

CHRIST AND CREATION

By ROBERT BUTTERWORTH

IT IS NOT OFTEN that the mystery of creation is considered in relation to Christ. We generally look on creation either as the supremely free act, or at any rate as the result of an act of God, whereby at some point in the immeasurable past he brought into being the things from which present realities somehow derive. Nor do we see how the creative act of God can have had anything to do with Christ; we do not relate our awareness of modern scientific theories concerning the origin of the universe and the evolution of living species on earth directly to our belief in Christ. Creation hardly seems relevant to christian belief as such, and generally forms no part of our conscious acceptance of the revelation brought in and by Christ.

Creation as a christian mystery

Yet there is to be found in christian belief statements that link Christ just as intimately with the beginning of things as with the final fulfilment of them. 'I am the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end'.¹ A basic feature of the mystery of Christ for us is his living reality not only as the final end and consummation of all things – the omega, but also as the beginning and source of all things – the alpha. As the alpha, Christ mysteriously already has a hand in God's act of creation: 'I am he, I am the first, and I am the last. My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I call to them, they stand forth together'.² It is the mystery of Christ in creation, and creation in Christ, that we need to recall to our consciousness as christian believers.

Modern theology under the influence of Karl Barth is bringing back the truth that creation is a christian mystery; that 'Jesus Christ... constitutes, according to scripture, the origin and foundation of being, the archetype and prototype, the light and power, the meaning and the value, the support and the purpose of creation'.³ The truth badly needs reinstating. As Küng goes on to

¹ Apoc 22, 13; cf 1, 17; 2, 8; cf Isai 44, 6.

² Isai 48, 12.

³ Küng, H. *Justification* (London, 1964), p 130.

remark: 'the chapter in the history of dogma dealing with this truth of faith remains to be written. It will turn out to be an important history of development, but probably also one of forgetting. It is not that this truth of faith absolutely disappeared but that it did not always remain in the forefront of consciousness'.¹ Both the early danger of heresy and the later speculation about the Trinity helped to push the revealed truth about Christ and creation underground. The role of Christ, the incarnate Word, in creation, so clearly attested in scripture, was seriously minimized and later ignored.

In the redevelopment of this truth in recent times, it is stressed that creation by God must be seen, not in terms of speculation about the possible origins of the cosmos, but in the light of man's salvation and fulfilment by God in Christ. By God's mercy and goodness, it is in Christ that man is to be saved and ultimately fulfilled, as it is in Christ that man – and along with man the rest of man's world – is created. Christ is the saviour of man, in whose creation he already has a decisive hand. God's action in man's regard can be seen as having three major 'moments': creation, reconciliation, and the final redemption and fulfilment of all things. Each of these three moments takes place in and through Christ. The total action of man's God is christoform: it starts with Christ, proceeds through Christ, and is completed in Christ. This is not to deny, of course, the possibility of a creation that neither envisaged Christ nor depended on him. But the whole of the real order in which we exist is christoform: created through, reconciled from its sinfulness by, finally to be fulfilled in Christ.² In all that concerns us, God first has Christ in mind. He is not an afterthought on the part of God. He is the original and originating principle which lies behind all the aspects of God's gracious, free activity towards man. Thus Christ is also the principle behind creation and operative in it. Creation, then, is a christian mystery, formally distinct from, but not wholly independent of, the mystery of our reconciliation and final fulfilment in Christ. Rather, creation in Christ underlies our reconciliation and fulfilment in him. Christ came to save and fulfil what was basically already his.

The plan of God

To get away, as much as is possible, from anthropomorphic expressions and their attendant problems, it is wise to begin with

¹ *Ibid.*, p 132.

² Cf 2 Cor 5, 19.

God's eternal purpose – his free and eternal decision to be the God who himself saves; in other words, who himself provides the only proper fulfilment and perfection for man and the universe in which man lives, who reveals and communicates himself as such to man, eternally commits himself to being man's salvation, making himself and man allies and partners in an eternal covenant. In the documents of the second vatican council it is encouraging to note passages which restore the perspective of the eternity of God's plan:

By an utterly free and mysterious decree of his own wisdom and goodness, the eternal Father created the whole world. His plan was to dignify men with a participation in his own divine life. He did not abandon men after they had fallen in Adam, but ceaselessly offered them helps to salvation, in anticipation of Christ the redeemer, 'who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature' (Col 1, 15). All the elect, before time began, the Father 'foreknew and predestined to become conformed to the image of his Son, that he should be the firstborn among many brethren' (Rom 8, 29).¹

Again:

In his goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man has access to the Father in the holy Spirit and comes to share in the divine nature.²

The restoration of the true perspective of eternity, in which alone God's revelation of himself and his saving purpose can be most properly viewed, not only provides theology with a criterion by which to redress the imbalances of the past; it is also, for instance, essential if mysteries such as sin are to be rightly assessed. It is eternally God's will and purpose to save man, irrespective of sin. His eternal saving purpose is neither baulked nor changed by sin. Even had man never sinned, he would still, since God's eternal purpose is to save him, have needed saving, in the sense that without God's further intervention men could never have achieved that fulfilment which, as we know from revelation, he is eternally planned and created by God to attain. Man is eternally meant by God to

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 2.

² *Dei Verbum*, 2; cf also 6.

be saved from his own inherent limitations, through the God-given attainment of his share in the divine nature.

Faith and theology need continually to recall that their terms of reference are what in fact God eternally and freely chose to reveal of himself and his purposes. Old Testament writers had no hesitation in stressing the pre-eminence of God's will¹ with its unshakable purpose² and hidden plan which was revealed through the prophets.³ But it is St Paul who is most acutely conscious that his role as minister of 'the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation'⁴ has involved him in the work of revealing and proclaiming God's eternal plan, 'the mystery of the gospel'.⁵ As he told the corinthians: 'we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification'.⁶ His claim to be heard rested on this: 'This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God'.⁷ He had knowledge of mysteries to impart: 'I became a minister according to the divine office that was given me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints';⁸ and this knowledge was of God's mysterious will.⁹

But for St Paul the mysterious will of God is Christ himself: 'To (the saints) God chose to make known how great among the gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory'.¹⁰ 'The mystery was made known to me by revelation', he says to his ephesian readers, so that they 'can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit'.¹¹ The colossians were to pray 'that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ . . . that I may make it clear, as I ought to speak';¹² because, as he explained to the ephesians, 'to me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things'.¹³ Christ is the agent of God's purpose: '(God) destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will'.¹⁴ In Christ we have

¹ Job 23, 13; Ps 115, 3; 135, 3-6; Sir 33, 13.

² Isai 14, 24-27; 46, 9-11; Prov 19, 21.

⁴ Eph 1, 13.

⁵ Eph 6, 19.

⁸ Col 1, 25-26.

⁹ Cf Col 1, 9.

¹² Col 4, 3-4.

¹³ Eph 3, 8-9.

³ Deut 29, 29; Amos 3, 7; Dan 2, 47.

⁶ 1 Cor 2, 7.

⁷ 1 Cor 4, 1.

¹⁰ Col 1, 27; 2, 2-3.

¹¹ Eph 3, 3-5.

¹⁴ Eph 1, 5.

God's plan, his mysterious and eternal purpose, made plain:

For (God) has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory'.¹

The eternal Christ

God's eternal covenant purpose is thus no impersonal intention or undertaking on his part. God eternally chooses for himself self-involvement with man as man's salvation, to make himself the salvation of man, the God for man; and he commits himself eternally to being such a God. In other words, God chooses eternally to be, in the person of his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ; to be a God who is so involved in man's salvation, so allied to man, as personally – in the person of his Son – to take humanity to himself and save, perfect and complete it, as Jesus Christ. Christ stands eternally first in God's loving purpose to be the God of the covenant with man. The eternal 'result' of God's covenant purpose is Jesus Christ.

This necessitates a radical adaptation in our normal way of considering the mystery of Christ. Because we are tied to an historical view of things, we naturally tend to think of Christ as some sort of afterthought on God's part; at worst as a sort of *deus ex machina* who came solely to save man from his sins. But Christ is what God eternally chooses to be, how God eternally sees himself in his Son – as incarnate Christ, who is man and the prototype and saviour of all men. Scripture speaks of God's destining Christ from eternity: '(Christ) was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of time for your sake'.² And it is in this pre-destined Christ that our destiny, our pre-destination, lies. Again, Peter tells the christians of Asia Minor that they are 'chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood'.³ Even more clearly St Paul explains to the ephesians that 'the God and

¹ Eph 1, 9-12; cf 3, 11.

² 1 Pet 1, 20.

³ 1 Pet 1, 2.

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will . . .¹ and that 'in him (Christ), according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory'.² It is in Christ that God 'has prepared (us) beforehand for glory':³ he has foreknown men in Christ. 'For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brethren'.⁴

The pre-existent Christ

In the light of the truth about God's original and eternal choice of Christ, we can perhaps begin to see what is the principle behind the mystery of God's creation. God creates, it would seem, in order that, in accordance with his eternal purpose to be a God who reveals and communicates himself to man, he might have that to which he can in time reveal and communicate himself. As Küng says, in describing Barth's view: 'Barth considers creation the external reason for the covenant, and the covenant the inner reason for creation. The purpose and, therefore, the meaning of creation is the making possible of a history in which God will join with man in a covenant – and one which has its beginning, middle, and end in Jesus Christ'.⁵ Creation is the way in which the history of God's saving of man, undertaken eternally in Christ, begins and is made possible. The eternal will of God to enter into covenant relations with man in Christ is the internal reason for creation. 'What God created when he created the world and man was not just any place, but that which was foreordained for the establishment and the history of the covenant, nor just any subject, but that which was to become God's partner in the history . . . The fact that the covenant is the goal of creation is not something which is added later to the reality of the creature . . . It already characterises creation itself and as such, and therefore the being and existence of the creature'.⁶ Creation is the first sign in time of God's eternal choice to be the saviour of man. Other express signs of God's choice will appear in the history of the chosen people, and above all, in the historical incarnation of the eternal Son.

¹ Eph 1, 3–5.

² Eph 1, 11.

³ Rom 9, 23.

⁴ Rom 8, 29.

⁵ *Justification*, p 14.

⁶ Küng quoting Barth, *ibid.*, p 21–22.

The question then is: how are we to conceive the pre-existence of Christ, in what sense did he exist before the historical incarnation. The witness of scripture to Christ's pre-existence is extensive. John says that it was Christ's glory that Isaiah saw;¹ and Paul saw Christ as the supernatural rock which is said to have followed Moses and the people in the desert.² Indeed, Christ himself was more explicit on the subject of his own pre-existence than we perhaps realize. He claimed to pre-date Abraham: 'before Abraham was, I am'.³ In fact he pre-dated creation; for he had glory in the Father's presence 'before the world was made',⁴ 'before the foundation of the world'.⁵ He is 'from the beginning',⁶ 'the first'.⁷

St Paul prefers to think of the pre-existent Christ in terms of Old Testament Wisdom. He calls Christ 'the power of God, and the wisdom of God',⁸ 'a secret and hidden wisdom of God, decreed before the ages for our glorification'.⁹ In the wisdom books, the female figure of Wisdom is often described as in existence before, and operative in, the creation of the world of time: 'Wisdom was created before all things and prudent understanding from eternity',¹⁰ and could be described as God's first production: 'The Lord himself created wisdom; he saw her and apportioned her, he poured her out upon all his works'.¹¹ She also took a hand in the creation of all else, as 'the fashioner of all things . . . and was present when thou didst make the world'.¹² 'When he established the heavens, I was there . . . I was beside him, like a master workman . . .'¹³ Paul found other ways of expressing this pre-existence of Christ. He speaks of Christ's being 'in the form of God'¹⁴ before he was 'found in human form':¹⁵ and of Christ's being 'rich' before 'he became poor'.¹⁶

Christ and creation

The function of the pre-existent Christ in creation is described in a number of ways. He is called 'the beginning of God's creation',¹⁷ the sole foundation: 'For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ'.¹⁸ He 'reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power'.¹⁹ It is in Christ, in the person of his eternal

¹ Jn 12, 41.

⁴ Jn 17, 5.

⁷ Apoc 1, 17; 2, 8; 22, 13.

¹⁰ Sir 1, 4.

¹³ Wis 7, 22; 9, 9.

¹⁴ Phil 2, 6.

¹⁷ Apoc 3, 14.

² 1 Cor 10, 4; cf Heb 3, 3.

⁵ Jn 17, 24.

⁸ 1 Cor 1, 24.

¹¹ Sir 1, 9; cf 24, 9; Prov 8, 22-25.

¹³ Prov 8, 27-30; cf Job 28, 23-28.

¹⁵ Phil 2, 8.

¹⁸ 1 Cor 3, 11.

³ Jn 8, 56-58.

⁶ 1 Jn 1, 1; 2, 13f.

⁹ 1 Cor 2, 7.

¹⁶ 2 Cor 8, 9.

¹⁹ Heb 1, 3.

Word and Son, that God sets himself to the task of creation; he founds his universe on him. By God's gracious and eternal choice, man, who is to be saved by Christ, is first created through Christ. 'In these last days', says the author of hebrews, 'God has spoken to us by a Son'; and adds that it was the Son 'through whom also God created the world';¹ whilst Paul reminds the corinthians that 'there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist'.² For St John, Christ is the eternal Word, and 'all things were made through him, and without him was not a anything made that was made'.³ But for a statement of the priority and primacy of Christ with regard to creation, nothing in scripture surpasses Paul's hymn: 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominations or principalities or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together'.⁴ The whole witness of scripture to Christ and creation culminates in this superb expression of the cosmic place and function of Christ. Christ is 'the image of the invisible God', the self-expression of the God who, invisible as he is, eternally desires to be seen and loved by creatures for who and what he is; who therefore eternally generates his own visible image, the only-begotten Son who reveals and imparts to men their God for what their God eternally is, the Father. It is only in and through the Son, 'who is the likeness of God'⁵ that men can come to see and love their God as Father. But if Christ is he for whom the whole universe is created, and he in whom it 'holds together', it is also true that it is in and through Christ that all things are created. And it is especially in the creation of man that Christ is operative, when God creates man 'in our image, after our likeness'.⁶

And yet the mystery of creation in and for Christ does not rest there. Not even man's sin can baulk the eternal, creative purpose of God. Rather it calls forth from God a new creation, a re-creation of man in Christ, by which man is invited to 'put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness'.⁷ Man can 'put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator'.⁸ For besides being the principle behind and in creation, Christ is eternally also 'the head

¹ Heb 1, 2-3.² 1 Cor 8, 6.³ Jn 1, 3; cf 1, 10.⁴ Col 1, 15-17.⁵ 2 Cor 4, 4.⁶ Gen 1, 26; cf 1, 27.⁷ Eph 4, 24.⁸ Col 3, 10.

of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent'.¹ It is of importance to theology that the order of reconciliation, which is formally distinct from the order of creation, should be related to that order in due dependence. Or rather, in interdependence; for just as Christ is 'the firstborn of all creation', so also he is 'the firstborn from the dead'. If man is reconciled by God in Christ, he is nonetheless also created by God in Christ. The key to the mystery of God's workings in Christ lies in the fact that God has one firstborn, his only-begotten and eternal Son, Jesus Christ: 'my firstborn, my might, and the first fruits of my strength, pre-eminent in pride and pre-eminent in power',² as Jacob said of his son Reuben. Whether God creates or reconciles or fulfils man, it is in Christ that God acts for man, 'that in everything he might be pre-eminent'.

Conclusion

It is along these lines that we may come to a new appreciation of creation as part of christian doctrine, as an essential part of the total mystery of Christ. He is our redemption and salvation, in spite of our transgression, because he is what God has eternally in mind for us; God's eternal purpose, in which we have, each of us, a part as potential members of Christ our head, the firstborn not only of man created, but also of man dead in his sins. Creation is for man; God gave this creation over to man;³ and man is for Christ. As Paul says: 'you are Christ's; and Christ is God's'.⁴ 'We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them'.⁵

In the light of the mystery of Christ and creation we can begin to glimpse our true reality, our own identity, which is in Christ. We can begin to appreciate the value of things created and redeemed in Christ; above all the value and meaning of human persons, created and saved from their own selfishness to partake in Christ's eternal self-giving reality before the eternal Father. This is something of the truth of the mystery of him who could say not only that he was for men the way, the truth and the life,⁶ the light,⁷ the resurrection,⁸ the door,⁹ the bread,¹⁰ the vine;¹¹ but much more simply and significantly: 'I am HE'.¹²

¹ Col 1, 18.

² Gen 49, 3; cf Deut 21, 17; Ps 89, 19, 23-28.

³ Gen 1, 28ff.

⁴ 1 Cor 3, 23.

⁵ Eph 2, 10.

⁶ Jn 14, 6; cf 1, 4; 9.

⁷ Jn 8, 12; 9, 5.

⁸ Jn 11, 25.

⁹ Jn 10, 9.

¹⁰ Jn 6, 35, 48, 51.

¹¹ Jn 15, 1, 5.

¹² Jn 8, 24, 28, 58; 13, 19.