

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF CHRIST III

ANY WHO HOPED to find in the first two sections of this bulletin a complete re-assessment of Jesus' awareness of his special relationship to his Father, or of his own personal mission to mankind, will have been disappointed. Traditional theology, it would seem, after winding for centuries along a sandy gully, has run dry, and those who have followed its meanderings in the vague expectation that it would one day rejoin the mainstream of christian catechesis have had to turn back and make a fresh start. As for the gospels, once brightly-shining beacons lighting the way to the Father (the way being Christ), they have been so effectively doused by the hoses of scholarship that they now glimmer dimly and doubtfully, unable apparently to offer any clear directions without the assistance of professional interpreters.

If this is the consequence of scholarship, some might say, give us the gospels as they were before, and let us continue peacefully to worship the Christ we have known. This plea is understandable, and not to be rejected out of hand, despite its dangerously fundamentalist overtones. The Christ of the gospels is the Christ of faith, whose lineaments cannot be revealed by the processes of historical scholarship alone, however painstakingly pursued. These can convince us that Jesus was a man like us and not a superman, 'utterly other', a point which St Mark's gospel in particular was concerned to emphasize. They can help to shift the accumulated debris of the tradition and give us a glimpse of the man Jesus as he was before the resurrection. And while aware of the limitations of this archaeological model, we may concede that a realization of Jesus' true manhood helps to protect us from the windy speculations of the dustier theologians.

But history can never take the place of faith; it cannot even generate faith; and the question whether Jesus was conscious of his own divinity is one that can only be asked by a believer. To the more fundamental query, was Jesus God?, history can offer no answer. But since faith enlivens and transforms the whole of our understanding, we can ask from within it the secondary question, whether Jesus was *aware* of his divinity, and make this the object of historical enquiry.

We have seen that Fr Raymond Brown, whose place in the first rank of catholic exegetes few would contest, is very cautious in his assessment of what might count as evidence for Jesus' consciousness of his own divinity, or indeed of his messianic status. His caution is understandable if measured against the kind of crude and uncritical rifling of the gospels which is what many theologians used to understand by exegesis. But he himself, towards the end of his article, suggested some lines of further enquiry, a number of which have already yielded some interesting results. These do take us some way beyond

Brown's own rather negative conclusions, and though still, of course, subject to the control of exegetical method, they seem to me sound and worth putting forward. Here I can do no more than offer a selection of a number of possible approaches.

Resurrection - faith

In the first place, one may make the general point that neither the gospel-writers nor the catechists whose work they adapted were writing fiction. All that they taught about Jesus' principles and beliefs, his aims and purposes, his character and temperament, was derived from the tradition and they did not set out to alter any of it. It is highly unlikely that they would have attributed to Jesus either, say, a developed messianic consciousness or a foreknowledge of his own death unless there were elements in the tradition upon which they could build without gross distortion or falsification. Similarly Vielhauer's theory, accepted by, among others, Conzelmann and Perrin, that *all* the 'Son-of-man' sayings are the fabrication of the early Church, seems fundamentally implausible when one considers how careful the New Testament writers are to confine the use of this title to Jesus alone. Only twice does it occur on anyone else's lips.

The same is probably true of Jesus' special relationship with the Father. We may not be able to point to any single passage in which the evidence for Jesus' awareness of this relationship appears overwhelming (Brown, as we have seen, even questions whether the 'cry of joy' in Matthew and Luke will not support a different explanation). Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that the primitive community, for all their profound resurrection-faith, would have wished upon Jesus that remarkable sense of immediate fulfilment of the Father's will and direct insight into his plans and purposes, had his life been completely innocent of any such awareness. If the apostles saw Jesus' life and teaching in the light of the resurrection (and this, though something of a cliché, is perhaps the best way of approaching their new understanding), what they saw was the Jesus they had known and loved and followed, not a gnostic redeemer with superhuman properties that obscured if not obliterated the human lineaments with which they were familiar.

This argument is not just a sophisticated version of the well-worn apologetic: 'either mad or bad or the Son of God'. It is based upon the manifest respect which all early christian writers had for the tradition and upon the radical improbability of their creating *ab ovo*, simply because of the dazzling experience of the resurrection, a figure which would have been puzzling and unfamiliar even to themselves. For the whole point of the resurrection-faith and of the gospels it inspired is the proclamation of the identity of the risen Christ with the Jesus of Nazareth who had gathered disciples around him and announced to Israel the imminent coming of the kingdom of God. So Paul, in Acts, insists that Jesus appeared only 'to those who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people' (Acts 13, 31).

It is fair to say that had Jesus' claims been as unequivocal and his miracles as prodigious as a cursory reading of the gospels might suggest, then the general incredulity of the apostles, and even of the Jewish people as a whole, would be totally incomprehensible. But it is even more fatuous to suppose that a few brief appearances, however extraordinary, would have stimulated Jesus' disciples to weave an elaborate theory about his true nature and essential being, unless they felt that such a theory did somehow explain features of his life and conduct which they had hitherto found puzzling and obscure. If he had done nothing during his public career to make the attribution of messianic and divine titles plausible to those who knew him best, the resurrection appearances could not have had the effect they did.

Jesus' titles

Attempts to derive proofs of Jesus' self-awareness from the titles he is credited with by the evangelists, have for the most part petered out unsuccessfully. The evidence on the whole suggests that Jesus made no public claim of messiahship, unless one counts as such a claim his tacit acceptance of the title 'King of the Jews' in the last hours of his life. He used the term 'Son of man' sparingly, and never directly identified himself with this mysterious personage. He certainly claimed God for his Father, but it is far from clear that the title 'Son of God' signified for him the sort of unique relationship later asserted at Nicea.

Concluding a chapter on The Tradition, in his book, *Jesus and the Gospel Tradition*,¹ C. K. Barrett has this to say:

The early tradition contained messianic hints, which called for development, and it would have been impossible to argue the place of Jesus in Judaism without introducing (if it was not there to begin with) the category of messiahship and with it that of adoptive sonship. Because the tradition was a genuine historical tradition, dealing with the real life of Jesus in his Jewish environment, it was necessary to argue the place of Jesus in Judaism. Thus the historical tradition was obliged to go beyond history, sometimes even to falsify history, precisely because it was historical. This fact constitutes the problem of the historical Jesus; at the same time it constitutes the only solution to the problem that we are likely to find. (p 33 ff.)

We may have reservations about one or two of Barrett's comments here, but he is basically correct.² A more profitable approach than title-hunting, as Barrett, like Brown, well sees, is to ask oneself what it was in Jesus' teaching and behaviour that led the early Church to attribute to him explicit claims to titles connoting divine prerogatives. The resurrection alone, though it

¹ London, S.P.C.K. 1967.

² A less radical view, well put and carefully argued, is to be found in the third and concluding section of P. Grech's article, 'Jesus Christ in History and Kerygma', in *A new Catholic Commentary* (London 1969), pp 831-837.

goes part of the way, is, as we have seen, an inadequate explanation. Where else are we to look?

Authority

First we may consider one of the best-attested yet most elusive features of Jesus' preaching: his authority. Tracing the source of this authority is a hazardous business, and it is as well to remind ourselves that Jesus himself refused to do so: 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things' (Mk 11, 33). Discussions of this topic often fall back on that curious combination of purposefulness and self-assurance which lends those who possess it the indefinable yet readily recognizable quality we know as 'leadership'. In Jesus' case this is sometimes hazily attributed to a kind of divine effluvia which is vaguely believed to have emanated from him as a consequence of the hypostatic union. This is presumably the sort of borrowed majesty repudiated by Jesus in the course of the temptations in the desert. There is no need, certainly, to deny him a personal dignity and charm of the sort nowadays popularly qualified as charismatic. Indeed his power to attract disciples prepared to follow even where they failed to understand is scarcely intelligible without just such a charism. But when the Jews demanded the source of his authority, they were looking for something more than an explanation of the effect he had on others, as Jesus well knew. Yet any attempt on his part to define his authority would, as Barrett notes, limit and diminish it. He was certainly conscious that it came from God ('If I by the finger of God cast out demons . . .'), but we do not need to suppose that he could have formulated the manner of its derivation in terms that a modern theologian (and perhaps he alone) would understand. Jesus' quiet assumption that his words and deeds were the expression of the will of God constitutes a remarkable, if indirect, proof of the intimacy of his relations with the Father. The prophets were far more vociferous than he about the divine origin of their message.

It is worth pointing out just where Jesus' teaching diverged from that of the rabbis with whom he is frequently compared. They, like the Pharisees, derived the authority of their teaching from the scriptures alone, and however tenuous the connection may sometimes be, it is a necessary feature of a religion for which the will of God is somehow totally incapsulated in a written law. Jesus' boldness is breathtaking: 'You have heard it said . . . but I say to you . . .' No rabbi could have spoken like this. H. Schlier, in a fascinating note on the word *Amen* in Kittel's *Wörterbuch*, goes so far as to say that, 'In the *Amen* before *I say to you* of Jesus the whole of christology is contained *in nuce* (i.e., in germ)'.¹ Most Christians would be surprised to learn just how much of Jesus' ethical teaching can be paralleled from contemporary rabbinical sources; but however small the amount of original teaching it is

¹ ThWNT, I, s.v. *Amen*, pp 341 ff.

quite decisive: it was Jesus, not Paul, who rendered inevitable the rupture between christianity and judaism that followed years later. He was the only teacher of his time to reject the established belief that the law and the prophets included all God required of men and to insist instead that God's demands were absolute and irreconcilable with any written formula, however comprehensive. Such a break from established tradition, revolutionary in effect if not in intent, argues an immense confidence in his own position. No doubt it was this assurance of the divine origin of his message, an assurance unaccompanied by any self-centred call for deference to his own person, that gave his teaching that indefinable stamp of God-given authority which made it seem so unlike that of the scribes and pharisees and which, paradoxically enough, offered the kind of surface to which the glorious titles attested by the tradition would naturally adhere. Even John's sophisticated and apparently alien theology of the word (anticipated anyway in some degree by Mark) finds a firm historical foothold in the tradition of a man who challenged the authority of the Torah, the Word of God *par excellence*, by declaring it insufficient: the young man whom Jesus loved, loyal to the law in its every detail, is still short of perfection: 'Come, follow me'.

Forgiveness of sins

So much for the general question of Jesus' authority. Now for a particular manifestation of it, perhaps the most startling of all. Where there is sin, the law has failed, and the covenant relationship between God and man established through the acceptance of his word has been broken. God's faithfulness and saving justice, his steadfast goodness and his loyalty, have been repulsed. The sinner has cut himself off from God, and now here was a man who stepped forward and affirmed, astoundingly, that he could heal the breach and re-establish the broken relationship. It may well be that in its original form the story of the cure of the paralytic let down through the roof held no suggestion that Jesus was arrogating this extraordinary power to himself alone. In aramaic, the crucial phrase may have meant, 'But that you may know that *men* (not "the Son of man") have authority on earth to forgive sins' (Mk 2, 10). But even so, what a breathtaking notion, that God should have delegated this power to men; even today protestant christianity jibs at the idea of such authority being granted to a human being. Small wonder that this idea, when first proposed by Jesus, should have given rise to puzzlement and resentment.

His own behaviour towards sinners was equally strange, as was his way of justifying it. Jeremias insisted long ago that the original context, or *Sitz-im-Leben*, of the mercy parables, is to be sought where Luke puts it, in Jesus' readiness to consort with tax-gatherers and sinners, with all whose conduct set them apart from the observance of the law. This was a source of great scandal to the orthodox, for it involved the breaking-down of what they regarded as divinely established barriers, and later on we find Paul, writing

to the corinthians, reverting to the principles of the pharisees in this matter: 'Now I write to you not to associate with any one who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality and greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard or robber – not even to eat with such a one' (I Cor 5, 11). Not that Jesus condoned sin, but the parable of the lost sheep would have little point if the shepherd had sat down among the ninety-nine sheep in the hope that the wanderer would find its own way home.

Speaking of the parable of the prodigal son (better, the merciful father), Ernst Fuchs maintains that

the usual interpretation tends to argue somewhat too hastily from the father's conduct to God's. Closer examination shows that Jesus is defending his own conduct. He does this because he rejected no sinner, and he bases his conduct on the will of God. It is true, he implies, that God must be severe, but he will nevertheless be merciful if the sinner flees for refuge to that God from whose judgment he had previously to flee in fear. Jesus therefore implies that God, despite his severity, mercifully receives the returning sinner, as he himself does. Hence it is not the prime purpose of the parable to explain the conduct of Jesus, although Jesus does vindicate himself in it; on the contrary, Jesus' conduct explains the will of God by means of a parallel drawn from that very conduct.¹

What Fuchs is saying here, and it is a point he labours heavily in his writings, is that the parables, those at any rate whose purpose is to commend to Jesus' hearers a particular mode of behaviour, are not simply stories invented *ad hoc* for the purpose of instilling a new ethical code into people at best only half-prepared to receive it. Rather they emerge out of Jesus' own situation, and furnish both a comment on and a defence of his own conduct. It is his deeds first of all and only secondarily his words which reveal the will of God. If Fuchs is right, as he surely is where the mercy-parables are concerned, the logic of this progression is remarkable. For not only does Jesus speak with immense assurance of the mind and heart of God: this is striking, in view of the novelty of his message, but many of the prophets had displayed a similar kind of insight. And not only does he do this in the face of relentless opposition on the part of the most learned and respected citizens of the country: the prophets, all men who continued to speak when ordered to be silent, had shown themselves equally courageous. The real audacity of Jesus' response here lies in the fact that it is a conscious justification of his own behaviour: this, he implies, exhibits in concrete terms the attitude of God towards his sinful people.

In the parable of the tax-collector and the pharisee all the themes we have discussed so far are finely focused: Jesus asserts that the extent of God's generosity has hitherto been ignored; he shifts the central emphasis of

¹ *Studies of the Historical Jesus* (London 1964), p 20.

religion from observance to integrity and humility; he implies that he himself can speak with greater authority than the Law.

Table-fellowship

Forgiveness of sins was part of the New Covenant promised by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Previously, pardon had frequently been offered as a reward for repentance. Now it was a pure gift: 'In those days and in that time, says Yahweh, iniquity shall be sought in Israel, and there shall be none; and sin in Judah and none shall be found; for I will pardon those whom I leave as a remnant' (Jer 50, 20). But the reservations implicit in the word 'remnant' were drawn out in the later apocalyptic, which, at least in certain of its forms, made a careful distinction between those to whom pardon was offered and those from whom it was withheld. Jesus' innovation was to extend the offer of forgiveness even to those who in the eyes of the religious leaders had renounced the privileges of their faith by acting like gentiles. His custom of eating and drinking with sinners takes on an additional significance when linked with the parables of the eschatological banquet and with sayings such as this: 'I tell you, many will come from the east and the west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 8, 11). Once again, the context in which Jesus' words must be read is his own life: here, and not in some esoteric dream, is the key, not only to many of his greatest parables, but also to the most important of the ways in which his disciples kept his memory fresh.

No one has expressed this insight more cogently than Norman Perrin:

The central feature of the message of Jesus is, then, the challenge of forgiveness of sins and the offer of the possibility of a new kind of fellowship with God and with one's fellow-men. This was symbolized by a table-fellowship which celebrated the present joy and anticipated future consummation; a table-fellowship of such joy and gladness that it survived the crucifixion and provided the focal point for the community life of the earliest christians, and was the most direct link between that community life and the pre-Easter fellowship of Jesus and his disciples . . . At all events we are justified in seeing this table-fellowship as the central feature of the ministry of Jesus; an anticipatory sitting at table in the Kingdom of God and a very real celebration of present joy and challenge.¹

The Kingdom of God

We must now turn to a larger subject, already touched on in the previous section, that of the kingdom of God. It is clearly impossible to do justice to this theme in the present essay. Once again, our concern is less with the message itself than with its broader implications in terms of Jesus' conscious-

¹ *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (London 1967), p 107f.

ness of his divine mission. The eschatological table-fellowship of which Perrin speaks is one facet of Jesus' preaching of the kingdom. Typically, though rooted in the present, it extends its leaves and branches into the future. The approaching fulfilment is anticipated in Jesus' life by the table-fellowship he inaugurated and by the forgiveness of sins, which had to precede the establishment of the kingdom. What is singular in Jesus' message is not the proclamation of the future kingdom but his conviction that the effects of the kingdom are already making themselves felt in his own life and teaching. Had he not felt sure that he carried in his own person the authority of God, he could not have spoken or acted as he did. His claim to be able to forgive sins has already been discussed and its connection with his personal conduct remarked upon. But this, though probably the most impressive feature of his work, is far from unique. Despite the features it has in common with current rabbinical teaching, Jesus' doctrine really represents what Nietzsche called an *Umwertung aller Wertungen* – a reversal of all values.

In a fascinating article entitled 'The Formal Structure of Jesus' Message',¹ James M. Robinson argues that 'the eschatological polarity of Jesus' message, which consisted in a proclamation to the present in view of the near future', finds expression in a series of sayings in which the criterion of men's worth before God is no longer the observance of the law but the acceptance of the proclamation of the kingdom: 'Truly, I say to you, the tax-collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before (or instead of) you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the harlots believed him; and even when you saw it, you did not afterward repent and believe him' (Mt 21, 31f). In sayings such as these there is always a double reference, to the present and to the future, even though it may be barely hinted at: 'How hard it is for those who have riches [now] to enter into the kingdom of God [later]!' (Mk 10, 23); 'no one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God' (Lk 9, 62). Jesus criticizes present actions and attitudes because of their consequences, and the context from which they derive their significance is invariably 'the kingdom of God'.

Sometimes the confrontation between present and future is marked out even more clearly: 'unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 18, 3). Sometimes the future is felt to intrude upon the present: 'But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you' (Lk 11, 20), a saying that shows especially clearly how Jesus has transformed the motif of the two aeons, a commonplace of current Jewish apocalyptic writing, into a dialectic all his own, in which the present is somehow suffused with the future, and not separated from it by a dam capable of being shifted back indefinitely to keep the two aeons apart.

¹ *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation*, ed. W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder (London 1962), pp 91-110.

Robinson points out that the same fundamental structure is to be found in other, apparently unrelated sayings, such as the beatitudes: 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' (Lk 6, 20). That the present tense here indicates promise rather than fulfilment is shown by the blessings that follow. The satisfaction offered to the hungry and the laughter promised to the sad are to be found in the kingdom of God and nowhere else. The blessings are balanced by a number of threats: woe to the rich, the replete, the merry and the well-spoken of. Their present satisfaction is a sign of the inordinate attachment blocking the only response which could gain them admittance into the kingdom. Perhaps the most general affirmation of this principle, whose importance can hardly be exaggerated, is the devastating comment that 'whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will save it' (Mk 8, 35; cf Mt 10, 39; Lk 17, 33). John builds this saying into his theology of the cross (Jn 12, 25), and Paul uses a similar aphorism as the basis of his exhilarating theology of the resurrection (1 Cor 15, 36). But there can be no doubt that the saying derived its original force from the present urgency of Jesus' preaching: 'Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted' (Mt 23, 12); 'But many that are last will be first, and the first last' (Mt 10, 31).

This teaching is, of course, the outcome and expression of Jesus' own life, through which God makes his decisive intervention in the world. It finds fresh configurations within the Church, not merely in the sense that the master's words are modified to suit changing circumstances, but in the sense that his very self is rendered present through the lives of others. As the christian community grew and developed, Jesus' message was bound to be adapted to meet new problems and fesh situations. But provided that the essential structure of his message is retained, such adaptations are both legitimate and necessary. Neither imitation, however fervent, nor acceptance of a new moral code, however whole-hearted, is enough to explain and justify christian belief. Somehow (and this word is deliberately open-textured to allow room for a theology of the spirit), the life and teaching of Jesus have to make themselves felt more intimately still, to become existentially accessible, and this can only be done if they are refracted by the mysteries of his death and resurrection. Through faith in these saving mysteries we 'put on Christ', 'Christ lives in us' – Paul gropes for words to express the *ontological* change wrought by the Easter-event. But the complex theological problems involved in these puzzling phrases are beyond the scope of this essay.

Jesus and the Father

For want of space I have left untouched a number of important topics directly related to the problem of Jesus' self-awareness and to the christological implications of his words and actions. There is the question, for instance, of Jesus' own faith, briefly discussed by Fr John Bligh in a recent note in the *Heythrop Journal*;¹ the problem of miracles, brilliantly treated by

Fr Raymond Brown in one of his *New Testament Essays*;² and finally the question of Jesus' decision to gather disciples round him and to make missionaries of them, a subject to which Fr Hans Schürmann has devoted a great deal of attention.³

However, just a word must be added concerning Jesus' relations with his Father, the ultimate source of his authority and strength. However reluctant we may be to take any single passage as conclusive proof that Jesus was aware of his divine sonship, it is hard to think that the confidence and familiarity with which he speaks of God throughout the gospels were simply invented by preachers or catechists. The individual sayings and incidents pile up: some of them we have already seen. His use of the familiar form 'Abba' in addressing God cannot be considered evidence of an *exclusive* relationship, since the early christians showed no hesitation in taking it over for their own prayers. Even so, it proves that he was on terms of especial intimacy with the Father: he may not have been the first man to speak of God as his Father, but he may well have been the first to address him in such familiar language (though even here we should be cautious: what of Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Job?). The 'cry of joy' recorded by Matthew and Luke may, as Brown remarks, have referred to the knowledge a son has of his father, not to a knowledge explicitly reserved to a single individual alluded to as 'the Son'. Nevertheless, if we are right in tracing the origins of this saying back to Jesus (and in formal structure it closely resembles the series studied by J. M. Robinson), then it was surely of himself that Jesus was thinking in the first place when he said, 'no one knows who a son is except his father, or who a father is except his son, and any one to whom the son chooses to reveal him' (Lk 10, 22/Mt 11, 27). (The formal structure occurs in the previous verse, in the contrast between the wise and understanding and tiny children). And the johannine flavour of this saying need not tell against its genuineness, especially if we accept Gächter's view that behind the great discourse in the fifth chapter of John, the passage in which Jesus comes closest to defining his relations with his Father, lies a very simple parable built upon the theme of the handing-down of a craftsman's skill from father to son – perhaps the skill of the carpenter.

The ultimate vindication of Jesus' teaching is the manner of his death. Having told others to do the Father's will, he accepted it, though shrinkingly, himself. Having told others to forgive and assured them in return of the pardon of God, he looked on the friends who deserted him without rancour and on the enemies who tormented him without hate. His submission to the Father's will was absolute and St John was therefore profoundly right to find triumph in his failure and true kingship in the degradation of the cross.

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¹ Vol 9 (1968), pp 414-419.

² *New Testament Essays* (London-Dublin 1964), pp 168-191.

³ *Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu den synoptischen Evangelien* (Düsseldorf, 1968).