

Antioch School *Growing Disciples*

Christian Basics 3 Who is Jesus? Why did he come?

The God-Man

The Bible is our final authority in all matters of faith and conduct, but it is an historical collection of divine revelation, not an organised statement of what we believe!

So across the centuries – often because of the pressure of unbelief or of false belief – a number of other important statements of faith have been made. These are secondary to the Bible, and need to be interpreted in the light of Biblical teaching.

The Uniting Church acknowledges the *Apostles' Creed* and the *Nicene Creed* “as authoritative statements of the catholic faith, framed in the language of their day and used by Christians in many days, to declare and to guard the right understanding of that faith” (Basis para.9).

The Uniting Church also commits ministers and instructors to study the witness of the Reformation fathers “as expressed in various ways in the *Scots Confession of Faith* (1560), the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647), and the *Savoy Declaration* (1658),” and “to listen to the preaching of John Wesley in his *Forty-Four Sermons* (1793)” (Basis para.10).

God’s revelation of himself has come very much through history and it comes to focus in an historical person, Jesus Christ.

The *Apostles' Creed* sums up what we believe about Jesus in these words -

I believe in Jesus Christ,
his only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.
He 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,
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Who is He?

We cannot read the account of the life of Jesus in the four Gospels without being faced with the question of just who this Jesus of Nazareth really was.

Matthew begins with a genealogy of Jesus, but when he gets to Joseph cannot say that he is the father of Jesus even though that was his legal status. He then goes on to tell us about the unusual circumstances of the conception of Jesus and leaves us without doubt that Mary his mother was a virgin, that in a unique and miraculous way he was “conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit”. He further

states that he came for the purpose of “saving his people from their sins” (1.21) and that he fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 7.14 as the Immanuel – “God is with us”.

Mark doesn’t tell us about the birth of Jesus, but begins with a plain statement of him as “Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1.1). (“Christ”, of course, is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word “Messiah” – “anointed”. Anointing with oil was used to set people apart – especially priests and kings. The Messiah was the focus of the Jewish hopes about the one God had promised to send.)

Luke begins his account with assurance of the great care with which he has gathered and researched his material. He speaks of the conception of Jesus from Mary’s point of view, giving the same clear statement – “conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary” (1.26-38).

John begins before creation and speaks about “the Word of God”, the expression of God who was there with God in the beginning and was God in the fullest sense (1.1). This is the one who (lit.) “became flesh and pitched his tent among us” – “We saw his glory, the glory which he received as the Father’s only Son” (v.14).

Some people have had great trouble with the doctrine of the Virgin Birth – that’s not the way it happens! There is no question about that. The question is – did it happen this once in human history? If Jesus was the unique Son of God coming into the world, is the Virgin Birth consistent with this fact? If Jesus was just the child of Joseph and Mary, could he have been the eternal Son of God in the sense that the Bible writers affirm him to be?

During his ministry Jesus made many statements and inferences concerning his identity. Was he speaking the truth, or was he merely a fanatic?

On the one hand, his authority was recognised (Matthew 7.28-29), the people glorified the God of Israel (15.31) and crowds welcomed him with “Hosanna to the Son of David” (21.9). But on the other hand, there was an undercurrent of opposition. This is highlighted in 9.33-34, when the crowds said, “We have never seen anything like this in Israel!”, but the Pharisees said, “It is the chief of demons who gives him the power to drive out demons” (note a similar incident in 12.23-24). It was also clear in the attitude of the people of Gadara (8.34), in the unbelief of those at Nazareth (13.54-56) and in the charge of blasphemy laid against him (9.3; 26.65).



What were his claims that led to this sharp reaction? In the first of the two passages last noted, it was his claim to forgive sins. Of course, all of us are able to forgive the sins of others against us. But forgiveness in this absolute sense is the prerogative of God alone. The reply of Jesus refers to “the Son of Man” – a reference to a glorious heavenly being in Daniel 7.13-14. The second passage follows another reference to the Son of Man “sitting on the right hand of God and coming on the clouds of heaven”.

In 11.29, Jesus describes himself as “gentle and humble in spirit”. He certainly doesn’t make his claims with the wild flamboyance of a fanatic. They are quietly but definitely in the background. He sought no great publicity for them (Matthew 16.20).

“Whoever wants to save his own life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it” (Mark 8.35). “Whoever rejects me publicly, the Son of Man will also reject him before the angels of God” (Luke 12.9). He accepted Peter’s description of him as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16.16-17). When asked by the High Priest, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed God?”, he replied, “I am” (Mark 14.61-62).

John records a number of his sayings where he speaks of himself as “I am...” (as in 8.12; 14.6). The most dramatic of these is probably 8.58 – “I am telling you the truth. Before Abraham was born, ‘I Am’.” The Jews picked up stones to throw at him. Why? Because he was identifying himself with the I Am of Exodus 3.14. In 10.30 we find him stating, “The Father and I are one” – and the crowd responds in the same way.

Possibly no claim of Jesus is more daring than the claim that he would die and rise again. When Jesus first spoke this way to his disciples, they were so filled with horror at the thought of his death that they missed altogether the promise of his resurrection (Matthew 16.21-22).

Probably the claim is most clearly stated in John 10.17-18 – “The Father loves me because I am willing to give up my life, in order that I may receive it back again. No one takes my life away from me. I give it up of my own free will. I have the right to give it up, and I have the right to take it back. This is what my Father has commanded me to do.”

It might seem easy to claim divinity, but to claim to have the power to die and then to rise again is another matter!

Yet this claim was the basis of his prayer and commitment in the Garden (Matthew 26.36-46), His reaction to the crowd who came to arrest him (v.53), his demeanour before Pilate (John 19.10-11)... When he was on the cross, was he unable to answer the taunts of the passers-by (27.40) and of the religious leaders (vv.42,43)? Had they gained mastery of him now?

These were the questions in the minds of the two disciples who were walking to Emmaus on the first day of the next week (Luke 24.13-32). They had hoped that he was the Messiah, the Son of the living God, but all these hopes had been dashed because he had been crucified and had died. The discovery that he truly had risen changed the whole perspective from which they understood who Jesus is and why he had come.

Paul writes of Jesus, “as to his divine greatness, he was shown with great power to be the Son of God by being raised from death” (Romans 1.4). There was simply no question for the New Testament writers that Jesus was the eternal Son of God who came into our human history (see further Galatians 4.4; Philippians 2.6,7; Hebrews 1.1-4; James 2.1; 1 Peter 4.11; 1 John 4.15). Indeed it is striking that on quite a number of occasions they took Old Testament passages that clearly refer to the Lord God and used them with reference to Jesus. Some of these are not as clear in translation as they are in the original languages, but note, for example Isaiah 45.23 and Philippians 2.10-11. Or look at Isaiah 8.14-15 which is almost quoted word for word from the Septuagint Greek in 1 Peter 3.14b-15a.

Incarnation

The Apostles’ Creed, quoted earlier, does not simply tell us that Jesus Christ was “his only Son, our Lord” who “is seated at the right hand of the Father”. Between those two statements is a statement of what we call the Incarnation – for the Son of God came and lived a life “in the flesh”.

To this point we have principally been thinking about how his life and teaching have revealed his divinity so clearly. But the record also makes clear his humanity.

In the post-apostolic period, there were sometimes strong differences of emphasis. On the one hand some groups tended to emphasise the Man Jesus and the example of his life, almost to the point of ignoring his divinity. On the other hand, there were groups who featured his divinity, almost to the point of doubting whether he actually could have died on the cross! This view is known as Docetism.

Both extremes lead to serious problems when we seek to understand his redemptive work later in this session. Suffice at this point to note that the two must be kept together – “the Word – eternally with the Father – became flesh and dwelt among us.”

We have already noted the uniqueness associated with his conception and resurrection. But between those two events we have the story of a really human life lived in a human body – he was born, he grew, he became hungry and thirsty, he was tired, he died and his body was laid in a tomb.

His mind, not warped by sin, needed to “grow in wisdom” (Luke 2.52), asked for information (Mark 5.30; 9.21) and expressed surprise (Luke 7.9). He had human feelings and affections – he loved, was grieved, was indignant, wept. And in the life of the spirit, he was subject to human conditions – he could be really and sorely tempted (see Luke 4.2; John 12.27,28; Luke 22.28; Matthew 27.38,39), and he was dependent on prayer.

How can the eternal Son of God come to live a truly human life? Philippians 2.6-11 is a key passage in helping us to understand the answer to this question. The key verb in v.7 literally means “he emptied himself” (*kenon*) and the Greek word *kenosis* is used when talking about this self-emptying.

The whole point is that Jesus in the days of his flesh had laid aside his heavenly glory and prerogatives. He was truly able to be the “second Adam” (1 Corinthians 15.45), to live the human life the way it was always meant to be lived – with our limitations, temptations and divine resources, but without sin.

We have this unreal picture of Jesus created for us by centuries of artists. It would be easy to pick Jesus in a crowd, wouldn’t it? You would only have to look for the person with a circle of light about his head or a glow emanating from his face! – except that it wasn’t like that!

John tells us that “we saw his glory, the glory which he received as the Father’s only Son” (John 1.14b). Peter writes, “We were there when he was given honour and glory by God the Father, when the voice came to him from the Supreme Glory, saying, ‘This is my own dear Son, with whom I am pleased!’ We ourselves heard this voice coming from heaven, when we were with him on the holy mountain” (2 Peter 1.17-18). Both these

references are telling about the experience they shared with James on the mount of transfiguration (Matthew 17.1-8). That only happened once. Just for a moment his glory shone through.

So Jesus was fully human, fully divine. The hymn writer, Charles Wesley, put it this way (AHB 229) -
 the incarnate deity,
 our God contracted to a span,
 incomprehensibly made man.

Now in Glory

Jesus was born of a virgin, lived here, taught, healed the sick, died on a cross, was raised to life on the third day, but what then?

Luke records for us his ascension (Luke 24.50-53; Acts 1.9-11). This marked the end of his physical presence on earth. We are now his Body, the means by which he fulfils his will, enabled by the promised Holy Spirit (compare Matthew 28.20b; Luke 24.49; Acts 1.8).

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, had a vision of Jesus “standing at the right-hand side of God” (Acts 8.55-56). Paul writes of Jesus “sitting on his throne at the right-hand side of God” (Colossians 3.1b) and “at the right-hand side of God, pleading with him for us!” (Romans 8.34b; compare Hebrews 7.25).

Jesus himself, faced by his opponents, said, “You will all see the Son of Man seated on the right of the Almighty and coming in the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14.62), a promise made to his followers quite a number of times (as in Matthew 24.30).

The subject of the Second Coming of Christ will be further considered in the session “Towards the End Times”. It is of interest here, however, to note the comment someone has made that we are called to live “between the times” – between the time of the incarnation and the time of his return in glory and judgment.

For reflection...
 What do we mean by “incarnation”?

For you, what is the clearest evidence that Jesus is truly and fully divine?

- Why is it important that Jesus is truly and fully divine?

Understanding Jehovah’s Witnesses

This movement originated with Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916) as the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. The title of Jehovah’s Witnesses was assumed in 1931 by Russell’s successor, J.F. (“Judge”) Rutherford.

Russell grew up in Pennsylvania. He reacted against doctrines of hell and was attracted by date-fixing for the Second Coming, which he estimated first as 1874, then as

1914. He caricatured the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as “three gods in one person” and held that Christ was the first created being.

In 1879 he launched a magazine, *Zion’s Watchtower and Herald of Christ’s Presence*. In 1884 he set up Zion’s Watchtower Tract Society in Pittsburgh, and this publishing house produced Russell’s six volumes of *Studies in the Scriptures* (1886-1904). These set out what has remained basically the Jehovah’s Witness theology. A seventh volume on the Book or Revelation was completed by others in 1917 after Russell’s death, and Arius and Russell are called two of the angels of the Seven Churches.

Arius was a presbyter of Alexandria (d.336) whose heresy basically denied that Jesus was the eternal Son of God. It was specifically against this teaching that the *Nicene Creed* was originally drawn up. It is striking that the modern Jehovah’s Witness movement sees itself as following Arianism.

Jehovah’s Witnesses view the Son as the first and highest created being – in fact as Michael the Archangel. When he became man, he became only man, and although at his resurrection he was exalted above the angels as a spirit being, his body remained dead, although it was removed from sight by Jehovah. Christ’s appearances were “in materialised bodies”. The holy spirit is the active force of God.

They do not believe in a soul that can live apart from the body, the primary purpose of Christ’s ransom is to give the right either not to die physically or to be restored by the resurrection. Salvation is through faith in the ransom, through baptism by Jehovah’s Witnesses, and through proclamation of their message, together with a moral life. There is virtually no interest in the devotional life. The Lord’s Supper is celebrated once a year only at the Passover, and only those who have the inner witness that they are members of the 144,000 elite may partake.

The sect has been continually expecting Armageddon and the setting up of the Kingdom. This kingdom will be governed by Jesus Christ through the 144,000 in heaven, and on earth through an indefinite number of “men of goodwill,” “other sheep,” or “Jonadabs.” This extra class was discovered when it was obvious that Jehovah’s Witnesses numbered more than the expected 144,000. The rest of mankind will be raised at intervals (except presumably those who fought against God at Armageddon) and will be judged for life or destruction according to their behaviour during the Millennium.

Members of the sect have no freedom to find the truth in the Scriptures themselves. They are told what they must find and may not deviate. In 1950 a translation committee brought out *The New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures*, later to be followed by the whole Bible. It is notoriously bad as a translation. One of its significant features has been the introduction of “Jehovah” into the text of the New Testament.

It was well-established practice by the time of Jesus to say “Adonai” (Lord) whenever the reader came to the sacred Name *Yahweh* in the Hebrew text. In fact, when

that all...
 I say that the things...
 sacrifice they sacrifice to demons...
 not to God; and I do not want you
 to become sharers with the demons.
 21 You cannot be drinking the cup of
 Jehovah* and the cup of demons; you
 cannot be partaking of “the table of
 Jehovah”* and the table of demons.
 Jehovah* and the table of demons.
 22 Or “are we inciting Jehovah* to jeal-
 ousy for a typical purpose.” Gr.,
 11* Or, “accom-
 11* Or,
 from 1 Corinthians 10 in NWT

the Massorettes put the vowel points into the text (the Hebrew alphabet only has consonants), they put the vowels for *Adonai* into the consonants for *Yahweh*. The Septuagint Greek (LXX) in the second century BC simply translated it with the Greek word for “Lord”. English Bible translators have followed this practice with “LORD” (capitals). The New Testament writers fairly consistently used the LXX in all Old Testament quotations and allusions. In many striking instances they took passages referring to LORD God and refer them to Lord Christ. Among other things, the NWT, by deliberate deception, seeks to hide this fact from their members.

The primary error of the Jehovah’s Witnesses is in what they believe about Jesus Christ. This then has very serious consequences for their understanding of salvation. Issues such as blood transfusion are really peripheral. The central issue is Christ.

Founded by Charles Taze Russell (1852-1916)
See themselves as following Arius, presbyter of Alexandria (died 336)
No trinity – Jesus not God the Son, holy spirit seen as impersonal force.
Jesus seen as first and highest created being = the archangel Michael.
Serious consequences for salvation. Death of Christ on the cross not seen as an act of God (don’t believe in hell) and cannot save from sin.

Why the Incarnation?

Jesus was the eternal Son of God who emptied himself of his heavenly glory and prerogatives and became a human being. He was God incarnate, the Word of God who “became flesh and dwelt among us.” Our big question here is “Why?” The *Nicene Creed* answers that question in this way –

“For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven.”

In Session 1 we noted that since the Fall, “the human approach to God must be on the basis of an atonement. The alternative is judgment. And God approaches humankind on the basis of an atonement – or in judgment” (p.6).

The Messianic Promises

We have already noted (p.1) that “the Messiah was the focus of the Jewish hopes about the one God had promised to send.” In some ways the Messianic promises in Scripture and the Jewish Messianic hopes were not identical. (Is this why they didn’t recognise him when he came?) It was all too easy to look for national restoration and prosperity – and to miss other elements that are central to the promises.

As already noted, “anointing with oil was used to set people apart – especially priests and kings.”

Probably in thinking of most Jews the kingly role was dominant. The rule of David was seen to be normative – later kings were compared with him (as in 1 Kings 11.4,6; 14.8; 15.2,11-14; 2 Kings 18.3; 22.2). The prophecy of Nathan (2 Samuel 6.12-16) had looked forward to a lasting kingdom led by his descendants. In fact the kings who followed David were a “mixed bag”, and it became clear that the fulfilment would be in another “David” in the future.

Ezekiel 34 begins with a condemnation of “the shepherds of Israel” – a reference to those who ruled over the people. From v.11 there is a beautiful picture of how the Lord himself will care for his people. And then in vv.23-4, “I will give them a king like my servant David to be their one shepherd, and he will take care of them. I, the Lord, will be their God, and a king like my servant David will be their ruler.”

Quite a number of the Psalms (the “Royal” Psalms) seem to relate to this theme. They may have had reference to some immediate earthly ruler, yet go beyond that immediate reference – as is true of quite a number of other prophecies and their “fulfilment”. The king is seen as meeting world-opposition (2.1-3; 110.1). But as victor (45.3-5; 89.19-23) and because of the activity of the Lord (18.46-50), he establishes world-rule (72.8-11), based on Zion (2.6) and with a primary concern for morality (101.1-8).

Isaiah 7-12 is another example from the prophets where this emphasis comes through. In this section we often quote 7.14 and 9.6 and miss the overall promise of “the new king from the royal line of David...” (11.10).

It is easy to see why the Jewish people in troubled days were expectantly looking for a royal Messiah! But the priestly role is also part of the promise. Psalm 110.4 brings the two together – “You will be a priest for ever in the priestly order of Melchizedek.” Melchizedek was the king of Salem (probably Jerusalem) who greeted Abraham on his return from defeating Chedorlaomer and his allies, presented him with bread and wine, blessed him in the name of God Most High, and received from Abraham a tenth part of the booty which had been taken from the enemy (Genesis 14.18ff). This theme is specifically developed in the New Testament in Hebrews ch.7.

Another important aspect of the priestly theme is found in Isaiah. Modern scholarship has divided Isaiah into three major divisions written against different backgrounds by different authors. This is quite unnecessary and has some truly disastrous consequences for our understanding of the prophet and of the divine revelation he was conveying. It is significant that, against the background of the projected divine judgment, there is also given the promise of hope.

From ch.40 we start to hear about someone simply described as “the Servant”. Sometimes the reference seems to be directed to Israel itself or to a faithful remnant within Israel (41.8-10; 43.10; 44.1-2; 45.4; 48.20,21). But at other times it seems to point to a particular person who would come (42.1-4; 49.1-7). The climax is the well-known passage about the suffering Servant who bears the punishment on behalf of all those who have gone astray (52.13-53.12). Here is one who is not just priest but whose “death was a sacrifice to bring forgiveness” (v.10).

As we look back to the Old Testament, we have the wisdom of hindsight and faith. In fact, there were a number of strands of promise (including others that we haven’t mentioned here) that converge on the person and work of Jesus. But it was not possible to put it all together beforehand!

It is interesting that the community at Qumran (associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls) appear to have

expected two Messiahs, “the anointed ones of Aaron and Israel” – a priest and a king, the former having precedence. In one of the Dead Sea Scrolls the promise of a prophet like Moses (see Deuteronomy 18.15,18) is linked with the hope of a king and priest.

Why did He Come?

Those are really just a few passages out of many in the Old Testament that converge in the person and work of Jesus Christ. As we look at the Gospel record itself we note three major reasons why Jesus the Son of God came – Revelation, Redemption and Rule (or Kingdom).

When John described Jesus as “the Word” (1.1ff), he was introducing a major theme of his Gospel. Jesus is the Revelation of God. It is not just that Jesus revealed God by what he said, but that he revealed God by what he was. “No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is the same as God and is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (1.18). “If you knew me, you would know my Father also” (8.19b). “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me... Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (14.6,9b). “I have made you known to those you gave me out of the world” (17.6a).

The opening of Hebrews, which we considered in Session 1, also centres on Jesus as the Word of God who “reflects the brightness of God’s glory and is the exact likeness of God’s own being” (Hebrews 1.1-4).

Of course, the one who was the Message of God was also the Messenger of God! True wisdom is to hear and obey the things he taught (Matthew 7.24-27; compare also 13.1-9,18-23). In his teaching we note: (a) his constant theme of God’s Fatherhood and Love (Matthew 6.25-34); (b) his emphasis on the spirituality of God (John 4.23-24) and the need for inward purity in his service; (c) the place he gave to love as our chief duty towards God (Matthew 22.34-40); and (d) the declaration that God longs to rescue his lost and rebellious children (Luke 15).

This last is part of another major theme of Jesus’ life – Redemption. The angel reassured Joseph, “She will have a son, and you will name him Jesus – because he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1.21). “Jesus” is a Greek form of the Hebrew name “Joshua”, meaning “The Lord is salvation.” Jesus himself said, “I have not come to call respectable people, but outcasts” (Matthew 9.13b). “The Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people” (Mark 10.45). “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19.10).

This seeking and saving love makes him the chief character in the three parables of Luke 15 as well as the true “good Samaritan” who, at risk of his own life, goes to the aid of the wounded traveller (10.25-37).

At the point in his ministry when Peter, on behalf of the whole group, has confessed him as “the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16.16), “Jesus began to say plainly to his disciples, ‘I must go to Jerusalem and suffer much from the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law. I will be put to death, but three days later I will be raised to life’” (v.21). He spoke about his dying and rising again on a number of occasions after this (e.g. 17.9,22-23; 20.17-19). But when he rode into

Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday (21.1ff), they were so caught up in the euphoria that they put all thought of his death (and rising!) behind them. And on the night when he was betrayed, he celebrated the Passover with his disciples and added to it what we call the Lord’s supper. This focused on his coming death and “my blood which seals God’s covenant, my blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (26.26-29).

It is striking that about a third of the Gospel records (29 out of 89 chapters in all) are devoted to Jesus’ last week, his death and resurrection.

From the teaching of Jesus we gather that he saw his ministry as being very closely related to the Rule (or Kingdom) of God. It was the central theme of his teaching. The need to repent and be ready was the call of John the Baptist (Matthew 3.1-2) and marked the beginning of the teaching of Jesus (4.17).

But the Kingdom was not just about to come, it was “at hand” in the sense of being already present in the person and ministry of Jesus. It was visible in his casting out of demons (Luke 11.20) and in his many wonderful works (Matthew 11.2-14). The opportunity to respond to the Kingdom was available to those who were willing to receive Jesus (Luke 10.1-12). Indeed, believing in him leads to a whole inner transformation by which a person both sees and enters the Kingdom (John 3.1-17).

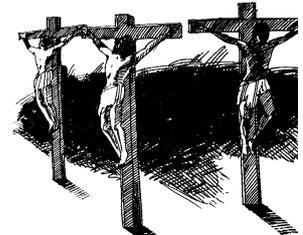
Yet there is a sense in which the Kingdom is hidden in this era. It is as a seed being sown (Matthew 13.1-9,21-30,31-32), yeast in the dough (v.33), a treasure that is discovered (v.44)... The second coming of Jesus at the end of time will mark the coming of the Kingdom in visible power and judgment (Matthew 25.31-46).

The Meaning of the Cross

We have already noted the prominence given to the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus said to the two who were walking to Emmaus, “Was it not necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and then to enter his glory?” (Luke 24.26).

The apostles, though slow to grasp it before it all happened, became quite convinced of this point. On the day of Pentecost, Peter affirmed that the death of Jesus was not just the result of human scheming – it was part of the divine plan (Acts 2.23). When Paul was speaking to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch, he affirmed that through this Jesus who died and rose again forgiveness is now available to everyone who believes in him (13.38-39).

As we seek to understand the meaning of the Cross of Christ, we firstly see the great Love of God, the great desire of God to rescue sinners and to bring them back into a positive relationship with himself (John 3.14-16; Romans 5.8; 2 Corinthians 5.19).



We also see the seriousness of human Sin. We assume that all we have to do is sin and all God has to do is forgive us – “to err is human, to forgive divine.” But in the absolute sense there cannot be this kind of cheap forgiveness, or the whole moral order of the universe is called into question. God is the moral Ruler and “sin pays its wage – death” (Romans 6.23a). The holy God who is

also the loving Father can only forgive us on the basis of an offering he himself has made in the person of his Son (Romans 3.21-26).

To understand the Cross requires an appreciation of Jesus as the God-Man. Redemption is the action of God himself, not an appeasement offered by sinful men. Yet Jesus stands also as a representative of the whole human race, the second Adam (1 Corinthians 15.22,45) who lived a sinless life (John 8.46; Hebrews 4.15). Jesus was (and is) eternal, and both Revelation 13.8 and Hebrews 14.14 seem to be speaking of the Sacrifice occurring at a particular date in history, yet accomplished from all eternity. Its benefit was therefore available for those who believed before he came (Romans 3.25-26) and reaches forward to the needs of those yet to be born.

So, again and again, the New Testament writers restate the theme that Jesus took the consequences of our sin. The sinless one identified himself with our sin (2 Corinthians 5.21), experiencing, not simply physical death, but separation from the Father (Matthew 27.46).

For us forgiveness is a very small matter. In reality, forgiveness involves accepting the hurt, pain, loss... These don't just vanish somehow. Reflect on Matthew 18.21-35 – the huge debt is either held against the servant or accepted by the king. By the death of Jesus, the God-Man, God has accepted the huge debt of human sin himself, and now offers forgiveness to all who will believe in him.

That is why the eternal Son of God “became flesh and dwelt among us”. That is why he died for us on the Cross. And he is alive and by his Spirit we can be his Body in this world!

“The simplest hearer feels that there is something irrational in saying that the death of Christ is a great proof of love to the sinful, unless there is shown at the same time a rational connection between that death and the responsibilities which sin involves, and from which death delivers... If I were sitting on the end of a pier on a summer day enjoying the sunshine and the air, and someone came along and jumped into the water and got drowned ‘to prove his love for me,’ I should find it unintelligible. I might be in need of love, but an act in no rational relation to any of my necessities could not prove it. But if I had fallen over the pier and were drowning, and someone sprang into the water, and at the cost of making my peril, or what but for him would be my fate, his own, saved me from death, then I should say, ‘Greater love hath no man than this.’ I should say it intelligibly, because there would be an intelligible relation between the sacrifice which love made and the necessity from which it released.”

James Denney, *The Death of Christ* (1903).

For Reflection...

Read carefully what James Denney is saying in the passage above.

- Where am I? (And where are the other members of the human race?) – on the pier or in the water?
- If I am in danger, in a real predicament from which I cannot save myself, then I need some action by someone else which actually rescues me. It is so easy to say, “Christ died for my sins,”

but what do we actually mean by this? What is it about sin that means I need rescuing anyway?

- Christ died all those centuries ago. What does his death do to help me in my sin predicament today?
- Reflect on the “three R’s” of why Christ came – 1. Revelation 2. Redemption 3. Rule of God. In what ways is (ought) each of these (to be) important for your Christian life?

John Wesley 1703-1791

John Wesley was the child of a rectory, the fifteenth son of Samuel and Susanna Wesley. He was educated at Oxford and ordained a priest.

Much of his early life was his own spiritual quest. His *Journal* gives the reasons he was going to the American colony of Georgia in 1735. “Our end in leaving our own native country was not to avoid



want, God having given us plenty of temporal blessings, nor to gain riches and honour, but simply this – to save our souls, to live wholly to the glory of God.”

Wesley’s idealism received some heavy blows in America. He returned to England disillusioned in January 1738, expressing his personal uncertainty more clearly than ever – “I went to America to convert the Indians, but oh, who will convert me? Who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of unbelief?”

The climax of his personal quest came on 24th May 1738. “In the evening, I went, very unwillingly, to a society in Aldersgate Street where one was reading Luther’s *Preface to the Epistle to the Romans*. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt that I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

That evening marked the turning-point in his life. The personal faith in Christ to which he had come had now to be shared with others.

He came into conflict with representatives of the Established Church, because he believed he had an extraordinary commission from God to evangelise Great Britain. In fact, he regarded the whole world as his parish.

Wesley was tireless as he pursued his task. For fifty years he travelled an average of 8000 kilometres a year, mainly on horseback, rising at 4.00 am, filling every moment with work and living frugally. He preached some 40,000 sermons. The number of hymns he and his brother Charles wrote ran into thousands.

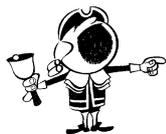
Wesley instructed his helpers, “You have nothing to do but to save souls. Therefore, spend and be spent in this work.”

When Wesley spoke about “saving souls”, he was emphasising evangelism and personal conversion, but was also relating to whole people, in their lives, environment and society.

Before his conversion, Wesley had been for a time the leader of a group in Oxford nicknamed the Holy Club. It was a society for spiritual improvement. Its members were committed to a rigorous discipline. In addition to spiritual exercises, this included visiting prisoners, relieving the poor and maintaining a school for neglected children.

Following his conversion, Wesley continued to be involved with the practical needs of people. In fact, his care for people deepened and his insight into their problems sharpened. We find him setting up schools and conducting medical clinics. We hear him speaking out against slavery and against war. He continued to visit the prisons and sought to arouse the national conscience on the state of the prisons.

Secular historians have commented that the impact of the revival that swept England in Wesley’s time was so strong and deep that a revolution such as occurred in France was averted in England.



Extra!!!

- How is Jesus “good news” for everyone in the world?

How is Jesus “good news” for everyone in the world?

So we’ve been thinking about who Jesus is and why he came? Paul wrote, “I have complete confidence in the gospel (good news); it is God’s power to save all who believe, first the Jews and also the Gentiles. For the gospel reveals how God puts people right with himself: it is through faith from beginning to end” (Romans 1.16-17).

When you go looking for a new car, the salesman goes over all the features of the different models. He tries to discern what we are prepared to pay. He also tries to edge up in price to take on some “extras”. Perhaps we haven’t thought of air-conditioning before. Perhaps we had thought of something basic and he is pressing towards a de luxe!

But here is the situation that doesn’t occur. “We have these two models here, Sir. They are identical in paintwork, steering, upholstery... In fact, they both have all the extras you could ever want. But this one over here is \$3000 less than the other.” “But why?” we ask, “There must be something very different about them!” “Not really,” the salesman assures us, “they are the same in every way except that this one doesn’t have an engine.”

The Christian life is the basic life, not the stripes down the side. Yet some folk say it’s just an option. It’s just a question of whether you want to believe in Jesus or not!

Now think about the question again in the light of our first two sessions.

To understand the good news, we have to perceive the problem of human sin and its consequences. To what

extent are we conscious of that problem – in our lives, in our community, in media reports about the world about us? To what extent is the average Australian aware of the problem? Can people grasp the good news if they don’t have an awareness of sin?

We have to realise the love of God for sinners. Don’t make a division between the “God of the Old Testament” and the “God of Jesus”. That is a false distinction. There is judgment for sin, but God who is the Judge (and Jesus and the New Testament writers call him that too!) is the God of love who wants to draw his wandering people back home! The good news stems from his love and his action for us.

Yes, God has done something! Jesus, the eternal Son of God, has died for sinners, bearing their penalty in his own death!

We could use a bit of good news like that, couldn’t we? But there is the question of what we do with it. The Bible talks about a two-fold turn – repent and believe. Repent means to turn away from sin. In Session 1 (p.5) we spoke about sin in its positive and negative forms. Thinking about the wilful breaking of God’s laws, repentance is the conscious choice to renounce that lifestyle. Thinking about our failure to hit the target, repentance is the acknowledgment that our best efforts haven’t “made it.” Belief or faith is here not principally our intellectual conviction about Jesus (though these are important), but our reliance on him as our Saviour, our dependence on his sin-bearing on our behalf. Someone has said it is a matter of transferring our trust for eternal life from ourselves and our moral achievements to Christ and his redemptive work on our behalf. That is a big difference.

So – what makes a person a Christian? Have you made that two-fold turn yourself? How would you go about explaining it to someone else?

- Write down the words you might use to explain to an average non-church-going Australian how Jesus is “good news” for him/her?

Next week: Holy Spirit and Holy Trinity

- John 4.1-26
- John 16. 4-15
- Luke 24.36-49
- Romans 8.1-17
- Matthew 28.16-20
- Ephesians 4.1-6
- Galatians 4.1-7