

## Who Is Jesus?

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A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Christ the King Sunday, November 26, 1989: Scripture Lessons: Psalm 95; Colossians 1:11-20; John 19:16-19.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

In the first chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians there's a classic statement as to what Christians believe about Jesus.

Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God... through him God created everything in heaven and on earth, the seen and the unseen things...

These words about Jesus are the basis for what the Nicene Creed says about Jesus. The Nicene Creed is a Confession of faith that has united Christians in every time and place for sixteen hundred years. It's also one of the confessions that summarise what we believe as Presbyterians. It says we believe...

"in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made; who for us men (sic), and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and... was made man... was crucified... buried... rose ...and ascended into heaven..."

We believe that Christ is the One through whom all things were created. If we were to say that about any other person it would be laughable. But St. Paul closely identified Jesus, a Palestinian Jew, with the Creator of the universe.

Now, this, of course, doesn't mean that the *man*, Jesus, existed before he was born in Bethlehem: but it does mean that the One who Created the universe became a man in Jesus. It means that the One through whom God created solar systems, galaxies and quasars once was confined to the Virgin Mary's womb. Now that belief is either utterly ridiculous, bordering either on insanity or blasphemy, or else it's utterly profound... giving us insight into the meaning and purpose of our lives.

When I was a child I believed Jesus was God in the flesh because my parents, my preacher and my Sunday school teachers all said it was true. I

believed the doctrine even though I didn't understand its significance. As I grew older I began to pooh-pooh the whole idea of doctrine and ridiculed theologians who argued over doctrinal issues. In fact, just last week I came across an old paper I had written for Dr. Kerr at Princeton Seminary in which, in five pages, I expressed my view that systematic theology and doctrine were a waste of time. The grade he gave me on that paper indicated that he thought my paper was also a waste of time.

But as I experienced more of life... as I began to notice more and more of the pain, suffering and injustice in the world and as I began to experience just a little of that pain myself I began to wonder what relation God had to this suffering. And then I began to see the importance of the doctrine of the deity of Christ. I began to see in Jesus the very heart of God.

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The meaning of that doctrine is expressed in a play I read about last week, entitled *The Long Silence*. The story goes like this:

It's the end of time. Billions of people are scattered on a great, broad plane before God's throne for judgment. Most people shrink back from the throne of God in terror. But some talk angrily about this God who's about to judge them.

"What right does God have to judge us? How can *he* know about suffering?" snapped a dark-eyed brunette. She rips open a sleeve and reveals a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. "We endured terror. We endured beatings, torture and death! What right does God have to judge me when he made a world like this?" In another group, a young black man lowers his collar. "What about this?" he demands, showing an ugly rope burn. "Lynched- for no crime at all. I was simply black!" In another crowd, there's a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes. "What does

God know about what it's like to be young and lonely?" she cries in defiance.

Far out across the plain there are hundreds of groups talking like this as though God's on trial and not themselves. Each has a complaint against God for the evil and suffering God has permitted in the world. "How lucky God is to live in heaven where all is sweetness and light, where there's no weeping or fear; no hunger or hatred". "What does God know about all that humanity has been forced to endure in this world? After all, God leads a pretty sheltered life", they say.

So each of these groups choose one from among themselves who has suffered the most. There's a Jew from Auschwitz, a black South African, a victim of Hiroshima, a horribly deformed arthritic, a thalidomide child, a twenty-three year old man with AIDS, and others. In the centre of the plain they consult with each other. At last they're ready to present their case.

They have the audacity to tell God that he has no right to judge them because he's never endured what they've endured. They say that God, instead of judging them, should be sentenced to live on earth-- as a human being!

"Let him be born a Jew and see how he likes it", one of them says. "Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted" says another who never knew who his father was. Another who spent years in mental hospitals says, "Let him see what it's like for his family to think he's out of his mind." Another whose friends had deserted him says, "Let him be betrayed by his closest friends." Another who had been arrested and jailed unjustly said, "Let God see what it's like to face false charges, to be tried by a prejudiced jury, and to be convicted by a cowardly judge". A peasant from

El Salydor covered with scars inflicted by a death squad shouted out, "Let him be tortured and see how he bears up". "Let God bear our griefs and carry our sorrows. And then let God see what it's like to be terribly alone, to die. Let God be damned."

As each leader announces his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval go up from the throng of people assembled. And when the last has finished pronouncing sentence, there's a long silence. No one utters another word. No one moves. The Judge stands up, steps down from the bench, takes off his judicial gown, holds out his hands and points to his side and shows them the scars from crucifixion. And suddenly all know that God has already served his sentence. For the Judge is also our Savior.

The doctrine of the Incarnation declares that the Creator of the World is also the Savior of the world. The one who created this world where so much suffering takes place, himself suffered in Jesus Christ. God knows, therefore, what it's like to suffer first-hand.

The words of the First World War Christian poet G.A. Studdert-Kennedy express this so well for me. He wrote,

God, the God I love and worship, reigns in sorrow on the Tree,  
Broken, bleeding, but unconquered, very God of God to me.

This is the One we hail as our King.