

Identity of Jesus Christ

Dr. Margaret Nutting Ralph

When we gather at Sunday Eucharist, as part of every celebration, we profess what we believe about Jesus Christ. We say, “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered, died, and was buried. On the third day he rose again in fulfillment of the Scripture; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”

Had you lived in the first, second, or third centuries you would not have recited this creed. It was not until the end of the fourth century that this Creed took the precise wording that we now use. However, nearly everything professed in this creed appears in Scripture, in one Gospel or another.

The word Christology refers to the study of Jesus Christ. When we ask questions about the identity of Jesus Christ, about what Jesus accomplished on our behalf by his birth, public ministry, passion, death, and resurrection, and about what role Jesus has in our life after death, we are asking questions about Christology.

As Christians we claim that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. Our creed is very clear on this: We say that Jesus Christ is, “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God . . .” We also say that he was, “born of the Virgin Mary, and became man . . . he suffered, died, and was buried.” When we focus on the *divinity* of Jesus we call that high Christology. When we focus on the *humanity* of Jesus we call that low Christology.

The Gospels have different Christologies, not because they contradict each other, but because they emphasize different truths for the sake of each audience. This just makes sense. Imagine that you have two friends, one on death row and facing execution the next day, and one celebrating the birth of a first child. You want to write each friend and share with that friend the good news of Jesus Christ. Would you say the same thing to each person? Obviously not.

For the friend on death row you might emphasize Jesus’ love, Jesus’ call to repentance, his forgiveness and promise of eternal life. For the other you might emphasize Jesus’ love, Jesus’ provident care, Jesus’ steadfast endurance, and his way of life. Different audiences call for different messages.

Mark's Audience and Message

Those in Mark's audience were facing persecution, probably under Nero around 65 A.D. They were having to choose between denying Christ or being eaten by a lion in the coliseum. The question they were asking is, "Why should I die?" It is not at all hard to imagine how one might rationalize one's way out of martyrdom.

For instance, a young parent might say, "Surely Christ would not want me to die rather than raise these children. If I deny Christ with my lips, Christ will know I have not denied him with my heart. That way I can live a long life and raise my family." Is martyrdom really necessary?

To help such a person remain faithful Mark holds up Jesus as a model. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus, too, wanted to avoid death. Jesus, too, left behind loved ones ill prepared for his absence. Nevertheless, out of obedience to his Father's will, Jesus died.

However, death was not the end of the story. On the third day Jesus rose again. Jesus' death and resurrection lead to our redemption and eternal life. Mark is urging his audience to follow in Jesus' footsteps, through death to eternal life.

In order to emphasize what Jesus has in common with those in his audience, Mark emphasizes Jesus' humanity. Mark's is a low Christology Gospel.

John's Audience and Message

The Gospels have different Christologies, not because they contradict each other, but because they emphasize different truths for the sake of each audience. While Mark's is a low Christology Gospel—emphasizing the humanity of Jesus—John's Gospel is different.

John's audience lived about 90 – 95 AD. These end-of-the-century Christians had expected Jesus to return in glory on the clouds of heaven long before their time. They are asking, "Where is Jesus?"

John wants to redirect the focus of his audience. Instead of looking for Jesus in the past, and envying those who physically walked the earth with Jesus, and instead of envying those in the future, who will see Jesus come in glory on the clouds of heaven, John wants his audience to look to the present, and to find Jesus in their midst.

The significance of the resurrection is that Jesus is not dead, but alive and living in the midst of his people. John wants everyone in his audience to be able to say, "I have seen the Lord," because they have recognized him in the Church and in what we now call the sacraments.

In order to help those in his audience see the risen Christ in their midst John emphasizes Jesus' divinity. John's is a high Christology Gospel.

John's High Christology

Because the Creed begins with high Christology and then moves on to low Christology we will discuss John's Gospel before we discuss Mark's. John's Gospel begins before creation. John says:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth (John 1:1-4, 14).

John's is the only Gospel that begins before creation. Mark's Gospel begins with Jesus' public ministry. Matthew and Luke's Gospels begin with infancy narratives. Only John tells us that Jesus was the pre-existent word who was present with God before creation, and that all that exists came into being through him.

John is not denying Jesus' humanity. John tells us that, "the Word became flesh and lived among us . . ." (John 1:14a). By using the word flesh John is arguing against those who did deny Jesus' humanity, who, because they believed that spirit was good while flesh was not good, thought it impossible that a transcendent God would get all mucked up in human flesh. Notice that John says, ". . . we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son. . ." (John 1:14b).

To see Jesus' glory is to see Jesus' divinity. Jesus' glory is, "the glory as of a father's only son." It is this truth that the Creed emphasizes when it speaks of Jesus as "the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father . . ." Jesus is God's son in a different way than we are God's sons and daughters. ***Jesus and God are of the same essence. Jesus is God.***

This high Christology point of view pervades John's Gospel. As John tells the story of the historical Jesus, he wants his readers to see the pre-existent Word, the risen Christ, shining through the story. For this reason John's Gospel, unlike the other Gospels, pictures Jesus as being all knowing, a quality that belongs only to God.

Jesus is All Knowing

We continue to explore the Christology of John's Gospel. Remember, each Gospel seeks to emphasize different truths for the sake of each audience. John's is a high Christology Gospel, emphasizing the divinity of Jesus.

In John, Jesus knows that he has been sent by the Father and will return to the Father. On one occasion when the crowd is speculating whether or not Jesus could be the messiah, they say,

“Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah? Yet we know where this man is from; but when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from.’ Then Jesus cried out as he was teaching in the temple, ‘You know me, and you know where I am from. I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do not know him. I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me” (John 7: 26-29).

Those in the crowd, despite their claim, do not know where Jesus is from. They know only that he is from Nazareth. However, John’s readers do know; Jesus is the pre-existent Word who came from the Father.

Jesus not only knows that he has come from the Father; he knows that he will return to the Father. When some Pharisees, angered that some in the crowd are beginning to believe in Jesus, send guards to arrest him Jesus says, “I will be with you a little while longer, and then I am going to him who sent me” (John 7:33).

In another scene, soon after this, some people are arguing with Jesus. They ask him, “Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died” (John 8:53)? Jesus answers, “If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, he of whom you say, ‘He is our God’, though you do not know him. . . . Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:54-55a, 58).

With these words Jesus is claiming to be the pre-existent Word. By saying, “I AM,” Jesus is identifying himself with God who revealed God’s name to Moses at the burning bush (see Exodus 3:13-14). As we noted in our article on the death of the Messiah, Jesus also identifies himself as, “I AM,” when he is arrested on the night before his crucifixion. On that occasion when Jesus says, “I AM,” those who came to arrest him fall to the ground (John 18:5-6).

“I am” Statements in John

In addition to picturing Jesus identifying himself with the Father through his I AM statements, John pictures Jesus making some other “I am” statements that are unique to his Gospel. For example, after multiplying the loaves Jesus says to the crowd, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35). After speaking to the woman caught in adultery Jesus says, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). After predicting Peter’s denial Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

All of these statements, placed on Jesus’ lips, are teaching John’s late century audience what was known about Jesus only after the resurrection. John’s “I am” statements are one more way in which he tries to help his audience see the pre-existent Word, the risen Christ, shine through his story of Jesus, the human being.

John wants his audience, including us, to be able to recognize Jesus in the whole created order: Light reminds of the risen Christ. He wants us to recognize Jesus in the Church and in the sacraments: Jesus is the bread of life. He wants us to be aware of Christ's presence as we live our daily lives in faith and love: Jesus is the way the truth and the life. ***John wants us, in every aspect of our lives, to recognize that the risen Christ is present and is dwelling in our midst.***

Mark's Low Christology

In the first article of this magazine, we said that Mark's is a low Christology Gospel, emphasizing the humanity of Jesus.

Mark's Gospel simply begins, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." So, Mark is not denying Jesus' divinity, that Jesus is God's Son. However, Mark emphasizes Jesus' humanity rather than his divinity.

Mark wants his audience of persecuted Christians to know that Jesus truly suffered, as they are suffering, and to know that the apostles failed, as many of them are failing. Nevertheless, Jesus remained faithful, as they should remain faithful. ***Death is not death. Death leads to eternal life.***

Jesus is Not All Knowing

Mark's low Christology pervades his Gospel. Jesus is presented as a human being with whom we can all identify. For example, in Mark's Gospel Jesus is definitely not all knowing. This is evident in Mark's story of the woman with the hemorrhage (see Mark 5:25-34). This woman "came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, 'If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.' Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, 'Who touched my clothes?'" (Mark 5:27-30).

Not only does Jesus not know who touched him, but it appears that Jesus' healing power flowed from him without his consciously willing to heal the woman. The disciples are impatient with Jesus. How can anyone know who touched him with the crowd pressing upon him?

Had the woman not presented herself, Jesus would have had no answer to his question. However, "the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease'" (Mark 5:33-34).

The woman was full of fear because she has disobeyed the law by touching Jesus. She was ritually unclean because of the flow of blood, and by touching Jesus she had made him unclean

too. Evidently Jesus is completely unconcerned about his ritual cleanliness because he never mentions it.

Jesus responds to the woman with great compassion, calling her “daughter,” and assuring her that it was her faith that saved her. This story is obviously not concerned with emphasizing Jesus’ divinity, but with emphasizing Jesus’ humanity. Jesus is loving and compassionate toward those who suffer. He knows what suffering is all about. Those who are suffering need to persevere in faith.

Jesus Grows in Understanding

Another way in which Jesus is not all knowing in Mark’s Gospel is that he grows in knowledge as he responds to events, just as we do. This is evident when Jesus meets the Syrophenician woman. This woman is suffering because her daughter has an unclean spirit. She begs Jesus, “to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs’” (Mark 7:26:b-27).

Why is Jesus at first hesitant to cure this woman’s daughter? It appears that Jesus understands his ministry, and the ministry of his disciples, to be just for the house of Israel. Jesus is telling the woman that it isn’t fair to give to her, a non-Israelite, what was meant for the Israelites.

The woman is obviously not insulted by Jesus’ words: “. . . she answered him, ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ Then he said to her, ‘For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter.’ So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone” (Mark 7:28-30). Because of the woman’s request and persistence Jesus grew in his understanding of his Father’s will.

It might be hard for us to imagine Jesus growing in his understanding of his vocation even though that is our experience too. It seems that Mark had no hesitation in picturing Jesus as a person who grew in understanding, just as every other human beings does throughout his or her life.

Jesus is Impatient

Another way in which Mark emphasizes Jesus humanity is that he often pictures Jesus as being very impatient with the disciples.

When the disciples wake Jesus to calm the storm Jesus asks them “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith” (Mark 4:40)? When they do not understand what he taught the crowd and ask him about it later he says, “Do you not understand this parable” (Mark 4:13)? When they misunderstand Jesus’ warning about the leaven of the Pharisees, thinking that Jesus is reminding them that they have forgotten to bring bread, Jesus says, “Do you still not perceive

or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear . . .” (Mark 8:17b-18a)?

This impatience builds until Jesus enters Jerusalem, knowing that he faces imminent death, and knowing that the apostles understand next to nothing. Jesus, full of frustration, hungry and tired, curses a fig tree that has no fruit (see Mark 11:14). This is Jesus’ last expression of impatience: He will be betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter, condemned by the Sanhedrin, tortured by the soldiers, and sentenced to death. Through it all his only desire will be to do his Father’s will.

Truly Man Truly God

We see, then, that our Creed is rooted in our Gospels. We believe in Jesus Christ who is both, “true God from true God,” and who, “suffered, died, and was buried.” We also believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

Gospel Christologies

If Mark’s is a low Christology Gospel, emphasizing the humanity of Jesus, and if John’s is a high Christology Gospel, emphasizing the divinity of Jesus, what would be the Christologies of Matthew and Luke? Remember, the Gospels have different Christologies, not because they contradict each other, but because they emphasize different truths for the sake of each audience.

Matthew’s audience was Jewish. Matthew seeks to emphasize Jesus as the fulfillment of the long expectation for a Messiah. Matthew also portrays Jesus as a Jewish teacher, and the inaugurator of God’s Kingdom. As you read Matthew, can you find evidence to support these emphases?

Luke portrays Jesus as God’s co-equal by the kinds of things he does and says from heaven. Through the Holy Spirit, the divine name and personal manifestations, Jesus behaves toward people as does Yahweh in the Old Testament. Jesus reigns over Israel, the church, the powers of darkness and the world. Luke depicts Jesus as deity who by nature behaves as servant. What evidence do you find in Luke to support these emphases?

This article was originally published as part of the People of Faith series from Harcourt Religion Publishers.

For Catholic Parishes: *This article has an imprimatur from the Most Reverend John G. Vlazny, May 12, 2005.*