

## **Sermon:** Who is this Jesus?

John Dixon, who's a minister, an author, and the founder of the Centre for Public Christianity, tells a story about going on JJJ, the ABC youth radio station, to talk about Jesus. At the end of his segment they opened up the phone lines and invited people to phone in with any comments or questions for John.

He says he was quite nervous about it, because Christians don't always enjoy a good reputation with the wider community – in particular young people, many of whom grow up these days with no exposure to the church.

But John was surprised: he had ten callers, and they all had good things to say about Jesus.

Well, actually, they all had one good thing to say about Jesus. And that is that they thought that Jesus was a good teacher. They liked his moral and ethical teaching. "Let he who is without sin cast the first stone", "do unto others as you would have them do unto you", and so on.

Good stuff. Jesus was a good teacher. Jesus' teaching remains relevant to the whole world today. And Jesus is acknowledged by people the world over as a good teacher.

So, John Dickson was pleased that the people calling into JJJ thought positive things toward Jesus.

But he also lamented that Jesus being a good teacher is only part of what Christians believe about Jesus.

Today we've recited the Apostle's creed together, to remind ourselves of what we believe. We began, "*I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary..*" and so on.

That's not just what we here at St Ives Uniting believe about Jesus, and not just what the Uniting Church believes or indeed what the protestant church believes, but those words which are part of what's referred to as the Apostle's Creed, are a statement of what the worldwide Christian church believes – and in various languages summarised what Christians believe since AD 390.

It gives us those essentials of what we understand about Jesus – that he is God's son, that he was born a human, that did suffer and die, that he did rise again and ascend. And that he will return.

They are big ideas, and they tell us that Jesus was so much more than just a good teacher.

In today's reading from his letter to the Philippians, Paul gives us what we can think of as his creed, he tells us what he believes about Jesus, and in doing so he is encouraging the Philippians – and us – to understand those things, and to become more like Jesus.

In verse 5 he writes "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus", and then he goes on to tell us who that Christ Jesus is:

*“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man” (5:6-8)*

Jesus is God’s only son. Remember those wonderful words from John’s gospel that we looked at a few weeks ago- “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son”? But Jesus who was equal with God, who was by nature God, emptied himself, became human – was born of the virgin Mary as we said in the creed.

In Jesus, God all powerful and all mighty became a defenceless baby. From the glories of God, to the harshness of human life in the first century. He became one of us.

But he was special.

Paul writes in verse 8 that “he humbled himself and became obedient” – obedient to God that is. We know from the gospel accounts that he was at least some of the time not obedient to the religious authorities of his time, and that in so much of his life, in reaching out to the outcasts of society: lepers, gentiles, adulterers, tax collectors and so on, he was certainly not obedient to the social conventions of his time.

And it was in this time of course that Jesus did his teaching –

“You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.” - Matthew 5:38-40

“Do not judge, or you too will be judged” Matt (7:1)

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” -Matthew 7:3

"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you." -Matthew 7:12

And so on...

But Jesus’ teaching wasn’t simply moral and ethical lessons for us – it was him declaring, as he stated right at the beginning of his mission, that the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God had come near, and as we read the gospels we find that the Kingdom of God comes near through Jesus.

And so much of Jesus’ teaching is about God and the Kingdom of God. He says “The Kingdom of God is like this” and tells a parable. Or indeed, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." -Matthew 5:3

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." -Matthew 5:8

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." -Matthew 5:9

I wonder how those people who say that Jesus is a great teacher, but who reject the idea of God, deal with those sorts of teachings. The witnesses we have to Jesus’ teachings are the

witnesses we have to Jesus being the Son of God, and to me and to multitudes of Christians throughout the ages, it all just goes together.

And besides teaching, Jesus did other things in his ministry. Importantly, the gospels tell us that he fed multitudes. He healed people – people of all sorts of backgrounds and needs – and he cast out demons.

Then Paul tells us that Jesus became obedient “to the point of death— even death on a cross.”

You don’t get more obedient than that.

Jesus had many opportunities to avoid death... but he chose to be obedient. He prayed for another way. But in the end he gave himself up to suffer and to die, as we will be remembering particularly on this coming Friday – Good Friday.

The Apostle’s Creed puts it like this “he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead.”

I think this really captures Jesus’ humanity.

If you think about it, being human consists of being born, living, and dying. And that’s what Jesus did. He was born in a stable in Bethlehem, he lived, and he died - on a cross outside Jerusalem, not all that far away from where he was born.

And I think too that we can take heart that whatever we face in life, right up to facing dying, Jesus has already faced. Jesus doesn’t tell us what to do; Jesus tells us to follow him – in all things, Jesus has gone ahead of us.

Because of Jesus’ obedience, because of Jesus’ death, Paul tells us that “*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name*”. Or as the Apostles’ Creed tells us “*On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father*”

In his death and resurrection, Jesus has conquered death. The power of sin and death couldn’t hold the son of God and – as we will celebrate next Sunday – he rose again. Paul tells us in his letter to the Colossians that “Jesus is the firstborn from the dead” – the firstborn of the new creation.

That new creation is what we all can look forward to as followers of Jesus.

John tells us that Jesus is the way, the truth and the light and that no one comes to the father but by him, and here Paul tells us that God gave Jesus the name that is above every name. Jesus is unique. No one else can do what Jesus has done. No other person, no teaching, no philosophy, no good works, no wealth, no power, no ethical system, can ever bring us to God.

Finally, our creed reminded us that Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead. Some people will say that Jesus' story ends with his death on Good Friday. Some will say it ends with him conquering death on his resurrection on Easter Sunday. Others will say it ends with his ascension to heaven – and after that, it is all up to us...

But Jesus was clear that it didn't end there. Paul was clear that it didn't end there.

Billy Graham at a particularly tumultuous time reportedly stood up before a crowd and raised his bible in the air "It's alright!" he assured them "I've read the whole thing. There is a happy ending."

Of course, sometimes people become concerned by Jesus return. He's coming to judge the living and the dead. Quickly, tidy the house! Look busy!

For his followers, though, it's not something to be concerned about. 'Judgement' is a bit daunting, but without judging, the problems of the world can't be made right.

The fulfilment of that is shown by Paul in Verse 10 and 11 which continue "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord..." not just a small crowd on the approach to Jerusalem shouting "Hosanna!" as they did on that first Palm Sunday, but who turned away soon after, but every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

It's a wonderful hope, and a wonderful vision for the future. That all people everywhere will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And there will be peace. Not just peace on earth, but peace between God and all people. All because of Jesus.

All because of Jesus. Who lived for us. Who died for us. Who rose again for us. Who will return for us.

Jesus who was a great teacher. But who is also so much more than a great teacher.

Jesus who still calls us today to follow him.

All of us.

All of us at St Ives Uniting, and all people everywhere to follow him. In life. In death. And into life everlasting.

So as Paul calls us to, let's be of the same mindset as Jesus, and all live out our lives as followers of Jesus and as members of his church.

And let us all look forward to the day:

*"that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*

Amen.