

# What will happen to God?

## Part II

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### **This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased**

These are famous words attributed to the Father, who, as the Synoptic Gospels record, pronounced them at the moment when the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus immediately after his baptism. The event is also recorded in the Fourth Gospel, but there we are told only that John the Baptist bore witness to the fact that Jesus was the Son of God. John's relative reticence is an argument in favour of granting him priority over the Synoptic account because it is so much less expansive on the subject of these extraordinary happenings. At the same time, John's account confirms that there is an important link between the Baptism of Jesus and the revelation that he is the Son of God.

Students of early Church history may recall that Paul of Samosata was condemned at a Synod of Antioch in 268, apparently because he believed that the Baptism of Jesus was the point at which God adopted Jesus of Nazareth as his Son. The descent of the Holy Spirit, according to Paul's interpretation, was the seal which God put on this new relationship into which Jesus had entered. It is not difficult, of course, to see why Paul of Samosata should have fallen into this particular error. Paul was a firm believer in baptismal regeneration, and it seemed to him to be only logical that Jesus' baptism should have the same effect on him as it does on us. Jesus was therefore a man like us who acquired eternal life in the same way we do, by baptism. His uniqueness lay only in the fact that as a man he had never sinned, and therefore had earned the special grace which God had bestowed on him, whereas we are dependent on his mercy for forgiveness. Empowered by this grace, Jesus was able to live the kind of life and die the kind of death which would attract many more sons to glory, as they sought to experience the same grace of adoption which was first revealed in Jesus.

It would not really be worth mentioning this rather strange heresy were it not for the fact that a curious version of it survives, and even flourishes, in academic circles today. Very numerous are the scholars, theologians and bishops who believe that the uniqueness of Christ consists mainly of the fact that he introduced mankind to a new type of religious understanding and experience. Usually this belief is coupled with the statement that Jesus himself drew nearer to God than any man before him or since, though Dennis Nineham, writing

in the Epilogue to that once-notorious symposium, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, at least had the honesty to say that this assertion did not follow logically from the former, and might still not be true. As he pointed out, there were many things about the teaching of Jesus—his views on hell, for example—which his heavenly Father could not have been well-pleased about, and we may legitimately wonder whether Jesus' rather cramped moral vision has not been superseded by quite ordinary people—Dennis Nineham, for example—in our own time.

This modern form of adoptionism which, if pressed to its logical conclusion, would dissolve historical Christianity into contemporary spirituality, and remove the few remaining links between the Person of Jesus Christ and the modern Church, is a danger far greater than anything ever imagined by the likes of Paul of Samosata. We must combat it at the most fundamental level if we hope to survive as a witnessing community of believers in our modern world. How can we do this?

We ought, I think, to begin with the Gospel account of the Baptism of Jesus, even though modern adoptionism has generally abandoned this starting-point in favour of the so-called 'Easter event'. According to the Fourth Gospel, when John the Baptist saw Jesus coming, he cried out: 'Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world'. This verse, which may be familiar in what seems to be a more appropriate, but which is in fact a less Biblical, sacramental context, makes a very clear statement about who Jesus is in relation to the rite of Baptism. It is my belief that the sacraments are intended as a means of preaching the Gospel. This belief of mine, is remarkably borne out in this verse, because John recognises immediately that his baptism is inapplicable to Jesus; indeed, he realises that the shoe, which he is unworthy to unloose, is really on the other foot—he is the one who ought to be receiving baptism from Jesus, not the other way round.

The Fourth Gospel is so reticent at this point that it does not even say that John baptized Jesus; for this we must turn to the Synoptic Gospels which mention the same details, more or less, and also stress John's unwillingness to baptize the Son of God. Jesus, as Matthew records the event (3:15), agreed with John's estimate of the situation but pressed him for baptism in order that he might be seen to fulfil all righteousness. Since there was no righteousness for Jesus himself to fulfil, this must be a reference to his atoning work as the Lamb of God, who became sin for us that we might be set free from all sin. The Baptism of Jesus is therefore both the beginning and the summary of his teaching message—that he had become a man on earth in order that we might be set free to reign with him in heaven. Moreover, by this act, Jesus revealed the meaning of John's baptism for repentance, which would find its fulfilment in the baptism

of blood at Calvary.

We are now in a position to understand, I think, that the extraordinary events which followed the Baptism of Jesus cannot be dissociated from the unique conditions which preceded it—indeed, which would have *prevented* it, had Jesus not intervened. It was precisely when Jesus demonstrated by this act who he really was and what he had come to do that the heavens were opened and the barrier separating earth from heaven was visibly and audibly penetrated. That the result should be the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of the dove of pure sacrifice and by the voice of the invisible Father is only to be expected, because where the Atonement is preached, there the Trinity is also revealed. The Atonement is after all, a work of the Son of God *inside* the trinitarian Godhead; it is a sacrifice presented to the Father, the effects of which are then brought to us by the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost—no longer the spotless dove, but tongues of fire to cleanse and renew the spirit of each believer. In the baptism of Jesus then, we are given a foretaste of the glory of heaven—we are given, in short, a revelation of God.

From what the Gospels record, it must therefore be obvious that the Baptism of Jesus was in no sense the adoption of man into the Godhead, nor did it make the slightest difference to the relationship which the Son already enjoyed with his Father. The voice from heaven was not *establishing* the Sonship of Christ, but merely *revealing* it to the world, and *confirming* that the pattern of Incarnation was the one the Father had approved for the fulfilment of his plan. For although the Baptism of Jesus is tied to the fact that he is Son of God, we must never forget that it was in the human nature which he had assumed that this Son of God was baptized and commended by the Father.

There is another ancient heresy, also called adoptionism, but associated with Elipandus of Toledo, an eighth-century Spanish bishop and his colleague Felix of Urgel who wanted to argue that though Christ was Son of God in his divine nature, he was only an adopted son in his human nature, a belief which effectively reduced the latter to an optional extra. No doubt Elipandus and Felix, as mediaeval male chauvinists, would have been shocked to see the female Christ crucified which was recently on display in the Episcopalian cathedral in New York, but in principle there is no reason why they should have been. Indeed, the idea of a female Christ is very prominent in mediaeval mystical literature, a genre which reflects a type of experience in which the physical world was most devalued.

Elipandus and Felix were propounding a doctrine which ultimately denied the historicity of the Incarnation because it *divided* the unity of the Person of Christ manifested in his two natures. Once that happened, once it was claimed that the term 'Son of God' did not

really apply to the humanity of Jesus—or applied only in the sense in which it applies to us—the way was opened for the spread of a purely mystical, non-historical religion. That is precisely what happened!

Today, we are familiar with this same process which we see developing all around us. Having demythologised the God-out-there, we are now remythologising the man-down-here. Nor should we be surprised that the remythologisation involves a considerable dose of the feminine. For having disposed of the agent of creation, who is the cosmic Christ of Colossians 1:16–17, we are driven inexorably towards the agent of procreation, and Christ becomes a woman as he did in mediaeval mysticism. The late John Robinson was not wrong when he said that sexual intercourse was the modern form of Holy Communion and we must not be surprised if our secularist theologians try to elevate it to the level of God himself.

Yet the Baptism of Jesus reminds us that God the Father was well-pleased with the historical incarnation of Jesus as a male, and in this form recognised him as his Son. I suggest that although the maleness of Jesus has only limited significance with respect to his relationship with his Father, it has great importance with regard to his relationship with us—an importance moreover, which is clearly tied in the New Testament to the covenant relationship with man which God established in the Garden of Eden.

On the subject of the inner relations of the Godhead, I do not think it matters greatly whether the Second Person of the Trinity is described as a Son or Daughter as far as the basic relationship of inheritance is concerned. That this is the case is acknowledged by Paul, supposedly the patron saint of male chauvinists, when he argues that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Galations 3:28). This much abused verse is clearly explained by what follows, that if we are Christ's, we are Abraham's offspring—in other words, as he goes on to add, we are heirs according to the promise. In the kingdom of heaven, a daughter inherits on the same basis as a son, and this glorious fact—which many Jews of Paul's day were inclined to doubt—is clearly acknowledged by the Apostle. I therefore submit that as far as the inheritance is concerned, it does not matter whether we think of Christ as male or female.

The rub in this argument is that inheritance is not the only consideration when we come to examine the Person of Christ. If it were, there would be no difference at all between us and him, and we would all be standing before God in perfect equality without needing Jesus as our Mediator in the presence of the Father. It is in his mediatorial rôle that the maleness of the Son viz.-à-viz. the Father becomes significant. It is not his status as heir, but his work as mediator, which determines his sex. From the human standpoint, there is no reason why we cannot have a female Mediatrix—the Roman Catholics have said as much of the Virgin Mary, and they are

at least as chauvinistic as any Protestant! Here the maleness of the Son is important, not in relation to us, but in relation to the Father. It guarantees his absolute identity with the Father in his capacity as the Father's representative on earth. If Jesus Christ is to be a revelation of the Father, then it is important that he *correspond* to him, and not that he *complement* him, which is what a female Christ would logically do. In this respect, the gender of Jesus is not irrelevant to his mission, and we must be careful to treat it with the utmost seriousness.

However, I do not want to dwell on this point, because I think that it is secondary to the main issue. Sexuality is a human trait, applied only by analogy to the divine, and it is in the human nature of Jesus as the *incarnate* Son of God that we must look for the real significance of his maleness. The Son of God's entry into the covenant scheme of redemption is both dramatic and radical. Jesus openly claimed to be greater than Moses and greater even than Abraham, from whom the Jews derived their special title as the chosen people. The teaching of Paul makes it plain on more than one occasion that in covenant terms, Jesus takes the place of no less a figure than Adam himself, so that all discussion concerning him is of direct relevance not only to the Jews but to the entire human race. Nor can it be said that Paul thinks of Adam mainly as a mythological, or representative symbol for mankind in general. On the contrary, more than once he makes statements and assumptions which clearly demonstrate that he thought of Adam as a historical person, the literal ancestor of the human race, in association with the woman Eve, who was taken out of his side and became his wife, thereby establishing the principle that man and wife are one flesh in the sight of God.

What is more, Paul conceives of our relationship to Christ in a way which parallels our relationship with *Adam*, not our relationship with the Father. (I use the word parallel in this context in talking primarily of the structure, or framework of the relationship rather than of its content.) This parallelism is clearest in 1 Corinthians 15:22 where the similarity and difference are most clearly stated: 'For as in Adam all die, *even so* in Christ shall all be made alive'. The parallel is indicated by the words *even so*; an identical relationship produces diametrically opposite results because the second Adam obeyed where the first Adam disobeyed the Father's commands. We have inherited the disobedience by nature; we are granted obedience by grace in faith, but either way we trace our inheritance to Adam—first and second, old and new.

Now in performing this work of redemption, it should never be thought that Christ improved on Adam's status as a human being. He did not himself possess a human nature which was superior to Adam's, nor is there any indication that he widened the scope of Adam's competence as this was given to him at creation. The central

difference between the two men is that in Christ we have received eternal life, which was denied to Adam after he had chosen to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But nowhere does the New Testament suggest that the pattern of human relationships established by God at the creation of the first Adam has been in any way altered by the appearance of the second Adam—on the contrary, it would appear that this basic pattern has been reaffirmed, precisely by the identification of Christ with the first Adam. This has the most serious consequences for human relationships, both as we live with each other and as we relate to the human nature of Christ. The New Testament is not slow to point this out.

The first consequence is the relationship of authority which in the New Testament is clearly delineated as Father → Son → male → female. The male is put over the female on the ground that Adam was created first and that Eve derives both her being and her glory from him. This relationship cannot be overturned on earth any more than the relationship of Father and Son can be overturned in heaven. Nor does it in any way affect the sensitive issue of equality, which reigns in both worlds. The female is equal to the male but she does not have authority over him; just as the Son is equal to the Father but does not have authority over him. Authority is not a mark of superiority but of service, and those to whom it has been given are always, as a direct consequence, called to fulfil a corresponding responsibility which must be carried out if the whole system is to function as originally intended.

Furthermore, it can be said that the New Testament pattern of authority can be applied only when the whole Person is involved, when the relationship is therefore essentially personal rather than impersonal, or formal. This means that there is nothing in Scripture to prevent a woman from occupying the very highest positions of authority in those cases where it is the position rather than the person to which obedience is due. Like the English Reformers, we owe allegiance to a Queen, who in our case has been served also by a woman Prime Minister. However, our position with respect to them is governed not by their persons but by their offices. On the day she gives up office Mrs. Thatcher once again becomes an ordinary citizen, and any deference to her will arise out of respect for her past office only. The same would be true of the Queen should she ever decide to abdicate. *A fortiori* the same conditions apply in places of work when the employer is a woman—it is the office, not the person which commands our loyalty, just as it is an office, and not our persons which we give in exchange. The Bible warns us categorically not to put our citizenship in the place of God, and the same must be true of any other secular activity. If these things engage the whole of our being, then we will have turned them into idols and will incur a far more serious fate than anything meted out to a mere male chauvinist.

There are however, relationships on earth in which the whole of our being is engaged, and in these, where the personal element dominates over the official, or impersonal, type of service, the headship of the male under Christ must be respected. In the Bible, relationships of this kind are to be found in the Church and in the family. The analogy between spiritual and married life is well-known but it is important to remember just how significant it is. Ephesians 5, in particular, makes it very plain that the relationship of a husband to his wife is directly analogous to that of Christ and the Church. Paul could not be more transparent in his insistence on the vital link between authority and responsibility. A man is to serve his wife as Christ served the Church—if necessary, by giving his life for her. Who could even begin to suppose that these are the words of a male chauvinist?

Yet, of course, at the same time, Paul is equally firm in telling the wife to respect the husband who has been set over her in exactly the same way as Christ has been set over the Church. Denial of male chauvinism does not entail a lapse into feminism, which is really only the reverse of the same coin. Rather it demands striking a balance in which the peculiar grace given to both male and female will be demonstrated to best advantage.

This grace may be explained as follows. To the male is given the grace of submission to Christ so that he may represent the Son of God in his relationship with the female just as the Son of God himself represents the Father. This is not easy, and without the grace of God working in the heart of the male, bringing him into submission to Christ, it is hard to see how things can avoid going horribly wrong. An unbelieving husband, or a Christian not submitted in this respect to Christ—and therefore really worse than an unbeliever—is a tragedy for any Christian woman, and when we assert the teaching of Scripture on this point we must not blind ourselves to the sad reality which makes that teaching so hard for many women to bear.

The peculiar grace of the female which comes from submission both to Christ and to the male is security—the peculiar freedom which enables her to develop her many gifts in the knowledge that she is protected both in heaven and on earth. God knows that she is more vulnerable than the male, and so has provided the male for her safety and support. But lest I leave a false picture of the helpless female, God also knows that paradoxically the male, though stronger in some ways, is most vulnerable to the female, because she is his missing side. Thus it is necessary for the woman to submit to the man in order for *his* security to be guaranteed. What a difference there would have been in the Garden of Eden if Eve had deferred to Adam's judgment instead of leading him into the serpent's temptation! The ancient story is not a myth; it contains a profound truth which Paul was determined to uphold both in the family, and in

the life of the Church.

It is when we come to the latter that most of our problems arise. Two questions in particular raise their heads from time to time. The first concerns the single person, especially the single woman, whom many people think belongs in a different category to her married sister. The second concerns the vexed question of ordination, and the many complications which arise from it.

The argument that the single woman is different from the married one in relation to the male is, I think, a false one. The relationship of marriage is the most intense form of male–female relationships, but both the Hebrew and the Greek languages warn us against making any rigid distinction here between the married and the unmarried state. It is certainly true that we over-emphasise this distinction in our own way of life—to the mutual impoverishment of married and single alike—but the Bible does not share our particular hang-ups about this. Paul lodged with Priscilla and Aquila for a considerable period of time without any noticeable friction, and the main reasons, though the New Testament is silent on this point, must be that Paul respected Priscilla's submission to Aquila, and did not simply treat her as another man, and that Priscilla and Aquila were not so wrapped up in themselves as to be unable to digest their rather extraordinary house guest. No man, and certainly no clergyman, should ever deal with another man's wife, or with a woman other than his own wife at a deeply personal level without being absolutely certain that both he and she are fully respecting their obligations to the opposite sex—in particular, their respective marriage vows. There is no reason to exclude single people from this, and the Biblical norms ought to apply in the appropriate way to all relations between the sexes. In pastoral ministry, what is wrong for a married woman, or man, is equally wrong for their single counterparts—and vice versa.

All this comes to a head when we come to the second question and raise the delicate matter of ordination. Here there is an overlap of two types of relationship which needs to be understood if clashes are to be avoided. For the ordained ministry of the Church, as it really exists—not as some theorists would like it to be—contains both pastoral/personal and administrative/official aspects, with boundary lines between them which are often far from clear. In a matter like the celebration of the Eucharist, for example, the whole question of whether women are acceptable celebrants may well turn on the prior question of whether we see this as a personal or as an official responsibility—whether the celebrant is standing in for Christ, or whether he is merely performing a function which is basically administrative and impersonal.

The possibilities for confusion are particularly great within the Anglican Communion, and here we must try to see where the nettle is before we attempt to grasp it. On the one hand, we have preserved



the threefold order of the ancient Church, which I suppose must count as a major achievement at a time when we seem ready to sacrifice virtually everything else which we have inherited in the deposit of faith. On the other hand, the Church's glory is somewhat tarnished by the fact that not one of these orders now functions in the way in which it was originally conceived. The first and most universal order now scarcely functions at all and is further confused by the recent admission of women. It is obvious that we cannot really begin to discuss the question until some moves are made towards realigning the existing orders along New Testament principles. The bishop would then be the incumbent, the presbyters his ministerial team, and the deacons a mixture of stipendiary and non-stipendiary paid workers: but what scope there is for reform must surely be inhibited by the admission of women in advance of any attempt to define the concept of ordination.

If such a re-ordering could be achieved, the diaconate would clearly be a mainly administrative order, and therefore open to men and women equally. In case you have forgotten, the Church of England was once a pioneer in women's ministry, giving administrative rôles far superior to anything enjoyed by a priest or even by most bishops. Long before Queen Elizabeth I was recognised as its Supreme Governor, the Church of England had produced an army of formidable abbesses who controlled not only their own monasteries and the priests called to serve them, but also governed any number of parishes which were tied to the abbeys for their support. Their legacy can be found up and down the country in such names as St. Ebbe, St. Werbergh, St. Etheldreda and everyone's favourite, St. Sexburga, whose lone benefice in the Isle of Sheppey has now been united with St. Mary the Virgin and, believe it or not, the Parish of St. Peter, Halfway! Nor was St. Hilda a woman to be trifled with, and even kings might find themselves obliged to do her bidding. Here there is surely a useful tradition which could easily be revived as a permanent diaconate, and in the process free the other orders for the work more properly entrusted to them. This was the motive which prompted the Apostles to establish the diaconate in the first place, and there seems to be no good reason why a church even more overburdened with administration than they were should not follow their example.

The New Testament distinction between bishops and elders is unclear, and the two may well have been different names for the same office, but in practice almost all churches recognise somebody as *primus inter pares*, and there seems to be no good reason why this should not be properly admitted and recognised. But bishops and elders are alike in the most important respect, for the rôle proper to them is not administrative at all. Rather, it is pastoral in the fullest sense of that term, and we find that we have moved from the realm of the official and basically impersonal to the realm of the most intensely

personal, so that the question of sexual distinctions in the service of Christ must be raised once more. The New Testament does not draw a rigid distinction between deacons and other types of ministry—Paul, after all, behaved like a deacon when he collected money for the Church at Jerusalem, and Philip the Deacon preached the Gospel like an apostle—but it does draw a firm line between men and women when it comes to the Ministry of the Word.

Here, of course, the confusion in Anglicanism is as great as it is over holy orders. Our Reformers believed that the sacraments were part of the Ministry of the Word, not that the Word was a warm-up for the Ministry of the Sacrament. We have so lost this perspective as a church that women deacons, deaconesses and other women are licensed to preach—though not to celebrate the Eucharist—whilst the *Alternative Service Book* has for the first time made it legal to celebrate Holy Communion without preaching a sermon! In many churches where there is more than one ordained priest—the separation is further reinforced by a division of labour between vicar and curate; ‘if you preach, I’ll celebrate’, and *vice versa*!

None of this makes it easy to establish what the principles are which ought to govern these key ministerial activities, but I would like to make the attempt. It seems to me that the key principle in Christian ministry is the Gospel, which we as ministers are required to proclaim by preaching the Word and by presiding at the Lord’s Table, where we show forth his atoning death till He come. It might be possible to argue, as many Roman Catholics do, that in performing these activities we are imitating Christ even to the point of standing in his place. I think that there is more force in this argument than many Protestants are willing to admit, though we must insist that our ministry merely *represents*, and does not *replace* the work of Christ. Just as we do not preach another Gospel, so we do not offer another sacrifice—or even extend the force of the one already made. It is this emphasis which alienates Protestant sympathies and we must, quite rightly, eschew any such pretensions.

Nevertheless, I think that the main argument in favour of an all-male ministry at this point must rest ultimately on a rather different basis. This basis is the relationship which we have with Christ on the basis of his ascension and his *present* mediatorial work at the right hand of God the Father. Talk of the imitation of Christ is bound to refer primarily to his earthly ministry and to lead inevitably to Calvary—to the repetition or re-presentation of the one sacrifice once offered. Even if that is not intended, it is the logical result of such an emphasis. We on the other hand, must relate in our ministry to what Christ is doing now, and to the commission which he has given to us. I have already indicated that I believe that the mediatorial rôle of Christ requires maleness more than other aspects of his work, and it is in the light of this that the preacher is called to his task. If it were

not so, preaching would be little more than lecturing on a particular theme from Ancient History, with nothing but a moral application for today.

But preaching is more than this—it is the reminder to the Church that the Gospel message is alive and applicable today—that the work of the mediator has not ceased. We no longer see him, but we see those whom he has sent, and in them we learn what it is to be like Christ. In other words, the minister today is called to represent Christ in his teaching and in his behaviour. If this sounds shocking or impossible, read the New Testament: ‘be ministers of *me*’, says Paul, ‘even as I am of Christ’. How can the Apostle say such a thing? How can he dare to say that it has been given to him to fulfil in his body the sufferings of the Lord Jesus? Where is the link, the common measure between what Jesus suffered and what Paul—or you and I—are called to endure? These things cannot be understood unless we are prepared to accept that the minister of God is called to exercise an authority for service in the Church which is directly representative of the authority for service exercised by Christ—an authority for service which Jesus himself entrusted to his disciples shortly before he ascended into heaven. The man who would rule the Church must have towards it the love which Christ has for his Bride—the same love, in fact, as the husband is called to show to the wife. In the Church, as in the home, there is a pattern and an order of responsibility which must be assumed if the Gospel of Christ is to be faithfully proclaimed.

We may appear, in this examination of male and female, of ordination and marriage, to have travelled a long way from the Baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. But in reality we have been doing no more than explore some of the deeper implications of that event for the confession which we make of Christ and the way in which the principles of that confession are worked out in everyday life. Jesus of Nazareth was not merely a particularly gifted prophet or rabbi, he was the Revelation of God come down to earth. The fact that God chose to reveal himself in human form has always been a source of scandal, and it continues to be a major point of division between Christians and adherents of other monotheistic religions, with whom we appear on the surface to have so much in common.

The form of humanity which the Son of God adopted was specific and particular, but it conformed in every detail with the demands of the covenant promises made in the Old Testament and the requirement that in Christ the world should see a true representation of God the Father. As Christians, we have been called to have a share in that work of revelation, not by repeating or adding what Christ has done, but by reflecting it in our teaching and in the ordering of our lives.

In many ways I believe that so much of the identity crisis which has

afflicted the modern Church is due to the fact that we have ceased to identify Christ in his humanity, that we have ceased to see in him the authentic revelation of the eternal God. Instead, we have conceived of him in what are primarily functional terms. I do not think it matters greatly whether our functionalism is liberal or conservative, whether we think of him as the founder of a new religious consciousness or as the Saviour of a sinful mankind. At the heart of the problem lies a fundamentally mistaken attitude to the whole question of the identity of Jesus.

When John the Baptist hailed him on the banks of the Jordan, he did not hesitate to acclaim him as the Lamb of God, who would take away the sins of the world. Today I think we are inclined to see this mainly as a sort of prophecy—a forewarning of the atonement at Calvary. Without in any way wishing to deny or even to minimize that aspect of the matter, I would like to submit to you the suggestion that John's acclamation should be read, as it is written, in the present tense. The earthly ministry of Jesus was not a preparation for a future event, but a fulfilment of past promises. His appearance meant that the Kingdom of God had arrived among men. When he spoke, the demons fled in fear. When he gave the word, the sick were healed, the handicapped were restored, the dead were raised to life. He even sent his disciples out to preach and to baptize *before* his death and resurrection.

We cannot now go back to that time as if the key events of Easter and Pentecost had never happened—the mistake which, I have already remarked, is characteristic of some Roman Catholic theology. But although we cannot turn back the clock, we can I think learn a very important lesson about our own faith from the way in which Jesus taught his disciples. Jesus always discouraged attempts to appeal to his miracles, and even went so far as to suggest that the mentality which looks for signs and works is virtually condemned to rot in unbelief. What Jesus pointed men to was not what he did, but what he said, because what he said revealed and explained who he was. The high points of the Gospel narratives are those at which the confession of Jesus is most loud and clear—at his Baptism, at Peter's confession, at the Mount of Transfiguration. At these points the veil is lifted and we see the Son of God—not, note, the resurrected and ascended Son, but the Son still incarnate in our flesh and blood—revealed in his true glory, in his true identity.

And here of course, we come to the heart of the matter. When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, says John, we beheld not his works, not what he has done for us, but his glory. The works are essential—without them we would not be here today, and we would have no assurance of forgiveness or of eternal life. They are necessary, but more fundamental than works and what puts them in context, is the glory, the identity of the Son of God on earth. John the

Baptist saw it and confessed, and from that moment on it has been the very hallmark of authentic Christian faith. Jesus said that we would do greater works than he had done, but we do not believe that this means that we shall work out a better salvation for us than the one he has provided. Why not? Because it is the Person and presence of Christ, dwelling in us now by the Holy Spirit, which makes such works possible. Without him, we can do nothing. Knowing who Jesus is is more fundamental than recognising what he has done. Knowing who he is means living in a personal relationship with him—not merely referring to him as a key historical figure in the onward march of faith. Knowing who he is gives us the key for understanding how his work in the past on earth, in the present in Heaven, relates to us and can be applied to us. John the Baptist did not wait until *after* the Resurrection to proclaim Jesus as the Lamb of God; he acknowledged him when he *met* him, and entered into that understanding and that relationship with him *before* he had done anything at all!

By concentrating, as we tend to do, on the works of Jesus rather than on his Person, we tend to push this living relationship into the background, and reject his presence in our lives. We are embarrassed to think that we are ambassadors of Christ, called to represent him in an unbelieving world. People who cannot see *Him* can and do see *us*. What is more, all too often they judge his claims by what they see and hear in us. The ministry is a sacred calling, a fearful vocation, because it lays upon us demands which were laid only on Christ. So much of the militant feminism and the tolerance which has now become indifference and even pride in the number of heresies we can contain under the umbrella of a single church—so much of this can be laid squarely at the door of those men who have been called to serve Christ, to take up their cross and follow Him and who have shirked their awesome responsibility. Like Jeremiah, they have rejected God's call out of fear; like Elijah they have run away and thought up a thousand good excuses for not doing what they have been called to do.

I must confess that I have seen so much of this that now when I hear a vicar announce that we will have a time of praise and sharing instead of a sermon, I assume he has ducked out of his preaching responsibilities. When I hear clergy glow with enthusiasm about every member ministry, I suspect that they are looking for yet another impeccable excuse for doing nothing themselves. Now I know that these thoughts are exaggerated and unfair, and I do not want to criticise unduly, but there is enough truth in them to make me worried.

And then there is the problem of clerical marriage. Paul makes no bones about it—he prefers celibacy as the best way to be free to serve God. We are told, not that celibacy is a rule, but that those who are married should live as though they were not. Jesus, again, provides us

with an example which few would even dare to acknowledge—let alone imitate. And yet, what do we see when we look around us? Potentially good men, weighed down by nagging wives and children who expect that if Daddy is at home he is available for their exclusive use. We see widespread marriage breakdown—clergymen are now well above the national average in this respect. And why? Because the Church has ducked the issue! It has encouraged family life as the clerical norm without ever thinking about what this means in the social context of our time or of the terrible cost involved. In this respect, as in so many others, we are afraid to be imitators of Christ, afraid to assume our responsibilities, content merely to drift along with the secular tide and make shipwreck of ourselves on the same reefs where a generation ago you would have found only Hollywood film stars and other immoral persons.

Now I do not want to go to an unbiblical and impractical extreme; there is obviously a place for clerical marriage, just as there is for celibacy, and both are found in the New Testament. The burden of my complaint is not that—it is rather that we have acquiesced in a secular way of thinking about these matters which shows no understanding whatever of the imitation of Christ. We have adopted an ethic of self-fulfilment, even to the point of having therapy sessions and enrichment weekends for both marrieds and singles, when the true message of the incarnate Christ is one of self-denial. He who was rich beyond all splendour—all for love's sake became *poor*! He who thought it not robbery to count himself equal with God, emptied himself and became a servant for our sakes. This is the Jesus who walked the hills of Galilee and who now reigns in glory at the Father's right hand. This is the Jesus who told his disciples that 'He who has seen me, has seen the Father!' He gave up what he was entitled to in order to share his riches with us. Alas! How many of us have ever really seen *him* as he truly is? May God grant us the grace to see through the mist and mystifications of our own unbelieving age that we too might see with John, that Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, and recognize in him that beloved Son, in whom the Father is well-pleased.

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