

Jesus Is Lord!

Pledging All Our Allegiance to Jesus

by the Rev. Dr. J. Ted Blakley



YEAR A • TRINITY SUNDAY

Genesis 1:1–2:4a

Psalm 8

2 Corinthians 13:11–13

Matthew 28:16–20

A. D. 2014, Sunday, June 15th

☞ 8:00 a.m. • St. John's Episcopal Church; Wichita, Kansas

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The Sermon

1698 words • ?? minutes

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. *Amen.*

WORSHIPPING JESUS — EXTRAORDINARY

It happened on Easter morning. In the wee dawn hours, Mary Magdalene and another Mary make their way to the tomb where the body of their crucified Lord had been placed two days before. But when they arrive, they find the tomb empty. An angel tells them that Jesus has been raised from the dead, and as they are heading back to share this extraordinary news with the other disciples, Jesus suddenly appears and greets them. Immediately, the two Marys fall down and worship him. Jesus then tells them, “Don’t be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” Today’s gospel reading presents the rest of the story.

The scene opens on a mountain in Galilee where the remaining eleven disciples have assembled in anticipation of seeing Jesus again. When Jesus joins them on the mountain, some doubt that it is really him. Others, however, worship him just as the two Marys had done earlier. This is extraordinary. You might expect such behavior from the ancient Greeks and Romans, with all of their gods and goddesses, with all their divine heroes and Caesars, but not monotheistic Jews. Jews don’t worship human beings, even extraordinary human beings, because worship is reserved for God alone. Nevertheless, they worship Jesus with no sense that they have abandoned their monotheistic faith. Clearly, they have come to understand that Jesus, though clearly a human being, belongs to the unique identity of the one true God. He is not just the Messiah, the anointed son of David; he is, in fact, the Son of living God.

ALL AUTHORITY — EXTRAORDINARY

Equally extraordinary are the words that Jesus speaks. Listen to all of the *alls*. “*All* authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of *all* nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey *all* that I have commanded you.” (28:18). *All* authority, *all* nations, *all* commandments.

What a massive, sweeping, all-encompassing claim. Jesus doesn’t just possess some authority; he possesses *all* authority, without remainder. Moreover, this authority is not just heavenly authority, it is earthly authority as well. In other words, Jesus’ authority encompasses all spheres of human life, not only the spiritual, but the political, the economic, and the social spheres as well.

Yet, we live in a world that has learned to separate the church from the state, the religious from the secular, faith from knowledge. Consequently, Jesus is only granted influence over a part of life, not the whole of it. He is relegated to the realm of personal opinion and private devotion, and barred from the public square.

For example, notice that when Jesus appears in *Time* magazine, he appears in the religion section, not the section on world affairs. That’s where Jesus supposedly belongs in our increasingly global and pluralistic world. Jesus belongs in the religion textbooks, next to the other great leaders of the world’s religions, alongside the likes of Moses and Mohammad, Buddha and Confucius. Our world is comfortable with that sort of Jesus; that sort of Jesus is safe. Unfortunately, more and more Christians have also become increasingly comfortable with that sort of Jesus.

But that is not the Jesus we meet in today’s gospel, the Jesus that claims all authority in heaven and on earth. Nor is it the Jesus early Christians proclaimed. When the first Christians traveled throughout the Roman Empire enduring much hardship, they were not proclaiming a new religion or a new private spiritual experience. Had this been all that they were up to, they might have been belittled, but they would never have been persecuted. After all the Greco-Roman world was a consumer of religions and spiritualities, and they had room for more. Instead, the early Christians were proclaiming that Jesus is Lord of all. And you know what that means. If Jesus is Lord, then Zeus isn’t. If Jesus is Lord, then Isis isn’t. And if Jesus is Lord, then Caesar isn’t. In short, if Jesus is Lord, then all other lords—be they religious, ideological, or political—are not. If Jesus is Lord, then we owe our whole allegiance to him.

OUR CHRISTIAN CONFESSION — JESUS IS LORD

In 2001, I attended a talk at Fuller Theological Seminary. It was being given by my mentor, Marianne Meyers Thompson, who is a New Testament scholar as well as an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church. She was speaking to a group of Presbyterian ministers, and the title of her talk was, “Jesus is Lord: How the Earliest Christian Confession Informs Our Proclamation in a Pluralistic Age.” I would like to conclude today’s sermon by presenting the concluding section of her talk.

“There is no right worship of God where Jesus is not also acknowledged and confessed as Lord. To confess that Jesus is Lord is not to confess that in him we have found a way to God, but that in him God has embodied a way to us. To say there are many equally valid ways to God is not to make God more generous, but simply to make God generic. And a generic God, a God known apart from Israel’s story and apart from the narrative of Jesus, is simply not the God of the Bible. What is imperative for the church to articulate today, if it is not simply to be assimilated into its pagan context, is a

theology which does not cater to the lowest common denominator of confession, but stands with Paul in affirming in the face of every possible objection and obstacle: “There is one God, and one Lord.” From that starting point, we may work together to bring the church to the point where ‘every knee will bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.’

Our context is no more pluralistic than was [the early Christians]. The early church knew of the claims that there were indeed ‘many lords and many gods.’ Precisely in the context of such claims, Paul affirmed that there is ‘one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ.’ Our world, too, knows of ‘many lords and many gods’—and many of them take the same form as they did in Paul’s own day—nationalism, foreign deities, fate and fortune, and the pantheistic belief that all is God. In the ancient world, Christianity provided an alternative to the shapeless confusion of antiquity; in the modern world, it can provide the same alternative, but only if it articulates the gospel clearly.

It is urgent that the church have the courage to speak its belief in the one Lord. The church must be clear that it does not seek to add another deity to the pluralistic mix, but that it intends to bear witness to the Lord who is ‘above every name.’ The confession that Jesus is ‘my personal Lord’ is not the same as the confession ‘he is Lord.’ And unless we truly believe that he is Lord, we ought not to make the confession he is ‘my Lord,’ because to do so is tantamount to idolatry, honoring one lord among many lords.

But if we are to speak the gospel, we must be certain that our mode of confession matches the self-giving and self-emptying of the Crucified One. So question 52 of the [Presbyterian] Study Catechism asks, ‘How should I treat non-Christians and people of other religions?’ Answer: As much as I can, I should meet friendship with friendship, hostility with kindness, generosity with gratitude, persecution with forbearance, truth with agreement, and error with truth. I should express my faith with humility and devotion as the occasion requires, whether silently or openly, boldly or meekly, by word or by deed. I should avoid compromising the truth on the one hand and being narrow-minded on the other. In short, I should always welcome and accept these others in a way that honors and reflects the Lord’s welcome and acceptance of me.’

If this is what the Catechism asks of us in relationship to people of other religions, how much more should we deal with friendship, kindness, generosity, and forbearance with our sisters and brothers in Christ? The virtue we must seek to cultivate is not the American virtue of tolerance, but the biblical virtue of humility. Humility is not the same as tolerance, for humility recognizes that a word of judgment may always be addressed to us. Humility is the stance that we, as those who are united in baptism to the death and resurrection of our Lord, must seek. We have a long way to go before we show the kind of courageous love which Jesus demonstrated to the tax collectors and sinners as he welcomed them to his table. We forget the scandalous character of his act, as we forget the shameful character of his death on the cross, which he endured for us while we were yet sinners. There will be a profound irony and, indeed, shame if those of us who insist most vociferously that Jesus is Lord are also known to be characterized by a lack of humility and love.

But, as the Catechism states, we must also ‘meet error with truth.’ There is no formula—nor has there ever been a formula—for how one measures and mixes truth and forbearance. Paul’s unflagging commitment and unflinching compassion remind us that we can never compromise on our zeal for truth—or for forbearance. This is neither an easy road to walk nor an easy witness to bear. But let us also be reminded that where the church fails to hold fast to its commitment to Christ as Lord, and

there-fore to hold and speak this truth in the humility of Christ himself, the loss is not only ours, or the church's, but also the world's.”

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