

“Christ’s Lordship”

A sermon preached by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church

Durham, NC

10:55 a.m. Sunday, March 25, 2007

Text: Revelation 5:6-14      John 14:21-24      NRSV

Opening prayer: O God, open our hearts and minds through the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, so that we may receive your truth for us today. Amen.

BACK TO BASICS

Vince Lombardi was the legendary football coach of the Green Bay Packers. The story is told that at the first practice of every season, he would hold up a football and say, “Gentlemen, this is a football.” Now, that is back to basics! No matter how much we have studied the Bible, read theology, or worked in the church, one of the conditions for growth is that we not lose track of the basics.

For Christians one of the basics is “Jesus is Lord.” Long before there was the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed, the earliest Christian creed was simply “Jesus is Lord.” The early Christians were considered rigid and unbending in their absorption with Jesus Christ. From the book of Matthew to the book of Revelation in the New Testament, we find a clear witness to Jesus’ identity as God’s unique Son and his absolute authority as the governing Lord of the universe.

Today the mission of Duke Memorial United Methodist Church is sharing Christ from the heart of Durham. Exactly what are we sharing? Part of what we are sharing is Christ as Lord, Christ’s Lordship. Our mission is to help people follow Jesus Christ as Lord.

Jesus put forth a critical question to his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15) This is a crucial question because our response can affect so much of

what we do.

Who is Jesus? Is he just a good person among many good people? Is he a teacher of morals? Is he just another religious leader? Is he God's Son? Is he Lord? Our response determines our eternal relationship with God, our lifestyle, our priorities, how we rear our children, how we spend our money and leisure time, and how we respond to the needs of others.

People in the New Testament church had a clear conviction that Jesus Christ was different from any other person who ever lived. No one had ever said or done the things that Jesus did. The early Christians were so convinced of the validity of the witness concerning Jesus and the fact of his resurrection that they were willing to lay down their lives for this man. Those people were willing to forsake everything they knew. They were shunned, persecuted, considered a cult, thrown out of the temple and imprisoned – because they believed that Jesus Christ was the living Lord, the object of their faith. Among many options for first-century faith, they followed Christ.

The captain of a ship stared into the dark night and saw faint lights in the distance. Immediately, he told his signalman to send a message, "Alter your course 10 degrees south." A return message was promptly received: "Alter your course 10 degrees north."

The captain was angered. His command had been ignored. So he sent a second message: "Alter your course 10 degrees south – I am the captain!" Soon another message was received, "Alter your course 10 degrees north – I am Seaman Third Class Jones." This really steamed the captain. He sent another message: "Alter your course 10 degrees south. I am a battleship." Then the reply came, "Alter your course 10 degrees north. I am a lighthouse."

In the midst of our turbulent society, all sorts of voices are shouting orders into the night, telling us what to do, how to adjust our lives. Out of the darkness, one voice

signals something that is different from the rest, something that might be considered ridiculous. However, that voice happens to be Jesus, the Light of the World. That is the voice that we need to heed.

## WHAT DOES LORD MEAN?

When we love and obey Jesus, we follow him as Lord. The meaning of “Lord” was clear during the first years of the Church. “Lord” meant the one who had absolute authority. Caesar was the only person who could be called Lord with a capital “L.” The typical greeting on the street in the Roman Empire would include the affirmation, “Caesar is Lord.” And the response would echo this affirmation: “Yes, Caesar is truly Lord.” It was the law. To fail to publicly acknowledge Caesar’s claim to deity and absolute authority could mean arrest and ultimately death.

When we proclaim Jesus our Lord, he becomes our authority – the One who calls us and sends us. Our response is one of obedience. Jesus affirmed to his disciples that our response is important. He said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 7:21)

Many of us have a warehouse full of reasons why we are less than what Christ calls us to be. I have my excuses, too. We often say that Jesus is first in our lives, but in reality, he comes after careers, relationships, clubs, golf outings, band practice, basketball, soccer, and even yard work.

In our denomination’s tradition, the membership vows are powerful: “Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin? Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice and oppression? Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord?”

Making those vows is a great opportunity for us. It gives us a goal to work

toward for a lifetime. It also affirms that God's grace is with us as we strive to live with Jesus as our Lord, even as we fail and try again.

Herbert Gabhart writes about a young girl who was asked how she was able to ward off the devil. The girl replied, "When the devil knocks at the door of my heart, I take Jesus by the hand. I ask him to go with me to answer the door. When I open the door, the devil sees me and Jesus standing hand in hand, and he says, 'Excuse me, I must be at the wrong place.' Then he leaves.

Jesus' presence and strength with us makes all the difference. It is a lot tougher to ward off the devil and his temptations when Jesus is not by our side.

Our scripture lesson today from the book of Revelation gives us a glimpse of the worship of God in heaven. What a glorious vision! According to this vision, there is no doubt that Jesus is Lord. The Lamb, representing the crucified and now victorious Messiah, stands in the center of the throne. Thousands of angels, the living creatures and the elders sing, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Revelation 5:12) Then all the creatures in heaven and on earth sing songs of praise. Nothing is more important than the Lord. For us, this is a call to faithfulness.

## LOVE AND OBEDIENCE CREATE A CLOSENESS WITH GOD

In the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples about love, obedience and closeness with God and the interrelationship between these three concepts. Jesus said, "They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me." (14:21) When we love Jesus, we will keep his commandments.

Jesus also said, "Whoever does not love me does not keep my words." (14:24) When we don't love Jesus, we do not obey his words. These ideas are fairly straightforward.

Professor Momerie once said, “Think of Jesus till you love him and your love has made you like him.”

Jesus presents an intriguing truth. A person’s love for Christ and obedience to Christ help create a closeness between that person and the Lord. Jesus taught: “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” (14:23)

When we love Jesus and obey him, we experience God’s love. Through this love we will also experience the indwelling of God and Jesus. Jesus tells us, “(My Father and I) will come to (you) and make our home with (you). We love Jesus by keeping his commandments. We live what Jesus has taught us and demonstrated in his own life. Then we find ourselves once again in his love.

John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist societies in England. On May 24, 1738, he had an experience with God in a society meeting on Aldersgate Street. Wesley felt his heart strangely warmed. He felt an assurance that Christ had taken away his sins and had saved him from the law of sin and death. Many of us are familiar with that entry in his journal.

Listen carefully to what John Wesley wrote in his journal the following day: “The moment I awaked, ‘Jesus, Master,’ was in my heart and in my mouth; and I found all my strength lay in keeping my eye fixed upon Him, and my soul waiting on Him continually.” A close relationship with Christ gives us the strength to follow Jesus as Lord.

## FOLLOWING JESUS AS LORD

One of the basics for Christians is that Jesus is Lord. Exactly what does it mean to follow Jesus as Lord? It means to love God with all that we are and all that we have. It is to love your neighbor as yourself. It is to make disciples of Jesus. Bill Hybels writes that Jesus’ number one value was people. To follow Jesus as Lord is to be concerned first and foremost about people. When we follow Jesus as Lord, we pray,

study, serve, give and worship. When Jesus is Lord, my first priority is what God wants me to do – no matter how difficult it is.

In one of his books, C. S. Lewis puts it this way, “I think that many of us, when Christ has enabled us to overcome one or two sins that were an obvious nuisance, are inclined to feel (though we do not put it into words) that we are now good enough. He has done all we wanted him to do, and we should be obliged if he would leave us alone. But the question is not what we intended ourselves to be, but what he intended us to be when he made us.

“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on. You knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised.

“But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts terribly and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards.

“You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage, but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself.”

As individuals commit their lives to loving and obeying Jesus as Lord, this group of individuals called the Church has the opportunity to honor him as Lord. Telling the good news about Jesus is the unique business of the church. The YMCA has excellent recreation programs. There are many effective social-service agencies in our community. Multitudes of clubs and organizations welcome people’s participation and involvement. There is only one thing that we can offer that these organizations do not already offer – Jesus Christ.

Jesus once said, “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to

myself.” (John 12:32) When Jesus is Lord, we lift him up. We point to him. When Jesus becomes the focus of the life of a congregation, new life comes to dry bones, and people begin to stand up and become a vital army. Our mission is sharing Christ from the heart of Durham.

Olav Parnamets tells about an event that happened in Estonia in 1951. Josef Stalin was in power. Estonia was under the domination of the Soviet Union. Because atheism was an integral part of the state ideology, it was dangerous to be an active, confessing Christian. People were afraid because mass arrests were taking place. Multitudes of people were taken from their homes and sent to Siberia.

At that time Olav did not know Christ as his Savior. His Christian parents invited him to a prayer meeting where over 100 people had gathered. At the end of the service, the pastor asked if there was anyone who wanted to commit to following Jesus Christ. After a brief inner struggle, Olav decided to open his heart and ask Christ into his life. That night many other people also accepted Christ. Can you imagine the courage that took?

The faithful and courageous pastor, Alexander Kuum, was later arrested. He was imprisoned for 4 years in a Soviet gulag in Eastern Siberia. Upon his release, he returned to Estonia and faithfully served the Lord for the next 30 years until his death.

Most of us have suffered little for our faith, yet we are tempted to drift away. We are tempted not to love Jesus and not to obey him. It is a temptation to distraction – to forget about God and to live our lives without God.

Years ago a young pastor had the opportunity to meet Mother Teresa while he was traveling in India. On a whim, he decided to visit the Missionaries of Charity headquarters while he was staying in Calcutta. He wasn't even sure whether Mother Teresa was in the country, but it was worth the chance.

After an adventurous cab trip through crowded streets, he arrived at a simple

structure. He knocked at the door. A young novice in the simple white and blue sari of the Missionaries of Charity answered. She listened as he explained the intent of his mission. Mother Teresa happened to be working in the headquarters that day.

The young disciple ushered him into a simple parlor. After a brief wait, the pastor could hardly believe his eyes. There she stood! A little frail, bent-over woman, overflowing with the presence of Jesus. She graciously spent about 20 minutes with the young clergyman. Not wishing to intrude on any more of her time, he stood up to express his appreciation and depart. Before he left, he asked, "What advice might you have to offer a young preacher?"

"Only this," she replied. "Preach Jesus, the true Jesus, the real Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, and not a Jesus of people's imaginations."

I'm convinced that one Jesus of people's imaginations is a Jesus who loves us, but who does not call us to do anything, or expect anything of us. "Surely, Jesus doesn't expect me to do anything! Jesus wouldn't want me to sacrifice for my faith, would he?" The heresy is: Jesus loves me, and I'm going to live anyway I want to. The reality of the Christian faith is: Jesus loves me, and that love compels me to love and obey him as Lord. Now, that is the greatest adventure of life.

Today, as a response to word, I invite you to affirm your faith in Jesus as Lord. But as you say that you believe in him, commit yourself also to love him and to obey him.

The Affirmation of Faith is "The Apostles' Creed," no. 881 in your hymnal. Let us stand. Christians, what do you believe?