who became his disciples. Moreover, Jesus' whole life had been lived in that same Spirit, including, as we have seen, his birth. On this foundation, the Gospels portray the Spirit as coming upon him in his baptism, as leading him into the desert where by the Spirit's power, he is victorious over the 'world, the flesh, and the devil'. As such, the scene is set for his entire ministry of victory over the demons, destruction and death. In this way the final kingly rule of God is foreshadowed in the midst of life, and so the risen Jesus sets in motion the realization of the promises which the prophets had made concerning the pouring out of the Spirit 'on all flesh'. In this way, the Spirit is present in the world as the power of making disciples of all the nations.

*Second*, the Holy Spirit is the risen Lord's *gift* to us. If the Holy Spirit is given to us as freedom for him, and therefore freedom for life, it follows that while the gift is actual and living in us, it is never our permanent, secured possession, either corporately or individually. This is why in the language of the New Testament our life is understood as being an arena where a battle is continually being waged between 'the Spirit' and 'the flesh'. Spirit and flesh are not two parts of us, but they are two powers which continually claim the *whole* of us. Even the most splendid things in us, including our Christianity, without the Holy Spirit are simply 'flesh'. But on the other hand, even the most insignificant and unpretentious things in human life are destined to be caught up in the Spirit and transformed for the service of God by virtue of his gift to us. The true

Is a gift ever fully possessed? Is the Spirit the quintessential gift, defining other gift-giving?

contrast is not that between Spirit and Body, but between Spirit and 'Flesh', flesh being understood as the whole human being turned away from God and the neighbour.

*Third*, the Holy Spirit is the risen Lord's gift *to us*. The Spirit is not a two way transaction between God and the individual self – it is a shared life, life together, life as the Church. It is no exaggeration to say that if we really believe in the Holy Spirit we should be beginning to feel more conscious of others than of ourselves. Nor would we so easily be able to think of the church simply as the totality of individual Christians who, one by one, decide (or decide not!) to come together to worship God. The greater, we tend to say, is the sum of the parts. But it is otherwise. The Church as the communion of the Holy Spirit is a whole of which, only subsequently, do we know ourselves as part. The whole calls into being the particulars. So the Holy Spirit's gift is the calling into being of a wholly new reality – 'the' new community out of all our old separated communities of race, class, sex and age. That is what the word Church means, to which the Creed immediately moves – the new community of those who 'belong to the Lord' and therefore to one another, however distant, unattractive and different that 'other' may be. In our openness to one another in Christ's name, the Spirit possesses us. So we hear 'where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in their midst' (Matthew 18.20). This is not a text for Sunday, though it is true for Sunday too; it is the text for Monday to Saturday as the gospel of reconciliation is lived out in the midst of our broken world, witnessing to the present reality of the creative activity of God in human life, which is the church's confession of faith – 'I believe in the Holy Spirit'.

What does it mean to say that the church is greater than the sum of its parts?

## The holy catholic church

With these words of the Creed we come to something new. The third article commencing 'I believe in the Holy Spirit' says nothing more about the Spirit as such (compare the clauses regarding the Father and the Son), but immediately moves to the Church, the forgiveness of sins, and the Christian hope. But we must not move too fast. For each of the articles of the Creed acknowledge that the triune God requires 'space' in the world. So it is that after confessing who God the Father is in the first article we are not left 'in cloud cuckoo land', but are immediately confronted by the 'space' where he promises to be: *'maker of heaven and earth'*. The second article likewise conforms to the need for 'space': I believe in Jesus Christ: *'born...suffered...crucified...died'*. So here too in the confession of the Holy Spirit, 'space' is the way the Spirit is to be located: *'the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints'*. These are the present realities of Christian experience and the Christian life making possible the consciousness of a new forgiven life in company with the people of God – a life whose newness was such that it could be spoken of as 'eternal', as a 'risen body'. Remember that the Apostles' Creed was the early baptismal creed of the Church, and so the 'cash value', we would say, of faith in the Holy Spirit is to participate in the Spirit's gifts as a new trans-personal reality.

What do you make of the notion that God must be 'located'?

In what way do the church and the communion of saints 'make possible the consciousness' of a forgiven life?

In other words, the Church is not something in addition to faith in God, Father, Son and Spirit – it is not something accidental or optional or subordinate to belief in God. Rather, faith that the Church exists is the test of the reality of all that has gone before in the Creed. Without the Church, belief in God, even the 'Christian' God of Father, Son and Spirit, could lead one off on one's own to some place of our own devising; 'the Church' keeps our feet firmly in the world of which we have heard God is the Creator and for which in Jesus Christ he has declared his love.

There are at least two things to ponder on the way in which the Creed speaks of the Church. First, the Church is as much an object of faith as is God himself as Father, Son and Spirit. That should make us think. So often we act as if God is distant, remote, hidden, and elusive, whereas the Church is well and truly here, to be seen and touched, grasped and consumed, loved or despised – here, in its buildings, its liturgies, its music, its priesthood and ministry. It is not for nothing that one wit has told us, without approval, what is otherwise inescapably true: that Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom of God and in its place came the Church. That is so often only too real – we would gladly turn our backs on its triviality, its unfriendliness perhaps, its all too obvious worldliness, its introversion, its dull services, dreary or empty hymns, its boring sermons, not to speak of the awful revelations of recent decades of apparently widespread sexual abuse. That is why it is really good news to hear that in the midst of all its visibility where perhaps it is not helpful, one never truly *sees* the Church, one can only 'believe' it. This means that the real Church is always hidden in these externals which we time and again are tempted to think are all that there is.

In what way might 'believing' the Church change your experience of it?

We ought not to be surprised at this hidden nature of the Church which cannot be seen but can only be believed. For the same is true of the Church's Lord. Everyone saw Jesus, he was visible, all too visible, as he lived in the community of his fellows. But only a few really 'saw' him, that is, really grasped what was hidden in the everyday 'there-ness' of his presence; and as the Gospels tell us, at the end, no one was prepared to back even that judgement. In other words at the point of his greatest visibility hanging on the Cross, in his *meaning* he was most profoundly hidden from the eyes of those who saw him. So it is with his Church – always

called to be visible, its reality is always a hidden thing. In this sense the Church is never seen, but can only be confessed in faith. Let us beware, then, lest we put our faith in the wrong thing, so that when we are uncertain, or even heartily sick of the Church, we do not do as the majority of our contemporaries do and claim that we have 'no need of it', or we have 'grown beyond it'. For the Church is never exhausted by its externals – it can only be confessed in faith, not seen by the naked eye. Would that as a Church, we knew what that meant!

What would you say  
'that meant'?

And the second thing we learn from the way the Creed speaks of the Church is that while we believe *in* God the Father, while we believe *in* Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord, while we believe *in* the Holy Spirit, we do *not* believe *in* the Church; *we believe the Church* (but compare the equivalent confession in the Nicene Creed). We believe the existence of the Church, which means that the Christian congregation arises and exists not because we want to have a Church in the same way that we want to have schools and theatres and hospitals and sporting clubs and so on, which we may say we believe *in*. No, the Church comes into existence solely at the call and gift of God – those who are called together by the work of the Holy Spirit assemble at the summons of their king. John Calvin liked to apply to the Church a military image, that of the company of the faithful. A company of soldiers is formed on the basis of a command and not because of a free agreement. To believe the existence of the Church, then, means to believe each particular congregation to be just such a congregation of Christ. As we have said there is no logical demonstration that could prove that this is in fact the case – indeed more often we give the impression of serving ourselves rather than the Lord, and so help to justify the view that the Church is only too obviously a very fallible and human organisation. In the face of this, to believe the Church is to believe that here at this place, in this visible assembly, the work of the Holy Spirit takes place, and the one and only 'miracle' occurs – the fashioning of the Church out of that collection of odds and sods which then as now we represent, formed into an *ecclesia*, a congregation, a 'coming together', arising out of the summons to the national assembly which meets at the call of the messenger, or at the sound of the herald's trumpet.

Finally, of this Church, the Creed says two things – first, that it is holy, and second, that it is catholic.

- (i) *Holy*: fortunately for us, the word holy does *not* mean morally without blemish; it means 'set aside', but not by virtue of something we achieve in the sense of making us self-conscious. Rather, the holiness of the Church derives from its bond with the triune God and his cause in the world. God is holy in the sense of his 'otherness' from the world, so that he is free actively and really to love the world. Such love is holy love in that it draws people out of the ordinary perceptions of the world into a real communion with himself. This means that the Church is holy, not as a description of the holiness of the Church's members, but rather as the community that seeks to live out the holiness of Jesus Christ, who sanctifies the unrighteous, creating a true communion of saints. As such, the Church is the community of 'the last days', reflecting in its present life the coming divine glory destined to rule the earth. This means that what God is *for* the future of the world, so in every present time the people of God are called to be *in* the world, bound no longer to the service of the world *in its own terms* but to the service of God. The Church appropriates the holiness of God when it loses itself in God's service in the world, and as such is owned as holy by him,

How would you characterize the holiness of Jesus, and how is this different from holiness as moral perfection?

- (ii) *Catholic*: the Church is ‘catholic’ or universal. This universality is to be understood primarily not so much as filling a space, but rather as constituting a community reflecting the limitless lordship of Christ by testifying to his all-embracing rule. This means that the Church is limited by no barrier, whether of state, or of race, or of culture. The meaning of its catholicity is quite near to that of its holiness. The Church being holy, being different from any other human community, is therefore catholic, universal. Because the Church belongs to no-one but God, the Church therefore belongs to everyone. This means that the Church is called to be open to the needs and destiny of all in all the different facets of life. Embracing the whole world, catholicity opposes enemies of peace and justice in the world – nationalism, racialism, class boundaries, sexism.

Really to believe ‘the holy Catholic Church’ thus means the very opposite of what it is usually taken to be. For the Church is not about itself, its worship, its buildings, its finances. The Church is about the present reign of the triune God, about reconciliation, about the best and the worst in life. Rightly understood, then, if one cannot have the Church without God, no more can one aim at knowing God without ‘the Church’.

Have you been persuaded that this is the case? If not, why not?

## The communion of saints

These words follow the confession of faith concerning ‘the Holy Catholic Church’, because a fuller description of the Church was felt to be needed even in the early Church.

The original meaning of ‘the communion of saints’ was twofold; first, it expressed identification with the holy martyrs who had gone before in the life of the Church, and second, it expressed participation in what was central to the worshiping life of the ancient Church – the sacraments, and in particular, the Eucharist. The Church, then, was understood as the event in which one participates in the divine mysteries which mediate salvation, and in which one has communion with those who had gone before. This understanding was extended at the time of the Reformation to refer primarily to the communion of Christians in the sense that the apostle Paul describes all Christians, namely as those ‘called to be saints’. Therefore, the Church came to be understood as a living fellowship stretching across the ages, uniting the living and the departed.

There is today, of course, a problem with the word ‘saint’. For many people, ‘saint’ conjures up something stiff and unnatural, like a figure in a stained glass window. It has been said that Protestants tend to think of the saints as ‘dead Roman Catholics’! But ‘saints’ here, as in the New Testament, does not refer to extraordinary moral goodness, but rather to the fact that Christians are called into God’s people, a community chosen to be his witnesses in history, a community in which God dwells, and in whose life the tremendous energies of his spirit are at work. A saint, then, despite popular usage, is not one who is better than others; that would be Pharisaism. A saint is a beggar who knows where the party is – where in company with other guests, the Lord is host at the banquet spread for all. In a word, the communion of saints is about fellowship – with God and with the brother or sister beggar.

But the word fellowship has been so sentimentalized and trivialized that one fumbles to find something better today – belonging, comradeship? Nearly, but perhaps not quite. At any rate, the communion of saints involves real friendship, learning to live with the joys and sorrows of a real company of people, willing to be challenged, to accept possible rebuke, to be disciplined by others, and perhaps, what is harder, to speak the truth in love to another, and to receive it for oneself. To learn loyalty to a real community is not easy. It brings our Christian profession down to earth.

How would you characterize the nature of this community?

It is for this reason that the Church appears in the same section of the Creed where the resurrection of the dead is central. That is to say, the Church *as such* does not live; another lives in her. Since this other lives in her and is among us, the church is not a monument to the past when this other walked the earth. She is allied to the future, as the community which looks forward to him who even now keeps on coming in the power of the Spirit, and who, therefore, will come to judge 'the living and the dead'. How different to the great of this world who live under an 'Exit' sign. This is how we observe the departure of those who were once great and celebrated historical figures; the Church's Lord, however, lives under the sign 'Coming Soon'.

Only from this perspective can we explain the most remarkable thing of all: the martyrs of this Church did not merely suffer stiffly, silently, while they were torn away from a life that they, too, loved. They broke into songs of praise, whether they were in the arenas of Nero, facing the guillotine, or hiding from the secret police. They were not suffering to honour the memory of a great Nazarene. They suffered, rather, because they were already ahead of the present in which their persecutors lived; they heard the steps of the Coming One approaching from the other side. That is why an Orthodox priest could call out to his executioners before his death: 'I salute you, dead men, I go to the living ones'. In other words, the community to whom the last hour belongs has no need to fear the next few minutes. That is much more than mere stoic power to bear hardships; it is the joy which is able to expand the narrow prison cell, or the less obvious prisons in which we, too, so often feel trapped, into a stage where we experience the fulfilment to come.

What difference would such an outlook make for you, here and now?

Thus we are to believe the communion of saints. A local congregation may be poor and somewhat sterile, but whoever despises it, or lets other things take priority over it, also loses the Lord. It is but an excuse to say 'you do not attract me', 'your members do not appeal to me', 'what you say offends me so I will stay away'.

We need to remember that behind all that we do and are is the Church – behind each word of Scripture and liturgy, each hymn, each stone, there are faces and voices reminding us of what we owe to others, and that we ourselves have to earn our inheritance, and possess it, and then spend and be spent in giving it away to others.

In his tone poem 'The Moldau', the composer Smetana speaks of how the river begins as a tiny trickle through the grass, only to flow on and on, always broader and deeper, until at last it roars and thunders its triumphant way into the city of Prague. So it is with the life of the Church. Is it then so silly for Christians to say: 'We are a communion of saints – will you be part of this holy fellowship?' Might it not in the end be a very important question – almost the most important question of all?

Is this the most important question of all?

# STUDY 7: THE HOLY SPIRIT – RECONCILIATION AND ETERNITY

*Forgiveness of sins*

*The resurrection of the body*

*And the life everlasting*

## Forgiveness of sins

Today it is hardly an issue any more that sin and the forgiveness of sin are a matter of life and death. In modern times, a Christianity which takes its bearings from this point has increasingly come up against a lack of understanding and even scorn among people who do not feel themselves to be ‘sinners’, and who consequently believe that they do not need the message of the forgiveness of sins either.

What do you understand  
‘forgiveness of sin’ to mean?

The reason for this is that the forgiveness of sins has come to be associated with ‘Christian morality’ rather than with the fundamental issue of the meaning of our humanity. It is not surprising, therefore, that in a time when people by and large have ceased to accept traditional morality as a matter of course, that they should then treat so lightly the question of the forgiveness of sins. Because in society Christian faith has come to mean little more than a system of morality, together with some odd and superfluous beliefs, the message of the forgiveness of sins does not appear to touch decisively the really fundamental problems which people find in life. Instead, it often appears that Christian faith is heard to create artificial problems so that it can recommend their solution, and the whole thing is thought to be something that seems essentially hostile to life.

What can we do to change this state of affairs, so that faith in the forgiveness of sins is seen to be the utterly indispensable gift of Christian faith? For a start, it means putting the meaning of the word ‘sin’ into quite a different context from the conventional one. It means recognising that the basic problem of life lies much deeper than the moral question where we usually place it. This basic problem has to do with what it means to be human. It is here with this issue that Christian talk about sin and forgiveness of sin is concerned, not at the more secondary level of some abstract morality. So when Jesus told someone that their sins were forgiven, he was offering them the very source of life, free from the burden of a past which prevents a more promising future. In other words, the forgiveness of sins does three things:

it provides a new understanding of the *past*,

it offers a new beginning for the *future*,

and so yields a new *present*.

Now let us return to the place which this phrase has in the Creed. We discovered in the previous section that the communion of saints means first of all 'participation in the holy things'. The immediate consequence of this participation is the forgiveness of sins, for it is the first effect of the nearness of God mediated through Jesus Christ. It has to do with the present gift of the new beginning in him, whereas the final words of the Creed: 'the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting' describe the future, perfect participation of the new, towards which the forgiveness of sins points. So it is that participation in the holy, forgiveness of sins, and the future hope, all belong together.

Note that the forgiveness of sin is the consequence of the participation, and not the other way around. What difference does this make?

This of course is the meaning of Christian baptism, for which the Apostles' Creed was a preparation in the early Church. With the mention of the forgiveness of sins, and the hope of resurrection, the Creed turns at the end to the meaning and the force of the event of baptism to which the candidate is drawing near when she repeats the confession of faith. This is why, if we are to understand the last phrases of the Creed, indeed if we are to understand Christian faith at all, we have to sharpen our understanding of the words 'forgiveness of sins'. Let us try to do that again in the hope that we will see more here than perhaps we have done before.

'Forgiveness of sins' means liberation from everything which divides us from God and, therefore, from a fulfilled and free life. Because we are most deeply separated from God by the self-centredness of our lives, it is no final solution to our experiences of isolation simply to join together in communities; experience suggests that either the group replaces the individual, or else certain individuals exploit the common interest in order to force through their special concerns. That is why forgiveness of sins and hope for a new life in communion with God belong together. The point at issue for 'the forgiveness of sins' is not primarily our individual faults; it is rather the faulty foundation of our lives as a whole, which is expressed in this or that mistaken attitude or actual act. The problem with seeing sin simply as a moral thing is that it seizes on particular faults and judges them as being basically avoidable, because the nature of the human is supposedly good. But human sin is a much deeper thing – it means going astray at the most profound level, before anything is actually 'done'. It is failing to find the source of our life in our search for life. It is each of us striving for the fulfilment of life in the service of ourselves, separated from others and from God. But if God is the author of life and the 'living One', then separation from God inevitably leads to a failure to find the fulfilment of life which is our desire.

How would you characterize this 'faulty foundation'?

If we are, then, to know true freedom, it must be as something given to us and revealed from the outside, in contrast to all the ways in which we seek to express what we call our free will. Is this not indeed the major question thrown up by the spiritual situation, not only of the present day, but of the whole of modern times? Are we human beings already free in ourselves, or must we first be freed, even from ourselves, in order to participate in true freedom?

What could 'freed from ourselves' mean?

Our answer to that question determines ultimately whether at the fundamental level we are Christian or not. And it is as the definitive answer to that basic question that Christians want to say in the Creed that we believe 'in the forgiveness of sins'.

## The resurrection of the body

This phrase follows both that of ‘the communion of Saints’ or ‘participation in the holy’, and ‘the forgiveness of sins’, which we saw expresses the *present* re-orientating character of baptism. Those who are baptized into the death of Christ and, therefore, are bound to his cross, find themselves participating in a context that makes real a hope of partaking in the future in that new life which has already appeared in him, namely that of ‘the resurrection of the dead’. They do this because *already* the reality of the Christian life has conferred on them nothing less than a present experience of a ‘resurrection of the body’ in their life of discipleship. So the phrase ‘the resurrection of the body’, directs us first of all to the *present* as well as towards baptism’s *future* consummation.

Can we, today, hold such a hope? For many people, indeed perhaps for us all, this is another of the difficult confessions of the Creed to accept. It appears that for many professing Christians, their baptism has not, or does not, initiate any new project. How much more can it do so for the rapidly increasing majority for whom any sense of baptism is alien? When this failure is allied with a cultural pessimism of an expectation of a hereafter, replacing the optimism of earlier times as witnessed by the gravestones in any cemetery, the plausibility of ‘the resurrection of the dead’ is problematic, to say the least. We can only stutter when our speech reaches the boundaries of this world of space and time. Yet this was not always the case. Not so long ago, the textbooks were full of assured knowledge of the hereafter and what went on there. Detailed descriptions of the risen body and its activities were commonplace – how one would eat and drink, or how the soul repossessed a body long disintegrated. One bizarre assertion was the certainty that the bodies of all the risen would assume the age of thirty years, and be males! All this is surely as silly as the assured ‘knowledge’ most have accepted today that ‘when you’re dead, you’re dead’.

In order to help us speak of this last mystery, let us look again at what is meant by this article of the Creed. If we trace the history of the statement regarding the resurrection of the body back to its origins, we find that it had a difficult time of it, and caused much misunderstanding. Although it has scriptural origins, in its present form it is not found there. The usage goes back to Scripture inasmuch as ‘body’ there refers to the whole person, not merely to the physical body. So long as people realized that ‘resurrection of the body’ really meant the resurrection of the person in *every aspect* of existence, there was no problem. Real problems arose later when the Greek way of thinking became widespread, in particular the view that the life of the soul, having separated from the body, continued beyond death, as in the case of the chorus ‘John Brown’s body lies a mouldering in the grave but his soul goes marching on...’.

Christian belief was affected in two ways by this view:

- (i) belief in the ‘immortality of the soul’ meant that belief in the resurrection of the body was replaced by redemption *from* the body, and
- (ii) there began the widespread interest in understanding the resurrection of the body as having to do with the re-animation of human corpses, on which subject, of course, the Creed has nothing to say, as does the New Testament also. What remains as a cultural remnant is an assumption that the Church’s confession of ‘the resurrection of the body’ – even assuming that this is known at all – means that our bodies, this flesh and these bones, will literally be given back to us in the resurrection. But, in fact, this view is expressly denied

by Paul to be what he means when speaking of this hope, as for example: 'Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God' (1 Corinthians 15.50).

Misunderstandings are always with us. One version of the Apostles' Creed which was wanting to overcome the Greek problem of the separation of the body from the soul did so by speaking of the 'resurrection of *this* body', and could claim the same Paul as an ally when three verses later he says 'this perishable nature must put on the imperishable and this mortal nature must put on immortality' (1 Corinthians 15.53). How can this be reconciled with 'Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God'? Even the early Fathers of the Church were worried about sailors who got eaten by fish which fish got eaten by other sailors, who got eaten by more fish and so on!

The 'problem' is solved when we realise that neither Greek nor Latin languages have any word for what we call personal identity therefore it was very difficult to convey to the non-Christian world what was meant by the full Christian idea of the re-creation of the whole person. Yet that is the meaning of 'the resurrection of the body': that human beings as a whole, in their total relationships, are participants in salvation. 'The body' unlike 'flesh' is not merely a temporary quality of our life; it is an ultimate which has to do with a form of true human life; not simply the sum of bones and muscles and blood and skin. So when we say 'I believe in the resurrection of the body' we are saying that nothing of what constitutes our essential identity is to be annihilated. What is to be 'saved' is not a neutral, indifferent, characterless, immortal soul, nor merely mortal flesh and blood – rather it means, each of us, and all that we are together, have received the promise of 'eternal life'. Body is what makes us human, and what makes us communal. We receive our bodies from others; we live with others; and though we die alone, we are shaped and formed by others.

What kinds of things constitute our essential personal identity?

With this we are on the boundary of mystery – we cannot say how or why. But though we stutter and stumble when we try to justify this final and decisive hope, it alone is able to keep us from despising life, or regarding it as a meaningless circus; this life, rather, becomes the workroom in which we find and build up and explore together the elements of 'eternal' life. This hope, of course, is not subject to scientific proof, nor also, of course, to scientific disproof, but it does have a convincing basis – the witness of the New Testament to the renewal of life of the crucified and dead Jesus Christ our side of that death.

As those bound to him, we may look death in the face, for we know that the end is neither nothingness nor a realm of nameless shadows, but bodily reality: people, as loved, accepted, and renewed by the life of the triune God.

## And the life everlasting

Let us remind ourselves again at the end as we did at the beginning, that the Apostles' Creed concerns itself with 'the things to be believed'. If it was important to begin by saying: 'I *believe* in God', and not 'I *see* God' or even 'I *know* God', so too at the end as throughout, we have to preface every clause with the words: 'I believe', and so we say: 'I believe in the life everlasting'.

That means at the very least that whoever confesses belief in eternal life must look at life head on and hold to these words in the face of everything that carries within itself the seeds of death. For what is there that does not oppose it? We see all manner of suffering and death around us. We see the endless stream of generations before us, swept into the flow of history,

only to be cast into the still pools of past centuries. Or we need only regard our own bodies with their recognized, and often unrecognized, traces of age and decay. Or we think of the graves that have buried a part of our lives: a parent, a husband or wife, a child, a friend. Yet despite all this, the Creed dares to put into our mouths the words: 'I believe in the life everlasting' – a clear contradiction of our contemporary life, which seemingly neither knows, nor desires to know, of such a founded hope.

It was not always like this, as we know. For our elders, the images of eternal life as a paradisaal experience, a joyous feast, a heavenly song of praise, a vision of God's glory – all such pictures breathed reality. For us, the thought of eternity expressed in this way has become alien to our time. We have no images to describe it, and so we are silent. Or else we speak, demanding the right to put ourselves to death when, or even before, we assume that we have 'had enough'. Clinically and matter-of-fact, we require that life and death be understood as mere aspects of one single process, as biological experiences, in the face of which eternal life is some sort of contradiction.

What difference might a vision of eternal life make to our decisions about life and death?

But we are still far from the heart of things even with this observation. For the word 'eternal' or 'eternity' – like 'happiness' – means different things to different people. So we say of a period of waiting that 'it lasted an eternity', even if in the case of pain, this 'eternity' lasted only ten minutes. Or again, we may speak about 'eternal truths' that are indifferent to time, such as the sum of the angles in a triangle.

This, however, is not the biblical view of eternity. When God as the living God is called 'eternal' what is meant is that God is intensely involved with time. But even that realisation doesn't get us very far, for we are still in the realms of physical time as we have been all along. For the word 'eternal' is a religious concept, not one from the field of physics. If we confuse all that we to this point have claimed as the Christian reality of time with a more circumscribed concept of physical time, we end up with ridiculous problems, imaginary problems, which have largely given rise to present day scepticism about 'the last things'; hence the imagery of heaven as a place of endless playing of harps and singing, what one writer has called the *eisteddfod* view of the hereafter which even a Welsh nationalist might find tedious!

In other words, 'eternal' in the Christian sense has to do with *quality* of time, not *quantity*. How do we understand that distinction? We do so by considering our relationship to time. And what is that relationship? It is one of pressure. Unlike a plant or an animal, which are in time without their consent, human beings are aware of time. That is our problem. We are addicted to the past, and we rush into the future full of fantasies about it. We remember and we plan. We feel guilty about the past, and anxious about the future. We carry the burden of a growing past, and the consciousness of a diminishing future. If we are activists, we do not have enough time, or else we have too much time so that our life is spent 'killing time', as we say. In either case, we are not one with time, and therefore not one with ourselves. That is how deeply we are affected by time. We want to be in command of time, and instead we are ever more subject to it.

Does this account of the experience of time ring true with your own experience?

Over against our subjection to time stands the Christian claim that God is Lord of time. 'Eternity' is his divine power over time, the freedom to apportion it and to end it. As the fifth century theologian St Augustine helpfully puts it: 'God created the world *with* time, not *in* time'. This means for us that when we die, time dies for us. What this means is something for which we have no capacity of thought. 'Eternal' life belongs to God, 'temporal' life belongs to us. Yet they belong together, which is only another way of saying that God and humankind belong together. That is to say, Christian faith is the experience of God as

the Spirit of life and love that has *no end*, and which stands in contradiction to the experiences of death and fear which makes us squander the gift of our time. So faith in eternal life, as faith in that love and spirit, is what makes us whole in this life that we are living now. Faith in eternal life stands in contradiction to a life closed in upon itself; in contradiction to a life that grasps for time through its works or its pleasure, through its cares or its dissipation, and by those activities, of course, grants to death its power as the end of just that opportunity. Faith in eternal life, then, is not merely about an extension of time, of our human condition after death, but is the taking of the life of God seriously here and now as the Lord of life.

What does this taking seriously  
this life of God look like?

Thus, 'eternal life' is neither a *substitute* for this life, after death, nor is it a *prolonging* of this life after death. What then is it? The Cross of Jesus is for Christians the clue to the meaning of eternal life: it is the life in which we now share through faith in him, the new life of courage for the meaning of time. Eternal life is taking hold of another life than that all too familiar one which ends when our time ends. In this sense, 'eternal life' is everlasting, as the freedom from death, as its fulfilment and its conquest.

That is why the New Testament message is essentially this: 'whoever believes in the Son *has* eternal life' (1 John 5.12), and why, as one with the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body, the Creed concludes with the words: 'I believe in the life everlasting'. For in this confession of faith, hope, and love in him, the gospel has reached its goal, and therefore we, too, have reached our destiny.

Note that it is in this confession  
that we reach our destiny. What  
difference does this 'timing'  
make – that is it the confession,  
not in some other end, such as  
our death, that we reach our  
destiny?

## Reflections for the end of the study series

Go back to the beginning and re-read the introduction. In what ways has your understanding of the Creed shifted in the course of these studies?

What have you appreciated most in the studies, and found most unhelpful?

What would you like to discover more about, and how might you go about that?







# Also available

The covenanting God draws near

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Howard Wallace

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