

## We believe in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord

### Introduction

The Apostles Creed has a very short section on the Father and the Holy Spirit, but a lengthy one about Jesus. It is clear that in the second and third centuries AD the focus in Christian discipleship training was on the identity of Jesus at the centre of our faith. It was what set Christianity apart from Judaism out of which it came, as well as distinctive in its truth claims compared to the other known religions or belief systems of that day. The Christian leaders of this era knew that it was impossible to have a correct understanding of the Trinity, or how we are saved or even of the significance of His death and resurrection without understanding with clarity who it is they are claiming as their Lord and Saviour, and to whom they have pledged their lives in Christian service. It was not simply agreement about faith statements. In the Roman world of that day, many of the Emperors required citizens of their Empire to pledge allegiance to them by the declaration that: 'Caesar is Lord'. For the vast majority of residents of the Roman-controlled world around the Mediterranean Sea, these were merely words that tripped off their tongues as easily as most of us in the United Kingdom sing the National Anthem (God save the King or Queen...). However, these small gatherings of followers of Jesus were convinced that their pledge of allegiance was to a higher authority that was based on their understanding of the identity of the One they worshipped and adored. For some in their ranks, to hold to such truth claims could cost them their lives. This is why there is such a large focus on who Jesus is in this statement of faith known as The Apostles Creed. This message will focus on the first four things it states about His identity.

### 1. We believe in Jesus

Taking a step back into the Jewish world of 2,000 years ago in the Holy Land, the name of Jesus (the Greek rendering of the Hebrew name 'Joshua') would have been a commonly chosen first name for a son in a Jewish family. It means 'God saves' or 'God is my salvation'. We are familiar with the message through a dream from the angel of the Lord to Joseph, in Matthew chapter one. *But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save his people from their sins* (Matthew 1:20-21). For a boy going to his local school, there was a high probability that there would have been at least one classmate with this name. There were at least five Jewish high priests who were called Jesus, and in the works of the first century AD Jewish historian Josephus, there were at least twenty men with this first name of whom ten were alive at the time of Jesus [William Barclay, *The Plain Man Looks at the Apostles Creed*, p. 58]. This name is also found in the New Testament for, a Jewish follower of Jesus who was a colleague of the apostle Paul, Jesus Justus (Colossians 4:11). There is also a reference in the Book of Acts to a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named 'Bar-Jesus', living in Paphos on the island of Cyprus (Acts 13:6-12). It is probable, therefore, that a Jewish person in the first half of the first century AD would have viewed this name as a familiar name for a Jewish boy, without any particular divine significance. Therefore, unlike us today, the name of Jesus would have been seen more as a reference to the humanity of our Lord and Saviour, that He was a figure grounded in history two thousand years ago. In Christian religious terms, it would be to emphasise the reality of His humanity as much as His divinity. However, in the last three decades of the first century AD, after the clear parting of the ways between the Jewish followers of Jesus who declined to get involved

in the war against Rome, in contrast to other Jews of their time, the name Jesus was consciously not chosen by other Jews for their young sons as it was now seen as inappropriate because of their rejection of the claims of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

The same choice but for opposite reasons, was later found in countries where the Protestant Reformation was successful in the Sixteenth Century AD, over the last four centuries. It is unlikely that you would find any male child being given this first name out of reverence for the One central to our faith. It is, therefore, a shock to find out that in some historically Roman Catholic countries like Spain that parents would chose that name for one of their children. The explanation commonly given for that choice is that in that cultural context, people distinguish between the common name 'Jesús' that may be used to name a child, whereas 'Jesucristo' (Jesus-Christ) is used to refer to the Lord Jesus Christ. Of current Premier league footballers in England, there is one called Gabriel Jesus, a Brazilian by birth, who is a striker for Arsenal Football Club in London. It is probable that his parents would be of Roman Catholic heritage. In summary, this first claim about our Lord and Saviour is His name 'Jesus'. It reminds us of both His humanity and the fact that the name means 'God saves' or 'God is my salvation'. This statement in the Apostles Creed continues:

## **2. We believe in Jesus Christ**

At the heart of the Jewish faith as practised in the synagogues in Israel two thousand years ago, was an acknowledgement that they were waiting for the promised Messiah that they understood was referred to in their Bible, which Christians call the Old Testament. Many Jewish girls dreamed that one day they might have the privilege of being the mother of the Messiah and sermons in the synagogues were delivered to encourage congregations in tough times that when the Messiah comes things will be so much better as earthly oppressors like the Roman occupiers of their country would be removed. The word 'Christ' or 'Messiah' is a title not a name. It means 'God's anointed One'. It was a reference to the work and ministry of Jesus. It was descriptive of His identity like John 'the Baptist' literally 'John the baptizer', with reference to his distinctive ministry practice of baptizing by immersion the Jewish people who confessed their sins and repented of them at his services in the Judean desert.

Jesus was clear about His identity from the very beginning of His public ministry. In a service at the synagogue in His home town of Nazareth, the set Bible passage of the day was a well-known messianic passage from the scroll of Isaiah. Jesus read the opening verses of Isaiah chapter 61. This is Luke's account of what took place that day: *He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read,<sup>17</sup> and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: <sup>18</sup> 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free,<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.<sup>20</sup> Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him.<sup>21</sup> He began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4:16-21).* In all their years of attendance at the synagogue, the adults present would never hear another message like that one where the preacher for the day effectively told them, that the person they were waiting for had now come and was standing in their midst. It was a claim to be the Christ or Messiah, the One spoken of in their Scriptures.

In the New Testament there are many passages where this conviction is proclaimed. On the Day of Pentecost, the occasion when the Christian Church began in AD33, the Apostle Peter was the preacher whose message set out core Christian convictions about their faith and practice. In Acts 2:31-36, he declared: *Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of*

*the Messiah, that He was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did His body see decay.* <sup>32</sup> *God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it.* <sup>33</sup> *Exalted to the right hand of God, He has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.* <sup>34</sup> *For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, “‘The Lord said to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand* <sup>35</sup> *until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’”* <sup>36</sup> *‘Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: **God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.***’ We will come to the other title shortly, but the one that would have been grasped immediately by the thousands of hearers present was the claim to be the Christ, the Messiah. He is the person who will bring in the reign of God in its fullness. It is under His authority that God’s eternal purposes for His creation would come to pass. His eternal reign in glory would see all of God’s promises to His people fulfilled. Peter built on this truth claim in the next recorded message in Acts 3. Here after the healing of a lame man, an explanation is sought by those present for the miracle that has taken place before their eyes. In Acts 3:18-21, he declared: *But this is how God fulfilled what He had foretold through all the prophets, saying that His Messiah would suffer.* <sup>19</sup> *Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,* <sup>20</sup> *and that He may send **the Messiah**, who has been appointed for you – **even Jesus.*** <sup>21</sup> *Heaven must receive Him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as He promised long ago through His holy prophets.* This truth was stated by Peter again in the first message delivered to Gentile hearers in the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius in Acts 10:34-36: *Then Peter began to speak: ‘I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism* <sup>35</sup> *but accepts from every nation the one who fears Him and does what is right.* <sup>36</sup> *You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace **through Jesus Christ**, who is Lord of all.* Christians down the centuries not only acknowledged the humanity of Jesus, but also consistently proclaimed that **He is the Christ or Messiah** spoken of in the Jewish Bible whose coming, life, death and resurrection were predicted many years before His birth. In fact, so significant was His coming that history itself was divided in to time Before Christ (BC) and time in the year of our Lord (AD Anno Domini)

### 3. We believe in Jesus Christ **His only Son**

The third faith statement in The Apostles Creed is ‘His only Son’ with reference to God the Father. There is a qualifier here ‘only’ that makes it plain that Jesus is unique in His sonship. There is no-one else who shares it or who can share it. This principle is repeated in the Bible, for example in John 1:18: *No one has ever seen God, but **the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father**, has made him known.* Of course, John 3:16, the best known verse in the New Testament states: *For God so loved the world that He gave His **one and only Son**, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.* The vocabulary of the different translations of this verse may differ but they make exactly the same point concerning the uniqueness of the sonship of Jesus in His relation to the Father. At His baptism by John in the Jordan River, God the Father gave this declaration concerning Jesus and the actions He had undertaken. In Matthew 3:16-17 we read: *As soon as Jesus was baptised, He went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on Him.* <sup>17</sup> *And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.’* How are we to understand the sonship of Jesus in relation to the Father? Is He a lesser being or one equal to the Father? Jesus, in His message in John 5:19-23 made it abundantly clear how we should answer this question: *Jesus gave them this answer: ‘Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by Himself; He can do only what He sees His Father doing, because **whatever the Father does the Son also does.*** <sup>20</sup> *For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all He does. Yes, and He will show Him even greater works than these, so that you will be amazed.* <sup>21</sup> *For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom He is pleased to give it.* <sup>22</sup> *Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all*

judgment to the Son,<sup>23</sup> **that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent Him.** How important is it to accept this truth? In Matthew 11:27, Jesus declared: *All things have been committed to Me by My Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.* It could not be clearer or expressed more precisely than Jesus did to the congregation listening to Him that day.

There are plenty of references to the sonship of Jesus in the Bible. One passage that focusses on the identity of Jesus, is Colossians 1:15-20. Colossians 1:15 states: *The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.* What does this mean?

(a) **The exact likeness of God** *The Son is the image of the invisible God...* Most of us have seen a child of parents we have previously met and uttered words like: ‘he/she is so much like...’ their mother or father in one respect or another. Usually facial characteristics are prominent in the descriptive explanation. Yet on each occasion, if pressed, we would have to say that although this person is like another in their family in these respects, in other ways they are different from their – probably inheriting other characteristics from the other parent or grand-parent, as well as some features distinctive of them as a person. Yet what Paul says here of Jesus with respect to the Father is something very different. He chooses to use the word *εἰκὼν* (*image*). This word means a precise copy or reproduction of something that in every respect is the same as the thing it is said to be *an image of*. It was used in New Testament times to refer to the representation of the head of a ruler on a coin or the physical representation of a famous or powerful person in a statue erected in their honour. It is used in Hebrews 10:1 to refer to something that is real compared to something that is only a shadow or incomplete representation of something else. In more modern language we might use this term to refer to the likeness taken by a camera – ‘a photograph’. The picture doesn’t lie, unless it has been amended on photoshop or by some similar technology! A Roman soldier of that time Apion, in his surviving correspondence to his father Epimachus wrote the following: ‘I send you a little portrait of myself done by Euctemon.’ The word used for portrait (*εἰκωνιον*) is the diminutive form of the word used here by Paul. There is a second way in which this word was used in secular writing of that day from the world of business. In business transactions a person might order goods but not have all the money to pay for them at the time when the goods are ordered, so an I.O.U. document was drawn up and signed before they parted company that day; or they might pay for goods and the shop-keeper might need to check that the money submitted in payment was genuine. To the documents was attached an accurate, detailed and easily recognisable description of the purchaser of the goods. This formal description of the person was called an *εἰκὼν* (*image*) [W. Barclay, *The All-Sufficient Christ*, pp. 59-60]. Therefore, when Paul want to explain something of the relationship between God the Father and Jesus there is a ready-made vocabulary he can use to express it that people will easily understand.

How does Paul describe Jesus here? *The Son is the image of the invisible God...* In other words that Jesus is a ‘perfect portrait’ of the Father; that is to look at Jesus would be a perfect ‘photograph’ of what the Father is like; the Father who is invisible (I Timothy 6:16: *God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, <sup>16</sup>who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see.*) becomes visible in the person of Jesus. Therefore, in every respect the God-likeness of the man Jesus reveals to us all we need to know of the Father. We have the truth of the doctrinal convictions of our faith revealed through the authors of Scripture in the books of the Bible, the Word of God, but the revelation of who God is was manifested in human flesh in the living Word, Jesus Christ. Of whom John wrote at the start of his Gospel: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup>He was with God in the beginning. <sup>3</sup>Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made* (John 1:1-3). To ask what would God

say about this matter? Or what would God want done in this situation was observed in the gracious words and actions of Jesus in His earthly ministry. In His teaching consistently, not just in the Sermon on the Mount, in His healing and serving ministries and supremely in His amazing love for people revealed through His sacrifice on the cross, we see the mind and heart of the Father. In His relationship with the Father we see the supremacy of Jesus over any other person who has walked this earth who claimed to show people the way to God. No-one else has been described in this way- or at least not accurately! Jesus alone *is the image of the invisible God* (Colossians 1:15a).

On this basis we have no difficulty accepting Jesus' words in John 14:9 to Philip: *Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father*. Yet Paul writes about Christian believers these words in Romans 8:29: *For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image (εικονος) of His Son that He might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters*. Do you grasp what an incredible statement Paul has made here? That some, ideally all, believers have progressed so well in their faith that when other people see the way they live and hear the words they say that it is an accurate reflection of how Jesus would have spoken and acted! Wow what an amazing declaration! This is not the only passage to make this point. In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul wrote: *And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit*. John the apostle in I John 3:2-3 backed up what Paul wrote with these words: *Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.*<sup>3</sup> *All who have this hope in Him purify themselves, just as He is pure*. This is a statement of fact describing you and me! What an encouragement to keep close to Jesus and to seek to be like Him in our words and actions.

(b) **The one honoured by the Father** ...*the firstborn over all creation* (Colossians 1:15b) In ordinary human speech the word *firstborn* has a literal meaning of the first baby born to a couple. It can have that meaning in the Bible in many places, but that is not at all the meaning Paul has in mind in Colossians 1:15. Luke 2:7 was factually true. In his account of the Christmas story, Luke writes these words referring to the time Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem. *While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,<sup>7</sup> and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.* (Luke 2:6-7). Yet the Greek word Paul uses here can equally have another meaning. This is seen in Psalm 89:27 with reference to Solomon's relationship with his father David. *And I will appoint him to be my firstborn, the most exalted of the kings of the earth*. It was exaltation to the highest place of honour that is following David as the next king. Yet Solomon was one of many sons and closer to being the youngest than the oldest. Therefore, this term *firstborn* indicates the individuals pre-eminence in status. It was used of Solomon, but it was also used in the Old Testament to refer to the nation of Israel. Exodus 4:22 states: *Then say to Pharaoh, "This is what the Lord says: **Israel is My firstborn son,**<sup>23</sup> and I told you, 'Let My son go, so that he may worship Me.' But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son."* literally fulfilled in the death of that individual, but also in the death of the other first-born sons of the Egyptian nation at that time as well. It was the greatest honour for this nation to be honoured above all other nations, but with privileges comes responsibilities. (Jeremiah also refers to national Israel using this same term in Jeremiah 31:9: *Ephraim is My firstborn son*) Amos 3:2 states: *Hear this word, people of Israel, the word the Lord has spoken against you – against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt: <sup>2</sup> 'You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins.'* Privileges and responsibilities go together. Jesus was born as a human being in God's created world. He had the privilege of the place of honour over the creation, but also the responsibility of showing the people He encountered what God is like. He

honoured that privileged position through His perfect life and His death in our place. How are you and I getting on? Are we honouring God through our minds and hearts?

#### 4. We believe in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord

I had already mentioned Romans Emperors from the late first century AD wanting citizens of the empire to declare that 'Caesar is Lord'. But Christians would not do that because their highest allegiance was to Jesus as Lord. The baptismal confession of Christians throughout the years of the Early Church was 'Jesus is Lord'. In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul wrote: ***That if you confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*** <sup>10</sup> *For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved* (Romans 10:9-10). The challenge comes to each one of us. Has there been a time when you put your faith and trust in Him as your Lord and Saviour? In Philippians 2, there is a hymn of praise or at least part of a hymn of praise used in the first century church that contains these lines: *Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name,* <sup>10</sup> *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,* <sup>11</sup> *and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father* (Philippians 2:9-11). This passage is based on some verses in Isaiah 45:22-25: *'Turn to Me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.* <sup>23</sup> *By Myself I have sworn, My mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: before Me every knee will bow; by Me every tongue will swear.* <sup>24</sup> *They will say of Me, "In the Lord alone are deliverance and strength."* <sup>25</sup> *All who have raged against Him will come to Him and be put to shame.* <sup>25</sup> *But all the descendants of Israel will find deliverance in the Lord and will make their boast in Him.* In very simple terms, the pledge of allegiance by the Old Testament people of God to the One who was in covenant with them was to The **Lord**. For the newly baptized believer in the church to declare 'Jesus is Lord' is to proclaim that He is God (as well as a human being), in the same way that God the Father is God, as Jewish believers had proclaimed down the centuries. Have you acknowledged Him in this way, as did Thomas, one of Jesus first disciples', soon after Jesus was raised from the dead. In John 20:28 we have Thomas' profession of faith: *Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'*

In conclusion, I hope each one of us can declare in the words of the Apostles Creed: 'I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord', Amen

#### **Question for Reflection:**

In what area of my life do I feel I am doing well in honouring Jesus' Lordship over my life, and in what area do I need to focus at this time?

#### **Song for Reflection:** 'Jesus all for Jesus'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gIvnLl-vvOo>