

CHAPTER 13.

One must remember that this debate about the dual nature of Christ as God and man obsessed the Church in the first centuries of its life, and was only laid to rest at the Council of Nicea. The debate had been punctuated by unscrupulous manoeuvring and physical violence; all of which may have had its comic side, but was hardly the way to solve a weighty theological problem. The farce to which it degenerated was aptly summed up by an Oxford don in the question, "When the historical Jesus was dying in agony on the cross, was the Universal Christ arranging an eclipse of the sun, so that Nature could pay homage to his own demise?" Nor does the Nicene Creed resolve anything. Constantine called the Council, but a divided Church was no use to him; so he demanded unanimity on this issue. The worthy fathers did their best; the Creed simply states that Christ was God and man, and wisely leaves it there. Nothing is resolved; it was a political fudge, and remains so to this day; though time and tradition have turned it into a hallowed political fudge.

Human nature may not change; but the social conditions are as different as can be imagined from what they were in Christ's day. So what Jesus said about the relationship of God to man may be timeless; but even if at the time of his Ministry he had had all knowledge, it would be surprising if he had given much useful advice on how to cope with the problems of everyday life today. We all describe the Lord's Prayer as the way he taught us to pray; but he did not actually dictate it in English. It would have been difficult, because English did not exist at that time. No doubt English is infinitely richer than Aramaic; but Jesus had to be content with the linguistic poverty of Aramaic. Similarly with the social conditions and discipline of thought round about him. He had no alternative but to use them, however much they cramped his style.

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Is it possible to have thoughts which cannot be expressed in the limited vocabulary available? I think it is. Every advocate knows that his words express his submissions or thoughts. They express what he is trying to say. Even with the interpretation of an Act of Parliament, the words are not deemed to be the reality, because one seeks the intention of the draftsman or of parliament which lies behind the words. Perhaps with “Guilty” or “Not Guilty”, or with the General’s Orders to his Troops which have to be obeyed, words become reality; but generally words are mere ciphers to convey ideas. Nor do I agree with Wittgenstein who preached that thoughts were pictures in the mind. Thoughts are like dark shapes or moods in the spiritual world, which can be expressed inadequately in words, or music, or art, or action. And it is widely recognised that there is always a gulf between the imagination and expression; so that thoughts are not in the expression itself, but are portrayed by the expression.

Is it credible that Jesus, who had a difficult task doing the will of God particularly towards the end, should have burdened himself with All-knowledge, that is assuming that he had access to it. Knowledge that is to say, which might have been useful to him in past centuries, and knowledge which might be useful again thousands of years in the future? Or was his knowledge mercifully limited to what was useful in his own day and age? Is it to be supposed he had a working knowledge of physics and astronomy, even though he talked about the stars falling in the Day of Judgement? The stars may fall in the Day of Judgement, but in astronomical space there is no up, or down. We in England are not standing the right way up; nor are people in New Zealand standing upside down. Such evidence as we have suggests Jesus had no conception the earth was a sphere, and had never heard of Aristarchus’s hypothesis that the earth revolved and went round the sun, despite its having been made 260 years before his time.

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Instead of brooding on the limits of Christ's secular knowledge, it is more instructive to ask, as his contemporaries asked, how he came by his astonishing understanding of the spiritual world? Part of the answer is that until you believe yourself the Saviour of the World, you do not have any worth while thoughts about the way in which the world is to be saved. The thoughts of a carpenter on the way to save the world are hardly worth listening to. You must envisage the prospect of having to do it yourself! No wonder he went into the desert; and when he had thought about it, his answer was to show us the Father; to show us how he thought life ought to be lived if you believe the Father's spirit is within yourself.

The historical Jesus was surely very much a realist: not in the sense that "Politics is the art of the possible", which tends to mean cynical compliance with the world; but in his realizing the consequences of his stepping outside his own competence. He must have realized the great limitations in his knowledge of the secular world. After all he never sought to accommodate the secular world, often insulted those with power who sought to befriend him, and behaved as if he had no comprehension that it was the secular world which actually kept his little band alive and fed. In general he demonstrated a complete ignorance of the idea that bad government is better than no government at all. If you want to learn how the secular world works, go to those who had great experience of it; Julius Caesar or Winston Churchill, and read them.

I do not believe Jesus attempted to give serious guidance about conduct in the secular world; he realized his advice was not worth having. What he wanted was a new political, other worldly order, which did not call in question the supremacy of Rome. I think Professor Sir John Seeley's analysis in his book, *Ecce Homo*, is as correct as one is likely to get. If one reads how Jesus wept over Jerusalem, when he foresaw the city's fate in his mind's eye, one cannot think he ever intended to challenge Rome.

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If he did, he was mad! God would not have backed him. But I believe that in explaining his temptations to his disciples, as only he can have done, he made it plain that he renounced supernatural force as a means of establishing his Kingdom. My own opinion is that it was not available; although he appears to have thought it was. Nor was his Kingdom on the other side of death; it was to be very much in this world, at any rate to begin with. What he attempted to do at first was to preach the good-news: that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Why else did he later condemn Bethsaida and Capernaum for not repenting? Fantasy it may have been, but I have little doubt he dreamed of a new political order within the Roman peace. And the question everyone must ask himself, who disagrees with Professor Seeley yet takes Jesus seriously, is whether the Christian life is an attempt to get into heaven, or an attempt to live life properly in this world? No doubt Christ wanted to fulfil the messianic prophesies so far as he could; and a Theocracy was in the tradition of Israel. But maybe even in Christ's day a return to a theocracy was just a dream. Certainly it is not an option for us today; we experienced one attempt in the Middle Ages, and there is going to be no second attempt.

The question is crucial, although there may be no clear cut answer. And in seeking to learn Jesus' answer, we must remember he only had a sense of indwelling with God, whom he called Father, to inspire him. The only means at his disposal for saving the world was to behave as he believed the Father would have behaved, if He had come back himself. So of course he believed he could do anything, though it may not have been true; but he wisely used any power he had only to do good. And what is the difference between the Father coming back himself, and His sending a man whom He fills with his spirit, and in whom He reposes complete confidence? So Jesus told us about the nature of an indwelling with God, as he knew it. He could not at the same time tell us about an indwelling with man. It was not that it was too difficult for him; circumstances compelled him to choose one or the other.

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If Jesus had had an indwelling with mankind as well as with God, it might have disabled him from being the Messiah. He would inevitably have sought to make his kingdom embrace this other person; and his kingdom would probably have resembled Augustine's City of God: living beside the City of Rome, nourishing it and sustaining it, but being different from it. He only had God, so it had to be other worldly.

What do we mean by the Universal Christ? We all know what we mean by the historical Jesus, even if it is difficult or impossible to understand him. But what do we mean by the Universal Christ? Do we mean the Spirit who in our imaginations at least dwells in us: even though it may be a great fantasy on our part to think it is the spirit of Jesus? It can be fantasy, as is shown by the revolting conduct of many who have claimed this incomparable benefit (as Cranmer calls it). How can the men who conducted the Inquisition, began the Counter Reformation, and welcomed the Thirty Years War claim that the spirit of Jesus continued to dwell in them? We all make mistakes; but there comes a time when a man has either to acknowledge his mistake, and abandon his conduct, or part company with God. It is fairly obvious that they parted company with God. We all need to have a spirit within us; if we do not, then we are nonentities, mere ciphers. If we reject the spirit of God, graciously offered to us, then we may have to make do with a distinctly less attractive spirit. The spirit of Egotism, the spirit of Money, of ruthless Ambition, or the spirit of Murder. There are plenty of less attractive spirits, than the spirit of Jesus.

Or do we mean the Word of God: that the whole of creation was designed to be the setting for the Saviour's birth, and life? That the laws revealed by science, and the spiritual laws guiding men's conduct, were designed solely to reveal the one perfect life that has ever been lived? "All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made". Erasmus wrote, "In the beginning was the conversation". He suggests creation was the interplay of two minds, not one; which is mirrored by the view of the German General

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Staff that the proper way to conduct War was to have a marriage of minds between the Army Commander and his Chief of Staff. Why should not the historical Jesus be the Word of God emptied of everything except his immortal spirit? So that if he was faithful to the spirit within himself, he would struggle towards perfect union with the Creator. If he was faithless to the spirit within himself, he would get hopelessly lost in the labyrinth of the secular world. He would forget whom he was.