

“Jesus is Lord”

Romans 10:5-13; Luke 4:1-13

A Communion Homily by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden

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MUMC, Thomasville, NC

The Epistle and Gospel lessons read earlier in today’s service were the set lectionary readings for this First Sunday in Lent. According to a plan of readings called the Revised Common Lectionary, which is used by most mainline churches including United Methodist Church, readings are prescribed for each Sunday: a passage from the Old Testament, the Apocrypha, or the Acts of the Apostles; a passage from one of the Psalms; another from either the Epistles or the Book of Revelation; and finally a passage from one of the four Gospels. The Revised Common Lectionary, established in 1983, runs in three-year cycles; the gospel readings in the first year (Year A) are taken from the Gospel of Matthew, those in the second year (or Year B) from the Gospel of Mark, and in the third year (or Year C) come from the Gospel of Luke. Beginning with Advent in 2009, we are currently in Year C.

As a discipline we will use these assigned readings each Sunday. In our weekly sermon preparation, we, preachers, will ask: “What in particular does the Lord want our church family to hear as a word from God?” As I planned ahead for this service, I settled on the theme “Jesus is Lord.” And as you heard a moment ago when the scripture was read, this is a direct quote from the Epistle to the Romans in which the apostle Paul records the earliest known creed of the followers of Jesus Christ.

“Jesus is Lord.” We need to understand that “Lord,” or *kyrie* in the Greek language of biblical times, had a broad range of meanings. It could simply mean “mister,” or “sir.” It could also mean “master” or “owner” in the sense of someone in control, or someone with absolute authority. It is in this latter sense that the apostle Paul used the word *kyrie*, “Lord.” He was not describing Jesus as “mister” or “sir,” but he was describing the authority of Jesus.

Let me offer a few broad canvass strokes to attempt to create a picture of the cultural and political background of the Apostle Paul’s day and this statement of faith, “Jesus is Lord.” First, Paul’s background: he had Hebrew parents and was, therefore, a Jew by birth, but since he was born in Tarsus his citizenship in the Roman Empire was an entitlement. The

city of Tarsus was the capital of the Asia Minor province of Cilicia. Modern Tarsus is located in the country of Turkey. Tarsus was well-known for its culture of Greek philosophy and literature, so much so that at one time its schools and number of learned men rivaled those of Athens and Alexandria. Paul referred to Tarsus' perceived importance in the Roman Empire when he said he wrote in Acts 21 that he was "born in Tarsus, a citizen of no mean city." (Acts 21:39).

Paul understood the Jewish and Gentile cultures equally well, and benefited from both. He was the ideal candidate for preaching the gospel and establishing churches among both Jews and Gentiles. He lived at a time when the emperor of Rome was a self-declared deity. In fact, every citizen and subject of the Roman Empire was required by edict of the emperor to confess that "Caesar is Lord." Those who failed to acknowledge the deity of Caesar, and for conscientious reasons refused to declare "Caesar is Lord" were charged with treason or sedition, and many of these people lost their lives in the notorious Coliseum of Rome for this very reason ...a place which I have visited ...a very scary place!

It was against this background and in this climate that the early Christians began to assert that "Jesus is Lord." This was their earliest profession of faith in the divinity of Jesus Christ. From the emperor's point of view, the confession "Jesus is Lord" was considered subversive language in the Roman Empire. It was a risky and costly thing to make this confession in those days.

"Jesus is Lord!" These three words formed the first creed of the Christian church. To be a Christian then, and now, is to affirm that Jesus is Lord. Following the lead of the New Testament, if a person can say today, "For me, Jesus is Lord," that person is a Christian. So let us ask ourselves, "What does it mean for you and for me to say, 'Jesus is Lord?'"

First, it means that, for us, Jesus is uniquely in charge . . . that we are prepared to follow obediently in whatever direction Jesus chooses to lead, even when Jesus goes where we would rather not go . . . into the legislative assemblies of our land to ensure that equality and sharing of resources, rather than greed and gain, prevail . . . into the courts of our county to see that justice and equity prevail . . . into the schools of our city to establish values for life

and for learning that are inspired by a higher ethic of grace . . . and into our families that standards of fidelity, trust, and mutual respect are upheld.

Second, to say “Jesus is Lord” means that we allow the priorities of Jesus to become our priorities . . . that, like Jesus, we are drawn to minister to those at the margins of society, the outcasts, and even those people that society (and, alas, sometimes the church) suggests we stay away from. Also, like Jesus, we have a reverence for creation and are good stewards of the earth . . . using, not abusing, our natural resources . . . sharing the harvest of farms and mines with the hungry and the poor.

Third, the confession that “Jesus is Lord” means that we take our Christian faith seriously – we worship, we fellowship, we pray, we take Communion, we study scripture, and we even sacrifice, just as Jesus did – but we never let our religion become an end in itself . . . we never allow religion to get in the way of people and their needs.

Finally, it means we are prepared to give Jesus a love and loyalty that will be given to no other person in the universe . . . that Jesus occupies center stage in life . . . that the spotlight, the focus, of our devotion is Jesus.

An American preacher once went to Germany on a preaching mission to university students. In preparation for this trip he had studied the basics of the German language. He discovered that the word for “lord” in German was *herr*. Like *kyrie* in Greek, *herr* in German may mean many things: *mister*, *sir*, *baron*, or *lord*. While preaching to students on this early creed that “Jesus is Lord” in Romans, chapter 10, the preacher expressed his frustration with the German language because it did not have a special word like “lord” in English for describing the Lordship of Jesus. He found himself challenged when a German student raised his hand and asked, “Since you as an American have a separate word in your language such as ‘*lord*’ to describe Jesus, can you tell us what difference that has made?”

As we come to the Table of the Lord this morning, it is my hope and prayer that the confession “Jesus is Lord” *has* made a difference, not only to what we think about Jesus, but also to what we believe in our hearts, and how we behave in the church and in the world.

May it be so! Yes, Lord, may it be so! In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.