

Diakonia Program – Northern Illinois Synod ELCA

Early Church History

Session 4, Segment A Who Is Jesus?

- I. Opening Devotions
- II. Reflections on Last Week
- III. The Historical Jesus & the Christ of Faith – *“for me, trusting the Jesus of this story has come to mean more than knowing history. Over the years, it has come to mean recognizing the story to be grounded in the witness of the Spirit, in the testimonies of the saints and martyrs, and in my own life experience. People say this Jesus is found in the Bible and in the church. So many say it that I think it must be true, but for me the experience has not been one of finding him anywhere. For me, Bible and church, liturgy and creed, word and sacrament, have not served to facilitate a human quest through which we might recover Jesus and restore history. Rather, they have served to disclose a divine quest through which Jesus himself redeems history and recovers humanity. In short, I never once have felt as though I were finding Jesus in any of this, but I frequently feel as though I am being found. I think of the story that way: not as a place where I look for Jesus but as the place where Jesus finds me.”*¹
- IV. Sources of History
 - a. Roman Literature – Tacitus, Suetonius and Josephus all write about Jesus – sparsely. All write after Jesus’ death and are geared more to the movement than the man.
 - b. Jewish writings – only one ambiguous reference exists.
 - c. Paul – Though the earliest contributor to the “record,” Paul gives us very little historical information beyond cross and resurrection. He seems to refer to some sayings of Jesus at times.
 - d. The Synoptic Gospels – Synoptic means “parallel” referring to the overlap of material. They rely on one another and upon other sources unknown to us.
 - e. John – Seems to be composed in layers – some may be rooted in the eyewitness of the beloved disciple (Perhaps the holy week narratives). Very difficult to assess the source as a document of history.
 - f. Apocryphal Gospels – Other accounts of Jesus’ life that are not in the canon of scripture. Of the many documents, only two are generally given any credence by historians – The Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter.
 - g. The Apostolic Witness – The telling of the story and proclamation of the gospel by the apostles is the primary fuel for the early Church. All other documents accumulate along the way.
- V. Story as a way of knowing – Our modern view of knowledge is at the heart of our difficulty in grasping Jesus and the struggle of the early Church against heresy.

- a. Knowing through story is communal, interactive – it is expansive rather than restrictive as the modern view is. Layers of meaning happen. Early Church was not restricting meaning, but was discerning among multiple layers of meaning.
- b. Writing objectifies the content of the story.
- c. The early Church is concerned with preserving the story, not the history.
- d. Jesus is fused with the story of God's saving acts in Israel. Jesus is encountered in cross and resurrection. Through the Spirit, remembrances of Jesus flesh out the apostolic witness. The Historic Jesus, his prayers to "Abba" and the presence of the resurrected Spirit of Jesus among them began to be constitutive of the experience – the story – of the Church.

Session 4, Segment B
Controversies of the Early Church

- I. Heresy breeds orthodoxy – Walter Bauer
- II. Gentile inclusion is the first controversy
- III. Gnosticism
 - a. Surfaces and threatens the gospel between 80-150 CE. Beginnings are as early as 55-64 CE, evidenced in Paul's writings to the Corinthians.
 - b. Rooted in Greek philosophy. Characterized by human acquisition of divine knowledge that is secret to outsiders and a stark dualism. Spiritual is everything – material is nothing.
 - c. Some applications took the concept of grace and the gnostic rejection of material things as a license to hedonism – nothing matters.
 - d. Others took the opposite track and became extremely ascetic, rejecting anything physical.
 - e. The application of gnostic thought threatened the incarnation, resurrection, and humanity of Christ. The story was threatened. Incarnation as an illusion informed the docetist heresy – a gnostic bred rejection of Jesus' death.
 - f. Marcion – excommunicated in 144 CE – used this dualism to distinguish between the God of the Old Testament and the God revealed in Christ. They were different, and God in Christ had defeated the evil God of Moses.
 - g. Valentinus – Also rejected the God of Moses and connected that God to the Greek "Demiurge" – a kind of evil power. He taught that there were levels of knowledge and so, mystical levels of communion with the divine.
 - h. Montanus – Extremely ascetic group who expected the immediate return of Christ in Phrygia about 156 CE. He claimed divinity for himself, also.

IV. Easter

- a. Oldest celebration of Easter is the same time as Jewish Passover – 14th day of Nisan, whatever day of the week it falls.
- b. By 160 CE, Rome and Alexandria celebrate Easter on the Sunday following Passover. – the Sunday after the first full moon following the spring equinox.
- c. Certain groups insisted on the older dating, in spite of Victor, Bishop of Rome's call for unity on the matter. Lasted until the 9th century.

V. Docetists & Ebionites

- a. Docetists regarded Christ as God "disguised as a human."
- b. Ebionites saw Jesus as a normal human imbued with God's power in a special way at his baptism.
- c. Each seek to reduce the divine nature of Christ.

VI. Monarchianism

- a. This controversy brings to light the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.
- b. The essence of all variations of this heresy is that there is really only one "person" in God. In 3rd century, Sabellius pursued this heresy in Rome. The Father and Son are one in the same, we simply experience them in different "modes" (hence the modern term modalism). This was called "patripassianism" in the 3rd century.
- c. Hippolytus stood against Sabellius with a view that clung to distinct personhood of Father and Son. He even set himself up as anti-bishop of Rome in opposition to Callistus, who represented a sort of middle ground.
- d. This debate hung on into the fourth century when Tertullian began to address it. He introduces the sense that the Trinity is "one substance consisting in three persons."

VII. Arianism

- a. Arius was a presbyter in Alexandria in the fourth century. He denied the divinity of Christ stating that the Son was not God by nature. The Son's status was only a gift from the Creator who alone was God. The Son was a "creature" – as in, one created by God. While he did at some point agree that the Son was sinless and received enough wisdom to reveal the Father to humanity. He was excommunicated in 320 CE.
- b. Arius had supporters in the Church and the divisions over this heresy soon began to take political dimensions as territories all over the Empire were divided over the fight. The growing tumult over Trinitarian formulation led Constantine to call the Council of Nicea in 325 CE.
- c. The Council debate is not readily available – we do know Arius was condemned again and that others were cleared. We also know the outcome – a Creed that worked to confess a faith that guarded against heresy.

- d. Athanasius was a primary contributor of work on Christ's divinity. Through Christ, the image of God was restored to humanity. Christ was not just a messenger but "true God of true God."
- e. The Council did not put to rest the controversy. As long as Constantine was alive – nobody got out of line and orthodoxy reigned. At his death, Arianism began to grow again.
- f. The Cappadocian Fathers, led by Basil the Great of Caesarea, were the next advance in thinking that advanced the orthodox position. Their ability to talk about the Trinity in ways that informed both east and west led to the Council of Constantinople in 381 – one substance, three persons.

VIII. Apollonarianism

- a. Extreme reaction against Arians. Christ's humanity was different than other humans. Christ does not have a human soul.
- b. Denial of Christ's true incarnation was a natural outcome.

IX. Nestorianism

- a. Nestorius of Antioch was bishop of Constantinople in 428 CE. He rejected the idea that Mary was proclaimed as "God-bearer" (theotokos) and held a view of two natures in Christ.
- b. The notion of "two-natures" (dyophysite) persisted until the call of the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

X. Donatism

- a. In the wake of the Decian persecution, there arose a question of whether an apostate could be accepted back into the church.
- b. This centered in Carthage and when Donatus became bishop a hard line was taken against acceptance. Augustine became a chief opponent.

Session 4, Segment C Councils & Creeds

I. Jesus is Lord

II. "The Apostles' Creed"

- a. By the 4th century it exists in western liturgical rites, mostly at baptism

III. Jerusalem

- a. New Testament literature walks us through this controversy, which is settled (a little) at Jerusalem in the mid first century CE

IV. Nicea – 325 CE

- a. Constantine calls this council and it deals directly with Arianism. Eusebius is a major player submitting a first creedal formula that is rejected.

- b. The council comes up with a creed which bears resemblance to the “Nicene Creed” we use today.
- V. Constantinople – 381 CE
 - a. Our version of the Nicene Creed adopted.
 - b. The treatment of the Holy Spirit is expanded.
- VI. Chalcedon 451 CE
 - a. The dispute between a Christ with one or two natures came to head in 451. Informed by the work of the Cappadocian Fathers, Christology and matters about Mary were put to rest.
- VII. Athanasian Creed
 - a. In the East, the contributions of the Cappadocian Fathers – the mutual indwelling of the three persons influenced all thinking about the Trinity
 - b. In the West, Augustine becomes the one who articulates a deepening understanding of the Trinity. Following Ambrose and Jerome, he asserts that the Spirit proceeds or emanates from both Father & Son. East tends to lean toward procession from Father, through the Son.
 - c. By the fifth century, the Athanasian Creed appears with procession addressed in a Western way of thinking. It finds its way into the Nicene Creed with the word “filioque,” which in Latin means “and the Son.”

APOSTLES' CREED

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

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 into hell.*
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.

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

*Or, He descended to the dead.

NICENE CREED

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven;
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the virgin Mary, and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen

ATHANASIAN CREED

Whoever wants to be saved
should above all cling to the catholic faith.
Whoever does not guard it whole and inviolable
will doubtless perish eternally.
Now this is the catholic faith:

We worship one God in trinity
and the Trinity in unity,
neither confusing the persons
nor dividing the divine being.
For the Father is one person,
the Son is another,
and the Spirit is still another.
But the deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
is one, equal in glory,
coeternal in majesty.
What the Father is,
the Son is,
and so is the Holy Spirit.

Uncreated is the Father;
uncreated is the Son;
uncreated is the Spirit.
The Father is infinite;
the Son is infinite;
the Holy Spirit is infinite.
Eternal is the Father;
eternal is the Son;
eternal is the Spirit:
And yet there are not three eternal beings,
but one who is eternal;
as there are not three uncreated and unlimited beings,
but one who is uncreated and unlimited.
Almighty is the Father;
almighty is the Son;
almighty is the Spirit:
And yet there are not three almighty beings,
but one who is almighty.

Thus the Father is God;
the Son is God;
the Holy Spirit is God:
And yet there are not three gods,
but one God.
Thus the Father is Lord;
the Son is Lord;
the Holy Spirit is Lord:
And yet there are not three lords,

but one Lord.
As Christian truth compels us to acknowledge
each distinct person as God and Lord,
so catholic religion forbids us
to say that there are three gods or lords.

The Father was neither made
nor created nor begotten;
the Son was neither made nor created,
but was alone begotten of the Father;
the Spirit was neither made nor created,
but is proceeding from the Father and the Son.
Thus there is one Father, not three fathers;
one Son, not three sons;
one Holy Spirit, not three spirits.

And in this Trinity, no one is before or after,
greater or less than the other;
but all three persons are in themselves, coeternal and coequal;
and so we must worship the Trinity in unity
and the one God in three persons.

Whoever wants to be saved should think thus about the Trinity.

It is necessary for eternal salvation that one also faithfully believe
that our Lord Jesus became flesh.

For this is the true faith that we believe and confess:
That our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son,
is both God and man.
He is God, begotten before all worlds
from the being of the Father,
and he is man, born in the world
from the being of his mother--
existing fully as God,
and fully as man
with a rational soul and a human body;
equal to the Father in divinity,
subordinate to the Father in humanity.

Although he is God and man,
he is not divided,
but is one Christ.
He is united because God
has taken humanity into himself;
he does not transform deity into humanity.
He is completely one in the unity of his person,
without confusing his natures.
For as the rational soul and body are one person,
so the one Christ is God and man.

He suffered death for our salvation.
He descended into hell
 and rose again from the dead.
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.

At his coming all people shall rise bodily
 to give an account of their own deeds.
Those who have done good will enter eternal life,
those who have done evil will enter eternal fire.

This is the catholic faith.
One cannot be saved
 without believing this firmly and faithfully.

¹ Powell, Mark Alan, *Jesus as a Figure in History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998) p. 9