

5.13.2020 Easter Midweek Meditation, Week 5
1 Corinthians 12:1-3, Matthew 16:13-27

Pastor Timothy McKenzie
(John Norman Davidson Kelly)

“Who do you say that I am?”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

To be people of Easter means that we are people who confess our faith in the risen Lord, Christ Jesus. Each week at worship, whether it is in church or online, we confess our faith often through the words of the Apostles' Creed. The Apostles' Creed is certainly the oldest creed in current usage, especially if we consider its lineage from the “Old Roman Creed,” which dates from the second century. This creed developed out of early credal statements that can be seen already present and developing in the writings of the New Testament. No student of New Testament and early church history can study about the Apostles' Creed without encountering the work of British theologian and biblical scholar J. N. D. Kelly. Kelly did extensive research into the development of Christian creeds, in light of their emergence out of the language of the proclamation (kerygma) of the New Testament. The reading for today's meditation is from Kelly's book *Early Christian Creeds*, and provides insight into the early church's confession, as it is already present in the New Testament.

Confessing Christ Jesus as crucified and raised was a verbal expression about what someone believed about the person of Jesus. Eventually, this confession also became a part of the catechetical education of the church as preparation for baptism. This is why confession of the Apostles' Creed is contained within the baptismal rite itself (see ELW p. 229). A confession of the heart of the gospel message prepares one for baptism. Such catechetical confession developed alongside another kind of “public confession” about Jesus within imperial Rome, what today might be called “speaking truth to power.”

Perhaps one of the most well-known examples of this type of confession from the early church is contained in a work known as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna (present day Izmir in Turkey). This work is the oldest account of martyrdom outside the New Testament, and is contained in a body of writings known as the *Apostolic Fathers*. A brief look at Polycarp's confession is helpful. After his arrest Polycarp was asked by the head of the police:

“What harm is there in saying, Caesar is Lord (Κυριος ναίσαο), and offering incense," with more to this effect, "and saving yourself?" After being taken to the arena, the proconsul tried to persuade him to a denial saying, “Have respect to your age,” and other things in accordance therewith, as it is their habit to say, "Swear by the genius of Caesar; repent and say, Away with the atheists." Then Polycarp with solemn countenance looked upon the whole multitude of lawless heathen that were in the arena, and waved his hand to them; and groaning and looking up to heaven he said, "Away with the atheists." But when the magistrate pressed him hard and said, "Swear the oath, and I will release you; revile the Christ," Polycarp said, "Eighty-six years have I been His servant, and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" But on his persisting again and saying, "Swear by the genius of Caesar," he answered, "If you suppose vainly that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, as you say, and feign that you are ignorant who I am, hear you plainly: I am a Christian. But if you would learn the doctrine of Christianity, assign a day and give me a hearing."

The above demand to say, “Caesar is Lord,” places the early Christian confession “Jesus is Lord” (Κυριος Ἰησοῦς, see for ex. 1 Corinthians 12:3, and Romans 10:9) in both a religious and a political light. Before Christianity became the religion of empire, to confess, “Jesus is Lord,” was a

treasonous declaration, since it placed one's allegiance to Christ above all other temporal powers. The above passage about Polycarp also contains the verb "save," as in "save yourself" and "my king who saved me." An experience of having been saved by the risen "Lord Jesus" was what gave meaning to both life and death. In Polycarp's case, he was killed knowing he would live with his Lord. The word "martyr" means "witness" and in this way, Polycarp was a martyr (witness) to his faith in Jesus his Lord.

Very few of us probably think of a weekly liturgical confession of faith, in the words of the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed, in this way. However, what we think about Jesus is still a relevant issue in today's world. Within the New Testament, perhaps the earliest and most well-known confession was made by Peter. Jesus said to his disciples,

Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:13-16; see also Mark 8:27ff, and Luke 9:18ff).

The question, "*Who do you say that I am?*" remains a highly personal and even potentially subversive question, because it requires "my" answer in light of all of the other powers, principalities, and ideologies in the world. Speaking truth to power still knows no greater confession because it makes clear that one has decided to follow the call of the Lord, Christ Jesus, over and above all others who would be "lords" in this world. Jesus' call is also a call to love one's neighbor - a way of cruciform denial and sacrificial service for others.

Jesus makes this clear in the verses that follow Peter's above confession, stating to the disciples,

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?

For Jesus' disciples, and as we have also seen in the case of Polycarp, losing and saving one's life is bound up with confession and discipleship to Jesus. In Peter's case, he had still not experienced the reality of the risen Christ, because his confession was momentary. Peter, unable to walk the way of the cross and its inherent self-denial, denied Jesus. Only after the Easter event was Peter given by the risen Jesus, a new identity and task, as an apostle to "feed my sheep."

What we confess about ourselves is important. During the season of Easter, we are reminded that a crucial aspect of confession is the daily experience of the risen Christ who leads us in the light of the resurrection on a cruciform path of loving self-denial for others. As modern people, living in a post-modern world it is highly unlikely that we will face an arena such as Polycarp faced. Yet we are still daily called by Christ and challenged by the arena of our world to make a clear confession of faith through a life of love on behalf of "the least of these." It is a path that will place us in conflict with other powers in this world that seek other interests than the interests of Christ. It is a path that will place us in conflict with ourselves - with self-service and self-profit. Jesus' words challenge all who would follow him, "*For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?*" Our confession of faith is not simply a liturgical moment on Sunday morning, but a daily discipleship to our Lord, who does us no wrong, and only asks that we seek to be living signs of his presence in a suffering world. Amen.

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Easter Week 5 midweek meditation reading: John Norman Davidson Kelly (1909-1997)

From *Early Christian Creeds* ("Fragments of Creeds" & "The Original Pattern" pp. 16-18, 27-29)

So far we have been glancing at miniature creeds, hardly more than catchwords. Side by side with them are many more examples of fuller and more detailed confessions in the pages of the New Testament. In 1 *Cor.* 15, 3 ff., St Paul reproduces an extract from what he describes in so many words as *the gospel* (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον) *which I preached to you and which you received*: he adds that, so far from its being his gospel, he in his turn had received it, presumably from the Church. The fragment quoted runs: *For I passed on to you in the first place what I myself had received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve, then to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at once ... then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles...*

This is manifestly a summary drawn up for catechetical purposes or for preaching: it gives the gist of the Christian message in a concentrated form. A defensive, apologetic note becomes audible in the impressive array of witnesses with which it terminates. Along with it we should probably class the more closely knit theological statement of *Rom.* 1, 3 f: *Concerning his Son, who was born of David's seed by natural descent, Who was declared Son of God with power by the Spirit of holiness when He was raised from the dead, through whom we have received grace...* as well as the briefer extracts in *Rom.* 8, 34: *Christ Jesus Who died, or rather has been raised from the dead, Who is on the right hand of God, Who also makes intercession for us,* and 2 *Tim.* 2, 8: *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, of the seed of David (according to my gospel).* Odd sentences scattered throughout the epistles seem to echo catechetical formulae like these, e.g. *Gal.* 1, 4 (*Jesus Christ, Who gave Himself for our sins*); 1 *Thess.* 4, 14 (*If we believe that Jesus died and rose again*); and 1 *Thess.* 5, 9 (*...through our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us*). So, too, the lengthier, more freely expressed passage in 1 *Pet.* 3, 18 ff: *For Christ also suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, to bring us to God, slain indeed in the flesh but quickened in the Spirit, in which He went and preached to the spirits in prison...through the raising again of Jesus Christ, Who is on the right hand of God, having ascended to heaven, angels, authorities and powers having been subjected to Him,* reads like a part-paraphrase and part-quotation of an instruction preparatory to baptism. The insertion in verses 20 ff. of a short account of the meaning of the sacrament bears this out.

The plan of these Christological kerygmas is simple: they are built up by attaching to the name of Jesus selected incidents in the redemptive story. An underlying contrast between flesh and spirit, son of David and Son of God, humiliation and exaltation, can often be detected. The most impressive example of it is the well-known Christological passage *Phil.* 2, 6-11, which is entirely modeled on the antithesis between Christ's self-emptying and His elevation to glory as Lord of creation...

The Church's beliefs about Jesus only acquired significance in the setting of its belief in God the Father, Whose Son He was and Who had raised Him from the dead. If examples are called for, we need only appeal, as we have already done more than once, to the tag, cited alike by St Paul and St Peter, God, Who has raised the Lord Jesus from the dead. In the second place, it did not need conscious opposition to pagan polytheism to induce Christians to set forth their belief in God the Father. The doctrine was central in Judaism, from which the Church had emerged with the conviction that it was the true heir of the faith as well as the promises of Israel. It was central also in

the teaching of Jesus; and if St Paul's language is to be taken seriously, the cry *Abba* (= "Father") was a quasi-liturgical cliché on the lips of Christians. The belief in the Holy Spirit, too, was clearly part of the doctrinal apparatus of men who realized that they were living in the Messianic age and who felt themselves under its sway. It may be true that often, perhaps usually, the semi-credal confessions which achieved currency in the earlier decades did not give expression to this framework but were content to announce the purely Christological kerygma. It was, after all, natural and inevitable that the initial proclamation of the gospel should emphasize the distinctively Christian, entirely novel and revolutionary element in the divine revelation. But the framework was there. It was always presupposed; and the firmness with which it was apprehended is evidenced by the extraordinary way in which the binitarian and Trinitarian patterns wove themselves into the texture of early Christian thinking. In due course, with the development of catechetical teaching and of more systematic, comprehensive instruction generally, as well as with the evolution of liturgical forms giving fuller expression to the faith, these vital aspects of it came to receive more regular and formal acknowledgement in creeds and semi-credal summaries. But this was not in response to any challenge or prompting from without: it was simply that binitarian and, ultimately, Trinitarian summaries were inevitably, the Christian faith being what it was, more adequate vehicles for conveying its message. The impulse towards their formation came from within, not from without; and at the New Testament stage we can observe the process in full swing, with confessions of all types coexisting and interacting.

Thus we are brought back by devious routes to our starting point. The story that the Twelve, meeting in solemn conclave, composed an "Apostles' Creed" is no doubt a pious fiction. But the second-century conviction that the "rule of faith" believed and taught in the Catholic Church had been inherited from the Apostles contains more than a germ of truth.

Book recommendations:

Kelly, J. N. D., *Early Christian Creeds*. (Third edition), Essex: Longman, 1972.

Kelly, J. N. D., *Early Christian Doctrines*. (Revised edition), San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1978.

John Norman Davidson Kelly (1909-1997)

John Norman Davidson Kelly, or "J. N. D. Kelly" as he is known to students of early Christian creeds and doctrines, was a British theologian and academic at the University of Oxford, and Principal of St Edmund Hall, Oxford, between 1951-1979. A professor in the theology faculty at St Edmund Hall, Oxford, he also served as vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford in 1969. Kelly was also a cleric in the Church of England, a Canon of Chichester Cathedral, 1948-1993, a Fellow of the British Academy, and a member of the Academic Council of the Ecumenical Theological Institute in Jerusalem. A gifted administrator and patristics scholar, Dr. Kelly oversaw the independence of St Edmund Hall from Queens College, Oxford in 1958, and the admission of women into the undergraduate body of St Edmund Hall in 1979. However, his scholarship and research into the history of Christian creeds continues offer insights in the early church. The list of his works is considerable, including, *Early Christian Creeds*, *Early Christian Doctrines*, *The Epistles of Peter and of Jude*, *Jerome*, and the *Oxford Dictionary of Popes*.