

Pentecost 8 / July 23, 2023

Isaiah 44:5

“I am the first and I am the last; besides Me there is no God.”

The Lord, the only God and Saviour

In the ancient world it was universally believed that national gods sought the well-being of their people and promoted themselves, by making them successful. The Assyrians conquered many nations and had a large empire, because their gods were more powerful than the gods of other peoples. When the army of the Assyrian king surrounded Jerusalem, the commander warned King Hezekiah and the soldiers on the walls of Jerusalem, against thinking the Lord would save them. He said, “Do not let Hezekiah make you trust in the Lord by saying, ‘The Lord will surely deliver us.’” He asked mockingly ‘where are the gods of other defeated nations.’ He concluded saying, “Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their lands out of my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?” The gods of the Assyrians were too powerful.

The Lord showed His power over the Assyrians and their gods by sending an angel, who in the course of a night, slew their army. They gave up their siege of Jerusalem and returned home in defeat. At times the Lord saved His people in overtly powerful ways. He rescued them from the Egyptians, humiliated their gods and made a path to safety in the sea. But most often the Lord worked in more subtle ways: Forgiving Israel their sins. Preserving Judah in exile. Returning the Jews from captivity in Babylon. Most notably the Lord displayed His power to save by clothing His eternal Son in our humanity, so that through the perfection of His life and the suffering of His death, He would redeem us from captivity to sin and lift from our heads the condemnation of eternal death. The Lord’s purpose in all these actions, whether overtly powerful or subtle and humble, was to show Himself the only God and Saviour of all people.

In the ancient world, peoples chose their gods. Naturally they wanted gods that were powerful to fight for them in battle, save them from their enemies, provide them with bread to eat, wine to drink and oil to make their faces shine. If the gods failed to deliver the goods, they would choose new gods. King Ahab and his wife Queen Jezebel sought to replace the worship of the Lord with the prosperity god Baal. Defeated nations would worship the gods of their conquerors, since they had proven themselves superior. If other gods gave better benefits, nations would abandon their old gods and choose new ones. Judges chapter five speaks of the people gathering to choose new gods. The Lord lamented how often His people abandoned Him who is alone God, to serve things that are not gods.

The Lord chose Israel, in order to make Himself known in the world as the only true God, the Creator of the earth, the heavens and all that is in them. The only force at work in the story of creation is the Lord and His word. Other creation stories involved multiple deities, some working for creation and some fighting against. In the biblical creation there is only the Lord.

The Lord’s purpose in choosing Israel to be His people was to show Himself different than the gods of the world in the nature of His being. The gods of the nations were easily slighted, vengeful and often demanded horrendous sacrifices from their people, including human sacrifices. In contrast, The Lord was patient, compassionate, kind and forgiving. He stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son. He ended all sacrifice by giving His Son to atone for the sin of the world.

When it comes to knowledge of the Lord it is most important that we know He is forgiving and kind. The psalmists sang, “He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His steadfast love towards those who fear Him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us.”

The Lord displayed His compassion in forgiving Israel’s sins through the course of many generations. The Lord showed his power by preserving His ancient people in the face of immense adversities, which swallowed up other nations. The Lord displayed both His power and deep love for all people, in giving His eternal Son through Israel to be our Saviour. He did this so we and all people, would know Him as the only God and believe in Him as our only Saviour.

Our text begins, “Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and Israel’s Redeemer, the Lord of Hosts: ‘I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no God.’” It was very difficult if not impossible, for ancient peoples to conceive the existence of only one God. It was even harder to believe that the God of Israel was the one and only God. Israel was a people of no account. They were not a world power like the Egyptians, the Assyrians, Babylonians, Macedonians and Romans. Their God was a minor deity in the pantheon of gods. Israel’s God hadn’t prevented the Assyrians and their gods from conquering and dispersing the northern kingdom among the nations. The God of Israel didn’t stop the Babylonians from ransacking Jerusalem, destroying His temple and taking the tribe of Judah into exile. The God of Israel did none of the things ancient peoples expected from a national deity. How could they believe that He was a god, let alone the one and only God?

People today wonder about the existence of God, even as ancient peoples wondered how the God of Israel could claim to be the only God and Saviour. How can we know these things are true? The proof of the truth is in the results. The simple fact that the God of Israel is worshipped throughout the earth, while the gods of powerful ancient empires are remembered only in history books is proof in itself. It is astounding that the God of a small, insignificant, often defeated people, should be known throughout the world centuries later, while the gods of the most powerful empires are forgotten.

A prominent atheist asked which god he should worship, since there are so many worshipped in the world. Should he worship Zeus, Athena, Moloch, Thor or Odin? He should worship the God whose worship has passed the test of time. Israel didn’t win many battles, but the Lord won the war of the gods and showed Himself the only God and only Saviour of Israel and of all people.

The Lord, the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of the Jews, the God of Christians, the Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, has outlasted all the gods of the ancient world. His worship has outlived the worship of everything in the ancient world falsely called God. He has preserved his people through long ages of oppression, hardship, violence and persecution. His people have survived the vicissitudes of time and the oppression of every empire that set itself against them. How utterly amazing that the God who chose a nation of slaves, should be worshipped throughout the world to this day as the only God and Saviour! That in itself is undeniable proof that the Lord truly is the only God and Saviour!

The Lord is the only God in the world and the only Saviour of the world! He reveals Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; One God in three persons. He can be perceived in creation. He gives signs of His presence in the history of His people. He cannot be fathomed by the human mind. He dwells in light unapproachable. He reveals Himself in the scriptures, so we would know love is the nature of His being. As the psalmist says, He reveals His love by providing us with food to eat, wine to gladden our hearts and oil to make our faces shine. He reveals His love most fully in Christ Jesus, His sharing of our humanity and the sacrifice of His cross for our salvation.

No god produced by the imagination of humans or by the deception of the evil one, can compare to the majesty of the true and living God. His glory fills earth and shines in the heavens by day and night. The Lord gives the greatest display of His glory in love, giving His eternally begotten Son to share in our humanity and atone for our sins through His sinless life and sacrificial death. There is no god like the Lord. There is no God but the Lord. He alone is God. He alone is our Saviour for the sake of Christ and the sacrifice of His cross.

May The Lord bless us to worship Him alone as our God and Saviour. May The Lord empower us to witness to others of His love and salvation in Christ Jesus, offered for all to receive through faith in His Name. Amen