

Our Minister writes:

Hello Everyone

‘If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved’ (Romans 10:9).

Christians in Rome in New Testament times were persecuted for their faith. In this passage the word ‘confess’ has overtones of the court but whether it is in the court-room or in less formal circumstances, a Christian is called upon to testify to faith. I am always interested when people want to talk to me about faith. Someone once said it is better to have a small amount of faith in the right thing than a huge amount of faith in the wrong thing. I think that’s right, don’t you? So although I suppose it does matter how much we believe, what matters the most is what we believe or, as a Christian ought properly to say, ‘in whom we believe’. Christians believe in one Saviour, Jesus Christ and, in short, his saving work is his death and resurrection.

It seems to have become unfashionable in the Free Churches (Christian denominations in Britain that are neither Anglican nor Roman Catholic) to say the Creed. Free Church members often contended that although we did not say the Creed as regularly as the more liturgical churches, we sang the fundamental beliefs of our faith in the hymns of Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts. Even singing traditional hymns is less fashionable than it was but there has to be a place for stating what Christians believe, in worship and in wider witness. The simplest Christian Creed is simply this: ‘Jesus is Lord’.

It seems as if in this scripture passage Paul was quoting a well-established credal formula. It was the earliest and simplest expression of Christian faith.

While the longer expression, ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’ was probably in early use as well, the shorter version, ‘Jesus is Lord’, clearly gives lordship to Jesus, the man of history, who lived and died and rose again. The idea of lordship in the world of the New Testament was a familiar one – people would have had first-hand experience of the master-slave and king-subject relationships. To affirm ‘Jesus as Lord’, perhaps initially in baptism, would indicate a transfer of allegiance.

‘To believe in your heart’ is an interesting expression – we tend to feel with our hearts and believe with our minds. Perhaps the expression indicates that Paul does not have in mind a mere recitation of a Creed but rather a ‘deeply motivating belief’ (Dunn*). Such belief is not purely intellectual assent – rather in the way that I believe in Julius Caesar, Napoleon and Queen Victoria – but personal trust in something that really matters. Paul says that it is necessary not only ‘to confess with your mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord’ but also ‘to believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead.’ In the New Testament, belief in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is both foundational and critical. To believe that Jesus is alive is vital because a dead saviour in real terms is no saviour at all – and the issue at hand turns out to be salvation. It is by confessing and believing that the Christian is ‘saved’.

The whole notion of being saved requires something from which to be saved. Traditionally, Christians have expressed this in terms of sin and death. ‘Sin’ has probably never been a popular word but it is certainly not fashionable today. If we speak of sin at all, we often limit it to actions – perhaps even trivialising it where succumbing to temptation is equated with eating a cream bun or having an extra portion of pudding or getting up late. The biblical understanding of sin is different from that. Sin begins with a state of mind – rooted in unbelief it is a state of rebellion against God. Although we might not take kindly to being told we are, by our nature, rebels against God, this understanding brings logical sense to the verse. It is turning from unbelief and rebellion against God to belief and confessing the lordship of Jesus that we have traditionally called ‘repentance’.

If sin is unfashionable, 'death' is even more unfashionable. No one dies these days. Of course, in the world of the mass media, even people who have died look as alive as they ever did, though in time fashions date them. It's also noticeable that the common euphemism, 'passed away' has now, rather irritatingly in my opinion, become simply 'passed'. This seems to me to be a very feeble effort to avoid the reality of loss. Perhaps I have been rather privileged in my own close family bereavements (my father in 1989, my mother in 2014) to have shared the hope of faith with my loved ones – however, I wanted to make it clear to family, friends and everyone extending condolences that my parents had not 'passed away' they had 'died'. The Christian should not, indeed need not, try to avoid the reality of death and the consequent loss.

The hope of salvation, however, is that Jesus died and rose again and that, in a sense that we do not completely understand, our loved ones who confessed and believed are with Jesus. Confessing with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord' affirms our turning from sin and believing in our heart God raised him from the dead affirms our belief in his final victory over sin and death – it is salvation it is salvation from the very foes from which we need saving.

Our *Tuesdays Together* programme is not a plan of entertainment but a serious effort to nurture and sustain followers of Jesus in the local church. It is based on the New Testament pattern. This pattern was never intended to be an optional extra in the deluxe edition of Christianity (simply for enthusiastic people who like that kind of thing) but something fundamental to the Christian life for every believer. Through prayers and reflections, explore together, more traditional Bible study and worship, prayer and fellowship at 2B1, we are progressing and building one another up in Christian faith. I am grateful to those who work with me in preparing the programme and want to encourage everyone to be part of it. Everyone is most welcome.

God bless

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Minister