

The Creed Of St. Athanasius

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] I want first to get you to focus on a familiar verse in the 18th chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, which in your pew Bible is on page 18 of the New Testament section of your Bible, where it speaks of the Lord Jesus calling to him a child.

He put him in the midst of them and said, Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. That verse for me gives me encouragement in bringing the children of the congregation before you from Sunday to Sunday just so that you become very much aware of them and aware of the fact that when Jesus said about entering the kingdom, he didn't say that you become a slave so that you obey orders. You become a robot so that you do exactly what you're programmed to do, but you become as a child. And I find that particularly appropriate on the morning that we read together for the sake of preserving our Catholic orthodoxy, the Creed of St. Athanasius.

Now, it's bound to confuse almost everybody. There's few of you, I suppose, would have gone through it saying, Yes, yes, that's it. That says it.

[1 : 55] Rather, what does it say might have been the question most in your mind. But there are three things about it that I want to tell you. The first is that it uses the most precise and almost mathematical language to try and explain two things.

The doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ, that he is both man and God. And if you want to know who man is, it is Jesus Christ. And if you want to know who God is, it is Jesus Christ. So that's the first thing, that it precisely explains the central realities of our Christian faith.

The second thing that I want you to know is that it does. It makes a very bold statement about the necessity of right belief.

In strong contrast to our present society, which says, Unless you behave, you will go into eternal hell.

[3 : 06] While the Creed of St. Athanasius says, Unless you believe correctly, you will go into eternal hell. And it makes it very clear.

Now the writers of the Canadian prayer book were kind enough to put a paragraph of explanation at the end of the Creed, which I commend to your reading, lest you feel that you have been consigned to hell because you don't fully understand or appreciate the Creed of St. Athanasius.

And it tries to give you some background. So that it's a bold statement, and it's a statement which says that the heart of Christian faith is sound doctrine and right belief.

And from that comes Christian behavior. In distinction to our generation, which says that at the heart of Christian faith is right behavior and right belief is a personal option.

So I think it's good to be corrected in that way. You will also be happy to recall that somebody wrote about the Creed of St. Athanasius, that the Father is incomprehensible, the Son is incomprehensible, and the whole thing is incomprehensible.

[4 : 30] And in a sense that's true, but it also means that it does demand our best minds to understand the complexity and the beauty of the reality of what is revealed to us about the nature of God in the Holy Scriptures.

Now, I think that one of the things that happens to us coming out of that is the fact that it's very much easier to say what we don't believe than what we do believe.

And for the most part, as a minister, when I visit people, I find they're much readier to say what they don't believe in about the church, about its liturgy, about the members of the church, about the clergy they have known, and so forth.

That they find it very easy to articulate what they don't believe about the church and somewhat embarrassed to say what they do believe about the church. And so it's important again for that reason that we come to grips with what he is at the heart of our faith.

I'm presuming that most of you were here last week to hear Malcolm Muggeridge their eloquent personal testimony to the reality of this faith in his own life.

[6 : 01] And I found it most encouraging that a man of 76 could command and absorb our attention with the reality and the clarity with which he stated what is at the heart of our Christian faith.

But there are things that he said that continue to trouble me and to make me wonder how we're going to work them out in our own lives. He talked about the vast preference human beings have to live with their own fantasy rather than to live with truth.

That we cultivate and preserve our own fantasy and avoid if at all possible the truth. So that perhaps again the Creed of St. Athanasius comes burning in on us to remind us that there is a truth of which we may know but live all.

The second thing that I found was that while he described Russia and the tyranny that was there and the mistake they had made in allowing the novels of Tolstoy to be published in that absolute tyranny and thereby had undermined their whole purpose because of Tolstoy's testimony to the reality of love.

So how do we look at our society? And what is it that is going to undermine the tyranny that we are subject to in our culture and in our society?

[7 : 35] What is going to undermine the chosen fantasies of the western world in order to bring them face to face with the truth of the gospel?

It's a much more difficult thing to do. In conversation following the sermon Malcolm Modric said that he felt that we in Canada were in a much more perilous state because there is no visible pirates and we are all encouraged to develop our own private fantasy and to find the government willing to subsidize it.

My confusion with something like the longshoremen strike for instance is that I don't know who that's called. I don't know who they want to blame for the circumstances in which they find themselves.

It can't be the federal government because the federal government hasn't been in business any longer than the strike has been going on. and it can't be the western farmers who they seem to be penalizing because the western farmers are in a worse flight if anything than themselves.

So who are they aiming it at? Who do they want? Who do they regard as the tyrant against whom they have to go out on strike? Now I know from the news this morning that the probability that there is a hope that the strike will be over by Wednesday of this week.

[9 : 12] But just using it as an example I must admit that when I read about it I have the feeling that they are on strike against me for reasons that I don't understand and I feel helpless to do anything about it.

That somehow I as a citizen enjoying the good life of this land am somehow at fault because I am denying the things I enjoy to other members of this society and they are bringing it to my attention. But I think that in this instance and in our society generally the enemy is very hard to identify. And if you point a gun at somebody the outcome is that you will probably kill the wrong person.

it seems likely that if we did identify the chief enemy it would be ourselves something that's happening to us as persons.

History may soon reveal that the greatest enemy of the French in Canada is the French in Canada. That the downfall of the Empire of Alberta if it doesn't last forever may come from Alberta and not from the oppression of the other nine provinces and that could be applied equally to any other province though I thought it's a stretch to use Alberta as an example that the result of the tyranny of Toronto is that Toronto may destroy itself by that.

[10 : 52] But ultimately the chief enemy of man has the same address as the man himself and that the problem that we in our society have to face is the problem which we can identify best by examining our own hearts and trying to find out where we are in relationship to the truth.

And that I think is the chief business which Jesus Christ confronts us with. He confronts us with himself.

He teaches us in parables that we will not hear. He performs miracles that we will not believe. He reveals truth that we will not consider.

He demonstrates authority that we will not submit to. He offers unconditional love that we will not accept. And then he submits to our unwarranted violence without protest.

And as we turn away from him as those who have made a better world for our children by putting him to death he confronts us as the one having risen from the dead and we continue to run away from him in our confusion.

[12 : 23] This I think is the heart of our problem and the heart of the answer that we have in the Christian faith that the struggle and as Malcolm Margaret wanted to enforce upon us is not the recognition of this section as being more right than this section but of coming face to face with the ultimate reality of good and evil in our own lives.

this is why I think that the heart of the message of the gospel for us is to come face to face with the person of Jesus Christ and not to dismiss him as being an anachronism that isn't relevant to our society but to receive him as the one by whom we can test the truth of our fantasies and be brought into a real relationship with one another and with God and that that is the function of the church of Jesus Christ that is the centrality of the service of Holy Communion that we should bring ourselves without defense before the person of Jesus Christ and in the same way expose ourselves one to another we can't go on endlessly fighting personal fantasies or trying to preserve them against the hard reality of the truth we are like

Nicodemus in the gospel story who coming to Jesus Christ in order that Christ might help him to preserve his fantasy was bluntly addressed by that remark you must be born again are you a master of Israel and don't know this so we have to bluntly be confronted by the truth of Jesus Christ and our business is not to preserve the private fantasies of individuals in the hope that they may be encouraged to live a life which doesn't damage others but our business is to confront people with the hard reality of the fact of God as he confronts us in Jesus Christ us and how do we do this well there's two ways that our text suggests that we do it one is to become as a little child and a little child has the ability to be tall a little child has the ability to exercise faith and reason not just faith or reason for faith and reason a little child has the ability to subject himself to authority and a little child has the ability when he doesn't understand something to ask questions not being ashamed to reveal his own ignorance and so with regard to this faith that we have received we are to become as little children in order that we might come to know what we don't know to honor what we don't understand and to understand what we don't understand the second thing in the text that's important and that says that where it says whoever humbles himself like this child he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven whoever receives one such child in my name receives me and I think that it's probably important for each of us we need teachers with the slogan presented to you but probably many of you need to be teachers and you need to take it upon yourself to take someone much younger than yourself and to explain to them the reality of the Christian faith and in explaining it to them to come to understand it yourself to take if you want the complexities of the creed of Saint Athanasius and interpret them to a six-year-old the six-year-old might go on in confusion for quite a long time but you no doubt will begin to understand when you do it one of the great facts of my life which always encourages me when we say the creed of Saint Athanasius and maybe an encouragement to a congregation in which there are a number of lawyers is that a friend of mine came to believe in God but didn't know who Jesus Christ was and when on a Sunday morning he read the creed of Saint Athanasius he was delighted that his whole understanding of faith came together with the portrait of Christ that was presented to him in the creed of

Saint Athanasius if you were to take that portrait to seek to understand it yourself and then to communicate it to a child you would have hold of the catholic faith which except the man do believe he will perish eternally that's the words of the creed and the solemn reality which we are confronted with