

Credo, 2nd Series, Part Four: “**Our Lord**”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for January 19th 2020 (Second Sunday after Epiphany)
by Foster Freed

Matthew 4: 12-22

At the outset...at the outset I want to note that there is a sense in which it would pretty be possible for me, this morning, to preach roughly the same sermon I preached last Sunday. That was the Sunday—as some of you will recall—when I took for my focus the word “Son”: “Son” as in the Apostle Creed’s insistence that we are called to place our faith, to place our trust, not only in “God **the Father**, creator of heaven and earth” but also in “Jesus Christ his **only Son**.” The point I made in that sermon had to do with the “divinity” of Christ: with the fact that the title “Son”, whatever else it entails, most certainly does entail Christ’s divinity, a claim made all the clearer in the Nicene Creed which speaks of Christ in exalted terms as “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.” While the Apostle’s Creed does not offer those explicit affirmations, the very use of the title “Son” points unavoidably in the same direction: toward the acknowledgment of Christ’s divinity. But now here is the intriguing thing.

With its further use of the word “Lord”—as in “Jesus Christ his only son our **Lord**”—it could well be argued that the Creed is simply repeating itself: a fact that will be especially apparent to those familiar with the role played by the word “Lord” in the pages of the Old Testament. It’s not merely that the Hebrew word for “Lord”—**Adonai**—is one of the most frequent words throughout the Old Testament. There is the additional fact that the God we meet in the pages of the Old Testament not only has a number of “titles”, above all the title “Lord”, but that this God also has a name: a name indicated by the Hebrew consonants YHWH and generally thought to have been pronounced Yahweh. In time, however, that name was regarded as far too sacred to be casually pronounced every-time it turns up in the pages of the Hebrew Bible, so that it became customary...

...and remains customary in Jewish worship to this day, that whenever the sacred name is found in scripture or in the prayer book, instead of pronouncing that name, the word Adonai—Lord—is substituted. In short: when regarded from the perspective of our Hebraic roots, the word “Lord” as a title for Christ (no less powerfully than the word “Son”) points in the direction of Christ’s unique status: his divine status. However!

There’s a problem with letting things rest just there: a problem that might not emerge quite so powerfully were the Creed to say: that we believe “in Jesus Christ God’s only Son **the Lord**.” Were that the case, it would be quite easy....

...mind you, it would be a mistake but it would be an easy mistake to make...

...it would be easy, in that case, to see nothing more in the word “Lord” than a further reminder of the divinity of Christ. However! In truth, the Apostle’s Creed speaks not of Christ as **the** Lord but as **our** Lord. And that small shift—from the seemingly objective **the** to the subjective **our** represents a dramatic shift: one that we dare not overlook as we ponder the Creed.

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Go no further...no further than the call of the first four disciples, as told by Matthew in this morning’s Gospel reading. Safe to suggest this morning’s text represents an excellent starting point from which to ponder the Lordship of Christ, which is to say the **authority** with which Christ erupts into the lives of those to whom he calls. Note, especially, the two-fold use of the word “immediately” in this dramatic episode:

*While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”^[a] ²⁰ **Immediately** they left their nets and followed him. ²¹ And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. ²² **Immediately** they left the boat and their father and followed him.*

In passing, take note that Matthew here—as is so often the case—is lifting this episode from one of his key sources: the Gospel according to Mark. What’s fascinating, in this instance, is that Matthew retains the word “immediately” which is one of the most noticeable distinctives about Mark’s Gospel. Mark’s Gospel is an urgent Gospel: one in which the word “immediately” appears 35 times. Even though Matthew’s Gospel is significantly longer than Mark’s, that word shows up only 14 times in Matthew. But this episode—this calling to Simon and Andrew, James and John—is one of the instances in which Matthew hangs on to that key word because he too wishes to emphasize the immediacy of their response to the voice of their Lord. “Follow me” is his command...and they do so: **immediately**. While modern scholarship has sometimes tried to explain the immediacy of their response, neither Matthew or Mark wish for us to seek any explanation apart from the distinct authority held by this Jesus for all of life, but especially in the lives of those who recognize his authority and thereby wish to refer to him not merely as “the” Lord but as “their” Lord.

Nor is it surprising that this is the dimension—at any rate one of the crucial dimensions—of the Gospel, that made the early Christians an object of deep suspicion within the Roman Empire. Viewed from the perspective of the Gospel’s **Jewish** roots, to speak of Christ as Lord—as I noted earlier—is to speak in ways that powerfully hint at his divinity. Viewed from the perspective of the **Empire**, however, to speak of Christ as Lord is to make a potent—and potentially highly subversive—pledge: because the claim that Jesus is Lord...

...incidentally, far more ancient than even the Apostle's Creed is that most basic of Christian confessions, "Jesus is Lord"...

...the claim that Jesus is Lord entailed—during the Church's first handful of centuries—the corollary that Caesar most certainly is **not** Lord. As you will no doubt realize: that is something neither Caesar nor his minions would have been eager to hear.

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There is, I believe, no better instance of how the rubber hits the road when we confess Jesus as our Lord, than what has come to be known as the **Barmen Declaration**. Issued in 1934 at a meeting of Church Leaders in the town of Barmen, Germany—much of it written by the Swiss theologian Karl Barth who was yet to be deported by the Nazi regime—the Barmen declaration was written in response to the decision made the previous year by the national synod of the German Protestant churches to throw their support behind the Nazi government. Some of those who offered their support no doubt did so because they simply did not see it as the church's role to oppose an elected government. Many, however, saw in the Nazis and their leader someone who could restore national greatness to the German people, in the aftermath of the humiliating defeat they had suffered in 1918. For Church leaders such as these, the emergence of Adolf Hitler was not merely something to accept; it was something worth cheering about.

It is therefore important to recognize that the Barmen declaration was an "in-house" statement: not a statement addressed to the German nation, rather a statement one group of Christian-leaders addressed to another group of Christian-leaders, urging them to reject a number of "false" teachings, above all the false teaching...

...let's call it by its name...let's call it a heresy...

...the heresy that the church could place additional authority figures side-by-side with Jesus, without losing its defining character as the Church of Christ. And so, once a number of preliminaries had been addressed in the declaration's opening paragraphs, Barmen begins with a stirring affirmation of Christ, followed by a no less stirring rebuke of those who would substitute for the authority of Christ, some other authority within the life of the church.

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture—so begins that opening affirmation....Jesus Christ...**is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.** And yes: that affirmation is followed by a powerful rebuke to those who had chosen—in some cases quite wholeheartedly—to place their trust in Adolf Hitler. **We reject the false doctrine, as though the church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God's revelation.**

And no: you need not be a rocket scientist to recognize—within our own time and place—similar temptations and similar dangers to the one that faced the German churches in the 1930s. Those dangers and temptations, I hasten to add, are found both on the left and on the right of the political spectrum! They are an equal opportunity employer. And yes: they operate on the level of our politics...but they operate any time we as persons make choices: choices that will sometimes amplify...but often betray...our first loyalty. Our loyalty to the one we dare to reference—dare to confess—as “our Lord.”

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I am struck...struck by the crucial nature of the role those two small words—“our Lord”—play in the life of the Apostle’s Creed: at any rate, the role they play in **my** hearing of the Creed. Nor am I oblivious to the wariness with which most United Church folk embrace—or refuse to embrace—the ancient Creeds. I realize some of that has to do with a handful of particular statements found in the Apostle’s Creed: such things as affirming the Virgin Birth (come back next Sunday) or the bodily resurrection (come back in April!). That’s part of our wariness. But I think there is a larger issue, having to do with the sense that simply memorizing a handful of words—being able to recite those words at will even if, when push comes to shove we have no real idea what any of it means...

...I think that strikes many of us as an evasion of faith rather than its embrace: a faith-substitute rather than the genuine article! In effect, nothing more than memorizing facts about the Christian religion. But it seems to me that here—when we profess Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, as **our** Lord—surely here we break through to a completely different level, at which mere concepts give way to a lived commitment to be the persons...to be the people...whose lives truly reflect devotion to, commitment to, the Way of Jesus. And yes, I know...no one knows this better than I know it:

...we regularly fall on our faces with all of it. We regularly fall far short of the mark. We often embarrass ourselves in our half-hearted devotion and half-baked discipleship, which is why I—for one—am thankful that the Creed will eventually get around to speaking about the “forgiveness of sins”. God help us if it did not include those hope-filled words. And yet...all the same: I am grateful that the Creed also embodies an invitation for me not merely to say yes to the “concept” of God, yes to the “memory” of Jesus, yes to the “rumour” of the Holy Spirit: but invites me—in fear and trembling—to throw caution to the wind, and to pledge my very life to the One whom I am privileged to call “my” Lord...the one whom we are privileged to call “our” Lord.

I want to leave you this morning...I want to leave you with some of the most beautiful words ever written about this one we call “our” Lord. These words come from **Albert Schweitzer**, the renowned missionary who spent the final decades of his life serving in Africa. But Schweitzer didn’t start out as a missionary; he started out as a distinguished New Testament scholar who devoted one of his most important books—at

the start of the 20th century—to a review of the quest for the historical Jesus that had occupied so much New Testament scholarship during the 19th century. At the very end of that book, Schweitzer concluded with a brief paragraph which—in a very real sense—acknowledges that while the quest for the historical Jesus...

...the Jesus who ministered in Galilee, Samaria and Judaea, some 20 centuries ago...

...Schweitzer, at the end of his book, while acknowledging the grave challenges scholars will always face in attempting to capture the essence of Christ using the methods of historical research, suggests that there remains a way in which **all of us**, scholars and non-scholars alike, can come to know the Lord as our Lord. "He comes to us—writes Schweitzer...He comes to us as One unknown, without a name: as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those...who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."

May it be so! In the name of the Lord Jesus! Amen!!