

The following is adapted from a letter to the congregation from a past issue of *Crossroads*:

This month I'd like to speak to the words, *Jesus Centered*. What do they mean? What do they say about us? What is the difference between *Jesus Centered* and the more general description *Christ Centered*?

First, let me speak biblically. The term *Christ* is a title, the Greek ("Christos") version of the Hebrew word *Messiah*. When we say *Jesus Christ* we actually mean *Jesus the Christ*, Jesus the Messiah, or Jesus the "Anointed One." In the Gospels Jesus never uses the term *Christ* to refer to himself, although he frequently refers to the hope for a Messiah/Christ and Peter in particular avows that Jesus is the Christ. The earliest "Christians" (a term not generally used until a generation or more after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection) referred to themselves as *People of the Way*, meaning the way of Jesus the Christ. Paul in his letters to the church often refers to *Christ Jesus*, meaning the Messiah, the resurrected One of God. At other times and in almost the same way, Paul refers to *Christ*, meaning the Savior, the crucified One who died for the forgiveness of sins.

As the church emerged through the first three centuries, there got to be quite an argument over the nature of Jesus Christ. Some argued that Jesus Christ, the divine Son of God, was more Christ than Jesus (more God than man), and never really lived and suffered and died as we do. Contrary to this idea, the church affirmed in the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed and at subsequent councils, that Jesus truly was a historical figure and that his nature mingled the human and the divine. In one of the most succinct statements from this early history, the theologian and preacher Irenaeus argued that *God became man so that we might become one with God*.

Since the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, Protestants have tended to emphasize the human face of Jesus while Catholic and Orthodox have tended more to recognize the face of God. *All Christians* believe that Jesus is the Son of God and all Christians believe that Jesus is the Risen Lord who, with the Holy Spirit, has come to reclaim and transform the world for God. But the piety of Protestants has tended toward a relationship with the life, teachings and faith of Jesus and the piety of Catholics and Orthodox has tended toward the experiencing the mystical body of Christ in the bread and cup of communion. (Neither side is exclusive of the other).

In modern, North American, mainline Christianity an interesting thing has happened. As the Protestant churches split along evangelical/fundamentalist vs. liberal/progressive lines, many liberal/progressive churches got uncomfortable with the name of *Jesus*. Perhaps mainline folk got uncomfortable because of the Jesus language used by more conservative churches ("Jesus is my personal savior"), linked with very conservative politics about evolution, the place of women, and social issues like abortion and homosexuality. At any rate, many mainline churches began to dissect Jesus Christ and refer to Jesus as the historical man and Christ as something like the mind and purpose of God. Churches like ours got ashamed of using the name of Jesus, as though we might be mistaken for "holy rollers."

I believe it is time for churches like our own to reclaim the name of Jesus. Jesus gives us our purpose, our plan, our urgency. His invitation to "follow me" is an invitation to God's work of restoring thirsty lives and a broken world to wholeness. Without his bread and cup, how would we know what wholeness looks like? Without his challenge, why would we bother caring for the Samaritan or forgiving an enemy? Without his resurrection, why would we believe that death is not the final answer? Without his deep welcome to all God's people, why would we take a chance on people who are not familiar and comfortable for us? Without his prayer, how would we know to approach God?

Why do we let others co-opt the name of *Jesus* for their social and political causes?

I want to explore with you what it means to call Jesus: *Friend, Master, Companion, Savior*. I want to explore with you why calling our church *Jesus Centered* is more specific, more powerful and more satisfying even than calling ourselves *Christ Centered*. After all, Jesus Christ, head of the church, was a real man (not a title) and he is a living presence (not a memory)!

Blessings and peace at Easter time. *May the risen Lord Jesus be with us and among us!*

Peter