

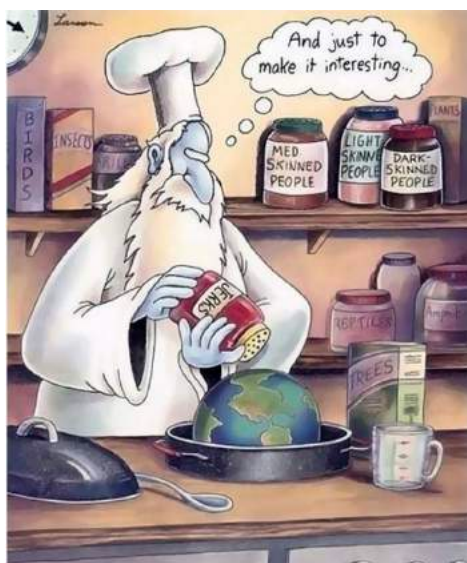
A Faith to Live By...

Sermons on the Apostles' Creed

3. "In Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord ..."

Notice that this article of the creed reiterates the opening 'I believe'. It does so because the creed follows a trinitarian structure, and the threefold repetition of the verb draws attention to this. Christians don't just believe in 'God'. In fact, I sometimes think that it would be better if we abandoned this word altogether. So loaded is it with misunderstanding and variety of definition that people suppose they know more or less what it means when, in fact, what *they* mean by it may have little at all in common with what Christians mean by it (or *should* mean by it).

Tom Wright recalls his conversations as Chaplain with undergraduates arriving at an Oxford College who, during a statutory cup of tea and interview, would nervously admit that they didn't really 'believe in God', and probably wouldn't be putting in many appearances at the college chapel. Tom's stock response was: 'Oh,



that's interesting; which god is it you don't believe in?' Surprised answers to this line of questioning generally trotted out some version of an all-powerful, prudish old man with a white beard, wearing a linen nightie and spying on the world from some place a long, long way away, in order to confirm his worst suspicions about human beings, and to build up a case strong enough to convict most of them and provide warrant for sending most of them to an



unpleasant place called Hell. A classic pastiche of bits and pieces drawn from all over the place, but un-thought-through, and singularly badly informed by exposure to Scripture's testimony to the character of God. 'That's good', Tom would continue, 'I don't believe in *that* god either'. As a follow up, lest they assume that they were dealing with an atheist priest, he would add: 'I believe in the god I see revealed in Jesus of Nazareth'.

Unfortunately, the truth is probably that many folk who are regular members of Christian congregations may also harbour some such inadequate and distorted view, so reluctant are folk in our day and age to *think* about their faith. But it won't do. Christians don't believe in 'God'. Or, we might better say, the God Christians believe in has little in common with popular caricatures or vague religious impressions. Last week I pointed out that the Jews of the Old Testament knew their god by a particular name (Yahweh, which lies behind the old English Bible renditions as 'Jehovah') and insisted that he was quite unlike the gods of other nations, so Christians know this same God by a particular name - in fact, because they meet and know this God in three different ways at once, it is a composite name: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And what is known of this God is strikingly different from popular accounts of the 'god' people sometimes insist that they don't believe in.

That's why, when we embarked on our reading of the creed, I decided to leave the word 'God' ('I believe in God...') without comment. Because there is a proper sense in which we are only able to fill that word with its proper Christian content once we begin to unpack what we believe about Jesus. Prior to and apart from that, we are working at best with something incomplete and patchy, and at worst with vague, shadowy and often quite false and certainly un-Christian notions.

I suppose a good question for a Christian to ask at this point is 'Well, what about those folks in Old Testament times? Did they or didn't



they *know* God, and have a clear idea of who God was and what God was like?’ That’s a great question, and it puts its finger on something very important. Because it’s vital to remind ourselves that Christians know and worship the *same* God as was known and worshipped by ancient Israel, and not some new upstart God, or a God who was concealed all the time behind the scenes of history, and in Jesus stepped out to take the spotlight, leaving Israel’s God now cast in the shade. Jesus was a devout Jew, and he worshipped the God of his Jewish forebears, treated the Hebrew scriptures as the authoritative Word of God, and made sense of his own mission and ministry in terms of Yahweh’s purposes and promises.

So, yes, the people of the Old Testament *did* know God, and what they knew was important and remains important for Christians, precisely because it was important for Jesus. But while, as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it: ‘Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ... in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, who ... is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being’ (Heb 1:1-3). In other words, although Jesus worshipped the same God as Abraham, Moses and the prophets, he knew this God in ways that far exceeded what God had yet made known of himself, and Jesus’ appearance in Israel’s midst was of such a sort as to effect a revolution in Israel’s understanding of and believing in this same God.



We are all perfectly familiar with the way in which, in a drama, things known about a key character in Acts One and Two can be transfigured by things only made known in Act Three. The change in our perception may be and often is radical, and once we have experienced it we

can never go back and read Acts One and Two in the same way again. But, what we knew of the protagonist in our first encounter with the drama was not ‘nothing’, and

nor was it false. It was simply what the playwright intended us to know at that stage, and for the sake of his or her purposes in unfolding the drama. And, of course, its 'truth' and vital importance is obvious if we ask what sense we could have made of things had we stumbled into the theatre at the beginning of Act Three with no prior knowledge of the play. We should almost certainly have become one of those irritating people who whisper (loudly) their questions to the person sitting next to them through the remainder of the performance. So, Christian faith in Father, Son and Holy Spirit is in an important sense *faith in the same God* known to Israel; and yet what is known of this God and his purposes is now so much more, transforms our ways of relating to him, and in some ways creates a crunch of gears for anyone working with an Old Testament understanding alone.

Jesus Christ

The positive relationship between Old and New Testaments in terms of the God about whom they speak is clearly flagged in these two words alone. The name 'Jesus' is a Greek version of the Hebrew/Aramaic name Yeshua or Joshua, and like many Hebrew names it is a contracted statement about God. It means something like 'Yahweh saves' or 'salvation of Yahweh'. So, when the angel instructed Mary about how to name her son, he wasn't just expressing a



personal preference; the name comes already theologically highly charged! Having said that, while today hardly anyone would call their son Jesus (presumably not wishing to be thought sacrilegious; although, funnily enough, folk seem happy enough with Joshua!), theologically charged or not, Jesus/Yeshua/Joshua was a very common name for Jewish boys. That's no doubt why, in due course (and in a society that functioned without surnames) Jesus came to be known commonly as Jesus of/from Nazareth – pinpointing his home town in order to clarify *which* Jesus was being spoken about among all those Jesuses in the telephone directory!

The name 'Christ', too, is packed full of theology. In fact, it's not really a name at all, it's a title, and one to which there is a very full job-description attached. So, we should really not say 'Jesus Christ', but 'Jesus *the* Christ', the one who, within the purposes and promises of the God of Israel, has a very specific role to fulfil. Again, the word 'Christ' comes from the Greek *Christos*, which was itself the translation of the Hebrew *Mashiach* (see John 1.41). *Mashiach* (sometimes transliterated into Greek



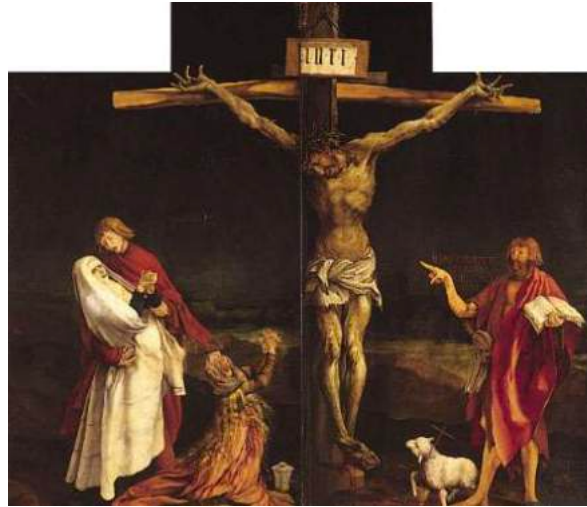
as 'messias' or 'Messiah') meant 'the anointed one' and referred generally to the anointing with oil of special figures (most notably kings and priests) in the life of the nation of Israel. The oil was symbolic of God's Spirit, who was held to empower and enable these figures for their ministry.

So, a *mashiach* was someone special whom God had set apart to perform a special role in Israel's life and in the accomplishment of God's purposes. And *the Mashiach* (the Messiah) was a figure in Israel's religious hopes and expectations who, it was widely believed, would be raised up and sent by God to restore the nation's fortunes, fulfilling the roles of king and priest, and so setting Israel's life on a firm footing both in political and religious terms – as the people called and set apart by God.

When we read about Jesus in the gospels, he often seems reluctant to apply the term 'Christ' to himself and is cautious about others speaking of him in those terms. It is unlikely that this was the result of undue modesty. Much more likely is that Jesus was only too aware of the limitations and problematic features of what messianic expectation had become, and of the gap between such expectations and the ways in which he would actually fulfil them in due course. There was no point in stirring up misunderstanding and exciting ill-adjusted hopes. It was better for people to discover gradually, by what he did and said and suffered, that God had sent a rather different sort of messiah than they had been looking for, and one who would accomplish something much more profound and world-changing than their limited

hopes had anticipated. His power would be exercised through suffering, and his victory through death.

In calling Jesus 'the Christ', though, Christians are insisting that Jesus is nonetheless the true Messiah of Israel; 'the one who is to come' has indeed here come and in coming has fulfilled the meaning of Israel's institutions of monarchy and priesthood, and the promises embodied in and associated with them. Again, even though these



expectations are, in their fulfilment in Jesus, blown wide open and shown to have fallen far short of the full reality of what God had always intended, they are nonetheless the background to and preparation for his coming, and we cannot begin to understand the significance of his coming properly unless we attend to them. That's why the Old Testament remains a vital part of the church's sacred text in which the story of God's dealings with Israel and, through Israel, the world is told. Acts One and Two, we might say, are just as important as Act Three, which *makes absolutely no sense* without them. That's why the proclamation 'This is the Word of the Lord' is uttered after the Old Testament as well as the New Testament reading on a Sunday morning. It is the whole book, the whole story told here which the



church acknowledges as the God-breathed testimony to God's character, purposes and promises. Of course, we have to read particular parts of it in relation to the whole book. But *all of it* matters

and has its proper part to play in making God known.

Jesus is Israel's messiah. That claim, with all its entailments and whatever difficulties it throws up, is fundamental to the church's faith. It's what it means to be *Christian*

at all. And that has implications beyond our attitude towards the Jewish scriptures. As one theologian notes, it involves us in acknowledging also 'the special place of the Jews in God's plan of salvation, recognizing and accepting them as the kinsfolk of the one Jew, the universal Saviour, in whom and for whose sake they were and, in spite of unbelief, disobedience, and rejection, still are – now in mysterious partnership with the church – God's special people'.

The messiah looked for and longed for by Israel was to be a man who, like his ancestor David, would be raised up and anointed by God, a key agent in the fulfilment of God's purposes and promises for the people. As I have said, Jesus, in his fulfilment of this messianic hope transformed it beyond recognition; but the hope's shortfall when compared to reality had to do not only with what the actual *Mashiach* did and did not *do*. There was something else; something which even in Israel's wildest dreams she had never imagined possible, and something which she would have the hardest time getting her head around and coming to terms with.

God's only Son ...

'When the fullness of time had come', Paul writes to the church in Galatia, 'God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children' (Gal 4:4-5). He's talking about Jesus, of course, but setting Jesus' life and ministry in a rather different perspective. What from one angle can and should be understood as the fulfilment of a trajectory within history – the raising up of a man who would fulfil the role of Israel's anointed King, albeit in a way no one quite expected – from another angle must now be recognised as God's sending of *his own Son* into the world, becoming a man in order to redeem his own human creatures. In other words, God had not simply raised up a human King for Israel, he *had himself become human* in order to fulfil that role himself – God and humanity united in a single human life.



'Son' is one of the New Testament's most characteristic designations for Jesus, and Jesus' palpable awareness of having a close, intimate relationship with God as his 'Father' is one of the most obvious features of his ministry. The phrase 'son of God' was used from time to time in the Old Testament of other figures, including the Messiah (e.g. 2 Sam 7:12-14; Psa 2:7). And, in a more general sense, as Paul indicates, salvation consists in our adoption as 'sons' and 'daughters' of the God Jesus knows as Father. But in the New Testament Jesus is also marked out as God's 'only Son', and the realization to which the first Christians gradually came was that this close relationship between Jesus the Son and his Father was not something to be made sense of in purely human and historical terms. Jesus had 'come from' and 'been sent' by his Father into the world, to ground within the flesh and blood of our humanity a relationship that already existed in God. It's quite clear that this is what Paul understands by the term, so that to call Jesus 'the Son' or 'Son of God' is simply to identify him as God, albeit now God in human form. So, for example, it is God's



'beloved Son' who is 'the image of the invisible God' in whom and through whom *all things were created!* (Col 1:13-16) John, too, in his prologue, makes the same link explicit: the one who was the Word of God, active in creation, is also the Son, who has become a human creature, and revealed God's glory in the flesh, 'the glory as of a father's only son', and 'God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart', has made the Father known (Jn 1:1-3, 14-18).

This is what, when we utter these words in the creed, we are affirming. That in the man Jesus from Nazareth, not only have all God's promises to Israel found their fulfilment in the 'Christ', but, beyond Israel's and our wildest imaginings, God's ancient purpose and plan, hidden until now, has come to fruition, as God himself in the person of the Son has come down from heaven to share our humanity, and in sharing it, to transform and redeem it, and to draw it into the web of relationships which is God's own life. Everything in Christianity hinges on this claim. If it is true,

then we can trust that in knowing Jesus we truly know God. The theologian T. F. Torrance recounts an experience when he was a chaplain on the battlefields of the 1939-45 war, and a young soldier, fatally injured and in terrible pain, clutched his



arm and asked in an anguished whisper:

‘Can I be sure that God is like Jesus?’

That’s the key question, and on it hangs

the gospel itself. If Jesus is none other

than ‘God with us’, God among us in

human form, the human Son of God

who reflects the character of a heavenly

Father, then the answer is, of course,

that we can. We can know that the one

in whose hands the provenance and course and destiny of the world and its history are held is here shown us in flesh and blood form – good, loving, merciful and faithful, healing diseased bodies and tormented spirits, and offering forgiveness of sins. There are and can be no nasty surprises where God is concerned, no secret God hidden behind the back of Jesus, because Jesus himself *is* God, and in dealing with him we are dealing with God himself. And, of course, if Jesus is God then our understanding of the word ‘God’ must accommodate and include all that we know of Jesus. The sort of God we believe in is not one who remains aloof and remote in the comfort and safety of ‘heaven’, sending other, lesser beings to get their hands dirty in dealing with the world. On the contrary, God is committed to the hilt to the well-being of his world and comes in person to bear the cost of its redemption and renewal.

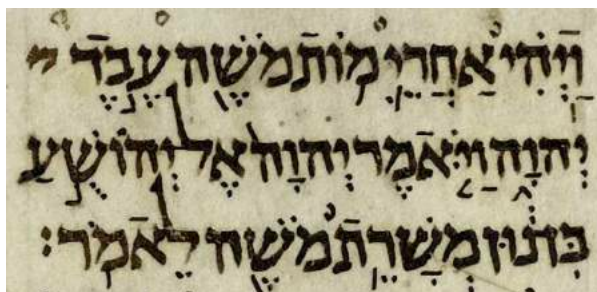
Our Lord...

‘Lord’ is another term laden with significance in its application to Jesus. In everyday Greek the word *kyrios* could be a simple term of polite respect, not far removed from someone saying ‘excuse me sir ...’ in English. Some of the uses in the gospels reflect this ordinary usage. So, for instance, in John chapter 20 when Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb and finds it empty, she tells the angels ‘they have taken away my Lord

(τὸν κύριόν μου)' and when Jesus (whom she mistakes for the gardner) asks her who she is looking for she replies 'Sir (Κύριε), if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him'. The same word used twice in quick succession, but in two quite distinct senses. And, of course, John is playing word games with his readers, because the one Mary addresses as *kyrie* (sir) is in fact her 'Lord', as will rapidly become clear in the story. A nice bit of linguistic irony.



So, what does 'Lord' mean in this more highly charged sense? We've noted before that the Old Testament treats God's proper name, Yahweh, with a huge amount of respect, holding it to be almost too holy to use. In synagogue worship the practice grew up of avoiding using it altogether, substituting for it when reading aloud another Hebrew word, *Adonai* (Lord). In due course editions of the Old Testament texts appeared in which the name YHWH was ornamented with some vowels, in order to aid those reading in public worship, reminding them that they should say *Adonai* instead of *Yahweh*. English versions therefore translate this complicated Hebrew word as the LORD, marking it out as a special use of the term. The Greek translation of the Old Testament, widely used and known in New Testament times, translated *Adonai* as *Kyrios*. So, this Greek word *Kyrios* was used in Jewish religious contexts to mean the



same thing as *Yahweh* or *Adonai* – that is, it served as the name for Israel's God, just as the LORD does in our English translations. One of the earliest Christian professions of faith, 'Jesus is Lord!' (see, e.g., Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3;

Philippians 2:11) was thus a concise and precise way of saying that the name, majesty and authority of God himself belong properly to Jesus, that he is none other than Israel's God, now present personally and humanly among us.

But the creed, like Mary Magdalene, the apostle Thomas (Jn 20:28) and others, does not say '*the* Lord', but *my* or *our* Lord. This reminds us again that we are not dealing with a merely 'academic' point of theological interest, but a personal and existential expression of commitment. By becoming one of us God's own Son has made us his own and laid claim to us. To use Paul's pecuniary image, he has 'bought us with a price', and we are owned by him (1 Cor 6:20). Acknowledging that, and *meaning* it when we do so, means that we now in our turn can only hand over the 'lordship' of our lives to him rather than continuing to claim it ourselves. In doing so, though, we recall that the one who is our Lord is also our friend and our brother, and has given everything for us. To say 'my Lord', therefore, is not only an expression of willing submission, but one of devotion and love too.