

Lent 2014 - Midweek Lenten Services



The Christian Symbol of the Fish

Text: Romans 10:9

If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

Theme: “The Confession that this Symbol Makes”

In the early church the fish became the most important symbol of Christianity. A teacher named Clement of Alexandria, who was born in 150 AD, recommended that Christians have their seals engraved with either a fish or a dove. Many of the catacombs of the early centuries use this symbol in the paintings. Frescoes, sculptures, rings, seals, and other Christian materials from the first 4 centuries often have a depiction of fish. By the 5th century the cross overtook the fish as the premier symbol of Christianity, and the fish was not used until the 1970's. Today I would like to look at the confession that this symbol makes.

I. Why did the early Christians choose the fish?

On one hand, fish play a prominent role in many stories in the Gospels. Jesus called His first disciples when they were fishing, and He told them that they would be “fishers of men.” (Lk 5:4-7) The one miracle that is recorded by all the evangelists is the feeding of the 5,000 when the Lord fed 5,000 people with just two fish and 5 small loaves of bread. In Matthew 17:24-27 there is the curious story of when Jesus told Peter to throw his net into the water. The first fish he took had a four drachma coin in it, which would cover the temple tax for both of them. Finally in John 21:1-14, fish are mentioned 8 times when the resurrected Lord appeared to the disciples at the Sea of Galilee. They miraculously caught 153 fish, and Jesus served them fish for breakfast.

About the year 100 someone came up with a clever acronym, using the Greek word for fish. The Greek word for fish is ICHTHUS. Each letter of this word stood for the following confession “**Jesus, Christ, God’s Son, Savior.**” When you think about it, this is the perfect confession of faith. It describes both who Jesus is and what He has done for us. Jesus is the Christ. He is the Anointed One whom the Jews looked forward to in the Old Testament. He is that promised Savior. He is the Son of God. This was a dangerous confession to make because at that time the Roman emperors were calling themselves the Theou Yios, the “son of God.” In fact, the emperor Domitian (81-96) who unleashed a horrible persecution against Christians, minted a coin which called him the “son of God.” In this symbol Christians were confessing that Jesus is the true Son of God, as John writes in John 1:18, “*No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made Him known.*” (NIV 2011) Finally, this confession calls Him the Savior. He is the one who has saved us from our sins. The symbol of the fish represented Jesus. It shows who He is and what He has done for us. We will be looking at each of those various aspects in the next several weeks.

II. This symbol was used in several ways in those early centuries.

It marked places where Christians worshiped, and where they buried their dead. It marked Christians. Many of them would put fish as a part of their seals, rings, and other items. The story is also told that one Christian would make an arc on the ground, and that when another person made the other arc to complete the fish, they would both know that they were brothers or sisters in Christ.

I also find it interesting that the symbol was often used in a sacramental way. In his work on baptism Tertullian, writes, **“But we, little fishes, after the example of our IXTHUS Jesus Christ, are born in water, nor have we safety in any other way than by permanently abiding in water.”** That is an interesting quote. The symbol of the fish was so widely known at the time, that Jesus is called “our IXTHUS.” Then Tertullian goes on to say that we are born in water, which is a clear reference to baptism and that we permanently abide in this water, which is our baptism grace. There are also pictures of communion which have to do with the fish. In one painting the table of the last supper is shaped like a fish. In another the plates have bread and fish, which show that in this meal we receive Christ Himself in the bread. The epitaph on the grave of Abercius, the second century Bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia tells us that in his journey from his Asian home to Rome, everywhere on the way he received as food "the Fish from the spring", as well as "wine mixed with water, together with bread," a clear reference to receiving our Lord's Supper along the way. By this symbol, the early Christians confessed their faith that Jesus Christ is their Savior.

III. A confession of Christ as Savior is central to our lives as Christians.

In our text Paul writes, *“If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”* Our salvation depends on what is in our hearts and on our lips. Do we believe in Jesus and confess His name to our world? Faith in Him takes away our sins and makes us into the children of God. The three men in the fiery furnace had such faith. Even the threat of death would not stop them from worshiping their Lord. In tonight's Gospel lesson the woman who anointed Jesus with the expensive perfume did so as a confession of faith that Jesus was her Savior. In tonight's second lesson Peter confessed to the entire Sanhedrin that salvation is found in no one other than Jesus for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. Throughout the Scriptures we have the confession that Christ and He alone is our Savior.

IV. When we know Him as our Savior, we cannot help but make this same confession.

Since the 1970's thousands of Christians have put the symbol of the fish of their cars, and worn lapel pins, necklaces, and rings with this symbol. It is a confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, our Savior. We have come to know His love and grace. We know that He paid for all of our sins on the cross, and we believe in our hearts that God raised Him from the dead as our Savior. There are many other things in this world that people worship or trust in, but we confess Christ as our greatest treasurer, because the gifts that we have from Him are those that will last for eternity. As Christians we confess Christ, and He will confess us as His people.

The symbol of the fish was an early Christian confession of who Jesus is and what He has done for

us. That confession that He is God's Son, our Savior is the essence of saving faith. May God give us both hearts that trust Christ and mouths that confess Him as our Savior, that we may receive the salvation that He came to bring.

Amen.

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