

## Christology: some contemporary issues

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*How did the theologians of the early centuries understand Christ? Thomas Weinandy, the warden of Greyfriars in Oxford, who teaches theology in the university, describes three principles worked out by the early Church and applies them to some contemporary questions.*

Contemporary Christology (the study of Christ) is alive with many issues and questions. This should not be surprising since it is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, who constantly leads Christians, of every age, to a deeper knowledge, and so love, of Jesus – who he is and what he has done for us. The present-day concerns are both old and new. Actually, many of today's questions arise out of the past and so, while the answers of today may be in some sense new, yet these new answers must of necessity find their foundation and source in the past. In this article we will examine some of these new Christological issues in the light of the Church's traditional teaching.

### **Three Christological truths**

Before we begin we must be clear about three incarnational truths. The early Fathers of the Church instinctively realised that in conceiving and articulating the mystery of the Incarnation these three truths must be maintained for they believed that such truths were at the heart of what Jesus revealed about himself and what the New Testament taught concerning him. Nonetheless, it must be said that they did not consciously articulate them in the systematic manner that I will now do.

It is truly the Son of God who is man. This truth emphasises that Jesus must be truly the divine Son of God. The Council of Nicaea (AD 325) upheld this truth against Arius, who conceived the Son of God to be a perfect though created being, and thus not truly divine. The Council stated that the Son of God was 'God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten and not made; one in being with the Father'. What is 'made' is always of a different nature (a different kind of being) from the maker. What is 'begotten' is always of the same nature (the same kind of being) as the begetter. Ants make anthills but beget other ants. Human beings build houses but beget other human children. God made the world but begot his Son and therefore his Son is God as the Father is God. Being 'one in being with the Father' equally meant that what the one being of God is is the Father begetting the Son. The very nature of the one God is the Father begetting his Son.

It is truly man that the Son of God is. From an incarnational perspective, it is of no value to uphold the full divinity of the Son if that Son is not truly and fully human. Thus, the early Church condemned both the Docetists, who claimed that Jesus' humanity was a mere pretence in that he merely took on the appearance of man but not the reality of man, and Apollinarius, who denied that Jesus had a human soul. The Son of God, if he were to save us, must live an authentic and genuine human life, and therefore he must be truly and fully human in every way, sin excepted.

The Son of God truly is man. This truth accentuates the fact that the incarnational 'becoming' must terminate in an incarnational 'is'. The divine Son and the man Jesus cannot be separate beings. The Son of God must actually exist as man. The Son of God must be man. Here the early Church at the Council of Ephesus (AD 431) condemned Nestorius. Nestorius believed that if the Son actually 'became' man, it would mean that the Son would undergo change and mutation and so would lose his divine transcendent perfection. God cannot be born, or hunger or weep, or suffer and die.

However, the early Church grasped, in faith, that this was the whole point of the Incarnation. Again, upholding the full divinity and the full humanity of the Son of God is of no value if the Son of God does not actually exist as a man, for it is through the Son's human existence – his human birth of Mary, the Mother of God, his human life, and especially his human death and resurrection – that the divine Son of God inaugurates our salvation. Thus the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) declared that it is 'one and the same Son' who is truly God and truly man. The one Son who is God as the Father is God is the same Son who is man as other human beings are human.

### **'Communication of Idioms'**

These three truths are expressed in what has traditionally been termed 'the Communication of Idioms', that is, the predicating of divine and human attributes of one and the same person – the Son. It is a way of accentuating the truth, and even the scandal, of the Incarnation. For example: 'God is born.' Such a statement embodies all three incarnational truths because it articulates that the Son is truly God and truly man and that the Son truly is man for only if he is man can he truly be born. Similarly, it is absolutely true that the Son of God suffers and dies. He does not suffer and die as God, but, since he actually does exist as man, then it is as man that the Son of God truly suffers and dies (more on this shortly).

Having delineated our three incarnational truths as found in the Church's authentic doctrinal teaching and expressed within the Communication of Idioms, let us now turn to some contemporary Christological issues. As we will clearly see they all have to do with the above.

### **The miracles of Jesus**

It might be surprising that our first example of a contemporary issue is that of Jesus' miracles. It is chosen not because some theologians deny that Jesus actually worked miracles, though some do, but because the manner in which Jesus worked his miracles is often misconceived, even by faithful Christians. Allow me to retell, with added bits and pieces, a Gospel story.

Jesus went to the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus for dinner. Martha served as a starter (the English term) raw carrots and garlic dip (a yet-to-be-discovered American fare). Jesus ate the carrots and garlic dip. Who was it who ate the carrots? It was the Son of God who ate the carrots. Did he eat the carrots as God or as man? He ate the carrots as man. God as God cannot eat carrots for obvious reasons. But, since the Son of God now existed as man, he could eat carrots, and he was very pleased that he had created them as God, because they were quite delicious to eat as man. Lazarus also ate the carrots, but unfortunately he ate a rotten carrot and died of food poisoning. Four days later Jesus returned and raised Lazarus from the dead. Who is it who raised Lazarus from the dead? It was the Son of God who raised Lazarus from the dead. Did he raise Lazarus from the dead as God or as man? Now here is the rub!

The Son of God ate the carrots as man because the Son of God truly existed as man. Many readers will probably, as do many of my students, now want to say that the Son of God raised Lazarus from the dead as God. But to say this is to forget our three incarnational truths. It is true that it was the Son of God who performed the miracle. However, it was performed by the Son of God existing as man, and so it was as man that the Son of God performed the miracle. It was the Son of God who cried out as a man, with a human voice: 'Lazarus, come forth!' In raising Lazarus from the dead the Son of God performed a divine action (or maybe better an action empowered by the Holy Spirit), but he did it in a human manner – he did it as a man. Some Fathers of the Church termed such deeds of Jesus 'theandric' actions, that is, divine actions done humanly. Everything that the Son of God did within his incarnate state was done as a man, whether it was eating carrots or raising someone from the dead. If we do not uphold this, we would have the Son of God doing some actions as a man, such as eating carrots, and some actions as God in a man. This, an authentic understanding of the Incarnation will not allow. All earthly actions performed by the Son of God must be done in a human manner for that is the manner in which the Son now exists – as man.

Let us now turn to the contemporary issue of Christ's suffering. Did he suffer as God or as man or as both?

### **The suffering of the incarnate Son**

It is commonly held, by the vast majority of contemporary Christian theologians, that God as God suffers in solidarity with our suffering. God, echoing the noble words of President Bill Clinton, would say: 'I feel your pain.' How can God be loving, they ask, if he does not suffer in union with the innocent and downtrodden? The paradigm for this, they claim, is Jesus himself. While the Christian tradition has consistently held that the Son of God suffered as man, yet he did not suffer as God, for God cannot suffer. Nonetheless, the present wisdom holds that it is precisely because the Son of God became man that he suffers not merely as man, but equally as God. In so doing he illustrates that God, in his very divine nature, always lovingly suffers in solidarity with those who suffer.

It is not possible to address here all of the complex issues that are involved in this deduction which seems so simple and so obvious true. For a comprehensive discussion of this issue see my book: *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000). Nonetheless, it must be remembered that God is not a member of this created order, and thus he is not a being who undergoes, as do human beings, a multiplicity of emotional changes depending upon the present state of affairs. Moreover, the evil that occurs within the created order cannot reverberate back into the uncreated divine order, and so God does not suffer in any literal sense. This does not make him unloving, aloof and indifferent. Rather, his perfect and unchanging love responds to all situations appropriately, whether it be in compassion, forgiveness or reprimand. His perfect and unchanging love, love that is always and fully active, perfectly embodies all responses – no matter what the human situation may be. To the sinner his unchanging love is experienced as reprimand. To the repentant his unchanging love is experienced as forgiveness. To those who innocently suffer for the sake of justice his love is experienced as compassion and the fostering of courage. But let us now return to Jesus and our three incarnational truths as found in the Communication of Idioms.

Those who champion a suffering God want Jesus to suffer not only as man but also as God. Only if he suffers as God, they claim, does God really experience and so know our human suffering. The Father of love did send his Son into the world to suffer and die so that we might be saved. Nonetheless, what is redemptive is not that the Son of God suffered as God, but that he truly suffered as man – in a manner exactly as our own. If the Son of God suffered

as God, he would not have experienced human suffering in an authentic human fashion, but he would have experienced human suffering in a divine fashion which would not be the authentic experience of human suffering.

What is redemptive is that the Son of God became man and, as man, suffered (in keeping with the Incarnation) the pains of sin and death, but in so doing, equally as man, lovingly offered his holy and innocent human life (not his divine life) to the Father as a sacrifice for our sin. Again, in keeping with our three incarnational truths, it is not what the Son of God experiences or does as God that is redemptive, but rather it is what the Son of God experiences and does as man that is redemptive. Those who advocate a suffering God completely miss the point of the Incarnation and so completely undermine its redemptive significance.

### **Did Jesus know he was God?**

The early Church confirmed, in keeping with the truth that he is genuinely human, that Jesus possessed a human will and intellect (the Second and Third Councils of Constantinople: AD 553 and 680-81). However, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the rise of historical consciousness and psychology, a new question arose. Was Jesus conscious, and so did he know, that he was God?

The first thing we need to do is to frame the question properly. The question is not 'Did Jesus know he was God?' as if Jesus, the man, was a different person or subject (a different 'who') from that of the Son. The proper question is: Was the Son of God conscious of himself and so did he know that he was God in a human manner, that is, through his human consciousness and mind? Again, in keeping with our three incarnational truths, who it is who is humanly self-conscious is the Son of God and the manner in which he is self-conscious is as man. The answer to this question must be 'yes'. If the Son of God incarnate was not humanly conscious and so did not humanly know that he was the Son of God, then he could not have revealed that to us for he would have been ignorant of his own identity, which in itself would be absurd. There is obviously something psychologically amiss with a person who does not know who he or she is.

But how then did the Son of God become humanly conscious and so humanly know that he was indeed God's Son? Traditionally, many theologians said that from his conception and birth Jesus possessed the beatific vision and so from his conception he knew he was the Son of God. However, I do not find this in keeping with the Son of God living an authentic human life, one like our own. I would argue that the Son of God became humanly conscious of who he was and so knew that he was the Son of God in a manner that is in keeping with normal human beings. I have been told that children normally come to perceive themselves as distinct persons at around the age of four. They begin to use the word 'I' in a meaningful manner. It would have been around this age, in conjunction with Mary and Joseph teaching Jesus to pray, that he began to perceive in a human manner his divine Sonship. Later, as he prayed the psalms and read and studied the Scriptures, his self-understanding as the Son of God would have become more clearly perceived and defined, so that by the age of twelve he would have clearly known that he, as the Son, must be about his Father's business. This may best be illustrated by a statue I once saw in France.

### **Joseph and Jesus singing psalms**

In an ancient monastery that now belongs to a charismatic community I saw a statue, carved from a huge old tree trunk, of Joseph sitting with the child Jesus (about seven or eight years old) on his lap. Joseph, with his expansive muscular arms around Jesus, held open before them a scroll of the psalms. Joseph and Jesus, with mouths wide, very wide, open were together singing the psalms. It is in this kind of setting, praying with his earthly father, that the Son of God became humanly conscious of his heavenly Father and so became conscious himself that he was the Father's Son. It was in coming to know the Father, through the light of the Holy Spirit dwelling within him, that the Son of God became humanly conscious and so humanly knew himself to be the divine Son of the Father.

It seems to me that this is all in keeping with our own Christian experience. By the power of the Holy Spirit we come to know the love of the Father, and thus we become aware that we are children of the Father. We perceive our true identities, who we really are, as sons and daughters only as we come to know, like Jesus, our heavenly Father.

### **Is Jesus a human person?**

Traditionally, in keeping with our three incarnational truths, the one person of the divine Son is said to exist as man. This is the meaning of the term 'hypostatic union', that is, the human nature is united to the person/hypostasis of the Son so that the person of the Son actually exists as man. However, some contemporary theologians argue that if Jesus is a divine person and not a human person, then he is missing something essential to being authentically human and therefore he is not fully human. They argue that Jesus must be a human person, but in so doing they end up denying that Jesus is the divine Son of God. This whole issue is entirely misconceived.

First, while it is absolutely crucial that Jesus' full and authentic humanity be maintained, yet this must be done precisely to ensure that this is what the Son of God is – a genuine man. To uphold the full humanity at the expense

of the divinity is to jettison the most important reason for upholding it, that is, to ensure that the Son of God actually is a man.

Secondly, the term 'person' is not some sort of 'thing' that must be added to a human being in order for that being to be complete. The term 'person' denotes that a particular being is a 'who' rather than a 'what'. Normal human persons possess a specific human identity, a specific human 'who'. When asked 'Who are you?' we answer by giving our name which identifies us as a particular and unique human being or person. Now the difference between Jesus and us is that, while he possesses everything that pertains to being authentically human – a body, intellect, will, self-consciousness, etc. – he possesses not a human identity but a divine identity as the Son of God. The identity of this particular and unique human being, Jesus, is that of being the Son of God.

Thus, to say that Jesus is a divine person or subject (a divine 'who') and not a human person or subject (a human 'who') is not to deprive him of a full humanity, but rather articulates the very mystery of the Incarnation, that is, that the person of the Son of God has come to exist as man, and, therefore, the identity of that man (who he is) is the Son of God. It appears to me this is what Jesus was getting at when he asked his apostles: 'Who do you say that I am?' He wanted them to acknowledge his divine identity, his divine personhood, who he really is. Peter got it right when he answered: 'You are the Christ; the Son of the living God.'

We have examined a number of contemporary Christological issues and, while I hope that our discussion has led to some clarity, I am equally sure that some may have many more questions. Nonetheless, it must be remembered, in the end, that theology is about the clarification of the divine mysteries, what the mysteries are. It is not about making the divine mysteries comprehensible and so thoroughly known. This is impossible, and those who do attempt to do so become heretics. Again, my only hope is that the mystery of the Incarnation has now become a little clearer in the light of contemporary concerns and in so doing has renewed and fostered a greater knowledge and love of Jesus.