

Thinking about Jesus

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Perhaps I'd better make two preliminary remarks. One is that, inevitably, I am speaking out of tradition which is quite clearly marked in a confessional sense, that is to say quite definitely in the Roman Catholic tradition, and so some of the problems which vex me may be peculiarly Roman Catholic problems. I mention that because certainly I shall not only be looking at thought that has been located in our Roman Catholic continuum, yet at the same time there is no doubt that for various reasons (in the way I have been philosophically brought up, and so on) this particular tradition will be exerting pressures, even of an unconscious kind, on me.

The second preliminary remark is of a rather different kind. I understand that I am supposed to open this discussion – that is to say to talk for twenty minutes or half an hour, but not more than that, so I think I can allow myself a certain amount of freedom. I would like to raise questions, rather than get answers.

So, two preliminary remarks. One to protect myself against seeming over-confessionally characterised, on the other hand I want to protect myself against being thought too questioning altogether.

The title has been quite definitely chosen as “Thinking about Jesus Christ”. I mean that title fairly strictly, because I wouldn't like the title to be “Jesus Christ”. Obviously, thinking about Jesus Christ can't ignore the object of the thinking! But I would like to stand back a bit from actually thinking *about* Jesus Christ, and think about *thinking* about Jesus Christ, because at the moment it seems to be a most difficult area.

Anyone who is a practising, believing Christian is bound to have some kind of permanent, binding relationship with Jesus Christ. The difficulties in fact don't arise at the level of practice; or if they do arise at the level of practice, the difficulties are sorted out, more or less, without having to appeal always to ultimate principles. But if one starts trying to take up the whole question of where one is as someone living in the twentieth century, not only involved in practical or moral problems, but with intellectual problems as well, then it seems to me that “Jesus Christ” has become extremely questionable – open to question in all sorts of ways, and perhaps not in the same kind of way in

which “Jesus Christ” was questionable, say (I speak now as a Catholic) fifteen years ago, or certainly one thousand five hundred years ago, or perhaps a little more.

I think this is where my own tradition is particularly influential to me. I had always wanted to teach the subject which has, I think fairly recently, acquired the title “Christology”. It is one of these ‘ologies which is not perhaps a very satisfactory ‘ology. There has been an unfortunate tendency to attach ‘ology to nearly anything. I begin by questioning whether this is appropriate, because in fact the ‘ology termination does presuppose a certain kind of abstraction, a certain kind of theoretical approach, a certain conception of what constitutes reasonableness, and in fact what is meaning at all, what constitutes thinking. I think one of the problems we have to face today is just what *does* constitute rationality, what *is* thinking, what *are* the appropriate categories, not only for thinking about Jesus Christ, but about anything else.

Certainly, when one attaches ‘ology to such a term as sociology, then the kind of rationality within that area is widely open to question. Similarly in psychology – what the ‘psyche’ is in ‘psychology’ is very much open to question. and the kind of rationality presupposed in examining what might be the psyche varies enormously, varies as much, very often, as the psychologists themselves. There are schools, of course, so many schools, and so many post-schools, that one doesn’t know quite where one is.

On Christology, if one is going to use this term, I remember thinking, about ten years ago, how much I should like to teach this subject. For various reasons, I was not able to do so, and I am extremely glad that I wasn’t because when I was finally able about two years ago, I realised that any attempt I might have made ten years ago would have been quite mistaken, or at least would have involved me in presuppositions which I wouldn’t care any longer to accept as presuppositions.

The point here, without labouring it too much, is that within the Roman Catholic tradition, the notion of rationality was, I think, if not universally accepted, at least, all Roman Catholic theologians were confident enough to be able to appeal to a single tradition of what constitutes rationality, what constitutes thinking, and what was appropriately the kind of thinking to be practised when thinking about Jesus Christ. And on the whole, really, the tradition of thinking about Jesus Christ could be shown to be continuous with the kind of thinking about Jesus Christ which went on in the fifth century, say, the Council of Chalcedon – with, of course, numerous differences, but on the whole, the assumptions were very much the same. That is to say there was, for instance, a cosmic order that was rationally intelligible; that God was, if not, certainly, someone who could be analysed rationally,

at least, rationality was capable of getting to a certain point in talking about God. You had various ways, of course, of protecting yourself from talking about God too easily, but on the whole, there was this rationality of the cosmic order; it wasn't wholly alien to the kind of rationality of God himself, and therefore, even when talking about Jesus Christ, you could find a rationality of human beings which wasn't again all that alien to the rationality of the cosmos. One could find a single, coherent way of thinking, talking and understanding which applied, with appropriate differences, to God, the cosmos, and human beings, and therefore to Jesus Christ himself, as well.

Well now, this whole assumption, which I think would have been shared by all Catholics, Roman Catholic theologians, until comparatively recently, doesn't seem to me to be tenable any longer. That is to say that when you start thinking about Jesus Christ, the first problem you've got to face seems to be what style of thinking would be appropriate, in view of the very wide variety of styles of thinking which are in fact available to human beings in the twentieth century. One's got to allow for the enormous multiplication of styles of thought, styles of intelligibility, and what counts for understanding anyway. I think, if one says that, and this is my own personal feeling at the moment, then one's not going to be able, if one tries to bring one's mind to bear on Jesus Christ, Who he is, What he is, to speak without at least beginning to examine one's own assumptions about intelligibility, understanding, categories, and so on. And this is, in itself, an enormous, frightening task. I'll just make one more remark about that before it may seem that I am promising, or threatening, perhaps, more than I can conceivably deliver. I suppose one way of putting the old assumption was that there was a universality of all things that existed, simply in virtue of the fact that they did exist, that they had, or were, being. Now I don't think that this kind of universality is acceptable any longer. I would myself be interested in trying to propose an alternative to this style of universality, and suggest *meaning*,* but if I went any further in that direction, we wouldn't get anywhere near talking about thinking about Jesus Christ.

To take the next step, I would like to enquire first of all into these two questions I have just put – “Who is Jesus Christ?” and “What is Jesus Christ?” They are perfectly acceptable questions. Nobody is likely to claim that they are inappropriate questions to put. They are attractively naive questions. And yet, at the same time, once one begins to put them, then the whole range of problems I've mentioned does begin to come into sight. Is there, first

* See *Meaning and Metaphor in Theology* in *New Blackfriars* March 1980.

of all, a connection between the two questions? What does one understand by a *who*-question as opposed to a *what*-question, even apart from Jesus Christ? If one is talking about human beings in general, people that one knows – people in this room – you and me – is there some difference between a *who*-question and a *what*-question? If I were not sure of the identity (let us use that word) of someone in this room, I might ask “Who was that?” and I would give some kind of description merely of the external appearance. And “Ah, yes! Well, he’s a doctor”, might be the answer. Now that is the answer to a *what*-question, and yet relevant, because one can’t dissociate the *who*-question from the *what*-question. In order to say *who* someone is, one’s usually got to give quite a number of *what* answers – it might be of a historical kind – “Oh yes – he’s fifty years old” – “he’s married” and so on. One can envisage a whole series of statistical slots here, into which information can be put. In fact, one can set up an entire file about somebody and say “Yes, well, that’s *who* he is”. And yet, of course, one knows very well that as soon as one has a file of this sort, one has lost contact, one says, with the person, with the *who*, and that somehow or other, *who* is not exhausted in *what*.

Now I’d just like to consider the older tradition on this. Generally speaking, I think in so far as the distinction between *who* and *what* was made at all, in equivalent terms, it seems to me *who*-questions were always answered, in regard to Jesus Christ, in terms of *what*-answers. About the fact that he was human, and that he was divine, for instance. These both seem to be *what*-answers, saying something about Jesus which, it seems to me, leaves Jesus out.

I said “Jesus”. Jesus is a proper name. It is used as a proper name. It can be given a kind of exegesis, “Yahweh saves”, or something of this sort. But the point about whether it has some kind of interpretative meaning is not, for the moment, relevant, because there is no doubt that the name “Jesus”, and later in the New Testament, “Christ”, were both used as proper names. “Christ” was perhaps used in a more interpretative sense, as Messiah, and yet, by the time of St Paul’s letters, “Christ”, “Christos”, was being used as a way of designating the person, the *who*.

So I think there is, then, straight away a range that needs to be explored. If one is thinking about Jesus Christ, *who*, in fact, is one thinking about? Well, in the old tradition, once one starts thinking about Jesus Christ, one starts to provide a whole lot of answers to *what*-questions. And what happens, then, to Jesus? Is Jesus, the person who walked about in Palestine two thousand years ago, the object of our thinking? Or are we thinking, and this is a real option, and one which I think has considerable significance for us all, are we thinking about someone called “Christ”?

If we are thinking about someone called “Christ”, then, it

seems to me, a very different range of expectations is broached. One might, for instance, want to appeal not to historical evidence derived from the Synoptic Gospels. One might want to consider some instances of *experience* (a very tricky word); an experience, say, of the Eucharist – something of this kind; some sense of cosmic wonder – Christ dwelling within one. Can one say “*Jesus dwelling within one*”?

When one says “Jesus”, does not one, on the whole, tend to think of a historical person (that extremely complex word) walking about in Palestine, who was born and who died – ah yes, of course, he did rise again, but that is a problem we’ll leave for the moment.

All I am trying to do is to draw attention to certain unconscious linguistic usages which allow one to talk about *Jesus* as an historical personality, and about “Christ” as someone who is universally accessible, someone who can be addressed *now*, someone who can be present within one, present within the community, present within the Church. And it is not so easy to talk about *Jesus* in this second way. And of course, when one talks about Jesus as a person who walked about in Palestine two thousand years ago, and calls him “Christ”, then one’s already involving oneself, as the Gospels and the New Testament did, in some sense, fusing two different orders, it might be, of experience, two different orders of concept. This is already, it seems to me, the kind of theological issue which one is bound now to try and face. And it becomes very much more acute, for a variety of reasons. First of all, the mere fact of the historical critical analysis of the Gospels in particular, which has been part of a whole new technique of historical critical examination, not only applying to the New Testament and New Testament figures, beginning in the nineteenth century and earlier, and applied to the whole of the past. This has meant, I think, that in order to talk about this human being, Jesus Christ, it strikes me as being no good any longer simply to say that he was human, or is human. That is to say that the humanity of Jesus Christ, that Jesus Christ is man, can only be sustained for us now by a continual attempt to put one’s finger, in the historical critical sense, on this figure of the past. I say a continual attempt, because it can never stop. I think the figure called the historical Jesus in fact becomes a vanishing point. One is never really going to be able to say with any confidence that one has reached the historical Jesus. One can’t even, I think, adequately categorise what Jesus might have seemed like to his contemporaries – all the Gospels have alternative versions of this Jesus. And from this point of view, it’s not something one ought to be particularly worried about. Let there be this variety, because in fact, in order to put one’s finger, as I say, on the historical Jesus, there’s got to be the historical, critical

approach. There's got to be this intensively analytical approach, in order to break through, as it were (this being the model one might use) the preaching of Jesus Christ in the Gospels to try and reach the historical figure behind the preaching.

But this may all seem very academic. What's the point of all this? Is it some kind of academic game? The reason why, today, in contemporary terms, it is particularly important to try and put one's finger on the Jesus of history is because, although one cannot ever say with any sense of conviction that one has reached the historical Jesus, yet the attempt to reach him is, it seems to me, of quite fundamental importance for our general sense of what it is to be human now, in all the various situations which one cannot avoid being conscious of, Latin America, South Africa, or, it might be, the Isle of Wight. In this sense, the so-called liberation theology has a particular care and concern to try and discover the historical Jesus, the man who was friend of outcasts, that figure who was compassionate in all sorts of ways, the man who was the friend of sinners, the man who, although he wasn't involved in political revolution, yet at the same time certainly adopts a stance which allows us, perhaps, to revalue our own insertion into society, or to criticise our own or other people's insertion into society – the ways in which society is unjust, and so on. The historical Jesus is very important here.

On the other hand, what does one do about the other side of "Who is Jesus Christ?" Here particularly I mean the Christ who is accessible simply by shutting (or opening) one's eyes, certainly the Christ who is accessible in the immediacy of experience – not by historical critical examination, not even by the enlivening of a sympathetic sense of who this Jesus might be, but actually a discovery, an immediate and personal discovery of Jesus as Christ Jesus present. And it is, of course, this second aspect which one has got, I think, if one is going to make shift in any sense, to give its proper value to. That is its value.

Well, since I am supposed to be introducing this subject, and I have probably had my twenty minutes already, I'll just make some concluding remarks. The thing I am trying to work towards is this. How can one make the traditional affirmation that Jesus is both man and God, and make it make sense for one in the twentieth century? The part I want to make clear, and I think I feel fairly committed to this, is that the absolute prerequisite for making sense of this statement is to admit at the start that one doesn't know what one means either by *man*, or by *God*. I think the difficulty about the traditional affirmation, for those who do find it difficult (I don't know that I find it difficult; I find it of absorbing interest, but I don't know what it means; but there are those who find it difficult ... in the sense of finding it inconsistent or incom-

patible with their own experience, or with their sense of life and meaning) is that there has been, in the past, in some traditions, not a complete but a far-reaching clarity both about man and about God, and therefore, when one made this kind of predication about Jesus, (who we are taking to be at the moment the subject of our thinking,) and I think these predications were what-predications, both of Jesus as man and Jesus as God, one knew what one was saying. I think the important thing, when one is making this kind of predication, is to recognise that one might *progressively begin* to understand what one is doing when one says Jesus is man, and God. But let's not say that we know at the start. Because above all, on any view of the revelation of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, it was a profound revaluation, in Jesus Christ, of both what one understands, of what his contemporaries understood, by man and by God.

It is not as though simply the God of the Old Testament were now to be addressed as Father by Jesus speaking as Son. That's certainly a very important part of it. But the question here would be, I think, whether its simply God who is being called Father, or whether, within some generalised consciousness of God – general tradition of God, Jesus's emergence, Jesus's disclosure, was not so much that *God is Father*, but that the one he called *Father was God*, in the same sort of way, it seems to me, as one finds for instance certain words in the Old Testament – that one doesn't say about Elohim (the general God-word) that Elohim is Yahweh, but that one does say that Yahweh is Elohim. And Yahweh is the important subject-term here. I think in this sense that one would want to say that eventually, when one says Jesus is God, one is doing something very like, only more so, saying Yahweh is Elohim. One is saying something very like "Yes, Jesus is all that we have understood by God in the past, and has also made us rediscover what may be meant by that extremely strange term". He might just prompt us to revalue our sense of awareness and understanding of what God might be, and it is in fact only by our attachment to Jesus that we can keep on rediscovering, as in this sense we must, the meaning of this term "God" as we might use it.

And we have to do this, and here I really will stop, by constantly trying to bring together these two aspects of Jesus Christ. In trying to think about Jesus Christ, we must think, certainly, as acutely and analytically and critically as we can about the historical Jesus, and to enter as sympathetically as we can, in a historical way, into who this first century Jew might have been. And there is, of course, a great body of more or less useful information to appeal to, which will help us to make this identification of Jesus. And then, secondly, one's got to somehow (and I say *somehow*

here) identify this now identified Jesus with the experience “Christ”, and in fact this brings us to the primary Christian affirmation “Jesus is the Christ”, or “Jesus is Lord”, the primordial New Testament affirmation about Jesus.

The turning point here, the real turning point of course, is how on earth one adapts oneself to the transformation and transfiguration of Jesus in the resurrection? In what sense does the resurrection first of all allow itself to be located by historical critical analysis, and secondly, even supposing that one can begin to do this, what are the implications of this resurrection?

I would say here that one might understand, by the resurrection, this experience of Jesus who is Christ, who is someone who lives among us, who is accessible at the absolutely simple reaching out of one’s hand, a simple turning of one’s attention. A simple rediscovering of Jesus within one, as it were. One can use that perception. This is an approach to what one has called the resurrection. It appeals to one’s own sense of the possibility of renewing and repeating this transfiguration of ourselves.

To summarise these remarks, in thinking about Jesus Christ, one is trying to bring together one’s own sense of what it is to be human; to allow this sense of what it is to be human to be illuminated and criticised by whatever one can discover about the humanity of Jesus himself, in his first century context, and also as far as he becomes accessible to us in our immediate experience of Jesus Christ. And having done this, one also I think makes this constant affirmation, that in doing this one is being invited to – and expected to – revalue one’s sense of who and what God might be. And it is in the attempt to locate Jesus historically, and also to rediscover him as the source of one’s own possible transfiguration, it is in this kind of attempt to establish here a new identity both for ourselves and for Jesus himself, that one hopes, I suggest, to rediscover who and what God might be. And this would be, obviously, a task not for one man, not for one generation, not for any individual at all, really, but for the whole history of mankind – something which we can allow eventually to show itself at the end of time.

Meanwhile, we reach out as far as we can.

NOTE:

This transcription of the tape recording of a talk given to the Isle of Wight Ecumenical Group on 5 March 1976 was made by Mollie Lamb.