

The First Word

by John Vissers

The sermon emphasizes the supremacy and lordship of Jesus Christ over all aspects of life and faith.

Duration: 32:29

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Acts 4:12, Romans 10:9, Philippians 2:9-11, Colossians 1:15-23, Revelation 1:8

Topics: "Christian Life"

Description

In this sermon, the pastor begins by acknowledging the significance of first words in various aspects of life. He reflects on the importance of his first words as the new pastor of Knox Church. The pastor shares a personal experience of his childhood, where he was deeply impacted by the words that spoke about the Lordship of Jesus. He then addresses the expectations of the congregation, stating that he will not share his personal testimony or lay out a vision for the future of the church at this time. Instead, he assures the congregation that he will not give a theological lecture, despite his background in teaching theology.

Transcript

Let us hear the word of God this morning as we read from Paul's letter to the Colossians, chapter 1 at verse 15. Colossians chapter 1 at verse 15. Paul writes, He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

For by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities. All things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior, but now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you wholly in his sight without blemish and free from accusation. If you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel, this is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven and of which I, Paul, have become a servant. Amen.

Let us pray and commit our time to the Lord this morning. Prepare our hearts and our minds, O Lord, to receive your word this morning. Silence within us any voice but your voice, that hearing your word we may also obey your will for our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Life is filled with first words. By the time children reach age two or three, they're starting to struggle with their first words.

Our younger son, Joel, some of you have met him already, is just beginning to speak. He listens and he learns words from the rest of us in the family and he talks about things like his daddy's yayas, which being translated means daddy's glasses, or he talks about his papa's car, which translated means his grandpa's car. He doesn't always get it right, but he's learning how to talk.

He's sharing his first words with us as a family. As we get older, we discover how important first words can often be. Some of you will remember that awkward moment perhaps when you went out on your first date or perhaps when you met someone for the first time and you were a little nervous about it.

You were worried about what you might say. You were worried about making a good impression. You were worried about, as they say, putting your foot in your mouth and making a fool of yourself.

First words can make all the difference. The first words of a radio ad, for example, may catch your attention or they may cause you to start thinking about something else altogether. The first words of a documentary or a talk show on television may catch your interest or may cause you to start channel surfing onto some other stations.

And the first words of a sermon can draw you into the message for the morning or perhaps cause you to think about something else altogether. As your new pastor, today is the first day that I step into this pulpit and I speak my first word to you. And I thought long and I prayed hard about what I should say as we begin our new ministry together as pastor and people here at Knox Church.

What should I say? I thought a little bit about what some of you might be expecting me to say. I thought that some of you might be expecting and might be interested in a word of personal testimony that I might share something about my own faith and my own life in Jesus Christ. And as appropriate as that might be, we'll leave that for another time.

Others of you might be expecting me to lay out a vision this morning for the future of Knox Church, where we're going to go in the years to come as we march into the 21st century together. The plans and the programs and the strategies and the visions. Well, as important as that may be, we'll also leave that for another time.

Perhaps some of you are worried that I might get up here this morning and give a theological lecture since I've just come from 10 years of teaching in a theological college. I want to assure you that you can relax this morning. We're not going to do that, at least not this morning.

The first word that I want to say to you as your pastor is not a word of personal testimony, not a word of plans and programs, not a word of profound theological concepts, but simply a name. Jesus Christ. And I want to begin my ministry here by saying and by acknowledging and by confessing with all of my heart and with all of my energy that Jesus Christ is Lord.

That he is the first and he is the last. He is the beginning and he is the end. He is the Alpha and he is the Omega.

And what I will seek to do in my ministry from this pulpit is to constantly remind us that there is no other name under heaven by which we can be saved. And in all things, I will seek to point us to Jesus Christ, to the majesty and to the meekness of our Lord, to the glory of our risen Savior, to the supremacy of our exalted King. And that's the word which comes to us from the Apostle Paul this morning in Colossians chapter 1 and verses 15 to 23.

Because in this passage, Paul speaks about the supremacy and the lordship of Christ. He wants the church to understand that Jesus is Lord. Now Paul was writing to a church which needed to hear afresh and to be reminded anew that Jesus is Lord.

They needed to be reminded that the risen and the exalted Jesus is Lord. The Christians in the city of Colossae faced many challenges. They lived in a city, for example, where not everyone acknowledged the lordship of Jesus.

It was a city of many religions. It was a city of many diverse philosophies. It was a city in which there were many competing ideologies.

It was a city in which there were diverse political viewpoints. There were many claims to power and many claims to authority and many claims to lordship. And many people in Colossae had not even heard of Jesus.

Others had heard of Jesus but thought that he was only a great prophet and teacher. That he provided one way to God but there might well be other ways as well. And this kind of thinking began to come into the Colossian church and confused some of the Colossian Christians and they began to think that Jesus maybe really wasn't Lord at all.

If you can imagine, they looked out at a city which was often filled with chaos and with confusion and they looked inward at their church and they often saw turmoil and tragedy and trouble and it didn't seem sometimes to them that Jesus was Lord at all or that God was in control at all. It didn't seem to them that Jesus was Lord and it was to this Colossian church that Paul wrote about the lordship of Jesus Christ. And it's to us here this morning at Knox Presbyterian Church here in the city of Toronto that God would remind us of the lordship of his son.

Because we too live in a city in which there are competing allegiances, competing ideologies, competing viewpoints. We live in a city where there is much chaos and confusion. We live in a time when many churches and denominations shrink from declaring the lordship of Jesus.

And we live at a time in the life of this nation, in the life of this province, in the life of this city, in the life of this neighborhood, and dare I say it, in the life of this congregation, when we need to hear afresh that Jesus is Lord. And we need to learn what it means together as pastor and as people to live under the lordship of Jesus Christ. The first thing I want us to notice in this passage is the following.

Paul gives an unequivocal declaration that Jesus is Lord of creation. Jesus is Lord of creation. Notice verses 15 to 17.

Paul writes, he is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities. All things were created by him and for him.

He is before all things and in him all things hold together. Paul begins here by saying and by reminding us that Jesus is Lord of the universe. That Jesus is Lord of all creation.

That Jesus is Lord of all that is. And this is so, Paul says, because Jesus himself is the creator. Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

Now be clear, this phrase firstborn over all creation does not mean that Jesus was the first one created in time. But it means that Jesus is prior to all things, supreme over all things, that he owns all things, that he is above all things. That he was there before creation and creation, but he is Lord of creation, creator and sustainer of the universe.

My friends, this morning you don't have to think very hard or very long to realize that we live in a world and we live in a nation and we live in a city. We live in a neighborhood where the lordship of Jesus is not readily acknowledged. Every day you and I rub shoulders with people at work or at school or at the shopping mall or at the rec center.

People for whom this claim means absolutely nothing. People for whom this claim, if they even listen to it at all, seems nothing but foolishness. And we live in a world where much of the evidence, quite frankly, points, often points away from the lordship of Jesus.

What does it mean to speak of the lordship of Jesus in the midst of a Rwanda? What does it mean to speak about the fact that Jesus is Lord in the midst of the kind of tragedy which unfolded last week in Oklahoma City? What does it mean to speak of the lordship of Jesus when even at this moment in some parts of our world, in Asia and in other parts of our world, women and children are regularly sold into prostitution and slavery? What does it mean to say that Jesus is Lord in a city where people regularly sleep out on the streets? And in our own lives, if we think about this claim, even those of us who acknowledge the lordship of Jesus, it is so often difficult to reconcile the pain and the suffering and the trouble and the difficulties and the burdens that we experience with our faith and with our confession that Jesus is Lord when you get sick or when a loved one dies or when your children reject the family and reject the faith in which they have been raised or when you face unemployment or even worse personal bankruptcy when you can't seem day in and day out to get up enough energy to really face the challenges of life and you slide further and further into discouragement and sometimes even into depression. What does it mean then to say that Jesus is Lord? You see, Christian faith is faith that in the midst of all the circumstances of life, no matter what we may feel, believes that Jesus is Lord of creation. That the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ and he shall reign forever and ever.

We don't always see the lordship of Jesus in our world and in our lives because it is in many ways still a secret lordship. It is hidden to all those except those of faith. But scripture reminds us that there will come a day when that lordship will be revealed to all creation and every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

We also don't always see the lordship of Jesus in our lives and in our world because the lordship of Jesus is a servant lordship. It's a kind of upside down lordship in a topsy-turvy world. You see, Jesus does not

wield power as some authoritarian despot or even as some benevolent dictator but as the servant lord.

And the lordship of Jesus over the universe is the lordship of the one who came into our world and into our lives as one who came to serve and not to be served. As one who came to suffer. As one who came to save.

You see, the lordship of Jesus is a lordship of love. Can you see that lord in your life this morning? Can you see that lord in our world this morning? Can you see that lord on the streets of our city this morning? The Jesus who comes as lord alongside to accompany us in the midst of life with all of its struggles and with all of its burdens and with all of its turmoil. The lord who comes to us as a servant.

The lord of creation who comes alongside of us. But secondly, we need to move on in this text because Paul goes on in verse 18 and he gives an uncompromising declaration that Jesus is not only the lord of creation but he is the lord of the church. Verse 18, he is the head of the body, the church.

He is the beginning and the first born from among the dead so that in everything he might have the supremacy. And here Paul uses the familiar image of the physical body to describe the church. The church as the body of Christ.

It's an image that he also uses as I'm sure you know in Corinthians. It's also an image that he uses in Ephesians. There is one body, the body of Christ.

There is one head, Paul says, the lord Jesus Christ. And Paul says here in noticensess that Jesus is the beginning and the first born from among the dead. Now why does he say that in this context? He wants to remind us that the church has its source in the life of its risen lord.

Jesus is the first one to be raised from the dead never to die again. That's the glory of the resurrection of Jesus. Before Jesus, others had been raised to life but only to die again.

Jesus was the first one to be raised never to die again and our hope of resurrection is rooted in the fact that he is the first born from among the dead and we are united with him in his body because the physical body of Christ was raised to life eternal, united as the body of Christ. We too have that hope of resurrection. And even more, the image connotes the idea that the church is animated and receives its life by the power and the presence of the physically resurrected Jesus Christ.

We are in Christ and Christ is in us, the hope of glory. My prayer is that this church will increasingly be a church where Jesus is acknowledged. And where Jesus is honored as head and as king and as lord.

Last Sunday, as all of you know, I was inducted as your new pastor. And I want to say again what privilege I counted to have been called to this historic pulpit. And I will seek to serve our lord and this congregation faithfully in the years to come as God gives me strength.

But I also want you to know that as your minister, I am very human. I am weak and I am sinful and I am frail and I have a lot of worries and I have a lot of anxieties. I worry about my family.

I worry about my children. I worry about life. I worry about lots of things and I have feet of clay as I suspect most of you do as well.

And I struggle. I struggle with what it means to follow Jesus in our world today. It's not easy.

Some of you may think it must be easy for a pastor to be a disciple in the world today. It's tough. And it's becoming increasingly more difficult in the kind of culture and society in which we live.

And I have my good days and I have my bad days. And I want to say to you that I did not come to be the pastor of this congregation to be the head of the church. Because if this text means anything practically to us today, it means this.

Jesus Christ is head and king of the church. And my role will be constantly to keep us, to keep pointing us to that head, to Jesus as together we seek to move forward as a community of faith. We face tremendous challenges.

We face unbelievable challenges and opportunities in the months and in the years ahead together as we seek to serve Christ in this place. But I want to remind us that Jesus Christ is the head of this church and if anything, if anything is going to happen, if God's going to bless this ministry, it's not going to be because I do it or because you do it, but because together we yield ourselves to the headship and the lordship of Jesus Christ. And my prayer is that together we can build a household of faith, a community of disciples, a fellowship of the spirit as we discover afresh what it means to walk into the future that God has for us together.

And then thirdly and finally, I want us to notice the last section of this passage in Colossians chapter 1 and notice that Paul gives an unashamed declaration that Jesus is lord not only of the universe, not only of the church, but also he is the lord of salvation. Verses 9 and following, for God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile to himself all things whether things on earth or things in heaven by making peace through his blood shed on the cross. Paul is saying that Jesus is lord of salvation.

And then in verses 21 to 23, once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior, but now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy and blameless in his sight without blemish and free from accusation if you continue in your faith established and firm not moved out from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel, Paul says, that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven and of which I, Paul, have become a servant. And in verses 19 to 23 here, Paul lays out the emphasis that Jesus is lord of salvation.

Jesus is lord of creation and head of the church and because he is the lord of creation and head of the church, he is the lord of salvation. And because he is the lord of salvation, Paul says he is my savior. And because he is my savior, he is my lord.

He is my personal savior and my personal lord because of what he has done for me on the cross. Can you make that word about the lordship of Jesus your word this morning? Are you trusting in Christ and trusting in Christ alone as savior and lord? Do you acknowledge the claim of his lordship upon your life that you belong to him at work and at play in your public and in your private life on Sundays and every other day of the week in body and in mind and in soul and life and in death? When I was a child, I remember going to Sunday school when I was five and six years old. Sunday school was a little different back then, I think, anyways, from what I see in Sunday schools today because when I was six years old, I started to learn the catechism.

That's not that long ago either, by the way. And I learned the Heidelberg Catechism. Some of you probably learned the Westminster Catechism, the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

All of us know the famous first question, what is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is what? To glorify God and enjoy him forever. The first question of the Heidelberg Catechism, however, points also to the glory of the Lord, but it does so in a much more pastoral way, I think, in a personal way. The first question of the Heidelberg Catechism, what I learned at the age of six, is this question, what is your only comfort in life and in death? What is your only comfort in life and in death? And the answer is this, that I belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to myself, but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood is fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil, that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head.

Indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him. I want to tell you that those words went deeply into my heart and into my mind and into my soul and into the very fabric of my being even as a child and they are words that have stayed with me right to the present because they speak about the Lordship of Jesus, the personal Lordship of Jesus, the Servant Lord in our lives.

Near the end of his life, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth was interviewed on the radio and near the end of the interview, after they had listened to some of Mozart's music, the interviewer asked Barth whether he had any last words for the listening audience. It was November 1968 and Barth ended up dying in early December of that year, a few weeks later, and it turned out that these were about the last public words that he ever spoke. Now, Karl Barth didn't always get it right in his theology, but at this point and in answer to this question, these last public words which he spoke, he got it profoundly right because he said this, the last word which I have to say as a theologian and as a minister of the gospel is simply a name, Jesus Christ.

He is grace and he is the last beyond the world and the church and even theology and what I have been concerned to do in my long life has been increasingly to emphasize this name and to say there is no salvation in any other name than this. That was his last word. My first word to you this morning as your pastor is the same word, Jesus Christ.

He is the beginning and he is the end. He is the alpha and he is the omega. He is the first and he is the last.

He is the Lord of creation. He is the Lord of this congregation. He is the Lord of salvation.

He is Lord of the city. He is Lord of my life and I trust that you too can say that Jesus is Lord of your life this morning and what I will seek to do in my ministry from this pulpit and in my pastoral ministry as I go in and out amongst you as your pastor is simply to say there is salvation in no name than this name. Trust in him with all of your life and with all of your being and may it be that in the weeks and months and years ahead together as pastor and people increasingly we will learn what it is to confess that Jesus is Lord.

Amen. Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, we acknowledge you this morning.

We acknowledge your lordship in our lives. You have saved us by grace and you call us increasingly to open our hearts and lives and our families and our congregation to your lordship. Teach us what that means.

Apply that truth very deeply in our heart and may we move into the future that you have for us together under your lordship. Amen.

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