

DEVOTIONS AND PRAYERS

by

CHAPLAINS

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Speaker Richardson and esteemed members of the House of Representatives, it is indeed an honor for me to be here this morning. I would like to thank my friend, Representative Bob Hanner, for arranging for me to be here, and Speaker Richardson for the invitation to come. I would also like to thank you all for your attention this morning.

Let me say how tremendous I think it is that you have this devotional moment. At the very least, the presence of this devotional moment is an acknowledgment of transcendence, that is, it's an acknowledgment that there is something above and beyond the immediate work that you are doing here, something above and beyond yourselves.

There is something to be said for transcendence. It keeps us from being flat-landers and it guards us from the conceit that what we happen to see just happens to be all that there is. So transcendence is good, but, for the Christian, transcendence is not enough.

It would be nice if mere transcendence was enough, if our claims about God could remain perpetually non-committal, non-offensive, fluid, ethereal, vague, substance-less. It would be nice, for instance, if we only had to speak in generalities, in leading nods and overtures to this or that opinion. It would be nice, in other words, if we could avoid the raw inconvenience of actual claims, of actual truths.

Sometimes truth really is kind of blunt and less poetic than vague meanderings. Sometimes the most obvious truths are the ones that are right in front of us.

You are, no doubt, familiar with the famous detective Sherlock Holmes and his trusty cohort Watson. Perhaps you've heard of the case that Holmes and Watson were on in which their pursuit of a particular criminal took them into the open country where they were forced to camp

one night out of doors. They set up camp, had their dinner, and then turned in for the night. In the dark hours of the night, Watson heard Holmes stir off to his left. Then Holmes spoke to Watson, breaking the silence.

"Watson," Sherlock Holmes said, "when you look up at the night sky, what do you see? What do you think?"

For a moment, only the crickets and rustling of the wind in the trees could be heard. Watson stared up at the sky and collected his thoughts.

Clearing his throat, Watson spoke: "Well, Sherlock, when I look up I see that brilliant and dazzling canopy of space. I see the myriad stars etched into the tapestry of the heavens glistening like a million little candles. I think about the amazing hand of Providence, a hand that must be amazing to create such splendor and beauty. I think about the vast immensity of space. I think of the mysterious and, indeed, frightening expanse of darkness in which our planet hangs. I think," Watson continued, "about how amazingly small this little planet called 'earth' really is. And I think about how much smaller still we are, Holmes, you and I, camping here on this little patch of earth, on this small island, on this little planet. And I see that we are small, almost insignificant in light of the majesty of the heavens."

With this, Watson stopped. The wind could be heard in the trees once again. Finally, Watson spoke again, "Holmes, when you look up in the night sky, what do you see? What do you think?"

After a moment, Sherlock Holmes spoke: "Somebody stole our tent."

Sometimes the truth is right in front of us, so close, in fact, that we almost can't even see it. Sometimes it's not really all that vague and ethereal. Sometimes the truth is a simple and blunt reality.

I am a Christian. Christianity is a two-thousand-year-old conviction and assertion that the transcendence we feel in our own hearts, is not all that we are left with. This holy longing, this innate knowledge of more, in fact has a content. It has a content and it has a name. Christianity has always asserted, oftentimes at great cost, that we are not damned to vagueness, to unknowing, to uncertainty, to mere transcendence. We are not condemned to a very real but ultimately very *vague* sense of the divine.

Christianity asserts that there is more.

My text this morning presents us with Christianity's bold and, according to the Apostle Paul, scandalous truth claim. It is found in the book of Romans, chapter 10, verse 9, where Paul wrote: "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

"If you confess with your mouth," Paul writes, "Jesus is Lord." There it is. That is as concise and clear a summary of the content of Christianity as your' likely to find. "Dominus Iesus." "Jesus is Lord."

At the end of the day, the value of all Christian claims rest on their faithfulness to that central assertion: "Jesus is Lord."

And so that is what I would like to say to you this morning. I would like to say, "Dominus Iesus, Jesus is Lord," and I'd like to tell you what I think this statement is.

First of all, this statement is a denial. The statement "Jesus is Lord" not only says something positive, it also says something negative. Let me explain. In the first century, there was a customary greeting among faithful Roman citizens.

It went something like this: "Dominus Caesar", "Caesar is Lord." This is what good Romans would say to one another. Caesar didn't mind. In fact, his supposed lordship was a central tenet of his own office and claim to power.

So we can immediately see the political challenge of this early Christian claim, "Jesus is Lord." Because to say "Jesus is Lord" is not merely to say "Jesus is Lord." It's also to say, "Jesus is Lord...and Caesar is not."

This is what I mean when I say that "Jesus is Lord" is a denial. If that statement is true, it also means, necessarily, that "I am not Lord." It means that "You are not Lord."

A few years ago Shirley McClain said that she likes to go down to the ocean, stand on the beach and shout, "I am God! I am God!" Well, everybody needs a hobby, but let me suggest that you not take up this particular one.

"Dominus Iesus." "Jesus is Lord." He is, and I'm not.

Christianity therefore makes a very strong denial. It denies the lordship of anybody other than Christ Jesus. It denies your lordship. It denies mine as well. It also denies any competing claims to lordship. This is what is known as the scandal of Christian particularity: "*only* Jesus is Lord." It was highly offensive two-thousand years ago. It is highly offensive today.

Perhaps this is why Jesus' enemies hated Him so much. Perhaps they understood clearly what "Jesus is Lord" meant for their own status, their own power, their own prestige. Perhaps they saw the threat in that statement.

Perhaps this is why everybody likes religion so long as it's the kind of pious but vapid platitudes we find on Hallmark cards. If I can get enough of God to make me feel "spiritual" (whatever that means) but still leaves me ultimately in control, the that's great.

That fascinating and wonderful little Georgia treasure, the late Flannery O'Conner, wrote short stories down there a Andalusia Farm in Milledgeville that have fascinated readers ever since they appeared. She once lectured up at Georgetown where she made a very famous statement about Jesus and the South. She said that the South was not so much Christ-centered as "Christ-haunted." In other words, according to Flannery O'Conner, folks in the South are kind of haunted by Jesus, but they're not necessarily followers of Jesus. I think she was onto something. Jesus is kind of "in the air" down here. Everybody knows that you're supposed to think well of Him and speak well of Him. It's hard to find folks in Georgia who'll say they don't like Jesus. After all, we're raised to love our moms, to love America, and to love Jesus. But sometimes it seems that our cultural haunting is really a bit different than actually following Jesus. How many of us actually realize the amazing threat that the lordship of Jesus presents to our own lives? How many of us realize that embracing Jesus means dying to ourselves? How many of us realize that embracing Jesus means dying to ourselves? So we prefer a vague and misty ghost of Jesus, the Sunday School Jesus, the Jesus who's lordship stays in the

sanctuary, but not in our lives.

But a Jesus of content and substance, a Jesus that refuses to leave me in charge, well that's another thing. This is precisely what "Jesus is Lord" means. It is a denial.

Furthermore, "Jesus is Lord" is a clarification and a definition. It tells us, in other words, what kind of Lord this Lord is. For Jesus walked among us at a particular time, and said particular things, and did particular deeds. What He proclaimed was a Kingdom that had come and was coming. What He did was model this Kingdom life, perform miracles, cast out demons, and turn peoples lives upside down through His incendiary teaching and example.

And above all else, what He did was take up a cross and carry it to a hill, and lay His life down on it for you and for me. And then this Lord Jesus rose from the dead, triumphant over sin, death, and hell. He ascended and He is coming again.

The life of Jesus pours meaning into the word "Lord." The Apostle John knew this well when he wrote in John 1:16-18 that:

"And from His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, He has made Him known."

"Jesus is Lord" is a definition and a description. He is the "God-man," the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is the crucified servant, the resurrected Lord, the coming-again King.

Finally, "Jesus is Lord" is a promise. It is no mere description. It pulsates with prophetic energy and power. It is an expectation and a hope. This is confirmed by the ancient Christian cry, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus!"

"Jesus is Lord" is stamped not only on the hearts of believers, it is stamped into the very fabric of reality. In his letter to the Philippian Christians the Apostle Paul points to this hope by reminding this band of Jesus-followers that "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that

Jesus Christ if Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (2:10-11).

So you must understand that for believers in Jesus Christ "Jesus is Lord" forms not only the content of our faith, it forms our understanding of reality. This is why some of us scratch our heads at the fear of some to pray in His name or to proclaim with joy this great and glorious truth. It is why many of us are confused at the occasional hesitance of Christian officials to allow their convictions on the Lordship of Christ to guide their actions in public office.

I understand that you Representatives who are Christians weren't elected to be pastors, but might I remind you that you were called an "Ambassador" by God before you were called a "Representative" by the state of Georgia? May I remind you that "*Jesus is Lord*" doesn't stop being true when "*The House is in session*" is true?

I don't know how to cut "Dominus Iesus" off. Perhaps this is what C. S. Lewis was talking about when he said, "I believe in Christianity as I believe the sun rises. Not because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."

It occurs to many of us that the abandonment of "Jesus is Lord" is not merely the abandonment of a certain set of religious truths, it is the abandonment of life itself, and so we cling stubbornly but hopefully to these three great words: words that have sustained Christian martyrs in persecution, have lifted suffering people above their most difficult trials, have fueled the joyful singing of countless congregations throughout the ages, have stirred simple believers the world over to lives of greater service, sacrifice, and accomplishments, have inspired the greatest painters and poets and authors of Western civilization to create masterpieces, and have given hope to the unknown, the forgotten, and the downtrodden. These words have also changed my life, even as I struggle to live up to full implications of their meaning for my life. And I believe these are the only words that will ultimately change yours as well.

So I leave you with this: "Dominus Iesus. Jesus is Lord."