

ROM 1.1-7: JESUS IS THE ONE WHO MATTERS

Last week I have been asked to say Grace at a Christmas champagne breakfast. But there was a condition: do please be sensitive to the fact that there will be people of other faiths present.

In other words, don't mention Jesus – don't mention that he is the reason for the season – just thank God in the vaguest of terms for the food.

The other week I took a funeral at which the chief mourner asked me to keep religion out of it. Just talk about our loved one.

Don't talk about God – and certainly don't talk about the difference that Jesus makes to living and to dying. If you have to be religious, just be vague about it.

Goodness, what a strange world we live in, where we have to be so sensitive to everybody's sensibilities.

We are told that we should no longer send cards wishing one another 'Happy Christmas', but instead send cards with the anodyne phrase 'Seasons Greetings'.

If the secularists have their way, nativity plays featuring the baby Jesus will only take place in church schools. For otherwise, it is said, we will upset our Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist neighbours.

The fact of the matter this is far from the case: people of other faiths are quite happy for us to speak about Jesus.

It's the people of no faith, the so-called humanists, who find Jesus a threat.

The first Christians also lived in a multi-faith world. It was, as Paul said to the church at Corinth, a world of many so-called 'gods' and many 'lords' (1 Cor 8.5).

But far from tip-toeing around lest they disturb other people's feelings, Paul and his contemporaries proclaimed Jesus to be the Saviour of the world. **“Even though there are many of these (so-called) ‘gods’ and ‘lords’, yet there is for us only one God, the Father, who is the Creator of all things and for whom we live; and there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things were created and through whom we live”** (1 Cor 8.5,6).

Unlike some Christians today, Paul was not embarrassed to talk about Jesus – nor was he embarrassed to describe Jesus as the Son of God and Lord of all.

We see this in the passage of Scripture I have chosen to preach on today.

1. THE GOOD NEWS IS ABOUT JESUS

Writing to the church at Rome, Paul says: **“The Good News... is about God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ”** (Rom 1.2,3).

Wow, that was a statement which packed an enormous punch.

Remember, Rome was the greatest city of the world at that time, it was the home of the most powerful man in the world, Caesar: and in almost the very first words of his letter to Christians in Rome Paul deliberately challenges the power of Caesar.

For when Paul writes: **“The Good News... is about God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ”**, he was picking up three phrases used of Caesar.

For two of Caesar's official titles were 'son of God' and 'lord'; and Caesar's birthday was described as 'good news'. So, in a famous 9 BC inscription from Priene in Asia Minor we find these words about Emperor Augustus: "*the birthday of the god has marked the beginning of good news for the world*".

So when Paul talks of the "good news" of Jesus, he is consciously setting Jesus over against the Caesar, and is in effect saying that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the true king, the world's rightful Lord.

When it came to the Gospel, Paul did not pussy-foot around. As he went on to say a few verses on in this chapter: "**I am not ashamed of the Gospel**" (NRSV); "**I have complete confidence in the gospel; it is God's power to save all**" (GNB) (1.16).

When it comes to Christmas, let's not be ashamed of the good news of Jesus.

- If you are going to send Christmas cards, then let them be proper Christmas cards – cards featuring the birth of Jesus, rather than simply a winter scene or a picture of Santa.
- Similarly, although it is probably too late for me to say this for this Christmas, when it comes to buying Advent calendars, let's make sure that they too feature Jesus. Sadly, its not always easy to buy specifically Christian Advent calendars – particularly if you want them to contain chocolate. But what are we teaching our children, if the focus is on Santa rather than on Jesus.
- And when it comes to the opening of presents, again, for the sake of your children and grand-children, make the link with Jesus. For instance, when we open our presents as a family, everybody has to sit down and be quiet while I read the Christmas story and have a prayer. You can't have presents without Jesus!

So with that introduction, let's look more closely at what Paul has to say about Jesus here.

2. JESUS IS THE MASTER OF THE UNIVERSE

"The Good News... is about God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: as to his humanity, he was born a descendant of David; as to his divine holiness, he was shown with great power to be the Son of God by being raised from death" (1.2-4)

Years ago, when I was doing a PhD in New Testament studies, I studied the early creeds and confessions of faith found in the writings of the Apostle Paul.

By common consent, here in Rom 1.3.4 we have an early Christian confession of faith. A linguistic examination of the original Greek reveals that almost certainly Paul is not using his own words, but is rather quoting a confession of faith known and recognized at Rome.

Remember, that Paul at this stage had not visited Rome – so here in his letter to Rome he is introducing himself.

He is in effect producing his credentials – and he does so by saying '*I believe what you believe about Jesus*'.

There are two basic affirmations present in this confession of faith:

(1) **He was born a descendant of David**

Although we do not find the Christmas story in any of Paul's letters, it is clear that Paul knew the basic facts regarding the birth of Jesus.

He may not have known of the shepherds and the wise men, he may not even have known that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but he did know that Jesus was descended from David.

Now, as we know from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, genealogies are important. They tell you something about the person. And as far as Jesus was concerned, they tell you something about the significance of his person – he was a descendant of David!

Many years ago, the prophet Nathan had said to King David: **“When you die and are buried with your ancestors, I will make one of your sons king and will keep his kingdom strong. He will be the one to build a temple for me, and I will make sure that his dynasty continues for ever. I will be his father and he will be my son. I will put him in charge of my people and my kingdom for ever. His dynasty will never end”** (1 Chron 17.11-14; see also 2 Sam 7.13,14).

This prophecy, when first given, referred to Solomon – he was the son of David who became king. He it was who built the temple.

Under Solomon the Jewish nation reached its highest point.

But after Solomon's death, everything went wrong.

Solomon's kingdom was divided into two – and Israel eventually lost its independence. It was conquered first by the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then the Greeks, then the Romans.

In the centuries following Solomon the words of Nathan to David were applied to a figure called the Messiah. The Jews began to hope for a king of David's line who would inherit these promises of a universal and everlasting kingdom.

This hope of a king descended from David finds expression in the prophecies of Isaiah:

- E.g. Is 9: **“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. They lived in a land of shadow, but now light is shining on them.... A child is born to us! A son is given to us! And he will be our ruler... His royal power will continue to grow... He will rule as King David's successor”**.
- Or again in Isaiah 11: **“The royal line of David is like a tree that has been cut down; but just as new branches sprout from a stump, so a new king will arise from among David's descendants... He will rule his people with justice and integrity... The land will be as full of knowledge of the Lord as the seas are full of water”**.

Down through the centuries this hope intensified.

By the time of Jesus the Jews were almost beyond themselves in longing to see David's kingdom restored by David's son, the Messiah.

This is the context in which we read: **“He was born a descendant of David”**.

This was more than a mere statement of historical fact.

It tells us not just about Jesus' ancestors, but about who he is.

He is the Messiah. He is the one who will restore Israel's fortunes.
He is the one who will bring in the Kingdom of God.
He will rule over all – and he will rule for ever.
This is what it means to say: “**he was born a descendant of David**”

But to the amazement of his contemporaries, Jesus, the Messiah, ended up on a Cross.
It just didn't make sense. But, of course, the Cross was not the end.
This leads to the second main affirmation:

(2) “**He was shown with great power to be the Son of God by being raised from death**”

Yes, on the third day Jesus rose from the dead – and in rising he entered upon all the promises made to David's son. It was then that Jesus became King.
His resurrection was actually his coronation. His ascension was his enthronement.
It was then that Jesus sat down at God's right hand and began to share in God's rule.
It was then that Jesus' claim to be the Son of God was seen to be real.

Or in the words of the Christ-hymn in Phil 2: “**God raised him to the highest place above and gave him the name that is greater than any other name. And so, in honour of the name of Jesus, all beings in heaven, on earth, and in the world below, will fall on their knees, and all will openly proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father**”.

In other words, this early Christian confession of faith simply elaborates upon Paul's statement: “**The Good News is about God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ**”.

Incidentally, do remember that the word “**Christ**” is not just a second name for Jesus. All our children have second names – Jonathan Paul, Timothy Mark, Benjamin James, and for some unaccountable reason our daughter has three names: Susannah Caroline Louise – but these other names have no real significance.

But when Paul speaks of “**our Lord Jesus Christ**”, he is sandwiching the name of Jesus between two titles, **Lord** and **Christ**

Christ is the Greek form of the Hebrew word Messiah – both mean God's anointed one. Anointed in the sense that a king was anointed at their coronation.

Jesus Christ means Jesus the King.

Indeed, so speak of our Lord Jesus Christ is to say the same thing twice.

Jesus is Lord, Jesus is King. Eat your heart out Caesar!

The challenge that we face today is to express this in terms that have meaning to our contemporaries.

To speak of Jesus as descended from David means nothing to your average Brit.

To speak of Jesus as the Messiah, likewise means nothing.

To speak of him as King perhaps has more meaning – although with a Queen who has no real power and who at times is little more than a puppet of our prime minister, it doesn't pack the punch it might.

Nor does the term Lord have the force it used to.

Maybe we should speak of Jesus as the Master of the universe.

For that is what the Messiahship or Lordship of Jesus is all about.

For when God raised Jesus from the dead, he seated him on the throne of the universe.
One day he will be the final arbiter of your destiny and mine
One day we will have to give an account to him of our lives
One day he will establish his Kingdom – and on that day what will count is whether we belong to him or not – or rather, whether we have submitted ourselves to him.

3. JESUS IS THE ONE TO OBEY

Yes, Jesus is the one to obey.

God calls us not just to believe in his Son, but to obey his Son.

So Paul goes on to write: “**Through him God gave me the privilege of being an apostle for the sake of Christ, in order to lead people of all nations to believe and obey**” (Rom 1,5).

Literally Paul says God has made me an apostle “**to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles**” (NRSV).

Or as the NIV puts it, God gave Paul the task of calling people to “**the obedience that comes from faith**”

It is significant that in Paul’s letter to the Romans, “**faith in God**” and “**obedience to God**” are one and the same thing.

Faith for Paul was not just about believing, but about obeying.

For instance, in Rom 10.16 he writes: “But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says ‘Lord, who has believed our message?’”
[contrast 1.8//16.19; 10.16a//10.16b; 11.23//11.30f; 15.18//1.5]

So Paul writes in Rom 10.9: “**If you confess that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised him from death, you will be saved**”

Faith is not just about receiving Jesus as our Saviour, it is also about submitting to him as our Lord.

Faith is more than mere believism.

God is not there for our convenience – he is there for us to serve him.

If some of us really grasped this, then our lives would be revolutionised.

Our attitude to relationships, to money, to our home, would be utterly different.

For ‘*faith is Christ really becoming my Lord*’ (Emil Brunner). Jesus is the one to obey.

And Paul adds: “**This also includes you**”

Paul of course had the Christians at Rome in mind – but I believe that I can apply these words of Paul to us.

Paul says to us: ‘*Have you obeyed him?*’

Have you obeyed him in submitting your life to him?

Have you obeyed him in yielding your all to him in the waters of baptism?

Do you seek to honour Jesus in the way you treat others? In the way you use your money? In the way you use your home?

What place does Jesus have in the way you bring up your children? In the ambitions you have for your children? In the time you spend with your children?

Jesus is the one who matters – he is the Master of the universe, he is the one to obey.