

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Christ is all and in all: Christ, the focal point in the local Christian Church - Luke 24:36

This morning we are going to look at Luke 24 and think about Christ as the focal point of the Christian church.

Luke 24 is a wonderful chapter which embraces, within the simplicity of an evening walk and a homely setting, some of the most profound aspects of our relationship to Christ and the power of Christian living. I have always thought that the chapter is all about the fullness of God's grace towards us expressed in the things Christ "opened".

Luke 24 begins with an open tomb and our relationship with the risen Christ. "But they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. Then they went in and did not find the body of the Lord Jesus" (Luke 24:2-3). The focal point of the Christian Church is the risen Christ. It continues on the open road and the reality of Christ's presence with us in all the circumstances of life. "So it was, while they conversed and reasoned, that Jesus Himself drew near and went with them" (Luke 24:15). The focal point of the Christian Church is the Christ who never leaves us or forsakes us.

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus opens the Scriptures to his disciples and we begin to understand the power of the word of God to reveal Christ to our hearts. "And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27). The focal point of the Christian Church is the Christ who is revealed to us in the Word of God.

We then enter an open home where Jesus is invited and where His presence is valued and His authority is immediately recognised. "But they constrained Him, saying, 'Abide with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent.' And He went in to stay with them. Now it came to pass, as He sat at the table with them, that He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them" (Luke 24:29-30). The focal point of the Christian Church is the Christ who has authority over our lives and homes.

It is in the home that the eyes of the disciples are opened and they recognised, not only the authority of Christ, but who He is in resurrection. "Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him" (Luke 24:31). The focal point of the Christian Church is the Christ who is known through our personal communion with Him.

If the eyes of the disciples were opened then so were their hearts. They had to share their experience of Christ with their fellow believers. When Christ draws near to us, its immediate effect is to draw us nearer to one another. "So they rose up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together." (Luke 24:33). The focal point of the Christian Church is the Christ who would always draw His people closer to each other.

When all the disciples are gathered in Jerusalem then Jesus appears amongst them (Luke 24:36). He stands at the centre of the small group of disciples He loved and, opening His hands and showing them His feet, He demonstrates why we should never doubt His love and power towards us, "Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have." (Luke 24:39). The focal point of the Christian Church is the Christ who never ceases to remind us that the love He showed at Calvary is a love that never diminishes.

The church's power is relative to the place it gives to the resurrected Christ and the effect of His love upon us. It is also based on our spiritual understanding of His person and His purposes. This comes by the Lord Jesus being our teacher and opening our understanding. "And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45). The focal point of the Christian Church is the Christ who expands our understanding of who He is and in doing so enables us to better serve Him.

Finally, Luke 24 presents to us an opened heaven. Not only did Christ ascend up into glory but, in doing so, affirmed that heaven would never be closed to us. This was ultimately shown in the giving of the Holy Spirit, who permanently links us to Christ in heaven, "And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven. And they worshiped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God. Amen." (Luke 24:50-53). The focal point of the Christian Church is the Christ who lives in the power of an endless life (Hebrews 7:16), who ever lives to make intercession for us (Romans 8:34) and who has made us into worshippers (John 4:24). With this background let us return to this morning's verse, Luke 24:36, "Now as they said these things, Jesus Himself stood in the midst of them, and said to them, 'Peace to you.'"

In the room in Jerusalem a nervous group of the Lord's disciples listened as the two who had met Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32) described their experience (Luke 24:33-34). It was the sharing of this experience on the road to Emmaus, and in their home, that sets the scene for the Lord to personally appear to all His disciples at Jerusalem. When Luke records the birth of Christ, he tells us that there was a multitude of the heavenly host who praised God and said, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will towards men" (Luke 2:14). Jesus had not only been born, lived and died but now, in all the glory of resurrection, spoke the words which God wants us all to know and upon which He builds His relationship with His people, "Peace unto you" (Luke 24:36).

In trusting Christ we know peace with God (Romans 5:1). By following Christ we can know "the peace of God which passes all understanding," (Philippians 4:7) and also know the Person who is the "God of peace" (Philippians 4:9). This is all known by faith but the first response of the disciples was fear, "But they were terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a spirit," (Luke 24:37). In spite of all that the Lord had told them when He predicted His death and resurrection, when these things actually happened they could not believe that Jesus was alive. After all, many of them had witnessed His crucifixion (Luke 23:26-48) and the burial (Luke 23:49-56) and these real and painful events had drawn them together in mutual sorrow. Even the recent experience of trusted friends had not changed their sense of loss and confusion. We can understand their feelings as we can often doubt and fear when faced with the realities of life. But there is a greater reality - the reality of eternal as opposed to temporal things. Christ was about to take them beyond their experience to a place where even death itself had been conquered - it was not an easy journey!

The Lord Jesus addressed their troubled spirits and doubting hearts by showing to them His hands and feet, "And He said to them, "Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts? Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have." When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet" (Luke 24:38-40).

The disciples then experienced a mixture of continuing disbelief and joy as it began to dawn upon them that the Lord was risen indeed! "But while they still did not believe for joy, and marvelled, He said to them, 'Have you any food here?' So they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish and some honeycomb. And He took it and ate in their presence" (Luke 24:41-43).

It never ceases to amaze me how the most profound aspects of the work of Christ are revealed through the most ordinary circumstances. Luke demonstrates this at the beginning of His gospel when he records the heavenly announcement of the birth of Christ (Luke 2:13-14) and afterwards the shepherds find the Christ as a tiny baby lying in a manger (Luke 2:15-20). Here, at the end of his gospel, we find the Christ who had conquered death eating a simple meal to demonstrate He was really alive and not a ghost. It is proof of the majesty of God's grace that He always reveals the deepest truths to us in the simplest terms.

The Lord Jesus reminds them of what He had already told them and then He opens their understanding of the whole of the Old Testament in relation to His person. "Then He said to them, 'These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.' And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Luke 24:44-45).

It does seem that the circumstances of Luke 24 lead to the place where Christ is central to His people and the focal point of the Christian church. In Luke 24:1-31 we see Christ's presence in the daily lives and the

home of individual Christians. This experience causes them to seek the fellowship of a larger group of Christians in Jerusalem. Christ then reveals Himself to the larger group (Luke 24:36-49). It seems to me that Luke 24 illustrates the important characteristics of the Christian church and fundamental to this is the centrality of Christ Himself. Until Christ appears things are still in a state of confusion. When Christ appears the disciples are gradually released from their inward fear and confusion. Through Christ sorrow is turned into joy, confusion into confidence, and doubt into understanding. This was fully experienced when, at Pentecost, the apostles were indwelt and empowered by the Spirit of God. Subsequently, the early Christian church was marked by clarity of faith and action which stemmed from the Spirit of God focusing the hearts and minds of the people of God on the risen Christ. Prior to Luke recording this happening in the Acts of the Apostles, or more correctly, the Acts of the Holy Spirit, it seems to me that he outlines the principle of Christ being the focal point of the Christian church in the final chapter of his Gospel.

For Christ to be the focal point of the Christian church He has to become the focal point of every Christian's life. I think this why the sequence of events in Luke 24 is so important. First Christ deals with individuals. He becomes the focal point of the conversation with the two disciples. Then He becomes the focal point of their home.

This addresses a fundamental issue for the Christian. We often bemoan the ineffectiveness of the public testimony of the local Christian church. But this testimony is inextricably linked to the individual testimony of each Christian. Of course, individual Christians can have a remarkable witness for Christ and we give thanks to God for each life lived for Him. But there is also the testimony of the local Christian church. So, for example, Christ teaches in John 13:34-35, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." This love can only be displayed by ways in which Christians display Christ's love towards each other.

In John 17:22-23, Jesus prays to the Father that, "the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me." This spiritual unity can only be displayed as a feature of a Christian church to act as a proof that God the Father sent God the Son and that the God the Father loves us.

In 1 Corinthians 11:26, Paul writes, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes." The death of Christ is proclaimed when the local Christian church remembers the Lord Jesus by breaking bread and drinking wine.

Of course, the centrality of Christ to the individual Christian both in our everyday lives and within our homes is vital to Christ being the focal point of the Christian church. What we do as individual Christians impacts upon the testimony of the Christian church.

When I was at school I remember being told at a harvest festival assembly a story about some farmers. These farmers had had a bumper year. They had never known such a year of plenty. In celebration, the local vicar suggested making a fountain of milk as a central feature for the harvest festival. The milk which was donated could then be distributed to needy people in the village. Each farmer agreed to donate the same amount of milk which was poured through a hole at the bottom of the fountain. One farmer had the clever idea of putting water instead of milk into the base of the fountain. He thought no one would notice that the milk had been watered down a bit. The problem was, all the farmers had the same idea and at the harvest festival, instead of a beautiful fountain of fresh cool milk, there was only water. There was a fountain of water because all the farmers were selfish and did not see that their failure to contribute damaged the well-being of everyone.

When Christ is central to our hearts we are taken to a new place outside of ourselves. That's what happened to the two on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-31). Once Christ was at the centre of their hearts they had to share what they had learned of Him with others (Luke 24:32-35). They brought Christ to their fellow Christians and in doing so Christ Himself appears to bless all the company. You can see the practical aspects of this in both evangelism and in the building up of the church. To reach people with the gospel we need to have a personal experience of the love of Christ and a desire to share it with others by the power of the Holy Spirit. Equally, to spiritually build up the people of God we need to first personally experience communion with Christ and then share what we have learned with other Christians.

Christ's appearance at the centre of the Christian company is very important. Jesus has already taught, "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20).

It is very touching that Jesus uses numbers which form the smallest groups. One is not a group, but two is and so is the next smallest group, three. Christ promises to be present with the smallest group of Christians. It is interesting that at the end of the Old Testament, in Malachi 3:16, we read, "Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD listened and heard them; So a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the LORD and who meditate on His name." It seems that small groups at the end of the Old Testament sought to put Jehovah at the centre of their lives and when we come to the New Testament, some 400 hundred years later, there were still people like Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-40) who had placed the coming Christ at the centre of their lives.

The centrality of Christ leads us to worship and worship emerges from the revelation and contemplation of who Christ is. This is illustrated by the experience of the two of the road to Emmaus, "Did not our hearts burn within us?" It is emphasised by the joy and marvel of the disciples as they realised the Lord, they had seen crucified, was risen indeed. This is seen at the end of the chapter, "And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven. And they worshiped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, **and** were continually in the temple praising and blessing God. Amen" (Luke 24:50-53).

The other key aspect of Christ as the focal point of the Church is the Word of God. Twice in Luke 24 it refers to the Lord Jesus explaining the Scriptures. "Then He said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?' And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself." (Luke 24:25-27). Then in Luke 24:44-45, "He said to them, 'These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.' And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures."

Before Christ returns to heaven He explained the Scriptures and opened the understanding of the disciples. The two disciples refer to the first of these events in Luke 24:32, "And they said to one another, 'Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?'" It is evident that the opening of the scriptures touched both their hearts and their minds. The Lord adds to this in Luke 24:45 when it says, "He opened their understanding."

A key aspect of the focal point of Christ to the Christian church is the place the Word of God has in our lives. The Lord Jesus constantly referred to the Word of God throughout all His ministry and prior to going to the cross prayed to the Father to, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" John 17:17. In our chapter this morning, Luke brings before us the time Jesus spent developing the disciples' understanding of the word of God in relation to Himself in the Old Testament. In John's Gospel Jesus explains that part of the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who He calls the Spirit of truth, was to bring to the disciples the teachings of Jesus, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (John 14:26). In addition, the Holy Spirit would, "guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). This looked forward to the completion of the written word of God.

The Christ is the focal point of the Christian church. This is demonstrated through our personal communion with our risen Saviour, the selfless contribution we make to the Christian testimony, the love show to each other, our belief in and obedience to the word of God, and our worship of our glorified Lord.

As we go to our local church this morning whom are we focussing on? The Person who died and lives for us or someone or something else more important?

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