

INCARNATION AND TRINITY

By JOHN O'DONNELL

SOME YEARS AGO in his book *On being a Christian*, Hans Küng made the point that the distinguishing mark of christian faith is not some doctrine, rite, mode of conduct or ideology but rather the concrete, historical person of Jesus of Nazareth. In that book Küng made use of modern exegetical studies to get behind the various dogmatic traditions of the Church and find the person who lies behind the New Testament and the various interpretations which have arisen during two thousand years of Christianity. The same stress on rediscovering the historical Jesus of Nazareth can be found in the writings of Schillebeeckx. 'In my view the christian confession is about a historical phenomenon, Jesus of Nazareth, a particular man with a history of his own which ended in crucifixion. This man is believed to have been a manifestation of God's action for the salvation of humankind'.¹ Schillebeeckx fears that our dogmatic interpretations of Jesus and the often one-sided stress on his divinity can obscure the real historical person and message of Jesus.²

Schillebeeckx and Küng are representatives of a general trend in theology today to reappropriate the history of Jesus. At the centre of our faith is an historical story, the story of a man who lived a particular type of life, preached a unique message and met a distinct kind of death. To put it another way, Christianity is essentially a narrative religion. Christian faith is linked to the memory of a definite person and narrates one single history, one sequence of events, the history of Jesus.

Resurrection and Incarnation

Further reflection, however, reveals that narrating the history of Jesus also involves an interpretation. In general we can say that there are no such things as purely objective, empirical facts. All facts are facts for human subjects who interpret them according to the questions they are asking. But this is even more true in the case of Jesus. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find a merely

objective record of events. The New Testament presents us with a faith interpretation of the life of Jesus.

The clearest instance of this is the resurrection of Jesus. There is no doubt that the resurrection is the event which made christian faith possible. All the gospels presuppose that the Jesus whom they are narrating is not a past figure but a present reality. Jesus is alive, he is the Lord of the christian community, a person with whom one has real contact. All the New Testament texts, therefore, take the resurrection as their point of departure. They read the life of Jesus in terms of his ending. Perhaps one could say that the early christian community read the life of Jesus backwards in the light of the resurrection.

In a provocative article called 'Easter meaning',³ Nicholas Lash makes the point that the resurrection is an interpretation of the whole life of Jesus. Jesus lived from his experience of a unique mission from the Father. He was the Father's final ambassador to the world, sent to preach and inaugurate the reign of God. But this mission also required a confirmation. Only the full manifestation of God's kingship in the world could vindicate Jesus's claim. However, to the man who has only the eyes of physical sight what happened was the rejection of this man and his message, a tragic fate, crucifixion and death. Empirically the story of Jesus seemed to amount to a story of failure, to the triumph of death, violence, despair. The Christian, however, sees the story differently. The resurrection is not just another fact. The resurrection is an interpretation of the whole life of Jesus. As Lash indicates, the resurrection is really the answer to the question: how did it go with this man and what was the sense of his ending? The resurrection (a faith interpretation) means that in spite of appearances the life of Jesus is really a victory, the triumph of life over death, hope over despair.

But the resurrection implies even more. For the resurrection says not only that Jesus lives but that he lives in the glory of the Father. In other words, the only way in which one can adequately speak of Jesus's resurrection is in terms of God-language. The resurrection is God's confirmation of Jesus, God's vindication of him. God has so identified himself with Jesus that we can no longer think of Jesus without God or God without Jesus. Our experience of God is now irrevocably bound to our experience of Jesus. God offers himself to the world through this risen Jesus. God's lordship over the world is mediated through Jesus. These

were the conclusions which the first christian communities drew on the basis of their experience of the risen Christ. God who alone is Lord (the monotheism of the Old Testament) has made Jesus both Lord and Christ (Acts 2, 36). The term applied to God in the Old Testament, namely *Kyrios*, can now be applied to Jesus.

These reflections lead to the conclusion that once the first christian communities began to explore the meaning of their faith in the risen Jesus, the meaning of his glorification and exaltation, the meaning of God's unsurpassable identification with him, they inevitably moved toward another type of language to interpret him, the language of incarnation. The language of incarnation indicates that the whole life of Jesus, his entire history, is the revelation to us in our finite history of the reality of God. In the resurrection we see in full luminosity that God has identified himself with Jesus, and had always identified himself with him. God was expressing himself in Jesus from the beginning, in his birth, in his whole life and ministry, even in his seemingly God-forsaken death. From the perspective of the resurrection, the whole life of Jesus, his history, is God's own history, for God has identified himself with it. But this means that the incarnation is not something which happened merely at the beginning of the life of Jesus, something that happened once and for all at the moment of the annunciation. Rather incarnational language is a way of interpreting the entire life and person of Jesus. As Lash puts it, the language of incarnation answers the question: who is this Jesus and where did he come from? Thus the New Testament starts from the story of Jesus, from the history of this historical person. But it uses two different ways to interpret that history. Beginning with the interpretative category of resurrection it proceeds by way of an inevitable logic of faith to the category of incarnation. But as Lash points out, these two stories (incarnation, resurrection) are not stories about two consecutive sequences of events. They are rather two ways in which we truly narrate the one single history of Jesus of Nazareth.

Incarnation and Trinity

We have already seen that these interpretations are by their very nature faith interpretations, interpretations which elucidate the meaning of Jesus in properly theological language. The sense of the New Testament is that we cannot properly understand Jesus apart from God or God apart from Jesus. The two are inseparably

linked together. This also led the early christian Church in the direction of a trinitarian understanding of God. The experience of Jesus and his relationship to his Father forced the christian community to break out of the categories of Judaism and to understand God in a totally new way. Why is this so? What is the relation of the Church's faith in Jesus as the incarnation of God and its faith in the Trinity?

It seems to me that one cannot find an explicit faith in the Trinity in the New Testament but what one does find are the seeds of the doctrine of the Trinity. One sees, for example, texts in the New Testament which refer to the pre-existence of Jesus. Certainly some of these texts belong to the later period of New Testament writings. In John's gospel, for example, in the prologue, the evangelist identifies Jesus with the eternal Logos. This Logos is said to be God: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God' (Jn 1,1). Later in the same gospel John says, 'Before Abraham was, I am' (Jn 8,58). The use of the expression 'I am' is evocative of God's identification of himself to Moses in the Old Testament (Exod 3,14). And then there is the famous 'I and the Father are one' (Jn 10,30). But there are also other texts which are much earlier such as the hymn in Philippians 2. Paul says that the pre-existent Jesus did not consider his equality with God a thing to be clung to, but emptied himself and entered into our human condition of sinfulness and death.

Looking at these texts exegetically, one might be tempted to say that the early Church in its meditation upon Jesus pushed back the moment of christological identity further and further—from the resurrection, to the baptism, to the conception of Jesus, to his pre-existence. But as Kasper points out,⁴ this view presupposes a dubious conception of time and eternity. Rather what we see here is that the Church in the logic of faith is driven to ground the real history of Jesus in God's eternity. The move towards trinitarian thinking in the New Testament is not an abstract fascination with the inner life of God. Rather the focus is constantly directed to our salvation, our salvation in Jesus, but in Jesus as coming from God.⁵ The incipient trinitarian theology of the New Testament makes a point of utmost significance for our salvation. The God with whom we have to do in Jesus is not a capricious God, but a God who from all eternity has been the God of Jesus, a God open to the world, desirous to give himself to the world. What happened

in Jesus is not a mere accident but the revelation of God's essential nature. Through the pre-existence language of the New Testament the historical event of Jesus of Nazareth is rooted in God's eternity and therefore Jesus belongs to the eternal nature of God himself. Jesus is part of the definition of God's eternal nature. The relationship between Jesus and his *Abba* is constitutive of God himself.

But this leads to the further point that it is exactly this relationship into which Jesus wishes to initiate us. The relationship which Jesus has from all eternity with his Father is the very relationship which he offers to us, namely his relationship of sonship. The love of the Father and the Son is not closed in upon itself. It is not the closed circle of narcissistic love. The love of the Father and the Son is by its very nature open, open to the creation, open to the gift of the incarnation. This bond of love, this openness outward, is what we mean by the Holy Spirit. It is precisely this Spirit which Jesus offers to us, so that we can share his sonship. This is most beautifully expressed in Galatians, 'Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying "Abba, Father"' (Gal 4,6).

We see then on the basis of the story of Jesus a great journey of God outwards, the journey of his sending love, and then the great return journey of that same God, the journey of his gathering love. Thinking through the story of Jesus, we see that it is impossible to think of Jesus without God and God without Jesus. Jesus is part of God's definition. But we also see that the love between Jesus and the Father is the love which Jesus offers us and into which he wants to incorporate us. And thus I believe that fundamentally the trinitarian faith of the Church is thoroughly a doctrine of our salvation. One begins with the experience of salvation in Jesus. But as Schillebeeckx stresses, the pattern of our faith is always 'salvation in Jesus, as coming from God'. The more one plumbs the depths of the mystery of salvation, the more one is drawn to re-think what one means by God. God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, a Father whom I know through Christ because I have his Spirit dwelling within me. A German Jesuit seems to me to sum up the salvific importance of the trinitarian faith of the Church when he says that to participate in the revelation event of Jesus means to be caught up in the love between God and God, the love between the Father and the Son.⁶ This love itself, which has become an event of our history in the Incarnation, becomes a contemporary event for me by the gift of the Spirit

dwelling within me. In fact, the meaning of the Holy Spirit is nothing other than this love in person, the bond of love, who unites not only the Father and the Son but also unites me with the Son and through him with the Father. Thus, as Rahner says, the Trinity is the origin of the history of salvation.⁷ The open love of the Father and the Son becomes historical in the event of the Incarnation and becomes contemporaneous in the bestowal of the Spirit. The mystery of the Trinity thus opens out to the searching love of God in the history of salvation. Reciprocally, through the Incarnation and bestowal of the Spirit, God's gathering love seeks to unite the creation with himself. By the gift of the Spirit, I am caught up in the event of God's revelation, in the eternal love of God himself, of the love of the Father for the Son.

From this perspective we can see that at least for the New Testament there is no interest in developing a speculative doctrine of the Trinity for its own sake. Rather, starting from the story of Jesus as the story of God's salvation offered in him, the Church is led by the logic of faith to a new understanding of God, a God who in his very being is an openness to reveal himself and offer himself. The doctrine of the Trinity therefore exists to guarantee that the event of God's love which I experience in Jesus really is an event which is identical with God himself. It is the trinitarian faith of the Church which allows us to say with absolute confidence that God is love and which assures us that the love which I experience in Christ is nothing other than the love of God himself, the eternal love of the Father and the Son, now made available in our human history.

Incarnation and Trinity in the Second Week: some theological reflections

We have noted above one of the recurring themes in Schillebeeckx's work: salvation in Jesus, as coming from God. This phrase indicates that there are two poles in the christian experience, Jesus and God. And in general one could say that in the christian tradition there have been two approaches to christology, one from below starting with the human Jesus and one from above starting from the Trinity. I think it is important to stress that neither of these poles is exclusive; they must necessarily operate dialectically. Nevertheless, the tendency of contemporary thought is to proceed from the concrete human history of Jesus, a history which leads the believer to confess that this Jesus is God's incarnation. Thus in the first part I sketched the trajectory as it is often understood

in contemporary theology, from resurrection to incarnation, from incarnation to Trinity.

However, on the basis of this type of reflection (which seems to me the type of process of reflection which took place in the first christian communities), it is equally legitimate to move in the opposite direction. This in fact the method used by St. Ignatius in the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises. He situates the life of Jesus within the framework of the trinitarian decision that the Son should become incarnate. Thus St Ignatius uses the classical approach of a christology from above. At the same time it seems to me important to recognize how thoroughly Ignatius's approach to the Trinity and the Incarnation is oriented to the mystery of our salvation. Rahner's description of the Trinity as the origin and ground of our experience of salvation history⁸ equally applies to the ignatian meditation on the Incarnation. St Ignatius does not have the slightest interest in a speculative theology of the Trinity or in the immanent Trinity as such. All his interest is focused on the eternal decision of the Trinity to save us, that is on the economic Trinity of our salvation history. The first prelude of the meditation sets the tone:

Here it will be how the Three Divine Persons look down upon the whole expanse or circuit of all the earth, filled with human beings. Since they see that all are going down to hell, they decree in their eternity that the Second Person should become man to save the human race (Exx 106).

The second point that I would like to make is that the meditation on the Incarnation provides the theological underpinning for the whole of the Second Week. Leaving aside such key meditations as the Two Standards or the Three Classes of Persons, we see that the Second Week is substantially devoted to contemplations of the life of Christ. But these contemplations always presuppose that the exercitant sees the life of Jesus as the incarnate presence of God in our world. Underlying the whole of the Second Week is the theological notion that Jesus is the sacrament or symbol of God in the world. How should we understand this notion?

Someone like Rahner⁹ calls our attention to the distinction between a sign and a symbol. A sign draws our attention to another reality, a reality which is absent. But the relationship between the symbol and the symbolized is so intimate that the

symbolized only becomes present through the symbol. One could think, for example, of a bodily gesture such as a kiss through which my love for another comes to expression and is made concrete. Or again, one could think of the relationship between myself as a person and my body. I am a person because I can express myself through my body. My body is not just accidental to my being a person. Without my body, I could not be a person in the world. So my body is both something which I have but more radically something which I am. Analogously, the same is true of the relationship of God to the world. When God wants to express himself to the world, what comes to be is Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is a concrete, human, worldly reality (in that sense different from God) but he is so united with the Father that we can in fact say that he is the Father's self-expression. This is what Rahner means when he says that Jesus is the symbol of God. Rahner writes:

The incarnate Word is the absolute symbol of God in the world, filled as nothing else can be with what is symbolized. He is not merely the presence and revelation of what God is in himself. He is also the expression of what—or rather who—God wished to be, in free grace, to the world in such a way that this divine attitude, once so expressed, can never be reversed, but is and remains final and unsurpassable.¹⁰

This understanding of Jesus as the symbol of God is the theological justification for the Second Week. Every Christian must meditate and penetrate ever more deeply into the life and history of Jesus because this history is our access to God. There is no direct access to God which bypasses this history in which God has expressed himself perfectly. 'He who sees me sees the Father' (Jn 14,9). Rahner warns us that it is a perennial temptation to believe that we can soar directly to God, leaving the world and all worldly mediations behind. But this is impossible. God has defined himself in Jesus of Nazareth and therefore, in Rahner's words, this humanity, this human history, is of permanent significance for our pilgrimage to God.¹¹ As Rahner points out, even in the beatific vision, our access to God will always be through the humanity of Jesus. Hence the process of contemplation which the exercitant begins in the Second Week is one which will literally go on for all eternity.

A final word. The ignatian trinitarian and incarnational vision must be seen within the specific focus of the Second Week. At the heart of the Second Week is the Election. Ignatius wants the exercitant to concretize his love in the world. Hence the specific focus of the Second Week is the following of Christ in a concrete choice. This is abundantly clear in the prayer which the exercitant is to make after the meditation on the Kingdom where the stress is on imitation and service. But it is also the focus in the meditation on the incarnation. The meditation begins with the petition for the grace of 'an intimate knowledge of our Lord, who has become man for me, that I may love him more and follow him more closely' (Exx 104). The colloquy at the conclusion stresses, 'I will beg for grace to follow and imitate more closely our Lord, who has just become man for me' (Exx 109). Thus the type of incarnational mysticism which Ignatius offers is a mysticism of action. This mysticism is rooted in the eternal plan of the divine Trinity to save. The trinitarian plan has been executed in the incarnation of Christ, in his life, death and resurrection which the exercitant is asked to contemplate intensively during the Exercises. But the focus of this contemplation, especially in the Second Week, is on the choice, the imitation, the co-operation with Christ and the other trinitarian persons in their desire to save. The eternal decision of the Trinity to intervene in our history for the sake of our salvation is the ultimate foundation of the ignatian goal of contemplation in action by which the exercitant, led ever more fully to conform himself to the pattern of the incarnate life of Christ, co-operates concretely with the mission of the Trinity in the world.

NOTES

¹ Preface to *Edward Schillebeeckx, portrait of a theologian* by J. Bowden (London, 1983), p ix.

² Schillebeeckx, Edward, *Jesus, an experiment in christology* (London, Collins, 1979), p 671.

³ Lash, Nicholas: 'Easter meaning', *Heythrop Journal* XXV (1984), pp 3—18.

⁴ Kasper, Walter: *Jesus the Christ* (London, Burns and Oates, 1977), p 172.

⁵ This phrase is a recurring *leitmotif* in Schillebeeckx's *Jesus, an experiment in christology*.

⁶ Knauer, Peter: *Der Glaube kommt vom Hören* (2nd ed) (Frankfurt am Main, 1982), p 150.

⁷ Rahner develops this thesis at length in his book *The Trinity* (London, 1970).

⁸ See *ibid.*

⁹ See 'Theology of the symbol' *Theological Investigations IV* (London, 1966), pp 221—252. For a short summary of Rahner's symbol theology, see J. O'Donnell, 'The mystery of faith in the theology of Karl Rahner' *Heythrop Journal* XXV (1984), pp 213—215.

¹⁰ Rahner, 'Theology of the symbol' p 237.

¹¹ Rahner, Karl: 'The eternal significance of the humanity of Jesus for our relationship with God', *Theological Investigations II* (London, 1967), pp 35—46.