

Who Is Christ For Us? A Prophet
A Sermon on Luke 4:14-21
Third Sunday after the Epiphany
January 27, 2019

Introduction

Disciples like to say we have “No creed but Christ,” but we do have a creed. In Disciples congregations, the minister asks new members and the Pastor’s Class to make the same confession of faith that Peter made in Matthew 16:16: “Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, and accept him as Lord and Savior?”

For the next three Sundays, I would like to explore what it means when we say that Jesus is the Christ. Christ is not Jesus’ last name—it is an office. Jesus is to Christ as Judge is to Judy. Christ is a translation of Χριστός. We transliterate it into English as Christ, but in Greek it means the Anointed One. The most literal translation is the Smearred One.

Do we simply leave it to people to decide on their own what Christ means to them? Can they say that Jesus is their personal Lord and Savior and let it go at that? Eugene Boring, a Disciples New Testament scholar, suggests that the meaning of the Christ should be filled in by the Bible, not from somewhere else.

Three offices in the Bible are anointed by God: prophet, king and priest. Holders of these offices are anointed with oil when they take office; olive oil is poured over their head. It is a sign that they will bring fatness to the land.

When we confess that Jesus is the Christ, we confess that Jesus holds a certain office. Jesus is not the Christ because we have elected him to an office; he has been appointed to the office by God.

Today we will talk about Jesus as a prophet anointed by God. In the next two weeks we will talk about Jesus as king and as priest.

First Move: Jesus is a Prophet Like Isaiah

The first words out of Jesus’ mouth as he begins his public ministry are: “The Spirit of the Lord [is] upon me, for which he has anointed me.” Anoint is a translation of the Greek verb, χρίω. It is the verb form of the noun, χριστός. The Lord has *christed* Jesus.

Instead of anointing Jesus with olive oil, the Lord has poured the Holy Spirit out on him. In Luke's gospel, heaven is opened after Jesus' baptism and the Spirit descended on Jesus. The Spirit then led Jesus into the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil for 40 days. Jesus returns to Galilee in the power of the Spirit and begins teaching in the synagogues.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus' power is not limited to healings. The same power guides his teaching and gives him a unique ability to interpret Scripture. The people are amazed by his teaching and a report goes out about him to the whole neighboring area. Luke is describing Jesus as a prophet like Moses, who was a mediator between God and the people. Jesus can understand and explain the law with great authority, as Moses did. Moses was at the top of Sinai for 40 days, taking instruction from God.

The prophet also serves as a mediator between the people and the ruling elite. Joseph Blenkinsopp, an Old Testament scholar, characterizes the first prophets as dissident intellectuals. They objected to the new state apparatus that had emerged and replaced tribal structures. Classical prophets like Amos and Hosea argued for an alternative social vision in which the ruling elite was accountable to the people. What is distinctive about ancient Israel is that the prophets were themselves part of the educated elite and the kings recognized their authority. Anywhere else in the ancient near East, the kings would not have tolerated the social criticism of prophets. The prophets were the conscience of Israel; they are one of the great gifts of ancient Israel to social consciousness today.

Jesus is reading from a scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue. Second Isaiah was massively influential to the authors of the books of the New Testament because Second Isaiah is writing from a similar context—Israel has been conquered by a foreign empire. Isaiah is a mediator between the people and God. Isaiah brings words of comfort from God to Israel in exile.

Jesus reads aloud from Isaiah 61. Isaiah says that God has anointed him with the Spirit to proclaim good news to the oppressed. That would include all of Israel. Luke changes the oppressed to the poor. The Greek word for poor that Luke uses means the wretchedly poor, the begging poor. Isaiah goes on to say that God has sent him to proclaim release to the captives. The Greek word that is translated as sent is ἀποστέλλω. Isaiah is God's messenger, God has *apostled* him to deliver a message to the people.

Isaiah also brings recovery of sight to the blind. The people are made blind and deaf in Isaiah 6 because they have turned away from God. The punishment for their sin is that God allows a foreign empire to conquer them. God now heals them, opening their eyes and unstopping their ears. Their relationship with God is restored.

Jesus rolls up the scroll and tells the people in the synagogue, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your ears.”

The people of Israel in the first century thought that the days of the prophets were long past. Luke’s Jesus now claims that he is a prophet like Isaiah. He announces that he is a mediator who has the power of the Spirit. He relies on God for his power. He will liberate the people, heal them of their brokenness and restore them to their proper relationship with God.

Second Move: Prophets Speak for God

There are a lot of people around today who consider themselves prophets. Most of them are self-appointed. They point out what they believe are the evils affecting our society, based on their political philosophy. Many of them claim that Jesus is their personal Lord and Savior.

Ann Coulter describes herself as “a Christian first and a mean-spirited, bigoted conservative second, and don’t you ever forget it.” She summarized her view of Christianity in one of her columns in 2004: “Jesus’ distinctive message was: People are sinful and need to be redeemed, and this is your lucky day, because I’m here to redeem you even though you don’t deserve it, and I have to get the crap kicked out of me to do it.” That is a common understanding of substitutionary atonement. People are wretched and deserve the wrath of God. God in his infinite mercy sent Christ to bear the punishment for our sins. Substitutionary atonement does not come from the Bible; it comes from Anselm of Canterbury in the 11th century. He was one of the great thinkers of his age, and his explanation of atonement made sense in a feudal society. Today his view of atonement is reduced to a moral absurdity. Most people today have a different understanding of sin; we don’t see sin as breaking one of God’s commandments but as damaging our relationship with someone else.

Coulter says, “Christianity fuels everything I write. Being a Christian means that I am called upon to do battle against lies, injustice, cruelty, hypocrisy—you know, all the virtues in the church of liberalism.”

Coulter speaks for a lot of the self-proclaimed prophets out there. They give the church a bad name. People are turning away from the church in large part because they associate the church with Christians like Ann Coulter.

The religious left also has its share of self-proclaimed prophets. I worry that the religious left has given up on doing the interior work, spending time in contemplation and prayer to ensure that their message is coming from God instead of themselves. Robert P. Jones says in *The End of White Christian America* that young people are

turned away from the church because they see the religious right and the religious left as social activists, who sprinkle their politics with a thin layer of religiosity.

Prophecy is not about giving your own opinion. Prophets speak not for themselves but for God. As Eugene Boring writes, to say that Jesus is a prophet is to say that Jesus speaks for God. For Disciples to confess that Jesus is the Christ is to confess that God has spoken definitively in the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. This belief is expressed in the opening verses of the Letter to the Hebrews, “God spoke long ago to the fathers by the prophets, and at the end of these days, he speaks to us by the son, whom he appointed heir of all things.”

That is not good news for people who want to live their own life by their own wisdom without submitting to anyone else’s authority. Christians who live their own lives don’t have any Christian wisdom to share with the world. People don’t see Christ in the church if everyone is a prophet speaking for themselves.

Confessing that Jesus is the Christ is committing to a changed life. We look for transcendence—we look to Jesus for spiritual guidance. That changes how we act and what we believe.

This is a model that is used for preaching today. The preacher goes across the bridge that connects us with God and spends time studying the text, opening himself/herself up to Scripture, trying to discern the meaning of the the ancient text and discover the wisdom in it. If the text challenges our theology, we don’t reject it immediately. We hold it in contrast with our beliefs and try to see if there is some good news in the text that we can hold in contrast. It adds intensity and stretches our theology. Then the preacher comes back across the bridge and brings a message to the congregation, applying the text to the life of the members of the congregation. Hopefully the preacher is able to find something new and challenging in the text that will expand the beliefs of the congregation.

Third Move: Jesus Is Anointed to Do Four Things

Jesus says in today’s text that he has been anointed to do four things. That is the message that he hears from God.

First, to proclaim good news to the begging poor. That sounds great. But what is the good news to the poor? Amy-Jill Levine, a New Testament scholar at Vanderbilt, is an Orthodox Jew. She says that most Jews do not believe that Jesus is the Messiah because the Messiah is supposed to bring in the Messianic age with him. How were things different after Jesus arrived? How are things different now? Where is the kingdom of God?

These are all fair points. I would say that the failure is on our part as followers of Christ. Jesus stands in solidarity with the poor. That is who he ministered to and fed. He offers an alternative view of society, an inverted pyramid, where the people on the bottom matter. Christians have never really bought into this view of society. Christians over the centuries have continued to support an imperial or hierarchical society, where most of the benefits go to those at the top of the pyramid. Oh, churches have food kitchens and go on mission trips to Central America, but they have resisted doing anything about systemic poverty. We don't stand in solidarity with the poor, we patronize them and feel good about ourselves by giving them charity.

Reforming criminal justice would be a good start. Working to end the societal practice of warehousing people in prison. There can be accountability without destroying people's lives and putting up obstacles that prevent them from reentering the workforce and leading producing lives.

The second thing that Jesus was anointed to do is actually two things: to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. By joining these two things, the prophet is saying that these two things are similar. Release to the captives doesn't necessarily mean release from captivity to Rome. It could mean captivity to the devil, who tempted Jesus in the wilderness and tempts each of us. A more contemporary image would be captivity to evil desires or an evil spirit, acting under the illusion of what our culture tells us to desire instead of what God desires. Recovery of sight to the blind fits with this. Jesus opens our eyes to the sacred all around us. Jesus raises our awareness of the spiritual dimension, filling our lives with meaning.

The third thing Jesus does is to send out the oppressed in release. Send here is again a translation of ἀποστέλλω. Jesus liberates the oppressed and sends them out as apostles. The oppressed, those who have been liberated from sin, are apostles to share the good news with those who are still captive to the charms of the culture.

The fourth thing is to proclaim an acceptable year of the Lord. Most commentators see this as a reference to the Jubilee year in Leviticus. The poor are released from their debts. The Jubilee year has come.

When a new king would take power, he would show the people grace. He would cancel all their debts. The people would be grateful and beholden to the king.

The Jubilee year is a way to acknowledge that God is the source of all that we have. In Leviticus Chapter 25, every 50th year is proclaimed to be a Jubilee Year. All debts were cancelled. All lands were returned to the families that originally held them. It was a fresh start for everyone. It was also a way of acknowledging that the land belongs to God. God gave it to the people as a gift. They don't have the right to

private property. It is God's property. It is on loan from God. God will provide for all the people from the fruit of the land.

This may be the hardest thing for us to do. Can we stop seeing land as private property and see all that we have as a gift from God? We are stewards of ten acres around this church building. How do we make best use of this gift for God's purposes? We have been on this land for 35 years and, other than the Easter Egg Hunt, we have not used our land to apostle to the neighborhood.

Conclusion

You are having important discussions in your House Meetings about the direction of this church. I have more questions than answers for you today. The starting point is to ask, where is Christ leading us? What does it mean for us as Disciples that Christ is a prophet who speaks for God?

The nones and the dones have given up on church. Have they given up on Christ? Do they know Christ? How do we apostle them?

If we deepen our relationship with God and follow Christ as faithfully as we can, our church will be transformed. We will have a New Beginning.

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