

JESUS, THE CENTRE OF CHRISTIANITY

Then the high priest said to Jesus, 'I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.' Jesus said to him, 'You have said so.' (Matt 26:63-64)

Jesus said to his disciples, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' (Matt 16:15)

Thomas answered Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.' (John 20:28-29).

The most crucial question every person has to answer is the one addressed by Jesus to his disciples. Either Jesus Christ is who he claims to be, or he is a disillusioned fraud. Christians believe that how we answer this question will determine not only how we live in this life, but where we spend eternity.

While this key idea considers the person and work of Jesus Christ in particular, what Christians believe about Jesus Christ permeates all areas of the Christian Studies curriculum and the life and work of the Lutheran school. While one outcome of this key idea will be that students hear the story of Jesus, there will also be the prayer that through the work of the Holy Spirit, students will meet Jesus Christ or grow in their already existing relationship with him.

The person of Jesus Christ – Jesus as divine and human ('christology')

True God

Jesus is true God. This is what makes Jesus unique. He is more than a great teacher, wonderful model and inspiring spiritual leader. He is the Son of God 'from eternity'. That means, there has never been a time when Jesus did not exist as God's Son ('the Word', John 1:1–3). Jesus is 'God incarnate', that is 'God in the flesh' (John 1:14). If we want to know what God is like, we look at Jesus (John 14:9). He shows us the power, glory, wisdom of God, and especially the love of God (John 1:17,18).

It is God himself who is our Saviour. The Son of God 'humbled himself'; he did not always and fully use his divine qualities (power, glory etc). In order to save us, '*he gave up everything and became a slave, when he became like one of us*' (Phil 2:7). So great was his love for sinful human

beings, that the Son of God put himself through all the misery, pain, and suffering of sinful human existence and through hell itself (Matt 27:46) in order to rescue them from sin and its consequences.

Jesus' resurrection is central to the Christian faith. It shows that he is truly God, that God has accepted Jesus' perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world, and that death can no longer hurt human beings as the punishment for sin.

A real human being

Jesus is truly human. The Son of God became a human being **for us**, to take our place — to live the perfect life we are supposed to live but can't, to take our sins on himself and pay the penalty we deserved. As a human being he died our death and went through the hell of being forsaken by God.

Jesus lived a truly human life. He was born as a truly human baby (but without sin). He developed physically and mentally (Luke 2:40). He went through normal human experiences. He got tired, he was hungry and thirsty, happy and sad, pleased and angry. The one difference was that his life was perfect; he obeyed his Father in absolutely every respect, even though he knew all the time that this would mean sacrificing his innocent life to pay for the guilt of the whole human race.

Jesus' suffering and death were real. He felt what any of us would feel. In Gethsemane, for example, he was 'deeply distressed' and said: '*I'm so sad that I feel as if I'm dying*' (Mark 14:34). He felt the shame of the soldiers' mockery and the pain of their scourging, the weight of the cross, the agony of crucifixion and the torture of being forsaken by his Father.

Jesus' resurrection was real. The same human body that suffered, died and was buried became alive again. More than 500 eyewitnesses said they saw the risen Jesus, and they were ready to die for what they claimed. In the forty days after Jesus' resurrection his followers saw how Jesus' body was no longer restricted by the physical laws of time and space. Jesus' self-humbling for us is over. Now he is in an 'exalted' state; he always and fully uses his attributes (power, glory etc) as God.

Still today Jesus is God in human flesh. A human being — one of us — is forever at God's right hand, as the advocate who intercedes for us, as the Lord who rules all things for our benefit. We can follow him through suffering, death and

resurrection to live forever with bodies that will be glorified like his (Phil 3:20,21; 1 John 3:1-3).

Difficulties with this teaching

Although the Bible clearly teaches that Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine, it took the early church until the Council of Chalcedon in 451 to settle controversies about the two natures of Jesus Christ. Various attempts were made to deal with the miracle of the incarnation (Jesus becoming a human being) which denied either the full divinity of Jesus Christ or his full humanity. For example, some people taught that Jesus only seemed to be human ('docetism'). Others taught that Jesus Christ was not really divine. One group of these, led by Arius, taught that Jesus was subordinate to God the Father: if not, then God has divided into two – the Father and the Son – and therefore God is no longer one. The extended section in the Nicene Creed (325) dealing with Jesus Christ, grew out of this dispute. These same heretical teachings emerge from time to time in current thinking about Jesus Christ. Only if Jesus Christ is truly God and truly a human being, can he be the saviour of the world.

The teaching of the incarnation (Jesus as both fully divine and fully human) highlights a key emphasis of Lutheran theology, its paradoxical or dialectic nature. Lutheran theology seeks to hold in creative tension a number of apparently contradictory insights from revelation: law and gospel, saint and sinner, sacred and secular, left and right hand kingdoms, etc. As with the humanity and divinity of Christ, all of these aspects of theology must be clearly distinguished, but never separated: they must always be retained in creative balance.

The work of Jesus Christ ('soteriology')

The work of Jesus Christ is connected inseparably with his person. Only because Jesus is fully human and fully divine can he be the saviour of the world. There is a long tradition in Christian theology which sees the work of Jesus Christ under three 'offices': prophet, priest and king.

Prophet ('revealer')

The Old Testament prophets spoke on behalf of God. Jesus claimed this status for himself: 'No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known' (John 1:18). People who heard Jesus recognised that he spoke with a special authority (Matt 7:29; John 7:46). Jesus taught regarding our relationship with God and our relationship with one another – both the 'vertical' and the 'horizontal' relationships.

When Jesus began his ministry, he announced that the kingdom of God was here. In his person the loving, saving rule of God had come to human beings. In parables about the kingdom he told people what it is like when God rules with his grace. Jesus' miracles were 'signs of the kingdom'. God's loving rule was in action when Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, forgave sinners and accepted outcasts.

Jesus' clearest and most profound revelation came through who he was and what he did. Through Christ, God revealed his love for the world in his death on the cross to bring all people back into a right relationship with God (2 Cor 5:19-21; Rom 5:8). But this revelation of God in Christ is seen by human reason as 'foolishness' and 'weakness' (1 Cor 1:18-30). Only in Jesus Christ do we have hope – his revelation shows the impossibility of any attempts we may make to put ourselves right with God.

While he lived on earth in his humiliation (Phil 2:5-8), Jesus proclaimed God's word directly through his teaching and life: now in his exaltation (Phil 2:9-11), he continues this 'prophet office' through those who believe in him and proclaim his message of love through what they do and what they say.

Priest ('substitute and victim')

Jesus Christ is the priest who offered himself as a sacrifice for his people (Heb 9:26), but who also remains forever the mediator between God and his people (1 Tim 2:5).

Jesus Christ has taken our place (our substitute) in the face of all that threatens and accuses us. He came to serve and give his life as a ransom (victim) for sinners (Mark 10:45). Jesus Christ is the 'suffering servant' (Isa 52:13-53:12), the one who humbled himself to death on the cross (Phil 2:8). Jesus has freed us from the curse of the law (Gal 3:10-14). He has paid the penalty for our sin and has turned away the wrath of God (who is holy and cannot be where sin is) on account of our sin (1 John 2:2; Rom 3:25a). Jesus frees us from our sin and guilt through the forgiveness of our sin (2 Cor 5:21). This is the forgiveness we receive through the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Because Jesus is now 'at the right hand of the Father' he continues his priestly role as our advocate (1 John 2:1), who mediates for us, representing us to God, and God to us. Because he is both God and a human being, Jesus Christ is our high priest, continually interceding for us (Heb 7:25). Because he has suffered temptation, we can approach the throne of grace, trusting in God's mercy and help (Heb 4:14-16).

[Note: in speaking about the work of Jesus Christ, it is important not to play one person of the trinity against the other. Dr Jeff Silcock (83) expresses the concern this way:

It is not as if Christ buys God off through his self-sacrifice. *It's not that God was formerly angry and has now become loving because of his Son's innocent death on the cross. God has never been anything but love.* And it was his love that drove him to send his Son to the cross, just as it was the Son who out of love willingly obeyed his Father's will in the Spirit for our salvation. This is a profound mystery that we will never understand. Faith simply accepts it with gratitude and gives glory to the triune God.]

King ('victor')

Jesus is the king who has won the victory for us over sin, death and Satan. Through his death on the cross, Jesus has finally defeated these enemies and has also broken the power of the law over us. This victory is clearly demonstrated for us in Christ's resurrection. In our baptism, we have been united with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom 6:3-11) so that we now share in his victory.

Jesus is also the king who is a servant. His throne was his cross and his crown was made of thorns. He rules in the church through his love and mercy, demonstrating his love in washing his disciples' feet (John 13:1-20). His commandment is that we love one another (John 13:34-35).

Jesus rules as king now at 'the right hand of the Father' although his kingdom (the church) is not visible. Christ's ascension is his 'enthronement', and enables him to be everywhere at all times and no longer confined in time and space. Jesus will also return as king at the end of time (Col 3:1-4) and judge the living and the dead (Matt 24:27-44; 25:31-46). He will then reign forever in glory with the saints.

Christ as example

Some people see the life of Christ simply as a model for human living. While the life of Christ can certainly be seen as a model which we can try to imitate (1 Pet 2:21-25), there are aspects of his life (eg his suffering and death for the sins of the world) which are unique to Jesus Christ. There is also a danger that we see our own efforts as contributing to our salvation. It is very easy to slip into legalism or moralism which puts the emphasis on our efforts rather than the saving work of Jesus Christ.

The 'joyous exchange'

Luther spoke of the work of Jesus Christ as the 'joyous exchange' of Christ's innocence for the sinner's guilt and sin. Kolb (154-155) summarises Luther's position as follows:

In his passion and death Christ absorbed into himself all the evil that clings to his people. Substituting himself for sinners, he gathered onto his own back all the sin and guilt that condemn them to death. He took the entire evil of each individual with him into his tomb and deposited it there. This tomb is the only place in God's creation into which the Father does not look. Having assumed our suffering and death upon his own person, Christ trades them for life itself.

Christian Studies Framework Christian Beliefs

Key Idea 2: *The person and work of Jesus Christ is central to Christianity*

Explore the Mystery

This is one of the most profound mysteries of our faith – God crucified! Explore!

Describe situations where the amazing force of this mystery came home to you.

Have you also experienced the amazing truth that the God who suffered in Jesus Christ continues to suffer—especially with those in great pain?

Faith in Jesus Christ

To believe in Jesus means more than just acknowledging that what the Bible says about Jesus is true. It means trusting Jesus as our only hope of being rescued from our guilty condition and from the punishment we deserve. More than that, it means living and dying with the confidence that because of Jesus, God is always for us and nothing can separate us from God's love (Romans 8:31–39). Jesus Christ is both universal and unique. He is the only savior for all people, whether or not they have faith in him.
