

Our Saviour Jesus Christ

Certain key teachings need to be restated in a quite new way if we are to have a Christianity without the supernatural. We have already looked at the first of these: belief in God as the creator and sustainer of the universe. In this chapter we come to the heart of the Christian gospel: that God became human in the person of Jesus Christ who died to save us from sin and death.

To speak of a saviour implies that there is something we need saving from. That ‘something’ is given by Christians the name ‘sin’. But what is sin? ‘What is sin?’ was the title of the only essay I failed to complete when I was a student at theological college. (I leave you to draw your own conclusions from that fact!) The thing which interests me now is that I can still remember the opening sentence of what I did write. I said, *Sin is a theological invention*. This shows that my leanings towards religion as a human creation go a long way back. It also helps to explain why I never finished the essay: I was trying to cope with a humanist view of sin in a framework of supernatural religion. No wonder I could not do it! Now that I can see that both sin and God-the-saviour are human inventions, maybe I shall have more success.

Christian stories in the past

Views of sin, like all things human, run in fashions. The great fear and anxiety of one generation is hardly given a thought by another. So naturally the qualities looked for in a saviour-from-sin run in fashions as well. For the first few hundred years of our era, when the foundation stones of Christian doctrine were being laid, the great fear was extinction. The anxiety of the age was that earthly death meant total oblivion, and that was the fate from

which any religion had to offer a way of escape. The Christian response to this fear took the form of a drama in four acts:

- (1) God made humanity in his own image, and part of what it meant to be in God's image was that humanity shared as a gift what God himself had by nature: immortality.
- (2) As a result of human sin, the image became marred, and so the gift of immortality was lost. Only by restoring the divine image in the human race could the gift be conferred anew.
- (3) In Jesus Christ, God himself took on a human life and so renewed the perfect divine image and the gift of eternal life in a single human. This was triumphantly proved by the defeat of death in the resurrection of Jesus.
- (4) Potentially that renewal was achieved in every human being; to make it actual, a person needed to be baptized. This made them a sharer of Christ's new humanity and therefore also of his divinity and of his immortality.

'He shared our human life in order that we might share his divine life,' was a common slogan in those days, summing up both the method and purpose of the saviour. It was an important principle that Jesus should be both 100% God and also 100% human. If his divinity had been at all suspect, then his ability to renew the divine image and so confer the gift of immortality upon the human race would have been fatally harmed. If he were not fully human, then whatever aspect of humanity he lacked would remain unredeemed. All the doctrinal battles of the first five centuries were fought to ensure that these three basic criteria should be fulfilled: that Jesus should be fully God, fully man, and a fully integrated single person.

By the Middle Ages, the fashion had changed. The message for which the early church had fought so hard was taken for granted, so much so that it was commonly believed that the human soul was by nature immortal. The major consequence of sin was no longer thought of as loss of life but as punishment for wickedness. So the great anxiety was no longer that death would mean extinction, but that death would mean an eternity in hellfire.

The church responded by shifting the emphasis from the birth of Jesus to the death of Jesus, because this was seen as the key to escape from punishment. The script of the play had been completely re-written and now looked like this:

- (1) Humanity has been disobedient (sinful) from the first and must be punished or make recompense. God's honour and holiness do not permit this to be ignored.
- (2) In Jesus Christ, God the son lived a perfectly obedient (sinless) human life and so did not deserve death as a punishment.
- (3) By offering his perfect life (human and divine) freely and willingly on the cross, Jesus paid the debt of the whole human race.
- (4) This means that God can forgive human sins without offending his honour and holiness, and he does this through the sacraments of the church.

This theory again required that Jesus be both fully human and fully divine. Only if he were fully divine would he be capable of living the sinless life and only if the gift were of God's own life would it be of sufficient worth. But only if he were fully human would he be qualified to make the payment: humanity had sinned and so humanity had to pay off the debt.

Today the situation has changed again. Not many people live in mortal fear of roasting in hell. (Though there is still great anxiety on the part of conservative Christians, not for themselves, but for their unbelieving friends and relatives. This is one reason why these scaremongering doctrines need to be challenged.) What we do find today is a lot of unresolved guilt and an inability of people to forgive *themselves*. This reflects a longstanding negative attitude by the church towards human worth, and is looked at in the next chapter. The greatest overall anxiety today would seem to be that there is no meaning in life, no ultimate purpose to anything. A sense of lostness. (Sometimes this is reflected in a return to the old fear that death means extinction. The insistence of some conservative Christians on the physical resurrection may

be an aspect of this. But the real sickness of our age is the sense of aimlessness.)

The challenge to Christians of all points of view today is this: do we re-tell the Christian good news so that it effectively meets today's generation at its point of need? Or do we try to induce in people the old anxieties of the past, to which we have pre-packaged Christian remedies? I have no doubt that it is the first of these choices which we have to take. This being so, radical Christians, who are less bound than others to past slogans and beliefs, should be at a positive advantage.

It may come as a surprise to you that Christian teaching has changed over the years and can be so easily identified as belonging to a particular time or even a particular writer. We have been trained to believe that Christian truth is unchanging. But think for a moment of other areas of life. I am no great musician but, if I hear an unfamiliar piece of music on the radio, I can normally tell at once whether it is from the baroque, classical, romantic or modern period. I have only a slight knowledge of art history, but faced with an unfamiliar painting I could tell a renaissance Italian work from a Russian ikon or a French impressionist. In the case of a very distinctive style I might even be able to name the artist — Degas perhaps, or Renoir. Going 'down market' a bit, think of Hollywood historical dramas. The scene may be ancient Rome, or King Arthur's Camelot, but the hairstyles and costumes tell you at once in which decade of the present century the film was made. Religious teaching gives away its age just as surely.

The New Testament faces of Jesus

In the case of the earliest Christian books — those in the New Testament — we have a unique situation. Although they were all written at more or less the same time, they come from different places and show us independent responses to Jesus Christ. They date from a time before there was a single church with an agreed interpretation of events. (That is why so many quite different

ideas have subsequently been able to claim support from the New Testament.) Look at St Paul, who is widely thought of as the co-founder of Christianity and whose letters are the earliest Christian writings we have. He tells us nothing about the earthly life of Jesus before the day of his death, and almost nothing about that last twenty-four hours. For Paul, it is the Lord Jesus Christ who matters, a mystical person who was raised from the dead, whose body is the Christian community, and whose spirit lives in all Christians. If we had to rely on St Paul for information, we should not know that Jesus ever told a parable, nor that he ever performed a miracle. By contrast consider St Mark, normally thought to have written the earliest of the Gospels. He tells us nothing of Jesus *except* his earthly life. He gives us selected stories between his baptism in the river Jordan and the discovery of his empty tomb, and there stops abruptly — almost in mid-sentence. If we had to rely on St Mark for information, we should not know whether Jesus ever met up with his disciples again, nor whether his religious movement survived his death. Each New Testament writer gives us his own Jesus, and once you know them they are easily identified.

For most of its two-thousand-year history, the church in each age has had what we can now see is its own composite picture of Jesus. And each age, looking back over the biblical books and other Christian texts, has found its own Jesus there. This process was quite unconscious. Only in the past couple of hundred years, with the rise of historical research, has it been realized what was going on. As a reaction, the attempt has been made to draw a distinction between two characters. One is the Jesus of history, the actual figure we might have met by the Sea of Galilee, and who must be open to investigation by historians. The other is the Christ of faith, the figure proclaimed by the church as saviour of the world, who is liable to change in changing circumstances. It has to be said that this venture, the 'quest for the historical Jesus', has not been a success. The starting point was to take St Paul's Lord as the basic 'Christ of faith' and St Mark's itinerant preacher as the basic 'historical Jesus'. Careful comparison of the four

Gospels showed how certain qualities of the 'Christ of faith' seemed to have been read back into the life of the 'historical Jesus'. Much painstaking work led to a whole spate of biographies. The earliest, which opened up the entire field, was the *Life of Jesus* by D.F. Strauss, published in 1835. The most recent serious example I have seen is *The Founder of Christianity* by C.H. Dodd, coming a century and a half later. The trouble with these books is that, like the Hollywood costume dramas, they tell us far more about their author and the time they were written than about the historical character of Jesus. In all ages we look down the well of history and see our own reflection.

In the light of the failure of 'the quest', there are three options. The conservative one is to deny the distinction; to go back to a pre-critical reading of the texts and insist that the Jesus of history simply is the Christ of faith exactly as portrayed by the evangelists and Paul. The liberal response is to deny the failure and to continue patient historical and literary research. The radical answer is to accept the distinction and the failure and to say that it does not matter! Who needs the historical Jesus? Paul got on very well without him, and the four evangelists were each quite content to construct their own version of him. Why cannot we do the same? All the New Testament writers presented their readers with the Christ they needed. The church fathers of the first five centuries created a Christ who fulfilled their needs in a saviour. The mediaeval scholars did the same, and so did the sixteenth-century reformers and all other theologians since. So why break the habits of a life-time? Let us do exactly what all previous generations have done and create our own Jesus. The only difference will be that what they did unconsciously we shall be doing openly and knowingly.

Let us be clear what we are saying. We have no choice in the matter. Even if we wanted to, we could not study the historical character called Jesus of Nazareth, and decide on the evidence whether to accept him as our saviour. The evidence simply is not there. The four Gospels are not reports about a man's life. They are proclamations that Jesus is Lord. At first glance, or even after

careful study, they may appear to be ‘lives of Jesus’. But they are not. The lesson, the hard and still-to-be-taken-in lesson, of the failure of the quest for the historical Jesus is just this: St Mark may appear to talk only about the earthly life of Jesus, but he is in fact presenting us with the Lord Jesus Christ every bit as much as St Paul is. And so is Matthew, and Luke, and John. Each of them — like each generation of Christians since — has confessed him as saviour, and then applied to him the necessary qualities to do the job. That may sound awful, but it is what has happened. And it has worked!

Let us take an example. For reasons now lost to us, the first Christians were convinced that Jesus was the Christ. But he came from Nazareth, and the scriptures foretold that the Christ would be born in Bethlehem. How did each of the evangelists deal with this? Mark ignores it altogether. John refers to the discrepancy (John 7.41f.) but leaves it unresolved, preferring to draw his readers’ attention away from Jesus’ earthly origins to his heavenly ones (cf. John 1.14; 3.13; 16.28). Matthew says that Jesus’ parents lived at Bethlehem up to the time of his birth, but moved to Nazareth later to avoid persecution by the Herod family (Matt. 2.1, 22f.). Luke says that the family lived in Nazareth, and were only in Bethlehem at the time of the birth because of the census (Luke 1.26; 2.4–7). The point I am making is this: none of the evangelists believed that Jesus was the Christ because they knew he was born in Bethlehem. They thought he must have been born in Bethlehem because that was one of the criteria for being the Christ *which they already believed on other grounds*. So they made Jesus fit the criteria of their saviour. Naturally.

Remaking Jesus Christ today

The work of remaking Christian doctrine has to go on. It has always been thus. We saw earlier an example from the fourth century. In order to be saviour (as then understood), Jesus had to be divine. But this teaching was in danger of breaking another standard belief of the time: that God cannot suffer. One group of

Christians kept the balance by saying that although Jesus was divine, he was not 'of one substance' with God the father. Another group insisted that to be fully God he must be 'of one substance' with the father. They won, and the phrase is in the creed to this day. The doctrine is not in the Bible. But the church of the day said it was a necessary qualification for the saviour to have, so they made it a part of the Christian faith.

This may seem shocking, but we have to get away from the idea that Christian teaching about Jesus fell out of the sky ready-made. The creed just as much as the Bible has 'made on earth' written all over it. Made and re-made as circumstances required. It does not describe a timeless situation in a supernatural world. It sets out the belief-needs of a particular group of people at a particular time. We cannot be bound by it. We must be as innovative as those early Christians who wrote it.

Even if what I have just said is accepted, it may seem that to present a picture of Jesus which would fit in with a non-supernatural version of Christianity would be impossible. But if we go back to some of the key characteristics of Jesus in the Gospels, we need be no more selective than anyone else has been in order to produce a reasonable and usable ikon.

- (1) He does not teach by giving direct information about God. He tells stories and lets people draw their own conclusions. He reacts to questions by asking more questions.
- (2) He challenges the religious norms of the day. He breaks the sabbath, attacks the food laws, ignores the purity code.
- (3) He sits lightly to the moral conventions of the day. He keeps company with sinners and denounces the hypocrisy of the upright.
- (4) He calls his hearers to a completely new attitude to life: to turn around, to trust, to love, to forgive, and not to judge.

I am not claiming that Jesus in the Gospels did not believe in God as an objective reality. That would be absurd. I am saying that there is much in the Gospel teaching of Jesus which loses none of its force, which indeed gains added weight, if there is not

an objective God. More than that, I am saying that much in the attitude of Jesus in the Gospels encourages bold innovation. To read the text so as to bring this side of Jesus into focus is quite proper. And I dare say it conflicts less with the evidence than does that more common public-school portrayal of Jesus as the upright citizen and promoter of the status quo.

Maybe. But can this radical reading of the text give us a saviour? If it is true that our world today is afflicted by a fear of aimlessness, can this Jesus help, this Jesus who is just words on a page, whose objective existence we deny? The lost sheep needed a real shepherd to come and rescue him. The lost coin needed a real housewife to search it out. Do we not need a real saviour, a God who really is 'out there' and able to reach into our world and find us and bring us safely home? Perhaps it would be nice if that were the case, but we have seen the reasons why we cannot accept such a picture as literally true. In the previous chapter we saw that it is simply not possible to have information about such a supernatural being even if he did exist. In this chapter we have seen that the picture we have of Jesus is a human creation. Any power he has is that which we ourselves supply by using him as a focus and symbol for our own energies. But is this really such a loss? Do I really want to be like a lifeless coin, someone else's plaything to lose and find? Do I even want to be like a helpless lamb, dependent on a shepherd? Such metaphors do less than justice to the creative genius of human beings. Traditional religion has encouraged a wrong kind of dependency and devaluing of ourselves by using them.

St Luke sets alongside these parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin that of the lost son (more often called the prodigal son; see Luke 15). In this story the realization of his plight and the initiative to do something about it come from the young man himself. This is a better role-model for us. We are to work out our own salvation. The figure of Jesus will indeed help in this — providing an example, a symbol, a focus for our efforts — and without such support we cannot help ourselves. His role of saviour is therefore real and necessary, but the energy will come

from us and there is no need for Jesus to exist outside the text and our reading of it. Like the lost son in the story, we shall 'come to ourselves' and find our own way. It is true that the world has no meaning in itself. But we have the power to give it meaning by the value and values we put on it. Traditional religion devalues this world and its experiences, by contrasting their transience with the 'solid joys and lasting treasures' of the unseen world to come. We shall find our way when we give meaning to the here and now by our own commitment to the Christian values of love, joy, peace, etc. Jesus is our saviour when he focusses that commitment.

This is not quite so revolutionary to Christian thought as may appear. In the early days of the church there was a strong element of teaching which was totally negative about the present world and saw salvation in terms of escape from it. This extreme view never became official teaching. The official line of the church has always been the salvation *of* the world rather than salvation *from* the world. The physical resurrection has been seen as an important safeguard of this principle (despite the extreme difficulty of giving any precise meaning to that doctrine). What I am proposing simply takes this one stage further. Not salvation *from* this world, nor even salvation *of* this world (in the sense of its transfer lock-stock-and-barrel to some better place) but salvation *in* this world and *for* this world.. And the life-loving, life-affirming character who is one of the faces of Jesus in the Gospels, is a worthy focus of such a view on life.

The uniqueness of Jesus

Many will be concerned that by this approach we lose the claim to the uniqueness of Jesus, but that is in fact a gain. One of the great challenges to the church today is the existence of other faiths on our doorstep. Is it possible to affirm our own tradition without denying theirs? The claim to Christian uniqueness hampers genuine dialogue and if we have found a legitimate form of Christianity which avoids this problem, so much the better.

I sometimes put the question this way: Jews, Christians and Muslims all claim to worship the God of Abraham. Yet Christians say they worship God who is a holy trinity while the other two faiths deny this doctrine. Which then is more misleading: to say that we all worship the same God, or that we worship different Gods? World peace in the next century could depend upon finding the right answer to that question. If we believed there were an actual being 'out there' called God, then it would make sense — and indeed be essential — to ask which of the many versions of God is closest to the truth. Only one could be right. But if we admit that the religions (and the branches within each one) are parallel human developments, and each has created its own God, with some common elements and some independent ones, then it is much easier to be positive about all of them. We are not forced to call one right and another wrong, any more than we do with traditions of, say, art.

A familiar parable (attempting to allow some descriptive truth to all the faiths) likens the world religions to a number of blind men feeling the different parts of an elephant and each bringing his own contribution to the whole picture. On our view, a better analogy would be a number of people looking at clouds changing shape in the sky and saying how the different shapes appeared to them. In this second case there is no absolute truth by which the different offerings can be judged. Each carries its own truth. Central to our Christian humanist picture will be the idea that in Jesus the ultimate value of all human life is affirmed. 'God in Christ' will come to mean that Jesus provides a unique focus for all human ideals, but not in a way which denies the other religious traditions.