

Bible reflection, Hebrews 13:8

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever”

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Our passage from the Bible this morning is a brief and compressed text with a substantial content. Isolated and separated from the context we are listening to a comprehensive Christology – or Messiahology – describing the universality and nature of Jesus the Messiah. However, and maybe to our surprise, this well known verse is in the middle of a passage of exhortations.

In verse 7 we are exhorted to remember our leaders and imitate their faith, just as we have been doing this morning by giving honour to one of those whom we all loved and respected highly. If we should “consider the outcome of our leader’s way of life” (v. 7), Moishe Rosen is really an example to all of us.

Let me briefly share with you 3 perspectives which I was reminded on by reflecting on this verse:

The eternal and present Messiah.

If you had written this verse in your essay for high school exam, you would probably get red remarks from your teacher or examiner. The grammar is terrible. If we are speaking about the past, we are speaking about something that *was*, and not *is*. The author of the letter to the Hebrews is however not intending to describe the biography of Jesus, nor writing an essay about his life and deeds, but rather to focus on the nature of Jesus, the Messiah: Jesus Christ is!

Jesus Christ is. He is before all times and creations. He is above all things and creatures. He is eternal and not caught by the limits of time. He is, when everything else was not. He is, because he himself is not created but borne by the Father before all times, and therefore of the same nature as his Father. And he will continue to be when times end. He will be when everything else goes under or disappear. He is forever.

Jesus Christ is. Not only before, after and above. He is the one who is present; the immanent presence of the transcendent God. He is the image of God who really makes it visible to us who God is: His holiness and righteousness, his severity and mercy, his concern and his love. The Norwegian rabbi once told me that he as a Jew does not ask so much about *who* God is, but rather *how* he is: What he is doing and how he is acting. How can we know that God? John, who saw Jesus and sat next to him at the Passover meal is confessing: No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only (the Only begotten Son), who is at the Father’s side, has made him known (John 1:18). If you therefore want to discover how God is acting in history and in the life of His people, you have to turn to Jesus. Not only for the few years he physically walked among us. He is even yesterday. He has ever been present, and will forever be. Wasn’t it Jesus Abraham met when the three men visited him at the entrance of his tent among the trees in Mamre, confirming the promises to Abraham and his descendants? (Gen. 18:1) Isn’t it Jesus David is singing about in Psalm 23 when he is praising God for his protection and providence as the good shepherd? That is *who* He is, and *how* He is. In light of the fulfilment in the revelation of Jesus as Messiah we can all say: Amen.

Jesus is. We hear the echo of Jesus’ frequent self-presentation: “I am ...” (greek: *egoo eimi*). I am the bread of life (John 6:35). I am the light of the world (John 8:12). I am the good shepherd (John 10:14). I am the way and the truth and the life (John 14:6). I am the true wine (John 15:1). I am a king (John 18:37). These expressions from the Gospel of John are much more than a Messianic program. By “I am” Jesus identify with the One who once met the great prophet and leader of Israel through the burning bush, presenting His name by saying: “I

AM WHO I AM.” This is how Moses was asked to present the God he met to the people of Israel.

Especially in the Gospel of John we see this “Jahvistic analogy” where Jesus is not only acting on behalf of God or being divine through his teaching and miracles, but acting *as* God.

Jesus *is* God, present in His people. This is how he present himself in the New Testament, and this is also the provocation for the Jewish leadership at his time: “They tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. (John 5:18)

The eternal and present message

As already mentioned, the context of this single verse (Hebr. 13:8) is exhortations. In verse 7 we are exhorted to remember our leaders who spoke the word of God to us, consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. In verse 9 we are exhorted not to be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings, but rather being strengthened in our hearts by grace. Both exhortations are about teaching or content of faith, and in that teaching He who is, is the center of orientation and the key to right interpretation and understanding.

We who are gathered here at the 9th LCJE International conference are all leaders that will be remembered, at least for a period of time. For what reason? What is the outcome of our life? And what is the content of our teaching. We have already this morning remembered one of our leaders and examples for life and ministry.

When the author of the letter to the Hebrews speaks about teachers however, he is not primarily thinking about you and me, nor Moishe Rosen. The teachers in mind for this author are those who through history have been messengers with God given authority, proclaiming the word of God which is revealed to them. In the beginning of the letter, there is a similar expression: “We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him” (Hebr. 2:1-3).

God’s revelation and his message to the people of Israel was brought by his own messengers or angels. According to Stephen it was an angel who spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai (Acts 7:38). He received the Torah, which according to Stephen are living words to be passed on to generations. This is confirmed by Paul in Gal. 3:19 when he says that the Torah was put into effect through angels by a mediator.

These teachers and this teaching is the authority, and in this teaching Christ will always be the “origo” - the crucial orientation point - and essence of faith. Therefore the Church, including the Messianic Movement and fellowship of Jewish believers in Jesus, always have to consider and reflect if our cultural shaped traditions, our dogmas and expressions of faith are in accordance with the Gospel or contradicting the grace of God. Every generation, cultures and sub-cultures find ways of expressing faith. A faith without formulated dogmas is a self-delusion. Even if all of us will say that the Holy Bible is the one and only authority, we all know that we from point to point have varieties of opinions and interpretations, even on key issues. Even if we all want to return to the original message and Jewish context, we have to admit that building a bridge over 2000 years is almost impossible. We have all our luggage that impact our understanding and we all wear glasses that influence our sight.

A Messianic leader whom I recently met was of the opinion that we should forget all Church Councils, synods and creeds and return to the Bible alone. According to his opinion, the Church Councils only led to split in the Body of Messiah. According to my opinion it is

opposite: There *was* a serious split in the Body of Messiah in the early Church. The split was essential: Who is Jesus, and what does it mean that “*He is*”. The Nicene Creed is not an expression of a split Church, but an attempt of unifying the Body of Messiah, just and only because it is formulating what we have heard and been taught by angels: Living words that are passed on to us. I would therefore like to see more initiatives and efforts within our communities and fellowships working on statements of faith, as I see this as a protection and barrier against false teaching and a positive testimony and expression of faith towards the larger community and the worldwide Church.

Actually it is not a surprise to me that issues about Messiahology and the deity of Jesus is raised and discussed even within the Messianic movement today – almost the same discussion as the early Church had to deal with. I believe that such discussions will mature the movement and strengthen our faith in Him who is, and is the same.

The eternal and present commitment

By the end of this conference, let us listen to the author of this letter to the Hebrews, which we also believe is the letter to us from God in our present life and ministry.

Because Jesus the Messiah is the same and his message is the same, let us be obedient to His word through his messengers. Let us follow their example who faithfully passed on the living word. May we all be strengthened in our hearts by His grace. May we all, by His grace live and die as examples for others about trust and faith in Him. May we all have the strength to follow Christ in his suffering and bearing the disgrace he bore.

“For here, we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (Hebr. 13:15f).

We will soon conclude and adopt a statement from this conference. First and foremost our commitment will be to deliver ourselves to Him who is, and then to serve him through words and deeds, praise and acts.

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