

## Sunday - 10<sup>th</sup> June 2018 - 9.15 am – The Apostles' Creed – 'I believe'

' . . . crucified, risen and ascended . . . '

**Luke 18. 31-34**

**Romans 8. 31-39**

*In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.*

As things have worked out over this sermon series we are heading towards the end and have only just covered the three main '*I believe*' lines plus a look at them altogether on Trinity Sunday. So we still have a lot to cover and today I want us to look at the rest of what we say after the words '*I believe in Jesus Christ*'. . to the end of that section; Nine assertions of who Jesus was and what he did. Quite a tall order for a morning. And one of the interesting things to consider is the reason why these particular statements are in the Creed. Yes, they are all part of the Christian faith but in some cases they are there for very specific reasons often to do with early church thinking and especially to do with heresy – that wrong thinking about God which I keep mentioning.

So back to a beginning although not **the** beginning but to the incarnation. Jesus coming as fully divine man and fully human God; that's what incarnation is, in a nutshell - one of the central beliefs of Christianity. It's important because it not only tells us about Jesus but it also tells us something about all human beings – because Jesus became human and took on that identity, all humanity, we, have been blessed by God.

Last week we thought about Jesus Christ being God's 'only Son and our Lord' so now we need to think of:

*Jesus Christ who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary*  
With our understanding of biology - sperm meets egg – a 50/50 split of contribution - we perhaps think that the Creed is asserting that Jesus was half divine from the Holy Spirit and half human from Mary. But these words were written, not to explain Jesus' biological origin but instead to reinforce the idea that Jesus' conception was something special and that it was a real birth of a real human.

And what do we learn when we take the two ideas separately?

*who was conceived by the Holy Spirit*

In the Old Testament and into the New we have stories of women who were unable to bear children. Then God intervenes and the woman produces a son - Sarah, Rebekah, Hannah and then on to Elizabeth. God intervenes to fulfil his promise to the people of Israel. And the culmination

of this is this birth, wholly procured by holy intervention. *Jesus Christ, conceived by the Holy Spirit . . .* by the intervention of God – that’s what we are reminding ourselves of in the Creed. This reference headlines the great plans which God has for this baby boy.

*And born of the Virgin Mary?* .

Many of the heresies at the time when the Creeds were being formulated centred around the true identity and nature of Jesus Christ. Affirming that Jesus was ‘bodily born’ reinforces his nature as human and brings with it the messiness of human birth and humanity. A birth reinforces the powerlessness of the baby, so again Jesus’ humanity stares out at us.

And the giving birth by a virgin? Mary shouldn’t have been able to bear a child for an obvious reason so that makes her a very special type of ‘barren’ woman mirroring the very special nature of this birth and God’s intervention. This emphasis on Mary’s virginity is very different from that in the later church teaching which for so long included the denigration of sex (and thus women) and the veneration of virginity signalling purity. For too long Mary’s virginity has been used as a route to oppress women rather than celebrate the amazing reality of Jesus’ conception and birth. I wonder how you have always read that line and whether you begin to see things differently now.

So then to ‘*suffered under Pontius Pilate*’ Why is PP the only baddy who gets a mention in the Creed, you might ask? We’re told the answer is quite simple – he is named not to lay the blame, but to provide a date! In a similar way to the naming of reigns of Kings or rulers ‘*In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree (when Quirinius was governor of Syria . . .)*’ We’re being reminded that this isn’t a story about something that *may* have happened. This isn’t a story of a recurring cycle - like the local fertility myths, which told of cycles of birth and death and birth again. This happened at a particular time – a historical one-off verifiable event.

*‘was crucified, died and was buried’*

By now perhaps we are on automatic pilot saying the Creed – of course he was crucified and buried – we *know* that! But do we understand what saying that meant to those who first wrote and spoke it? I am not this morning looking at what effect the crucifixion had in the sense of allowing our sins to be forgiven – I am leaving that task up to Simon in a couple of weeks to where that is expressly mentioned in the last section of the Creed. What I am talking about this morning is that in saying that Jesus was crucified we are advertising the terrible truth that Jesus was humiliatingly killed in a way which was reserved for criminals and what was termed the ‘lower classes’. This death was scandalous and to include it in an affirmation of faith in those early days was tantamount to asserting that

Roman law had got it wrong, when they had crucified the king of the universe or the early disciples had got it wrong in proclaiming him to be King!

And this willingness to refer to crucifixion contrasts the faith of the early church with much of Christianity across history and still today which mistakenly believes it deserves prestige and respect. What we say in the Creed should remind us that Christ was despised and criminalised and in seeking to follow him we may need to be prepared for this too. This identification with a persecuted Christ may be a comfort to those today who say the Creed but who are persecuted for doing so. They choose to believe even though it's not the safe or respectable choice - but quite the opposite. It is *they* who are sharing with Christ in his suffering as they speak of the nature of his death in the Creed. And so are we surprised that it is so often today in the places of persecution and subjection where the church bears the most fruit?

And to go on to assert that Jesus '*died and was buried*' came as a further nail in the coffin (if you'll pardon the pun) of those heretics who denied that Jesus was fully human. He had a body – he died and so he was buried – just like you and me. That's what we're affirming.

And so also  
*'he descended to the dead'*

By all accounts, this was a later addition, not entering the Apostles' Creed until the ninth century. But whilst some may not consider it to be authentic, the truth of the statement is not denied. It follows Jewish traditional belief that death is the final going down – the final descent - Jesus was *really* dead. He enters the HQ of evil in order to defeat it and we see it as an essential part of Jesus' work of salvation for him to have destroyed the power of sin and death at its very core.

↳ From heaven to earth to the cross to down below, Jesus Christ has descended to the depths – his task is done and so the only way is up!

*On the third day he rose again . . .*

Jesus has passed through death and out the other side. And in that the Creed charts the downfall of Christ, it balances this with the upswing, through ascension, heaven and giving of judgment. This Biblical literary device puts the most important thing at the centre and bookends it with mirroring sides. So at the centre of the whole Creed, as at the centre of our faith and what the church believes, is Resurrection! On one side there is

Jesus as victim the other side as victor and the turning point is Resurrection.

So *'he ascended into heaven'*

Jesus going back up to heaven. It's easy to think of it as just an epilogue at the end of Jesus' life. But in fact it is an essential part of the story, which is why we rehearse it in the Creed.

The Ascension shows that the final destination of humanity is fellowship with God, our Creator - not the emptiness of nothingness. So it is Jesus who is sitting at the right hand of the Father, confirming his victory. It is Jesus who is shown great favour as the guest of honour and with whom God is sharing his authority. His ultimate destination is not death but intimate fellowship with his Father, reigning over all things.

And so we come to the last line of this section and perhaps the line we struggle with most:

*'and he will come to judge the living and the dead'.*

How do we react when we hear the word 'judgment'? Does it sound much more like the stuff of the Old Testament than the New? So many of us struggle with the 'harsh judge of the Old Testament' We can all be tempted to dislike the God who smites and judges – who appears to be legalistic and demanding and, let's be honest, angry. So we reject notions of judgment and instead prefer to focus on a God of love, what we read in Jesus' teachings in the New Testament - soothing and generous and utterly committed to our well-being in a way which we can understand.

But this line of the Creed reminds us that it is actually Jesus who is our judge. And if we believe that justice is when everything is put in its right place, then ultimately love coincides with justice in the person of Jesus Christ. We can't understand the purity of such infinite love and equally we can't really get our heads round what God's infinite justice looks like. What these lines in the Creed do give us though, is the confidence that we trust in the one who died and suffered for us. So our judge is also our redeemer. And Jesus will come as the judge to all those who have been and those who are to come. His reach is to both the living and the dead and no one is separated from him.

Of course, the Creed doesn't mention the 'I' word – the love of God from which our reading in Romans reminded us we cannot be separated. God's love is often the lens through which we tend to look at faith these days – not concerns about heresy like the Early church. And Paul reminds us that we can say the words of the Creed as conquerors – not through any right or work of our own, but through God's love for us made known in Jesus Christ – his life and death and life. Amen