

INTRODUCTION

Grab your Bibles and open them up to Matthew 21. We are taking a break from Judges for the next two weeks to focus our attention on Holy Week. For the next two Sundays we are going to focus on the early Christian creeds and their implications on the church today. That may seem like an odd focus, to spend the most joyous week on the Christian calendar looking at some old Christians idea of what was important, but what I hope to show you is that being attached to historical, orthodox, Christianity, by way of the creeds is one of the most exciting, freeing, and powerful facts we have. You may not believe that right now, but trust me.

But we are going to start today by acknowledging what today is: Palm Sunday. This is the day, less than a week before His death, that Jesus entered into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. We pick up the story in **Matthew 21.7**:

THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, "Who is this?" And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee."

We see here the high point of Jesus' time in Jerusalem. This seems like a pretty exciting time, as the people are shouting and laying down their coats, a sign of honor. You can imagine being part of that crowd: singing, dancing, just overly joyous at the fact that Jesus is here. But this is not the only crowd in Jerusalem. There is another crowd that Jesus will face before the week is out. That crowd is also emotionally charged, they are also shouting, they are also proclaiming who He is. Rather than king, they call Him criminal. Rather than shouting Hosanna, they shout: CRUCIFY HIM. Even when Pilate tries to convince them that this man has done nothing wrong, they shout CRUCIFY HIM.

In both of these crowds we see a bit of mob mentality...group think. When we think of mob mentality, our mind often goes to the group with pitchforks and torches marching to get the monster, be it Frankenstein or Beauty and the Beast. In our own day this might look like Occupy Movement, WTO riots, ...that sort of thing. When it comes to mob mentality or group thinking, we may think that we are free from it because stay indoors.

But one of the biggest changes that has happened over the last 20 years, is that we have found this way to be connected to people that we aren't really connected to at all. So we 'follow' people that we have never met, we 'like' people that we have never talked to, and we get excited by and caught up in movements and viral campaigns without having to move at all. A big part of this is our innate desire to be part of something bigger than ourselves. Maybe you aren't online and so you think you are free from this, but it could look like fantasy sports teams, local clubs, work or even church. The desire to be a part of something bigger than ourselves is an innate piece of who we are as human beings.

When we look at the two crowds in Jerusalem, we see that there was an excitement, an emotional rise that built and carried the crowd along. If we are honest with ourselves, we will see that this same excitement-craving guides much of our lives. We want to see action, we want to be part of it, even if that means reposting a link or forwarding an e-mail.

I am not going to rebuke you for having this desire, because I think that this longing to be part of something greater comes from God. But not only has God given you that desire; Jesus has already fulfilled it. We spend so much time trying to find it and we already have it.

FINDING EXCITEMENT IN THE CREED

When God calls us into His great family, He does not say: I have now ransomed you so that you can do something big. Adoption into the family of God is not: You now have the ability to fulfill the longings that you have always had. Instead, Jesus says, I invite you into the great movement that I have been coordinating all along. He says, you are my treasured possession, you have been invited into My great family, you are a part of my great mission. IT IS NOT UP TO US TO FABRICATE THE MOVEMENT. Do you get that, because I don't think we do; I know I struggle with it.

Just this week I am sitting at our Men's study and I feel this frustration inside of myself; disappointment with the turnout. Let down by the fact that there aren't as many men here as I would like...not able to see that I get to spend my time discussing the essential truths of the gospel with the men who were there. I get to be part of the continuance of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and I feel let down when it is not as personally rewarding, exciting, or important as I want it to be.

This is reason number 1 that we need the creeds. We need to be reminded of what we are a part of. The apostles Creed comes from the first few generations of Christians and has been repeated in churches since that time. By reflecting on these same truths we connect ourselves to the larger plan of God. One pastor put it this way:

Too many within church leadership today seem to have forgotten that the building of a foundational Christian identity is based upon that which the church has received, preserved, and carefully transmitted to a generation of believers. DH Williams

We have been handed a truth that was fought for, painstakingly recorded by hand, translated...that is what we hold when we talk of dead doctrine. There is nothing dead about it. In order for us to have this book a lot of people had to die. A lot of people had to consistently teach it. We are the next step in this continuance, and we need to remember those who came before.

Hebrews 12 says:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

This verse is the first verse of chapter 12, following the great BYFAITH chapter 11. In chapter 11 it lays out the many people who have come before, the people of Israel's history who were part of the story up to that point. Then moves from this history lesson to action. It says that since we know what we are a part of, since we know the people who God has used to this point, since we are attached to a much larger plan of God, it should cause us to respond without hesitation. In the same way that being part of a physical group emboldens us and makes us confident, crowds feed off each other, we also have a great cloud of witnesses, both in the Bible and in Church History, to give us the endurance we sometimes need to keep going.

As Pastor Michael Horton reminds us:

Losing the joy...-of our salvation is the result not of "dull doctrine," but of dull churches that have begun to forget the wonder of it all.

The wonder already exists, we just need to recognize it. But that doesn't mean that creeds don't have practical importance either. As with most things that God does, the existence of creeds both point us back to His absolute power, but they also provide us with help in running the race marked out before us.

If we return to the crowds in Matthew; **the first aspect we see in them is their emotion, but the second is in their bold claims about Jesus.** On Palm Sunday, we see some people calling Him Son of David, referring to the prophecy about the Messiah in Isaiah, but we also see that He is referred to as a prophet. And we know from a few chapters, that amongst those praising Him were those who viewed Him as an earthly king who would restore the glory of the earthly Israel. At the end of the week, they call Him heretic and criminal. So the question this begs is: who is this Jesus?

After His death and resurrection the question remained: who is this man? The Apostles went around declaring the truth and recording what they had seen in the gospels. But then their lives ended. Somewhere in the first century it became clear that the church needed some definitive statement as to who Jesus was. They didn't all have a copy of the Bible. So they wrote a creed. The word "creed" comes from the Latin word *credo*, meaning "I believe." Almost every group with a belief system at some point clarifies their main beliefs into a statement, sometimes called a motto, a purpose statement, or core values, but basically what all of these are is a brief declaration of belief. Why would a company, or a political party, or the church have a creed:

1. The Creed is a public statement of faith, a standardized way in which new people can understand quickly what they/we are about.
2. The Creed was a teaching tool, giving an outline for further discussion.
3. The Creed was memorized through frequent repetition, so that it becomes part of the natural thinking.

This is reason number 2 that we need the creeds. It gives the church an statement of truth to unify around. This idea was not created by the church; the Bible itself contains brief creed-like statements. We studied one last week, THE SHEMA.

Deuteronomy 6.4: *Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one.*

1 Corinthians 15.3-4: *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.*

In these God through His prophets is giving us these statements of belief, so that we HEAR, KNOW, and TEACH. So as Christianity was spreading in the early church they needed a way to get the truth of Jesus Christ heard, known, and taught and they developed the Apostles Creed. No one knows exactly where it came from. It is based on the teaching of the Apostles (which is where it gets its name), and it is built from the creeds that God gave us in His Word, but it seems to have just existed in the church. Rather than being derived from one persons teaching, or one persons writing, it seems to have just been what the church believed.

Around 200, Ireneus describes a creed that sounds like this (student of polycarp, student of John) wrote from France

In 220, Tertullian shared an early latin version of the creed (North Africa)

In 320, Marcellus records for us the creed in asia Minor

In 390, Rufinus writes the creed from Northern Italy

I think that is awesome. Not it came from this person and so that gives it the pedigree it needs, but instead, IT CAME FROM THE CHURCH. It is one of those things that belongs not to this tradition, or that group, but it is the statement of belief from the Church of Jesus Christ. And what does it say?

THE 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 to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of 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.*

This may be slightly different wording than what you grew up with, as the Catholic church, Lutheran church, Anglican church, and North American church all have slightly different wording [Holy Cross soccer game], most of it around the two phrases: he descended to the dead and the holy catholic church...but we'll get there.

The creed starts where the Bible starts, with the all powerful, creator God. You could say that the first statement is nothing more than two of God's creeds, Genesis 1.1: In the beginning... and the Shema, the great claim of monotheism, that there is one God. This sets them apart from the Canaanites in the Old Testament, the Romans in the New Testament. There is not a sun god and an earth god, there in ONE GOD. He created it all.

It goes on:

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.

This states that Jesus Christ was born. That may seem like another obvious statement, but there are those who consider Jesus nothing more than a manifestation or a mirage. That He wasn't a real man. BUT HE WAS BORN. More than that, His birth was not normal. He was born by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the body of a young virgin mother. Before you say: THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE, go back to belief #1, creator of all things, Almighty...able to do in this world as He wishes. Jesus was not someone that God simply worked through, like the rest of humanity. Instead, Jesus WAS the mission. He was sent by the Father, through the Spirit to earth to achieve His purposes. This is the belief in what Jesus Himself proclaims is **John 5.36**:

For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me.

The works that Jesus did while here on earth was not a set of things that He was doing as it came to Him. He wasn't simply responding to His surroundings. He was sent by God as the Savior, with a task which He fully accomplished. What was that purpose?

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

This section defines what Jesus Christ accomplished on this earth. Jesus, the son of God, brought into the world by miraculous means was murdered. And this wasn't some clean death like what we afford serial rapists, this was cruel and unusual punishment at its worst. Jesus suffered horribly...and He died. HE DESCENDED TO THE DEAD. In some translations it reads: He descended into Hell, which has led some people to confusion. Much of this confusion exists because we do not have a definitive picture of exactly what happens when you die. This statement refers to the time between Good Friday when Jesus died, and Easter morning when He arose. This phrase seems to point to two truths.

1. He was dead dead. In the same way that people die and their cease to have any life in them, Jesus body lay separate from His soul. He did not slip into a temporary coma. The coroner did not make a mistake. Death for three days had power over Him. He could not come back from it.

2. In receiving the wrath of God He suffered Hell. On the cross Jesus took the sins of the world upon Himself, this would make Him the worst of all sinners as He hung there. He was punished by God in death, and that death brought with it a forsaking. Jesus shouts out on the cross:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

God never gives us a full picture of this punishment, but we can say that he was not where He ought to be. He was not where he deserved to be. He was suffering the results of death for our sin out of His great love for us. We know that He did not stay there too long. Three days later He rose from the grave, visited with some friends and witnesses, said His goodbyes and then went back to where he came from. Today, He sits on the throne to rule over His creation. One day He will return as judge.

He will come back to earth, not as an illegitimate child of a peasant but as a great warrior coming to execute the rightful punishment on all those who continue to rely on themselves for salvation. Jesus is not only the one who accomplishes these tasks, He is the gift of these tasks. This short section characterizes Jesus: SAVIOR, KING, and JUDGE. But He is also the GIFT. Jesus accomplishes all of this so that He can offer us Himself. With the great gift of Jesus Christ we receive the benefits of New Life. Namely, as stated in the creed:

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.

This last section gives us the implications of Christ's work. It is because of Christ's righteousness given to us that we are able to have the Spirit living inside of us: guiding us, empowering us, sanctifying us. As we see in Acts 2, the Spirit is given to God's people as a gift to live as His set apart people on this earth. To be the church. The holy catholic church.

This is not a ringing endorsement of the Catholic church as we see it today, but the word catholic means universal (and for the sake of clarity some churches have replaced it). It is the understanding that through the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ and the unity of the Spirit we are one church with our brothers across town as well as across the world. As **Galatians 3.28** says:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

The divisions we had before now stand as a testimony to the uniting work of Jesus. And not only to those across space but also those across time: THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS. As we started out talking about, being a Christian unites us to thousands of years of faithful men and women. Not, hey we can learn from them and let's respect them, but they are united with us. Their lives are mingled with ours. They are connected to us in a very real way as the BODY OF CHRIST.

The creed ends:

the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

It is in Jesus that our sins are paid for. He inserts His perfect life where our broken one existed and we are released from the penalty of sin. This buys us a new life now, and a glorified body later. It is in this resurrected body that we will live out eternity, in the presence of Jesus. This is not only what we believe it is what we hold on to. It's all we have.

I want to return to the two crowds as we close today. We have the crowd that praises Jesus as Lord, and the crowd at the end of the week that seeks to make Him go away. And I'm not going to ask you which crowd you are, instead I am going to tell you which crowd you are. YOU ARE BOTH OF THEM. You praise God one minute and rebel against Him in sin the next. Let's be honest, we are fickle; our lives are like roller coasters, going from praising God one moment, to denying Him the next. Because it is easy for me to wonder how Jesus could be praised on Sunday and killed on Friday... but then I realize that I can praise Him at 9am, and turn my back on Him in sin before lunch. Our emotions bear much more weight on our reality than we want to think. Even the most rational of you have got to admit that your own personal circumstances affect the way you think. ULTIMATELY, INFLUENCE WHAT YOU BELIEVE.

Which is the final reason we need the creeds: TO REMIND US OF THE TRUTH. We need to remember that truth is divorced from our perspective. Truth does not bend to our life experiences, our culture, our childhood, or our belief that we have somehow moved beyond the simplicity of the basics. We need to stand up with 2000 years of Christianity and proclaim: I BELIEVE. We need to stand up with people of different nations, different times, different socio-economic situations, different fears, different sins, different pain, SAME JESUS. We need to do again, and again, and again. We need reminders. The Apostles Creed is a reminder of who we are in Christ, as is Communion.