THE IMITATION OF CHRIST

By JOHN ASHTON

THE PROBLEM I want to tackle in this paper may be put in the following way. What is the point of contemplating or of prayerfully reflecting upon the life and teaching of Christ as it is portrayed in the gospels? What does the christian hope – or what should he hope – to get out of this exercise? Why cannot he confine himself, as St Paul did, to attempting to assimilate into his own life the central mysteries of the christian message – God's revelation of himself to mankind through the passion, death and resurrection of his Son? St Paul succeeded in finding an answer to the question, What do the passion and resurrection mean to me and to others like me? We are so used to his answer that we tend to underestimate the difficulty of the question. Paul 'interiorized' Christ's passion and death by giving his own life (or recognizing in his own life) what Fr Yarnold has called 'a paschal shape'. By any standards this was an extraordinary intellectual and religious achievement. Why cannot we stop there? Why do we need to go further and enquire about or reflect upon the details of Christ's life?

The question may be put in another way: is it enough to think of Christ as man (as St Paul undoubtedly did), or must we be able to think of him as *a* man? And perhaps there is a third way of putting it too. Could christianity have dispensed with the synoptic gospels? Would it have been much the poorer, or even the same religion, without them?

Some may detect a bultmannian ring in these questions; and they would be right. Bultmann's challenge to the traditional christian interest in the character and behaviour of Jesus is so fundamental that we cannot afford to dismiss it out of hand, as we might be tempted to do, as aberrant and unacceptable. It is my belief that by refusing to evade this challenge and by allowing ourselves to feel its full weight and seriousness, we can only enrich our own understanding and appreciation of the real value and significance of the practice of contemplating the life of Christ. If we reject Bultmann's view, as most of us I take it, would wish to, what is our justification for doing so?

It might be as well to begin by saying a little more about what

Bultmann holds. It is both fruitless and illegitimate, he believes, either to attempt to reconstruct a life of Christ or to try and find out what he really thought of his own mission and destiny. It is fruitless because the gospels tell us nothing whatsoever about Christ's character and consciousness; and what they do tell us about his life and teaching is mediated by the christian community, which shaped and moulded the traditions it received in the interests of catechetical and moral instruction. In addition, says Bultmann, such a quest is illegitimate, because any desire to know the human personality of Jesus, to discover, that is, what he felt and thought about his own career and his own mission, is motivated by a curiosity which is purely human, and, far from springing from a proper spirit of christian enquiry, actually militates against a true faith. As well enquire what sort of clothes Jesus wore or the colour of his eyes. This is to know Jesus *kata sarka*, according to the flesh;[1] and even if such knowledge were in any way accessible, it would be no use to us as christians. (And before we go any further we can admit, I think, that there are elements of this kind of curiosity in all of us.

For instance, there is St. Ignatius's obsessive desire to remember precisely how our Lord was standing at the instant of his ascension. We might think he would have done better to keep his penknife! At the same time it would be wrong to attach too much importance to this odd twitch of whimsy. Manifestations of deep personal affection often look quirky to an outsider.)

Fruitless?

Perhaps we may now push Bultmann's objections a little further. Fr Yarnold has mentioned three difficulties in imitating Christ, the first of which is that the gospels do not provide enough historically accurate information to enable us to do so. If this is true, then it is a very real difficulty indeed. What sort of man was Jesus of Nazareth, and how do we know that when we speak of Jesus Christ as a friend, an acquaintance or as a model of all virtue, we are thinking of the same person? Towards the end of his famous book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Albert Schweitzer reached the following conclusion:

> This historical Jesus of whom the criticism of the future . . . will draw the portrait can never render modern theology the services which it claimed from its own half-historical, half-modern Jesus . . . He will not be a Jesus Christ to whom the religion of the future can ascribe,

[1] 2 Cor 5, 16 is frequently quoted in this connection.

> according to its long-cherished custom, its own thoughts and ideas, as it did with the Jesus of its own making. Nor will he be a figure which can be made by a popular historical treatment so sympathetic and universally intelligible to the multitude. The historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and an enigma.[2]

Schweitzer himself held that Jesus was a deluded visionary, who wrongly believed that the kingdom of God would come in his own lifetime. Others have seen him as a zealot, working secretly for the overthrow of the roman occupation, others as an urbane and liberal teacher, preaching, in von Harnack's phrase, 'sweetness and light and the higher righteousness'. Harnack delivered his lectures on the essence of christianity in 1900, and within hours of delivery they were available at station bookstalls all over Germany. The message of tolerance and reasonableness Harnack discovered in the gospels was very acceptable to middle-class europeans at the turn of the century; but surely George Tyrrell was not far off the mark when he commented that the Christ Harnack saw, 'looking back through nineteen centuries of catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a liberal protestant face seen at the bottom of a deep well'.[3]

More recently still – and this is an opinion with which John Bligh inclines to side in a recent article for the *Heythrop Journal* – Jesus has been seen as a social reformer:

> A good case can be made for the view that John the Baptist and Jesus intended to launch a better world movement, and that within the period covered by the New Testament the christian movement in fact lost much of its social concern and became more other-worldly than it was originally meant to be.[4]

The deluded visionary, the liberal teacher, the social reformer: these are all very different portraits of Christ, but they are far from the only ones. Most of us are probably more familiar with the portrait of the submissive religious or with St Margaret Mary's melancholy picture of a sensitive man personally grieved and affronted by human sinfulness.[4a] The point I am making here is the

---

[2] *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London, 3rd edition, 1954), pp 396 ff.

[3] *Christianity at the Crossroads* (London, 1909), p 44. Tyrrell is quoted in a very useful and interesting article by Dennis Nineham, 'Jesus in the Gospels', in *Christ for Us Today*, edited by N. Pittenger (London, 1968), pp 45–65.

[4] 'Development of Doctrine within Scripture', in the *Heythrop Journal* 11 (1970), p 413.

[4a] Some may wonder why I have made no mention of the long christian tradition of *imitatio Christi*. The answer is that I am chiefly concerned here with the possibility of caricature. Let us take two more examples: first, St. Francis' of Assisi's picture of Jesus

very real difficulty of painting a portrait of Jesus without filling in the essential lineaments from our own ideals. Jesus, we instinctively feel, was precisely the sort of person we would like to be ourselves. And if we are not very careful, we find ourselves emphasizing in him just those qualities which best accord with our own temperaments. Some will stress his love of silence and solitude, others his unfailing interest in people. But was he an introvert or an extrovert? It is very hard to say. What is indisputable is that just as man has an innate tendency to fashion a God according to his own image and likeness, so the christian is liable to picture Christ as a kind of ideal self.

Illegitimate?

So far I have been discussing the problems arising from Bultmann's first kind of objection to the quest of the historical Jesus: its impossibility. Now we come to his second objection, that the quest is illegitimate, inspired by an unhealthy curiosity which is poles apart from true religious faith. And here it is relevant to ask, even supposing that one succeeds in isolating elements of Jesus' character and in establishing them with reasonable probability, what has this got to do with christianity?

I propose to move into this objection by commenting briefly on another of Fr Yarnold's difficulties: that our situation is often so different from Christ's that we do not know how to imitate him. This proposition appears to me to be formidably true. Even in a situation akin to those in which Jesus frequently found himself, a situation, for instance, in which we have to deal with the outcasts of society (the equivalent of the tax-collectors and prostitutes of Jesus' day), we are driven to ask ourselves not how Jesus did act, but how he would have acted in my place. And how do I answer that? Only by weighing up all the elements in the situation and

---

as a gentle person with a warm love of all God's creatures and a predilection for poverty; secondly, St Ignatius's picture of a strong-minded leader sending missionaries into the world to bring men back to God. These are not totally irreconcilable pictures: strength and gentleness are both qualities which are prominent in the gospels themselves. (A novelist once remarked to me that the hardest task any writer of fiction can set himself is to create a character who combines both strength and goodness: it was the success of the gospels in achieving this feat that made her admire them as literature.) But I should still wish to maintain that where christian writers (especially the founders of the great schools of spirituality) highlight particular facets of Jesus' character, thereby leaving others in shadow, they are at least in part projecting their own personalities, in however legitimate and unobjectionable a way, onto the tradition. There can be many interpretations of *Hamlet*, but Shakespeare only wrote one play. I may be forgiven for not pursuing this analogy.

asking myself, What ought I to do? And once I have answered *this* question, there is no need to appeal to Christ. Not long ago, I was talking to someone who was busy wondering how our Lord would have driven a car. I pointed out that the only possible way of finding an answer to this would be first to ask how he ought to drive himself: with courtesy, consideration, care and restraint. And once this was clear, then the further question, how Christ would have driven a car, would be redundant.

What is more, this difficulty can be pressed home by asking questions concerning generosity, unselfishness, compassion, obedience to the will of the Father and so on: are these virtues because Christ practised them or did he practise them because they are virtues? Do we need the example of Christ to show us that integrity, loyalty, courage are good things? The classic statement of this difficulty is that of Kant:

> Nothing could be more fatal to morality than that we should wish to derive it from examples. For every example of it that is set before me must be first itself tested by principles of morality, whether it is worthy to serve as an original example, that is, as a pattern, but by no means can it authoritatively furnish the conception of morality. Even the holy One of the gospels must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before we can recognize him as such; and so he says of himself, 'Why call ye Me [whom ye see] good; none is good [the model of good] but God only [whom ye do not see]. But whence have we the conception of God as the supreme good? Simply from the *idea* of moral perfection, which reason frames *a priori*, and connects inseparably with the notion of a free will. Imitation finds no place at all in morality, and examples serve only for encouragement; that is, they put beyond doubt the feasibility of what the law commands, they make visible that which the practical rule expresses more generally, but they can never authorize us to set aside the true original which lies in reason, and to guide ourselves by examples.[5]

A human model can be an inspiration and an encouragement. But surely this is not the only reason for meditating on the gospels? And is there any more profit to be gained from meditating on the life of Christ, about which we know relatively little that is really certain, than on the life say, of Thomas More, or even from reflecting upon the example set by the handful of really saintly people whom we ourselves know?

---

[5] *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals* (p 29 in the 2nd german edition). A very similar position is defended by Fr. G. J. Hughes S.J., in 'A Christian Basis for Ethics', in the *Heythrop Journal* 13 (1972), pp 27–43, esp pp 30 ff.

Bultmann himself makes a very similar point when he writes:

> It is impossible to see what more was done by the historical Jesus who goes to his death in obedient love than was done by all those who, for example, in the world war took the same road, also in obedient love. Their road actually means more to us, not only because we see it more clearly, but chiefly because we were associated with them as with a living *Thou*. To try to create such experiences of encounter with a person of the past seems to me to be artificial and to lead to sentimentality.[6]

Finally, is it even certainly right to copy Jesus's moral teaching absolutely and unquestioningly in every respect? H. J. Cadbury has this to say on the apparent absence of altruism in Jesus' teaching:

> The gospels, so far as they represent Jesus as appealing to motive at all, are, to our way of thinking, exceedingly utilitarian in their sanctions. Jesus freely reminds men of the rewards that virtue will bring, both in this age and in the next, to the man who practises it. The deserts or the welfare of the other party hardly figures at all in the words attributed to him.

And he goes on to suggest that Jesus may have believed 'that men would best respond to arguments of self-interest'.[7] Cadbury seems to be to be presenting a rather one-sided view here. What about the parable of the Good Samaritan, for instance? But there is enough truth in what he says for his argument to be taken seriously. What are we to make of the undoubted fact that motives of the fear of hell and the rewards of heaven, both of which figure prominently in Jesus' preaching, are so unpopular with modern retreat givers? Does it indicate a radical disloyalty to the teaching of Jesus or merely a more sanguine view of human nature than Jesus himself exhibited?

If the purpose of theology is, as has been suggested, to discover and expound the conditions of the possibility of christian prayer, then it should be evident that a full answer to the questions we have

---

[6] 'On the Question of Christology', in *Faith and Understanding* (London, 1969), pp 127 ff. The whole of this essay, which is really a long review, written in 1927, of a book by Emanuel Hirsch, repays study. Where Bultmann, here as elsewhere, diverges most radically from the catholic tradition, is in the dichotomy he presupposes between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith; perhaps another way of saying the same thing is to suggest that he has a thoroughly inadequate theology of the resurrection. Speaking of the historical Jesus he says, 'As a *Thou*, in the sense of a fellow man, he has vanished – as every such *Thou* vanishes when the man dies' (p 137).

[7] *Jesus, What Manner of Man?* (London, 1962), pp 104 ff.

been considering would mean elaborating – or at least sketching out – a whole theology. All I hope to do here is to block off some false trails and suggest some conditions of an adequate answer. But before I do so, I would like first to consider briefly the rather different approach to the problem taken by David Stanley.[8] He states the difficulties clearly and fairly and in the first part of his essay ('Jesus is Lord!') makes a number of valuable comments, to some of which we shall be returning. But I find the solution he puts forward in the second part of the essay ('Creation of the gospels and of the New Testament') obscure and unconvincing.

Very summarily, he distinguishes between three principal stages in the formation of the gospel-tradition: '(1) *experience* of God's working of the individual or the collectivity, vouchsafed such a privileged revelation; (2) a period of *theological reflection*, animated by faith, upon the data thus revealed; and (3) the *formulation of the experience* with its concomitant reflection, in an attempt to communicate this revelation in writing to the present and particularly future generations of believers' (p 435). This description of the process of the creation of the New Testament is very puzzling. In what way, apart from the fact that writing is involved, does the reflection in stage (3) differ from that in stage (2)? How are the 'data' of stage (2) related to the 'experience' of stage (1)? Is it legitimate to talk of the experience as somehow detachable from the way in which it is formulated? What does 'the formulation of the experience' really mean if, as seems to be the case, those who are doing the formulating are not the same people as those who did the experiencing?

According to Stanley, the method of the ignatian *contemplatio* 'is actually the reverse of the process through which our gospels came into existence' (p 431). One must begin with the sacred text, the gospels as we have them, the result of the reflection upon the original experience of the apostles, proceed to a 'personal theological reflection upon the text' (p 440), and conclude by experiencing the saving event for oneself: 'the mystery must happen for me, to me' (p 441). The second and third stages present problems. With regard to the second stage, Stanley asks, 'How does one conduct theological reflection upon a narrative in the gospels? The technique may be reduced to one simple, searching question: What is the Lord Jesus attempting to say *to me now* through this particular text of the gospel?

---

[8] Cf 'Contemplation of the Gospels, Ignatius Loyola and the Contemporary Christian', in *Theological Studies*, 29 (1968), pp 417–443.

If I can plumb the depths of meaning in the words of the evangelist to the best of my ability and with the power of my faith, I shall assimilate them to myself – or better, I shall be disposed to be assimilated or conformed to the mystery which I am contemplating' (p 441).

This observation conceals a number of difficulties, and in particular it is not clear how the kind of reflection described here reflects what went on in the second stage of the tradition. No explanation of this very crucial point is forthcoming in Stanley's article. Despite these shortcomings, the article remains a brave attempt to tackle an important problem; and I point out its obscurities simply in the hope that someone may be stimulated to clarify them.[8a]

Answers

1. In the first place, it is no use shutting one's eyes to the fact that the study of the gospels has been revolutionized in this century by form criticism and redaction criticism. In the gospels, Jesus is seen through the eyes of the early christian community, whose central belief was that he had risen into glory. There is nothing to be gained by pretending that the traditions of Jesus' teaching and miracles remained unaffected by this faith, or that every incident recorded in the gospels is historically true in the same way as all the others. The infancy narratives present quite special problems here. David Stanley speaks, for instance, of 'the case of the missing Magi'.[9] St Matthew, in presenting God's extraordinary revelation of the plan of salvation to the gentiles, tells it in story-form. The point of the story lies (as the Church has always seen) in the *epiphany*, and to miss this is to have failed to grasp the writer's central idea. Whether the magi were real people or not does not affect the truth of this.

2. In the second place, some sort of answer must be given to the contention of Bultmann and his followers that the quest of the historical Jesus is utterly fruitless. Here I can do no more than record my conviction that they are wrong. There has been a great deal written on this subject ever since Ernst Käsemann launched

---

[8a] Fr E. Malatesta informs me that S. Amsler has a good treatment of this general subject in an essay called 'Texte et événement', in a collection dedicated to Wilhelm Vischer (Montpellier 1960) pp 12–19.

[9] *A Modern Scriptural Approach to the Spiritual Exercises* (Institute of Jesuit Sources, Chicago, 1967), p 110. Though useful and informative, this book badly needs pruning. It goes no way towards answering the difficulties we are considering here.

the new quest in 1954, and the pendulum is swinging back towards a guarded optimism.[10]

3. The legitimacy of the quest also requires arguing, though most people brought up in the catholic tradition must instinctively feel the need of some degree of acquaintanceship with what we may call, with due reservations, the human personality of Christ. D. M. Baillie warns us against 'the false idea that Christ is "Man" but not *a* man . . . Surely whatever else Jesus was, he was a member of the human race, the human species, a man among men, or one man among others. However true may be the conception of human solidarity, or of the solidarity of Christ with mankind, or of Christ as the "representative Man" through whom we come to God, it remains true that he was a man among men'.[11] Jesus was, in fact a first-century palestinian jew, and we need the synoptic gospels to remind us of this. Of course neither St Paul nor St John would have dreamed of denying it, but it was not, to say the least, a truth they were concerned to emphasize. Jesus' human individuality does not in itself legitimize the interest in his personal self-awareness, but it is the first condition of such a legitimization.

4. Among the false answers to the problem we are concerned with there is one which is particularly insidious. It is what I call 'the pantomime horse' theory of the relationship between Jesus' divinity and humanity. According to this view, Jesus looks like a man and talks like a man, but underneath we know that he is really God. So in meditating upon the infancy narratives, we reflect that this little child holds the whole world in the palm of his hand. Even as a child, Jesus knew exactly where he was going and what he was doing; while he was still in the cradle the whole of his subsequent career had been unrolled like a map in front of him. This view of the infant Jesus is indistinguishable from myth: like the infant Hercules, he was able to destroy anything that might harm him; and as we know, it was not long before some christian believers succumbed to the temptation to portray Jesus as a being endowed from his birth with superhuman powers: the apocryphal gospels are largely composed of stories which assimilate Christ to the heroes of legend and folklore.

---

[10] Outstanding among recent publications is Joachim Jeremias' *New Testament Theology, Volume One, The Proclamation of Jesus* (London, 1971). Another very fine book is Jacques Guillet's *Jésus devant sa vie et sa mort* (Paris, 1971). *The Founder of Christianity* (London, 1971), by C. H. Dodd, is more readily accessible than either of these. On the subject of Jesus' self-awareness, see my summary article, 'The Consciousness of Christ III' in *The Way* 10 (1970), pp 250–259.

[11] *God was in Christ* (London, 1961), pp 86 ff.

The nearest example I can think of in the canonical gospels is the story of the coin in the fish's mouth. If this story makes us uneasy it is worth asking ourselves why.

5. The second false answer I should like to mention is quite different: it involves considering Jesus simply as the ideal human being. And here I should like to take issue with something Fr Yarnold has said: 'We ought to imitate Christ because he is the embodiment of God's idea of what a true human life should be'. This smacks to me of platonism – the true human life, the ideal human being: is there really a kind of blueprint in the divine mind which we should all somehow measure up to? Where is the evidence that Jesus possessed in a supreme degree all the human qualities which we find admirable: a sense of humour, for instance? And if we assign qualities to him simply on the ground that, being perfect, he must have had them, then we are back in the realm of imaginative projections.[11a]

6. Freud, in a well-known passage, compares the Church with an army:

> In a Church (and we may with advantage take the Catholic Church as a type) as well as in an army, however different the two may be in other respects, the same illusion holds good of there being a head, in the Catholic Church Christ, in an army its Commander-in-Chief, who loves all the individuals in the group with an equal love. Everything depends upon this illusion; if it were to be dropped, then both Church and army would dissolve, so far as the external force permitted them to. This equal love was expressly enunciated by Christ: 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me'. He stands to the individual members of the group of believers in the relation of a kind of elder brother; he is their substitute father. All the demands that are made upon the individual are derived from this love of Christ's. A democratic character runs through the Church, for the very reason that before Christ everyone is equal, and that everyone has an equal share in his love. It is not without a deep reason that the similarity between the christian community and a family is invoked, and that believers call themselves *brothers in Christ*, that is, brothers through the love

---

[11a] At the same time there is in Jesus' life, not merely in the values it exhibits but in the course it took, a revelation of the tragic dimension of human existence, of its 'paschal shape', whereby the christian is enabled to make sense of what otherwise seems abominable and absurd. Christians are often reproached for offering anodyne answers to the agonizing problems of pain and death. And if the cross is either obscured by or even simply succeeded by the resurrection, such reproaches are justified. In fact the gospels hold a different answer, one which is easier to perceive than to articulate. However, this is not our present concern.

> which Christ has for them. There is no doubt that the tie which unites each individual with Christ is also the cause of the tie which unites them with one another. The like holds good of an army . . .[12]

No one with any knowledge of Ignatius's contemplation on the kingdom could fail to be struck by this passage. There is too much truth in Freud's observations for us to be able simply to shrug them off as tendentious and inaccurate. Certainly we can question the idea of Christ as a father surrogate, and the implicit ranking of christianity – and the catholic church in particular – among the religions of the *super-ego*; but it is clear that the relationship between Christ and the individual christian is something we would wish to retain, and it is equally clear that if we do so, then Christ is going to remain for us, not just a leader, but a model for us to imitate.

7. At this point the question arises how this relationship is to be conceived. We can, if we like, make a detailed study of the Sermon on the Mount and attempt to put into practice the principles and precepts we find there. But this is a difficult and, some would say, a dubious procedure.[13] We can regard Jesus simply as the embodiment of the ideal human life, the incarnation of all moral values. But as a way of arriving at our own fundamental ethical beliefs, this approach too is very much open to question. Moreover, there is a serious risk of confusing Christ with the *super-ego*, of acting in the way he would wish us to, simply for fear of incurring his disapproval. This kind of confusion, I am convinced, lay behind the moralizing meditations much favoured by an older generation of retreat-givers, whereby the great mysteries of the gospels were reduced to scenes for imitation. The retreatant was invited to imagine how Jesus, Mary or the apostles felt on a particular occasion and to try and make their feelings his own. The danger of what Henri Holstein calls *le mimétisme*, of cheapening the spiritual life into a kind of moral mimicry, is a real one:

> When we strive to make our own sentiments which we presume to be those of Christ, the Virgin and other gospel figures, we don them like suits of armour, with no real attempt at inner assimilation. In this way, the gospel scenes tend to be reduced to the level of moral and ascetical attitudes which we impose upon ourselves by a certain voluntarism, generous rather than enlightened. Hence, too, the

---

[12] *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, (*Collected Works*, Standard Edition), Vol XVIII, pp 93 ff.

[13] *E.g.* G. Hughes in the article cited above from the *Heythrop Journal*.

> imperatives which generations of jesuits (and, I believe, other religious) have found in the contemplation of the hidden life of Nazareth: obedience, silence, and the endurance of dreary years of formation.[14]

Holstein illustrates these remarks from a late nineteenth century commentator on the *Spiritual Exercises*, Moritz Meschler,[15] and continues:

> In this passage, characteristic of what I have called 'mimetism', it is striking that Christ is envisaged solely as model. No consideration is given to the redemptive work for which he became obedient, nor to the grace which enables us to 'take on his mind' by incorporating us to him, nor even to the apostolic dimension of the jesuit vocation. We have simply to 'make a copy' of the sentiments and attitudes of the great Model, Jesus Christ.[16]

It is easy to see why Luther was so averse to the whole tradition of the *imitatio Christi*. He felt that it arose from an implicit denial of justification by faith, and concealed an incipient doctrine of works.[17] Lastly, there is, as I have said, something very suspect about the tradition – however strong – of Christ as the ideal human being.

9. Distasteful as one may find the empty moralizing of the meditation manuals, there is still room for the imitation of Christ in

---

[14] Holstein, H.: 'Entendre la Parole de Dieu dans les Exercises', in *Christus*, 14 (1967), p 83: 'On fera siens les sentiments présumés du Christ, de la Vierge et des autres personnages; on s'en revêtira comme d'une cuirasse, sans effort vrai d'assimilation intérieure . . . D'où la réduction des scènes évangéliques à des attitudes morales et ascétiques, que l'on s'impose par une sorte de volontarisme plus généreux qu'éclairé. C'est ainsi que, pour des générations de jésuites (et d'autres religieux, je pense) la "contemplation" de la vie cachée de Nazareth est devenue un impératif d'obéissance, de silence et d'acceptation des mornes années de formation'.

[15] It is worth remarking that Holstein is quoting not from Meschler's definitive commentary on the *Exercises*, *Das Exerzitienbuch des Ll Ignatius* (Freiburg-im-Breisgau, 1925–26), published 13 years after his death, but from a french translation of a manuscript, published in 1913. *Ibid*, p 86 note 1 *(Ed)*.

[16] 'Dans cette page, caractéristique de ce que nous nommons le mimétisme, il est frappant que le Christ soit uniquement envisagé comme modèle. Ni la considération de l'oeuvre rédemptrice, pour laquelle il s'est fait obéissant, ni la perspective de la grace qui nous permet de "prendre ses sentiments" parce qu'elle nous incorpore à Lui, ni même la dimension apostolique de la vocation du jésuite n'interviennent. Il faut simplement "calquer" sentiments et attitudes sur le grand Modèle qu'est Jésus Christ'. *Ibid.*, p 84.

[17] On this point (and for many other valuable remarks) see Tinsley, E. J.: 'Some principles for reconstructing a doctrine of the imitation of Christ', in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 25 (1972) 45–57. Tinsley's book, *The Imitation of God in Christ* (London, 1960), was unfortunately unavailable to me. For a valuable discussion of the tradition from a catholic point of view, see the article 'Imitation du Christ' in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Vol. VII (Paris, 1970), 1536–1601.

christian spirituality. In the first place there is the need all of us have, because of our human condition, to imitate *someone*. We do not in fact arrive at our moral beliefs or acquire our values or develop our fundamental attitudes by solitary reflection upon first principles. We learn from one another, from our families, our teachers, our friends. A wise, generous and good man – or an evil man too for that matter – wields an immense influence over those around him. Sometimes this influence is institutionalized: the sage, the rabbi, the guru. At other times it is exerted less spectacularly. But in all cases men acquire authority not just by what they say but by what they do. Attitudes are exhibited in action as well as words. A teacher who is never seen outside the classroom has a very limited influence, because although his pupils may know his ideas they do not know him. Jesus' own teaching, as perhaps he came to see only gradually, would have had far less impact if he had not been seen to live up to it during his life and through his passion – if he had not been, in St Paul's words, obedient unto death.

Where there is discipleship there is also friendship – either as a basis or as a result. As Freud saw, the true leader has both to love and to be loved. But such a love need not be rooted in the ambiguous need men have for a father-figure. True love carries its own authority: 'I have called you not servants, but friends'. And humanly speaking, there is no substitute for this kind of influence. Some are luckier than others, no doubt, but everyone needs someone to admire and – up to a point – to imitate. But by and large 'discipleship' is a better word than 'imitation', which does not figure in the gospels. 'Learn of me', Jesus tells his disciples, 'for I am meek and humble of heart'; but he is talking of a moral conversion, not of an unthinking mimicry.

One can understand why Luther rejected *imitatio* in favour of *conformitas*. '*Imitatio* he disliked because he thought it suggested some human moral endeavour to emulate Christ undertaken apart from the words of the Spirit in grace. He preferred to speak of *conformitas* to Christ: the christian life as a process of conformation to Christ through the work of the Creator Spirit'.[18]

But provided that we exclude the motives of emulation or of slavish copying there is no reason why we should not look for a human model, and if we do so then we are simply acknowledging, it seems to me, a basic human need.

10. At this point the further question crops up, why Christ in

[18] Tinsley, *art. cit.*, p 45.

particular? Granted that we all need someone to teach us what real goodness is, would we not be better off with a less remote mentor? Can I honestly say that I have learnt more from Christ than from the many good, generous, brave and unselfish people with whom I have lived and worked? Just as many students will say that they have learnt more from discussions and conversations with their own friends and contemporaries than from lectures by professional teachers and lecturers, so the religious might claim that he owes most of what he knows of God and the spiritual life to people he has lived with.

The answer to this question, which is of course crucial, contains several elements. First of all, we must reply that Jesus is alive, and alive in a way which makes it possible for him to stand in a direct relationship with each individual christian. There are two interdependent factors in this relationship. In the first place, there is the fact of the Resurrection, the core of all christian belief: 'If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is vain'.[19] Secondly, there is the experience of the Spirit, received by Christ at his resurrection for imparting to others: 'Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear',[20] said Peter to the multitude which had just witnessed the miracle of Pentecost. In the first place it is through the power of the Spirit that Jesus was raised from the dead and received his titles of glory: 'Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified';[21] . . . designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord'.[22] In the second place, it is also through the power of the Spirit that the christian is able to acknowledge these titles: 'No one can say, Jesus is Lord, except by the holy Spirit'.[23] If the confession of Jesus as Lord is the first and most fundamental tenet of christian belief, the central experience is of the power of the Spirit.[24] And the Spirit is unconfined.

11. But why, one may ask, am I expected not just to worship Christ,

---

[19] 1 Cor 15, 4. [20] Acts 2, 33. [21] Acts 2, 36.
[22] Rom 1, 4. [23] 1 Cor 12, 3.
[24] On this point, see my article, 'The Spirit and the Church', in *The Spirit in Action*, edited by R. Butterworth (St Paul Publications, 1968), pp 11–30, in which I have attempted to outline some of the conditions of the possibility of Christ's continuing presence in his Church.

to proclaim him as Lord, but also actually to model my life on his? The answer to this question lies in the Incarnation, and this is the second element we have to consider. Jesus is our model because he and he alone is the perfect human embodiment of the divine. What he reveals to us is the fact of his own sonship, something of its nature and its exigencies, and our own vocation to participate in that sonship. St John expresses this vocation in terms of mission: 'that the world may know that thou has sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me'. And since, in the fourth gospel, the active agent of the transmission of this revelation to the christian is the Spirit (just as the presence of the Spirit in the heart of the christian is for St Paul the pledge and the proof of his share in the sonship of Christ), we may conclude that any full answer to our original question must be couched in trinitarian terms.

What really lay behind all Jesus' sayings, whether ethical or eschatological, was his overwhelming conviction of (a) the transcendent authority of God and (b) his fatherly goodness and providence; and this conviction was in turn grounded in his awareness of his own sonship of the Father. So the consequences of the christian's recognition of God as (a) Lord and (b) Father is, or should be, (a) obedience, utter and unqualified, and (b) love and absolute confidence.[25]

These are the attitudes urged by Jesus in his teaching and displayed in his own life. It is because Jesus is the son of the Father, and *shows us what this sonship means*, that he is not just a leader and a friend but a model and a guide. And it is this fact alone which justifies St Paul's exhortation to put on the mind of Christ, which is also one of the central ideas of the Exercises. If Christ were merely man, the prayer to become utterly like him would be either ridiculous or blasphemous.

12. The third element of our reply is more subtle and elusive. We may begin with a quotation from the Apocalypse of St John – 'I died, and behold I am alive for evermore'[26] – one of the great themes of the book. The splendid vision of the Lamb in chapter 5 expresses the seer's realization that the glory of the risen Christ is the glory of one who has suffered. His wounds are now the badges of his triumph. We are not expected, while meditating upon the passion, to ignore its wonderful outcome; but neither are we ex-

[25] This brief paragraph sums up the contents of a very important article of Heinz Schürmann, which first appeared in the Rahner *Festschrift, Gott in Welt*, (1964), pp 579–607.

[26] Apoc 1, 8.

pected, while celebrating Christ's glorious resurrection, to forget his sufferings. David Stanley has a fine analysis of this passage, and he lays great weight upon it. He concludes that:

> If he depicts the Lord Jesus as eternally adorned with the stigmata of his sacred passion, the seer has thereby called our attention to this significant theological truth by selecting the one most striking event in Jesus' mortal life: his passion and death. What our author clearly implies, however, is that all the mysteries of Jesus' earthly history, from the cradle to the grave, have been mysteriously endowed in his glorified humanity with a totally new and enduring *actuality*. The saving mysteries of the incarnation, birth, childhood and public life of Jesus Christ, with his temptations, triumphs, frustrations, and disillusionment, retain in him, as he now exists, a perennial, dynamic reality, which remains ever contemporary with the ongoing process of history.[27]

Or, in the striking words of Scott Holland, 'when he rose, his life rose with him'.[28]

Unfortunately, the implications of the vision of the Lamb are not as clear as Stanley would have us think. The vision concerns the passion. Why must it imply more? Better to content oneself with the simple observation that the Christ of the gospels is the Christ of faith and that the identification of Jesus as risen Lord is the *raison d'être* of the gospel form. For the evangelists, as for the author of Hebrews, 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever'.[29]

13. Finally, it should be said that God's revelation in Jesus Christ derives its intelligibility from the context in which it is set. Jesus enters history not as a puzzling freak – like a biological sport – but as the last of a long line of prophets, the fulfilment of the types and figures of the Old Testament. The contemplation of the mysteries of Christ's life cannot but be impoverished by an ignorance of this dimension.

The topic is an enormous one. Jesus is the embodiment of the virtues of the covenant God, steadfastness, loyalty, truth, goodness, mercy; he fulfils and supersedes the institutions of the OT, the priesthood, the monarchy and the law; he throws a new light upon the significance of the great leaders and prophets of Israel, Moses

---

[27] *Art. cit.*, p 430.

[28] Quoted by Donald MacKinnon, 'Scott Holland and Contemporary Needs', in *Borderlands of Theology* (London, 1968), p 115.

[29] Heb 13, 8.

and Joshua, Jeremiah and the Suffering Servant. In Luther's memorable and beautiful phrase, 'the Old Testament is the testament of Christ, a letter which he caused to be opened after his death and proclaimed in the light of the gospel' (Sermon on Jn 1,1-14 in vol. X, 1, 181 of the Weimar edition of his Works). In the growth of the New Testament tradition, Jesus soon came to replace the sacred books of Israel as the living embodiment of God's revelation to his people. From being the ultimate criterion, the final justification of any interpretative adaptation, they were relegated to a second place. They were studied no longer for themselves, but for the light they could shed upon the life and teaching of Christ.

The evangelists saw Jesus reliving the temptations of Israel in the desert and emerging victorious; crowning and concluding the old law; fulfilling by his message and his miracles the promise of a new age, the day of the Lord. His deeds and words are not just evanescent glimmerings of a divine authority breaking through the barrier between heaven and earth; their lustre is enhanced by a centuries-old tradition of prophetic expectancy.

> In short, the Jesus of our evangelists, even of John, is the beginning again of the abrahamic, mosaic, and prophetic faith – a faith that is a turn of mind, a burning heart, a relish of life as gift and sign and part of God's good-pleasure.[30]

14. These considerations are incomplete. Starting with Bultmann and the challenge his work has presented to traditional catholic devotion, we have remained tied to the bultmannian problematic. As a result, the main thrust of this paper has been scriptural. The gospels are of course the central document of the christian life and will always remain so. Reading them regularly and attentively should at least keep us from mistaking a caricature of Jesus – the republican insurrectionist, the divine propagandist – from an authentic portrait. But there is a further condition too, one arising from the fact that our reading must be, in this case, *prayerful* reading. We are hoping, through our reflection on the gospels, to help to build up a living relationship with the man whose life and teaching they describe. And in this as in any other relationship honesty and integrity must play their part. We cannot afford to allow false images

---

[30] Niebuhr, R. R., 'Archegos: An Essay on the Relation between the Biblical Jesus Christ and the Present-Day Reader', in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies presented to John Knox* (Cambridge, 1967), p 85 ff.

of ourselves to block our view of him whom we would have as our friend and model.

15. Finally – a point which can only be touched on here – there are the Church and the sacraments. Like so much of radical protestant theology, Bultmann's work remains disastrously lop-sided because, while embellishing the pulpit, he hacks away at the altar. The sacraments are all invitations addressed to us by Christ, and in receiving them we give exterior expression to our response. They are not the only way of finding God, but they are, in the fullest possible sense, a *christian* way.

As for the Church, there are two things to be said. One concerns tradition, a concept which has been neglected in this paper, greatly to its detriment. The great writers of the past, Origen and Bernard, Thomas and Teresa, are part of our catholic heritage, and even if nowadays, as I would maintain, their works have to be checked against the results of subsequent exegesis, this does not diminish their value or reduce the likelihood of their having had insights which a modern exegete, crawling through the gospels with a dictionary in one hand and a fretsaw in the other, may never even get near.

That is one aspect: the heritage of the past. The other aspect is the richness of the present: Christ in a thousand limbs and voices. Recently, partly due to the Pentecostal movement, there has been a great upsurge of interest in the holy Spirit. The realization has returned that the holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, and that the fruits of the Spirit we see exhibited within the christian community – and sometimes outside it – are living signs of Christ's own continued presence. Here is another test of authenticity – the exacting and difficult test of the discernment of spirits. For where the Spirit of the Lord is, there the Lord is also.