

THE FIRST-BORN OF ALL CREATION

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How to describe who Christ was, what he was and what he had done was an invitation to the preaching, liturgy and reflection of the New Testament Church. 'Who is this...'¹ was a natural cry of admiration at the wonder-worker's power over a storm on the lake. The fact that it belonged to Yahweh to control nature's forces could not escape the reflection of the writer of the story, and this itself was more than a hint as to how the question *Who?* should be answered in the mind of the faithful believer. And, as he would hear or read in the gospel story, Christ had, on the occasion when he quelled the storm, made an explicit appeal to faith.

The names and titles which were to be given to Christ are partial attempts to answer the question *Who?* They were not far to seek and arose easily in the conscious faith of a community already breathing a religious atmosphere. In the event one answer to the question was insufficient and the New Testament did not even confine itself to one type of answer. In the numerous attempts to describe the same mystery there are undoubted variations of emphasis. Though there is only one answer to the question 'Who is this . . .' and although we must hold that there can only be one basic Christian Christology, the appearance in the New Testament of several answers and even of an apparent plurality of Christologies is undeniable. The New Testament is also aware of wrong answers to the basic question, and the first epistle of St. John is explicit in its rejection of the pre-Gnostic Christology of Cerinthus. But what variation within the bounds of orthodoxy remains! The value for spiritual reflection of sheer variety in the expression of a divine mystery is inestimable. To see Christ variously, as the gospels saw him, in the guise of Prophet, Suffering Servant, Messiah, Son of Man, is to be able to partake of the riches of the divine mystery in our own developing spiritual insight. And this is true, too, if we

¹ Mk 4, 41.

meditate with an eye on scriptural contexts upon such titles and comparisons as Lord, Word, Second Adam, High Priest, even Alpha and Omega.

Thus, while there is only one mystery, every effort to express it means a special context from Scripture, or liturgical practice or even from philosophy. It is proposed here to see something of the context and meaning of the Firstborn title which occurs in the Christ-hymn of the Epistle to the Colossians.¹ This has been a text dear to the teaching of the Church since its origin. The full history of the usage and interpretation of the title 'Firstborn of all creation' has not yet been written. Whether the Firstborn referred to the eternal and pre-existent Word which assumed human nature, or whether this title referred to the Incarnate Christ is a subject upon which patristic tradition was divided. One line of interpretation, begun by Justin, thought that the title must have reference to the pre-existent Word, whereas the tradition which took its rise in anti-Arian reaction² considered that the Firstborn title of Christ belonged to the *economy* of the Incarnate Son. For purposes of this Christological meditation it will be assumed that this latter position can be justified exegetically.³ And first of all we must see something of the antecedents of the arresting title 'Firstborn of all creation'.

1

The firstborn, in the mind of the Old Testament, was the issue of the Father's first strength;⁴ or from the standpoint of the Mother it is the offspring which first opened the womb. It would seem that the prior relation was between the favoured child and his parents.

¹ Col 1, 15 ff.

² Marcellus of Ancyra, whose views were to be modified by Athanasius and so popularized.

³ If this were the place to establish an exegesis of Col 1, 15 we should try to show that the passage contains an adaptation of a Christ-hymn made by St. Paul for the reassurance of the Colossians, and so a reference to the Firstborn in the economy of the Redemption is correct; yet we have to agree that the role of Wisdom in creation (described in Prov 8, 22) did impress the author in such a way that the same role is ascribed to Christ. But this is done without intending a formal identification of *Christ-Wisdom* with *Christ-Firstborn*. It should be insisted that the hymn shows two aspects of the work of Christ. The transcendent pre-eminence of Christ is attributed on the one hand to his special relation with his Father, and on the other to the special relationship he has with a universe of beings whose creation and subsistence depend upon himself. It must also be insisted that the vocabulary, context and literary associations are strongly soteriological. The *Firstborn* has a role in creation and the Pauline context of the cosmic role of Christ is one which overlaps our concept of creation and relates him to redemption as well.

⁴ Gen 49, 3; Deut 21, 17.

Law and custom gave privileges and honours. Such a son would be the principal heir and the male firstborn was sacred and would have to be redeemed. In addition, the firstborn of every beast was sacred to Yahweh; and rules of redemption and inheritance regarding the firstborn are to be found in the Mishnah.¹

The primogeniture of the firstborn gives a kind of *potestas* over the family. There is a subjection of the brethren to the firstborn which is part of his right, as we know from Isaac's benediction 'Be thou lord of thy brethren, and let thy mother's children bow down before thee'.² Nor is it in a father's power to transfer the power of primogeniture.³

This favoured position of the firstborn is also expressed by names of strongly messianic import like Son and Lamb of God. The Beloved or Beloved Son is what Christ is called by the voice in the theophany.⁴ And the Mishnah brings out the connexion between the titles of Firstborn and Beloved, since such gifts of God as the Torah, Israel and the Messiah himself are the Firstborn of Yahweh in just the sense of their being 'the beloved' or sons of predilection.⁵

The Beloved who is unique and the servant of Yahweh is to be a victorious Messiah destined to bring hope even to the Gentiles. The basis of this doctrine taught by Isaias⁶ is quoted by Matthew⁷ to show its fulfilment in Christ who is God's chosen servant. And God's chosen servant is the chosen servant not for himself only but for his people and with his people. The Beloved used of Christ in this sense evidently summed up much thought by Christians about their Master, for it finds its place in the rhythmic hymn of blessing which is part of the introduction to Ephesians: 'in love he predestined us . . . to be his sons . . . unto the praise of the glory of his grace . . . in the Beloved.'⁸ This hymn of blessing should be compared with the Christ-hymn in Colossians⁹ in which the Firstborn title is embedded. It is a further strophic meditation on the primacy of Christ placing this time the themes of redemption and vocation

¹ The authoritative collection of the Jewish Oral Law. Its authority rests on the view that God gave to Moses on Sinai oral as well as written Law.

² Gen 27, 29.

³ Deut 21, 15 shows that in the case of a man with two wives, when the firstborn child is by the woman he no longer loves, he has no power to invest with the privilege of primogeniture the firstborn of the woman he does love. A double position belongs to the son of the wife he dislikes because he is the *first* of the children.

⁴ Mk 1, 11.

⁵ See the material in Strack-Billebeck on Rom 8, 29 (*Komm.* III, pp. 256-8).

⁶ Isai 42, 1-4.

⁷ Mt 12, 18-21.

⁸ Eph 1, 3-14.

⁹ Col 1, 15 ff.

before the mention of creation. The primacy of Christ in virtue of his primogeniture, while it is still clearly a primacy over the cosmic 'all', is yet placed against a more intimate background of the Christian family: 'he destined us to be his sons'. The association of the Firstborn and the Beloved is not lost in the Colossian hymn either when it appears as 'Son of his love'.¹

2

Thus, while the appeal to Christ as 'Beloved' brings out his unique relationship with God together with the family-relationship that he has with us, the title Firstborn underlines the human solidarity we have with Christ. He is the same as we are and the Pauline corpus reflects upon this fact;² 'this is true of him since he is in every way like ourselves, short of sin'.³ So the relationship between the Firstborn and his brethren can be explored, and it will be found to be vital and mysterious. Here in fact is the distinctively Christian advance: the use of a biblical phrase which is traditional now becomes an affectionate one, but it looks out upon a wider range. For the fact that Israel was God's Firstborn was already a commonplace. But as such its privileges were to be exclusive, merely for itself. The exclusiveness is clear in the touching *fin de siècle* messianism of the fourth book of Esdras: 'we, thy people whom thou hast called thy firstborn, thy only begotten, thy beloved are given up into their hands. If the world has indeed been created for our sakes why do we not enter into possession of our world? How long shall this endure?'⁴

But Christian prayer and reflection has its answer to this almost natural complaint.⁵ It is Christ who is of himself unique and exclusive, but his people who are his brethren all share their relation to this Firstborn. For he is already related to his brethren by the effect of God's predestination which stamps them as brethren. Man,

¹ The early Church used the title of Christ appreciatively. Cf. the *Prayer for All Needs* quoted by Clement of Rome ('through his dear [or beloved] servant, Jesus Christ') in *Early Christian Prayers*, ed. A. Hamman, O.F.M., translated by Walter Mitchell (London, 1961), No. 37, p. 26. The first strophe of this prayer carries echoes of the two Pauline hymns mentioned. Fr. Hamman's admirable collection shows at a glance how much the names and titles of Jesus and acclamations to the Victor were used by the Church in prayer. The Beloved is also used in the Epistle of Barnabas (3, 6; 4, 3, 8.) and in Hermas (*Similitudes*, IX, 12, 5).

² Cp. Phil 2, 7; Heb 2, 17.

³ Heb 4, 15.

⁴ IV Esdras 6, 59.

⁵ In IV Esdras Israel is at first named as the *Firstborn* by the side of other peoples and later in the second vision as *the only one*, the uniquely chosen people (only begotten), while in the third vision Israel becomes the 'Beloved'.

in Pauline thought, having the divine vocation granted to him is to be like this Son who 'is the image of the invisible God'.¹ In the Old Testament, the fact that man is created in the image of God is mentioned only three times,² but this doctrine remained very much at work: the special similarity and relationship with God was established. But by the predestination 'to bear a nature in the image of his Son's that he should be firstborn among many brethren'³ an even more intimate relationship is established. Nor does St. Paul fail to see the completion of our destiny as brethren of Christ: from the initial vocation in the divine plan he can foresee our joint glorification with Christ.⁴

The relation of the Firstborn to his brethren, however, is at its most effective and vivid peak in our participation in the resurrection, for Christ is also 'Firstborn of the dead'.⁵ That this is Christ himself through his redemptive passion and resurrection is also a matter of simple statement in the Apocalypse. There, in the formal initial greeting, John sends his wish for grace and peace that is to come from Christ 'the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the head of the rulers of the earth'.⁶ More explicitly even 'he is risen from the dead, the first-fruits of them that sleep'.⁷ In his resurrection this Firstborn is glorified by his relation to his brethren, who are eventually to receive their participation in his resurrection of the body. Thus the formula 'Firstborn of the dead' is more than a simple statement of sovereignty. An even wider context of this primogeniture of Christ is to be found in the first part of the Christ-hymn in Colossians, where the primogeniture shows his overlordship of glory and life to be enshrined in an overlordship of the whole visible and invisible cosmos: - 'for in him were created all things . . . all creation is through him and unto him . . . he is prior to all and in him all things hold together'.⁸

3

Thus the Firstborn Christ has his primogeniture over all creation which is as wide as the universe itself. Nothing is excluded. But it is a universe with a dynamic movement and a centre; and the First-

¹ Col 1, 15.

² Cf. Gen 1, 26-7; 5, 1-3; 9, 5-6.

³ Rom 8, 29.

⁴ Rom 8, 30.

⁵ Col 1, 18.

⁶ Apoc 1, 5.

⁷ 1 Cor 15, 20. An allusion to Ps 88 (89), 28 is clear enough. David is made by Yahweh to be his firstborn and overlord of the neighbouring kingdoms.

⁸ Col 1, 16-17.

born is not to be excluded from the series of which he is the first.¹ Nor is the totality of creation simply ungraded, or unrelated and without stress towards its centre, while throughout this cosmos the individual is also accented. The possibility of a shift of meaning from *creation* (totality) to *creature* (individual) has been outlined elsewhere; and this graded and accentuated totality is all *creation-creature*, which is at the same time *every creation-creature* whose significance, just like our own, is that of the class or individual centred upon Christ.² It is obviously not wrong to think that the Firstborn title refers to the whole created universe; but the overlaid context of redemption produces a change; and Père Huby was justified when he saw the work of creation in terms of redemption; in so doing he was at one with St. Paul.³

As creation had been made to deviate from its end by the lack of intelligent and free creatures who should bring it back to its creator,⁴ so the redemption of man by the Firstborn, who is the Father's as well as his own, has its echo in that creation. But there is little advantage in trying to stretch the imagination in regard of this universe of all creation (it is already difficult enough for us to envisage the world of principalities and powers with which Paul and the Colossians were so preoccupied). We should rather, without any conscious archaizing, envisage the redemption as having no limits except in the very extent of creation itself. And since Christ's primacy of all creation springs from his being First Principle (Archē) and Origin of an economy which is redemptive, it is the *Christ-plērōma* which is rather the measure of his creation.

This appears to some extent in the setting of the first chapter of Colossians which merits some remarks.

4

The broad context of Col 1, 9–23 is concerned with the one fact which should find its echo with the Colossians, the fact of our salvation according to God's design by Christ. So that it should

¹ The possessive 'of all creation' can express the relationship of brotherhood: the force of the expression would be 'Firstborn [of the fraternity] of every creature'. Cf. 'It is impossible not to understand the firstborn as first of the series, as we read in Romans (8, 29) "the firstborn among many brethren".' (J. Bonsirven, *L'Evangile de Paul* [Paris, 1948], pp. 86-7).

² Cf. the writer's 'Creation and the Creature', I; II', *Bijdragen*, XVIII (1957), pp. 129-139; 359-374.

³ Cf. *Les Epîtres de la Captivité* (Verbum Salutis, VIII), Paris, 1947, pp. 43-4.

⁴ Rom 8, 19; Eph 1, 10.

indeed impress them still more there is a prayer of petition, namely that the Colossians may be granted 'full insight' into God's will. The idea is one of some force, for the phrase refers to the call of God to Christians, a call made to Paul in mystical experience. The way in which this vocation is to be answered appears in a similar prayer, this time for absent brethren, which occurs later. The petition on the latter occasion is that they should become 'perfect and accomplished'.¹ And the worth to us of God's saving election is that he has made us capable of the apportionment of the kingdom of light, a complete break and transfer from the past, for our lot is now that of the saints.² The emergence from darkness to light is itself the time of salvation. It must not be thought that the simultaneous mention above of creation and redemption does anything to lessen the clean break which the history of salvation implies: the deliverance and the transfer are real. So much so that now Christian endurance and patience are called for,³ and our one-time hostility has now given way to blamelessness.⁴

And God, simply called 'the Father', is seen as the author of deliverance and rescue (or *liberation-redemption*, *apolytrosis*) placing us in the kingdom of 'the beloved' Son.⁵ All this is meant to be reassuring: redemption has taken place with absolute finality. It exists and is not merely to be hoped for, since Paul preaches the disarming by Christ of the principalities and powers⁶ in order to eliminate the fearful angel-worship of the Colossians, which in his mind is nothing more than a superstitious form of salvationism. Not only have we no need for bogus intermediaries but our Christ is himself *liberation-redemption*.⁷

It is worth emphasizing that the pre-eminence of the Firstborn must be made manifest in the sphere of the cosmic powers from which we have been liberated. For the Son, the 'Beloved' of the Father, is head and victor over the powers. Both in origin and in their present subjection they are captive to him. It might be said that just as Paul has no hesitation in seeing our salvation against the background of spiritual cosmic forces, so he can see Christ as indivisible and has no interest in distinguishing the pre-existent

¹ Col 4, 12.

² Col 1, 11-12.

³ Col 1, 11.

⁴ Col 2, 21.

⁵ The passages to be compared with this one for the meaning of *liberation-redemption* are: Eph 1, 7; 1 Cor 1, 30; Rom 3, 24.

⁶ Col 2, 15.

⁷ 1 Cor 1, 30-31.

Word in his relation to creation and the Incarnate Christ.¹ This makes it a little easier to see that Christ's role in creation and redemption affects all things, their individuality as well as their totality. They are *through him* because of his function as their term in the completion of redemption. Founded and created *in him* they also have their reconciliation with him.² And the point is made that creation is *unto him*. To find Christ as the *final cause* of all things is not to mistake Paul's Christology. For he sees that the reason why a thing is envisaged and produced for its completion affects any interim state. If all *creation-creature* is *unto him* it should here and now show more than a trace of this fact. Thus, because we can see that Christ is our final cause, so we can accept the doctrine that 'in him all things hold together'.³ This in fact tells no more. By means of a speculative and cosmological expression we are taught the actual *coherence of all things in Christ*. But the starting point is Christ as final cause. Pope Pius XII summed up the point effectively: –

At the beginning of time, when he decreed the creation of the world, in order to pour out his love and to bring into existence other beings who should be happy like himself, God before all else (if we may so speak according to the way we have of seeing and acting consecutively) turned his gaze upon him who was to be Head and King. He decrees that in order to redeem the human race from the servitude of sin, the Word born of the Father shall become flesh and dwell amongst us. There is God's masterpiece, the very finest of his works. Whatever the time and the circumstances of its appearance in history, it is most certainly that masterpiece which he willed to be first; and it is in view of that masterpiece that he made all the rest.⁴

5

In the rest of this consideration we may ask whether St. Paul saw any immediate application to the Christian way of life resulting from his doctrine of the primacy of Christ the Firstborn. That by

¹ Certain parallels with the 'Son of Man' title may help to make this sound reasonable. The Book of Enoch admits that the Son of Man was named before creation (*Enoch* 28, 3, 6), and in IV Esdras the pre-existent Messiah is described (IV Esdras, 13, 25 ff.).

² Col 1, 16, 20. 'In him'; 'through him'; 'unto him' (v. 16) are answered by 'in him' (the *pleroma*); 'through him' (reconciliation); 'unto him' (finality of reconciliation) – (vv. 19–20).

³ Col 1, 17.

⁴ Pius XII, *Discours et Panégyriques*, Paris, 1939, pp. 394–5.

this very position Christ has power and rights over us needs no proving. As his subjected brethren we owe him obedience of heart and mind, and in return (this is the point Paul wished to impress upon the Colossians) we are protected by him. The awesome unseen powers – and that there is no vestige of such a world would seem rather to be the reaction of the last century than of this – are under his domination,¹ which will increase in extent till the eventual subjection through Christ to the Father.² In spite of security therefore for the future the interim period allows for fears as well as hopes.

Paul had in fact several such fears and hopes for his Christians. Exhortation and prohibition can be direct and roundly proclaimed. One may even wonder if moral behaviour among his communities was really as bad as some of his prohibitions might suggest. Allowance should be made for commonplaces of rhetoric and exhortation, and moral and ascetic teaching is to be found in doctrinal exposition as well as in obviously hortatory passages.

What we would call the triad of theological virtues ('these three') seem to be the nearest reflection in man of God's gift through Christ. It calls at once for appreciation on the part of the Christian and for thanksgiving. This almost instinctive reaction occurs to the author at the beginning of Colossians and Ephesians.³ This immediate advertence to faith is partly conditioned by the contrast with the vain works of Judaism. What we now have is our faith in God, as in Christ Jesus.⁴ We can continue to benefit from the rescue and from the privileged position we now have under Christ; and this means constancy in faith and fidelity, an adhesion to God so strong that it is like a house or temple, firm on its foundations.⁵

But Christian faith and fidelity cannot be merely stationary or static. Paul desires to see it grow to the ambitious point of 'full knowledge of the mystery of God' which (for such now is his Christocentrism) is 'even Christ.'⁶ In such a life of Christ-centred faith there is no room for superstition nor scruple, nor even for merely compulsive mortification.⁷ What we learn to know in faith is to be

¹ Eph 1, 22.

² 1 Cor 15, 24–28.

³ Cf. Col 1, 4–6; Eph 1, 15, 17. The Epistles have an introductory literary unit which can be identified as a thanksgiving but it is never without doctrinal context. Cf. P. Schubert, *Form and Function of the Pauline Thanksgiving* (Beih. z. Z.N.W., 20), Berlin, 1939.

⁴ Col 1, 4.

⁵ Col 1, 23; 2, 7. Eph 2, 19–21 shows how, viewed from the aspect of the community it is Christ himself who ensures the solidarity of the building.

⁶ Col 2, 23.

⁷ Col 2, 21–23.

so vivid as to haunt the mind benignly: it is to inhabit the mind. And like all Christian goods which have to be shared, there is an obligation upon us to share by instructing one another.¹ But above all the life of faith will mean fulfilling together the first of our Christian obligations in prayer, which, like faith, entails perseverance. Especially if prayer is the genuine utterance of faith it should be prayer that by means of the apostles of the Church all that is believed should spread: 'at the same time pray for us, that God may open us a door for the word, to speak the mystery of Christ'.²

So in this interim time we are steadfast and adhere to Christ, the salvific mystery of God. But this means faith not vision. What we are to see is now to be hoped for. Together with faith this new and expectant attitude to God came as his gift with the proclamation of the gospel truth, and it centres on what is 'laid up in heaven itself'.³ In spite of fears and distractions, and because we are reconciled and hold on in faith and fidelity, we must also remain 'without swerving from the hope of glad tidings'.⁴

St. Paul now makes an interesting connexion which might escape us. In place of the rather individual and private view of this virtue which may be our own, he speaks of it as related to others and at the centre of his ministry and apostleship. The reason why the ministry can bring him joy in the present is because he can 'make up in my flesh what is lacking to the sufferings of Christ'.⁵ And the ministry of suffering in and for the Church is necessarily conditioned by hope. In this way hope is anchored in the experience of the here and now, and it even attains something here and now, no less than 'Christ within you, your hope of glory'.⁶

Some remarks may be made in conclusion about the relation of charity with Christ considered in his primacy as Firstborn. The Epistle to the Colossians is not so direct on this point. However it is shown to be closely related to faith in Christ Jesus;⁷ and the depth of charity between the brethren of the Firstborn appears from the complete elimination of differences and distinctions between men: there are no more religious prerogatives, for Judaic exclusivism has gone, and social caste and even the inequality between the sexes are all of no consequence.⁸ There can be no question of racial

¹ Col 3, 16.

² Col 4, 3.

³ Col 1, 5-6.

⁴ Col 1, 23.

⁵ Col 1, 24.

⁶ Col 1, 27.

⁷ Col 1, 4.

⁸ There are three catalogues of irreconcilable classes which have been abolished by the changed condition of Christians: cf. Gal 3, 28; Rom 1, 14; Col 3, 11 (the antithesis between slave and free is repeated at Eph 3, 8).

or religious hatred, no inequality legal or natural, but 'Christ is all and in all'.¹ Or, as the list in Galatians ends by saying, 'ye are all one person in Jesus Christ'.² The individual will then find that the community whose life he shares is knit together in charity.³ More intimately 'compassion' and 'kindness' are to be 'put on'⁴ by each one; and this unwarlike armour is to be matched by such manifestations of brotherly love as 'bearing with' one another and of course pardoning faults. But naturally it is to charity that we must look for the element which will ensure the existence of 'perfection'. In a deceptively simple phrase it is called the 'bond of perfection'.⁵

Finally, that Christian charity, whether it relates to God or to the brethren, is concerned with Christ is underlined by the best written expansion of the thought of Colossians, namely Ephesians. Where there is charity there is Christ. Like faith, charity is the result of the inhabitation of the Christian by Christ himself ('that Christ may dwell in your hearts').⁶ This charity, in an exalted and speculative phrase, is that by which Christians are to be capable of 'comprehending' the four dimensions of the divine salvific mystery. St. Paul has a word for this goal of special religious insight achieved even in this life. But there is a condition: we must build and root our activities upon charity, and the result will be the knowing of the 'charity of Christ which surpasseth knowledge'.⁷

¹ Col 3, 11.

² Gal 3, 28.

³ Col 2, 1.

⁴ Col 3, 12.

⁵ In the Epistle to the Hebrews 'perfection' can be looked upon as rather more intellectual than moral, and so more closely related to faith. But here the application is straight-forwardly moral. One should think of such passages as the panegyric of charity which shows the 'bond' related to so many virtuous actions (1 Cor 13), or of charity as the fulfilment of the law (Rom 13, 8-10). The traditional Jewish teaching was in any case to show the moral character of perfection (cf. Mt 19, 18-19). As to how the 'bond' should be exactly visualised is more difficult. Does it unite virtues as the tie united the bundle? Or is it the perfect bond because it subsists between those who are friends? Or is it finally the bond itself between persons which is the element that makes for perfection? This last view is best in harmony with Col 1, 28; 'teaching every man wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ'.

⁶ Eph 3, 17.

⁷ Eph 3, 19.