

**Epiphany 7**  
**23/2/2014**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Exodus 33:12-23**

**Psalm 99**

**Romans 8:12-17**

**John 1:1-18**

(Off RCL)

## **How Christians Believe 5**

In the end the Father

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This morning I want to pose and unpack the question of the end of faith. By this I don't mean the loss of faith, the shift from believing something to not believing it, be it God or something else. Rather, I have in mind "end" in the sense of goal: that "unto which" we believe, that towards which our believing is oriented.

It is an occupational hazard of being a minister that people often feel constrained to tell you what they do or don't believe. I imagine that this is a kind of pre-emptive strike by which people protect themselves from evangelical ambush by the minister. One of my favourite accounts of unbelief is, "I'm not religious, I don't believe there's anything after you die". This is often the opening justification for some gloriously hedonistic pursuit my conversation partner enjoys because this life is all there is and you might as well make the most of it!

When you read through a statement like the church's creed, it makes sense that people imagine that this is what faith is about: life after death. The creed speaks of a beginning (the creation), a middle (the history of Jesus, and all of us) and an end (resurrection of the body and the life everlasting). If you strip out the details which make it Christian and historically specific (the trinitarian names, with Jesus, Mary and Pilate), the creed is not much different from any other so-called "religious" view of the world, of which there are very many.

The "end of faith" – that unto which we are believing – is easily construed as being a buffer against our undeniable mortality.

Over the last couple of weeks, however, I've proposed that there is much to be said for reading the creed "backwards" – at least occasionally – and we have done just this in our weekly affirmation of faith. The reason for doing this is that in such a reading the end of faith is not "the life everlasting" but the person of the divine Father, the creator. On this reading, that unto which we believe is not security in the face of death, but knowledge of the heart of God.

Our gospel reading this morning extended slightly the reading we had on the first Sunday of this series. It is the "prologue" to John's gospel, which we normally encounter around Christmas. John's prologue is composed as a preface to the narrative of the body of John's gospel, serving to indicate what the reader could expect to discover in what follows. John's prologue is, then, a kind of key to unlocking what all fuller details of his gospel are about. It is important, then, how the prologue itself ends, for this indicates the climax of what is to follow. That climax is this: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1.18). The end toward which the ministry of Jesus is oriented, and so the goal of faith itself, is this knowledge of God. Later in John's gospel we hear Jesus declare, "If you know me, you will know my Father also.

From now on you do know him and have seen him. . . .Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14.7-9). John is here walking the very fine line between the scriptural affirmation that no one has ever seen God and the confession that to have seen and known Jesus is to have come close enough to the heart of God.

Now, much more could be said about all this: about how Jesus is not the Father and yet to see Jesus is to see the Father, about how “God” is a word more appropriate to the Father but which we still use for the Son and the Spirit, and so on. But this would take us in the direction of the highfalutin thinking which, perhaps a little unfairly, has given theology a bad name. The main point here is that we might see the difference it makes to understand the creed to be leading in one direction or the other.

Among the many objections to the credal language are the boyishness of the word “Father” and the link between the first article’s reference to “creation” and the creation stories of Genesis. Reading top down seems to place these as premises for all that follows. Reading the other way, however, turns these apparent premises into conclusions. Believing in God as Father becomes the end of faith – its goal – and not its premise. It is something into which we are slowly being ushered, not the point at which we begin to believe. Similarly, creation is no longer the “coming-into-being” which has to occur before anything else can happen; it is now, also, a conclusion from what has preceded. (We’ll come back to this in a moment).

Over the last few weeks I’ve drawn attention a couple of times to the emphasis with which we read the creed and suggested that, with our modern minds, we often read the wrong emphases into the credal statements. Another way of recasting our reading would be to consider the volume (loudness) at which it is read: where are the loud bits, and where are the bits at which our voice should be hushed? Where is the joyful confidence, and where the awe, an appropriate uncertainty, the “And can it be?”? The con-fident bits – literally the “believing-together” bits – occur under the article of the Spirit. Here is the promised shape of human life, beginning to be realised here and now: church, communion, reconciliation, restoration. Perhaps the “ordinary” voice occurs in the ordinary history of Jesus – life as it happens to us and to him. And the quieter voice might be reserved for the first article, for here the end – *our* end – is revealed: knowledge of the heart of God. John’s prologue, and his whole gospel, declare that this is the gift of the Gospel, but it is an *awesome* gift, an otherwise incomprehensible one.

Again, this risks becoming a wandering off into neat theological speak, if we remain only with the language of Father, Son and Spirit, which is why the dimension of creation is important here. If it is the case that the end of faith is the knowledge of the heart of God, then this knowledge is what realises for us our own true nature as creatures, as human beings. We are only properly ourselves when God is properly known as God or, in Paul’s words, when our spirits cry “Abba, Father” (Romans 8.15). Creation is now not the stuff which precedes any action – not a “thing” – and neither now the action by which God gets the whole show on the road. Creation is now a *condition* of things: creation happens *to* stuff – to *us* – when we know God as Jesus knew God; the problematic word “Father” serves only to link our experience of God to that of Jesus. Only the creature which is truly itself knows God as God is. The creature and the creator are properly as left is to right, as up is to down. To say then, as John again declares, that the Word became flesh, that God and the human coincided in Jesus, is to say simply that Jesus knew God as we are promised we all will, and God knew Jesus back in the same way.

And this brings me back again to those who imagine that religion is about affirming the continuation of life after death or, to put it differently, that the only destiny towards which the church looks is mere resurrection. The assumption here is that what we otherwise live before we die is in worthy of the description, "Life". Again it is John's gospel which sharpens the matter for us: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly". This life is linked to our knowing the revealed heart of God, and this knowledge comes from our being "in" Jesus as Jesus himself was "in" the Father (John 17.21-23).

By the gift of the perfecting Spirit we are conformed to the likeness of Jesus the Son, that we might know God as he did, and so become truly human, true creatures. We become, to shift from John's way of putting it to Paul's, the "body" of Christ, not in the weaker sense of a multi-membered community which gathers around Jesus as a pioneer of our particular religious interests, but in the strong sense of *Christ's own body* – his very humanity – imperfectly but perceptibly realised as that strangest of cities, the church which believes all this.

The pay-off of all this theology is freedom or, as Paul put it in our text from Romans this morning: adoption as children of this particular God. We confess a creed which, undeniably, declares that death is not to be feared, for it does not have the final say. We confess, then, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. But the reason death does not need to be feared is not simply because we need the creed to end there. The creed has another end which we also confess: who has seen Jesus has seen the Father; who has seen Jesus has seen his, her end: adoption as a child of this God, who lifts us up, restores us, creates us.

We believe and do as we do, in order that we might understand, as God has understood us in his Son. That we have been so understood, and that by grace we might stand under the banner of such amazing love, all thanks be to God, Spirit, Son and Father, now and always. Amen.

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