

Under new management?

Readings: Mark 10: 17-31 & Phil. 3:1-11

The shortest, most concise creed of the Christian faith is the three words – Jesus is Lord. These words not only encapsulate the glorification of Christ Jesus at God’s right hand where every knee will bow, but they also encapsulate the response of the individual believer that Jesus is their Lord. They are surely some of the most powerful three words in our English language. They summarize both who Jesus is and what it means to be a Christian. Yet for the early church those three words uttered by a Christian could be a death sentence, they were at times regarded as treasonous by the Roman authorities. Yet despite the terrible persecutions, in just under 300 years after Jesus, there may have been 20 million Christians who chose to confess that “Jesus is Lord”.

So I want to look in more detail at this short creed and to do that I want to split my sermon into three sections – kingship, covenant and consequences.

Firstly kingship. Jesus is Lord says clearly who Jesus is. This was the challenge for those who heard Him in the gospels, who is this man? Is He just another prophet in the long line of prophets? Is He just a better rabbi whose teaching is clear and with authority? How come people are healed, the dead are raised to life, demons flee and storms are calmed, all at His command? Is He the long promised Messiah, but if He is, why does He act in the way that He does and not the way we think He should? It slowly dawned on those who could see that this was more than just an exceptional man, this was the Son of God.

On the Mount of Transfiguration we read “a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” (Matt. 17:5). Peter recalls this vividly when he says in his second letter “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honour and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,” we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.” (2 Peter 1:16-18). Or again as Thomas saw so clearly after the resurrection, when he said to Jesus “My Lord and my God.”

Here was the King of the kingdom, and following His ascension He is now glorified at the right hand of God on high. As Stephen saw before he was martyred “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” (Acts 7:56). And this was the message of the early church. Paul said “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil. 2:9-11). Peter echoes this “Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.”

(1 Peter 3:22). Read John's vision in Revelation where twice he refers to Jesus as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Rev. 17:14 & 19:16). This is what the early church understood by Jesus is Lord. His is the eternal majesty and authority. Consequently there will always be a clash between the affirmation of the church that Jesus is Lord and any human authority, principality or false god that claims that position.

Secondly covenant. Jesus is Lord is a covenantal declaration. Owen reminded us a few weeks ago of the first three commandments. The preface to the 10 commandments begins, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." (Ex.20:2). This is covenant language. God is saying that He delivered them and He will be their God; but their side of the covenant is to keep the ten commandments. The people come under the Lordship of YHWH, their deliverer and sustainer but that brings them under new management. Boaz spoke to Ruth and said that in coming with her mother-in-law Naomi to the land of Israel and owning allegiance to the God of Naomi, she had taken refuge under the wings of the God of Israel (Ruth 2:12). She had come under the protection and care of God. Ruth would have been introduced to the Shema, the prayer said morning and evening by observant Jews. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." (Deut. 6:4-5). If you love the Lord then you will seek to do what pleases and honours Him.

But we need to see all this as part of a covenant. We understand covenant these days merely as an agreement. We see it sometimes when houses are bought, the seller puts a covenant on the buyer. I remember when we lived in Maidstone in Kent that the house we bought had a covenant on it about what kind of fencing we could put up. If we wanted the house we had to sign up to the covenant. But covenant in the Bible is much closer to the suzerainty treaties of the ancient world, where an overlord offers protection to a people and they agree to his demands. It is very much the greater to the lesser and the terms are dictated to by the greater. As God so often puts it in the Old Testament "I will be your God and you will be my people". The gracious offer comes from God and the people are called to obedience.

God's covenant was celebrated each year by the Jews in the Passover feast, where they recalled their deliverance from Egypt. The disciples must have gasped with amazement when at the last supper Jesus said "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." They knew very well the words of Jeremiah – "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jer. 31:31-33). God said He would make a new covenant and here is Jesus bringing in that new covenant. This is the only time that Jesus is recorded as using the word covenant. Unlike Old Testament prophets He did not call the people back to the old covenant but proclaimed the kingdom of the God. Here He institutes the new covenant in the midst of the celebration of the old covenant. And furthermore, the

disciples knew that covenants were ratified by blood, and here is Jesus saying that this new covenant will be ratified in His own blood. He not only initiates the new covenant but completes it. He is indeed the author and perfecter of our faith. God prepares the feast and then says come and eat, but to do that, we have to come under His Kingship and rule. It is only under His rule that we truly find ourselves, the people that God created us to be.

As Alan Hirsch said “Jesus becomes the pivotal point in our relation to God, and it is to him that we must give our allegiance and loyalty. Jesus is Lord! And this lordship is expressed in exactly the same way that it is in the Old Testament. It is the covenant claim of God over our lives – the unshakable centre of the Christian creed and confession. And it is not just about the nature of God himself; it has practical implications for our lives.” (The forgotten ways, 2nd Edition p100). I would go further and say it has **profound** practical implications for our lives, so now we turn to consequences.

Thirdly consequences. Jesus is Lord is life changing in the here and now. Our faith in Jesus is not just a set of creeds we subscribe to, but a life changing call. It permeates our whole being, there is no part of our lives that does not come under the Lordship of Christ. As Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch theologian and politician said “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine.” The contrast between the rich, young man in Mark 10 and Paul in Philippians 3 could not be clearer. The rich, young man comes to Jesus and genuinely wants to learn the truth but sadly the cost of discipleship is too high for him. Please note that it says Jesus loved the rich young ruler. Jesus doesn’t rule out the rich entering into his kingdom but He emphasises the difficulties they have to overcome – is their trust in their riches or is their trust in Him? We know that there were rich people within the circle of Jesus’ followers e.g. Joseph of Aramathea, and some of the well-off women who provided for some of the disciple’s needs. Yes, Jesus reaches out to the least and the lost but his message is universal to whoever will come, rich and poor alike are called to follow Him with all that that entails in the path and cost of discipleship.

In contrast to the rich young ruler, Paul declares that he has suffered the loss of everything to follow Jesus. We must not belittle what Paul had to give up and the hardships he had to endure just because he had a dramatic encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road – they were real! He declares “whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:7-9). Here is Paul talking not just about his initial following of Jesus, but his lifelong journey of following. As Jim Elliott said, that which is lifelong has to be surrendered over a lifetime. Following Jesus is not just an initial decision to follow Him, but a lifelong walk in the steps of the Master. It is truly being under new management, the old has passed away, behold the new has come. The new covenant that Jesus initiated not only brings the

glorious offer of forgiveness, but also the new life of the indwelling Spirit of Christ to bring forth the likeness of the King in all those who own Him as Lord.

You would have noticed that my title has a question mark at the end –“Under new management?” So where do we stand, under the rule of God or not?

I want to finish with some very challenging words of Lee Camp - “The proclamation of the “gospel” has often failed to emphasize a fundamental element of the teaching of Jesus, and indeed, of orthodox Christian doctrine. “Jesus is Lord” is a radical claim, one that is ultimately rooted in questions of allegiance, of ultimate authority, of the ultimate norm and standard for human life. Instead, Christianity has often sought to ally itself comfortably with allegiance to other authorities, be they political, economic, cultural or ethnic. Could it be that “Jesus is Lord” has become one of the most widespread Christian lies? Have Christians claimed the lordship of Jesus, but systematically set aside the call to obedience to this Lord?” (Quoted by Alan Hirsch p106.) I pray that this may not be said of any of us.