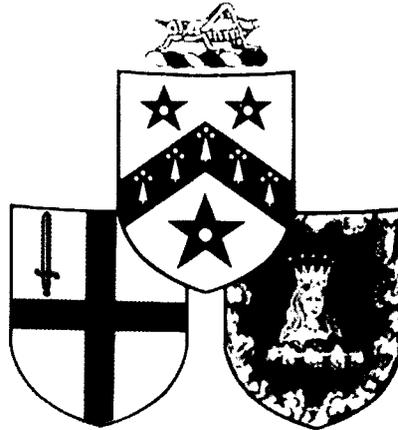


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LIVING THEOLOGY

Lecture 3

LIVING WITH JESUS (Second of two lectures)

by

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24 February 2000

Gresham Spring 2000

III

Living with Jesus - 2

Aaron Copland said somewhere that we were in need of a usable past. Since we have to live our individual lives forwards and can only understand them backwards, it helps us to negotiate our own journey if we have maps from the past to guide us. These maps are the traditions of our forebears, their reflections on how they made their own journey and understood its meaning. Education, formally understood, is the way we pass on the tradition. Societies which have achieved stability and duration usually do this best, in the sense of handing on a coherent guidance package for the journey of life. The beauty of such societies is that they inculcate the acceptance of a common view of things, a group narrative that both interprets and directs every aspect of the journey. Nietzsche has many illuminating things to say about this process:

'History teaches that the best-preserved tribe among a people is the one in which most men have a living communal sense as a consequence of sharing their customary and indisputable principles - in other words, in consequence of a common faith. Here the good, robust mores thrive; here the subordination of the individual is learned and the character receives firmness, first as a gift and then is further cultivated'.¹

Nietzsche then goes on to offer one of his most brilliant insights. He continues:

'The danger to these strong communities founded on homogeneous individuals who have character is growing stupidity, which is gradually increased by heredity, and which, in any case, follows all stability like a shadow. It is the individuals who have fewer ties and are much more uncertain and morally weaker upon whom spiritual progress depends in such communities; they are the men who make new and manifold experiments. Innumerable men of this sort perish because of their weakness without any very visible effect; but in general, especially if they have descendants, they loosen up and from time to time inflict a wound on the stable element of a community. Precisely in this wounded and weakened spot the whole structure is inoculated, as it were, with something new; but its over-all strength must

be sufficient to accept this new element into its blood and assimilate it. Those who degenerate are of the highest importance wherever progress is to take place; every great progress must be preceded by a partial weakening. The strongest natures hold fast to the type; the weaker ones help to develop it further'.²

It is important to understand the use of the terms *degenerate* and *morally weak* in that quotation. There is usually a strong undercurrent of irony in what Nietzsche says, but we probably ought to understand the meaning of the terms from the point of view of the strong guardians of the tradition in question. In Nietzschean language, the strongest natures will have interiorised the tradition most completely and will practise it unselfconsciously. From their point of view, any questioning of the tradition and any weakness in fulfilling it will be defined as degeneracy and corruption. We have all encountered exemplars of powerful traditions; of both the strong and stupid types. There is the strong conservative male, perhaps a high-ranking officer in a uniformed profession, who has completely internalised the tradition that bred him and repeatedly risked his life in its defence. These descendants of the warrior class have usually had to eschew political opinions or involvement, but they are inescapably bound in to the conservation of the tradition whose customs forbid them to be transparently political. They are, in fact, a highly politicised class, though usually in an unadmitted sense. They would die for the protection of the system that has produced them and of which they are the highest type. People who find themselves in these guardian roles usually have a high practical intelligence, but they are rarely reflective or open to doubt; there may even be a strong genetic pre-disposition in them to the unquestioning acceptance of system and order. They are often intolerant of radical reformers, whom they usually dismiss with colourful contempt. Further down the chain of authority from these strong types we usually find the truly stupid members of traditional communities. They are usually rather shallow beneficiaries of the prevailing system who have done little to protect or extend it, and they offer it their uncomprehending benediction with the kind of mindless advocacy that is so tellingly fixed in Private Eye's 'Great Bores of Today' column.

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-too-Human*, section 224, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, Penguin Books, New York, 1976, p.54.

² *Ibid.*

One of the many paradoxes of human development is illuminated here. The duration of a tradition is important to societies that prize stability and continuity, but the price they pay is a level of stagnation and stupidity that can end by threatening the safety of the tradition itself, because they inhibit its evolution and development. The strong types end up as fundamentalists who, in Giddens definition, can only 'defend tradition in the traditional way' and thereby put it at risk. Nietzsche's insight here is that it is precisely those who deviate from the tradition, because of their proneness to doubt and reflection, who provide the means for its development and continuance. The very people who are persecuted by the system for their heresy and corruption may be the agents that preserve whatever is enduringly sound in the tradition in question. A deeper version of the same paradox is that the founders who become the passionate focus of fundamentalist loyalty in a later era were originally heretics in their native context, corrupters of the traditions that nurtured them. This would appear to suggest that a tradition must be continuously subverted and re-invented if it is to have enduring life; and it is the wounding that this process inflicts that inoculates the body with the new element that helps it to develop further. This was the effect Jesus had and it is a similar type of adaptive subversion that some of us are struggling with in our own time; but in order to adapt the tradition of Jesus, we must first try to understand it.

All we have to go on are the texts of the New Testament and some other writings that did not make it into that official Church publication. The texts themselves have been a constant battleground and little that is not controvertible can be said about them. Speaking personally, I have occupied most of the notches on the continuum of interpretation, except the fundamentalist or literalist notch, which made a fairly late appearance on the historic scene, anyway. I have, at times, put my faith in the historical reliability of the texts, while working hard to smooth over their internal contradictions; at other times I have tried to demythologise them or, to be more accurate, remythologise them, by separating the essence of the message from its cultural context and trying to universalise it; latterly, I have decided that the significance of the texts cannot lie in historical claims about their extrinsic or revealed authority, but must lie in their own ability to challenge and exalt us. This

final way of using them sees them as powerful myths that connect with our own nature and its needs and confusions, offering us wisdom and the discomfort of constant challenge. This way of using the texts, though it tries to understand something of their original context, effectively separates them from it and lets them speak to our condition in ways we can use. What they say to us varies enormously in its usefulness, but it is the testimony of millions that the central core of the meaning and message of Jesus offers us a powerful instrument for guiding our lives today. In short, in the New Testament we can still find a usable past, but it has to be interpreted and adapted to our own needs.

An interesting paradox for our time is that the aspect of Jesus that is most likely to puzzle and alienate us may well be the one that challenges us most powerfully. The best way to enter the issue is to think about the word that many people regard as a kind of surname of the man of Nazareth, *Christ*. Christ is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Messiah* meaning 'anointed', which denoted a person invested by God with specific powers and functions. In the Hebrew Scriptures it could refer to anyone set apart for a special function, such as a priest; but it was used particularly of the king, who was thought of as having been anointed by divine command. When the prophet Samuel is looking for a successor to the disgraced King Saul he discovers David and anoints him. David became the once and future king of Israel, the figure the people of Israel looked back on and longed for as they endured their own tragic history. In one of my lectures in the last series I talked about this apocalyptic theme in scripture. I pointed out that apocalyptic is a widespread phenomenon among broken people, who project their anger at their oppressed state and their longing for deliverance from it onto a future hope of supernatural intervention. - Part of that longing, in the case of Israel, was the expectation of the coming of a righteous ruler, a son of David the ideal king, who would establish justice on earth. This messianic longing was an element in the mix of circumstances of the time of Jesus, and caused nervousness among the political and religious rulers of the people. It is not absolutely clear whether Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, but his followers certainly gave him the title and the word Christ occurs 500 times in the New Testament. He was certainly executed as a messianic pretender, as the ironic inscription above his

cross signified: *'The King of the Jews'*.³ The messianic consciousness of Jesus is one of the most contentious and irresolvable issues of New Testament study. The most powerful fact in the debate has to be that Jesus was clearly thought of by his followers as the Messiah, albeit a suffering rather than a triumphant one. The earliest gospel, Mark, clearly makes this identification, though he insists that Jesus wanted it to be kept a secret:

[8.27] Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" [28] And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." [29] He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." [30] And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

[31] Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. [32] He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. [33] But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

[34] He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. [35] For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. [36] For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? [37] Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? [38] Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Whatever the precise consciousness of Jesus on the matter, he was clearly understood by his immediate followers in messianic terms, and the fact that they were in daily expectation of his return at the Second Coming lends weight to the apocalyptic interpretation of Jesus. One of the most famous theological books of the Twentieth Century defined him as an ultimately tragic figure whose apocalyptic consciousness impelled him to his death. Albert Schweitzer believed that there was

³ Mark's Gospel, 15.26.

little apocalyptic expectation around in the time of Jesus, apart from the movement that surrounded himself and John the Baptist.

'The apocalyptic movement in the time of Jesus is not connected with any historic event. It cannot be said that we know anything about the Messianic expectations of the Jewish people at that time. On the contrary, the indifference shown by the Roman administration towards the movement proves that the Romans knew nothing of a condition of great and general Messianic excitement among the Jewish people. What is really remarkable about this wave of apocalyptic enthusiasm (which grew from the work of the Baptist and Jesus) is the fact that it was called forth not by external events, but solely by the appearance of two great personalities, and subsides with their disappearance, without leaving among the people generally any trace, except a feeling of hatred towards the new sect.

The Baptist and Jesus...set the times in motion by acting, by creating eschatological facts.

There is silence all around. The Baptist appears, and cries: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand". Soon after that comes Jesus, and in the knowledge that He is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, He has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to his purpose, is hanging upon it still."⁴

More recent scholars than Schweitzer have taken some of the intensity out of his claim, and see Jesus as a more complex and rounded figure whose eschatology was capable of different interpretations. Since our search is for usable wisdom, not scholarly solutions, we can leave that debate aside and concentrate on its significance for our own time. The enduring value of apocalyptic is that it expresses radical discontent with the world as it is, so it can act in the creatively subversive way that is essential if societies and traditions are not to fossilise into unchanging systems. Jesus himself did not exclusively rely on the expectation of an eruption of

⁴ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, SCM, London, 1981, pp 368, 369.

the future into the present; he offered an eschatological manifesto for the new society now.

[5:1] When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. [2] Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

[3] "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[4] "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

[5] "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

[6] "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

[7] "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

[8] "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

[9] "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

[10] "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[11] "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. [12] Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

[38] "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' [39] But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; [40] and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; [41] and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. [42] Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

[43] "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' [44] But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, [45] so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. [46] For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? [47] And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? [48] Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

These verses are all taken from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel, one of the most subversively difficult passages in spiritual literature. We know from other passages in the New Testament that Jesus subverted the Law by going beyond it or by absolutising it to the point of absurdity. Custom and law are the basis of civilisation; they vary enormously from culture to culture, but the role of custom is itself constant, acting as a container for the anarchic impulses of humanity. As we have already gathered from Nietzsche, these customs or legal systems can harden into a form that takes them beyond their original usefulness. The best approach to religious systems that have become rigid and absolute is to acknowledge their arbitrariness and accept them, if we accept them at all, as a private discipline, a way of ordering our own chaos. When they are justified in absolute terms, defended in the traditional way, they enslave the human spirit rather than protect it from its own excesses. Jesus' vision burned right through the external systems to the anxious human heart that lay beneath them and called for its transformation into a perfection of love. It is the impossibility of the vision, its eschatological hopelessness, that is the most compelling thing about it. Law has always been a problem for humanity. We need it to limit and discipline our tendency to excess and chaos, but it is in constant danger of becoming tyrannous and inflexible. When its detailed observance becomes the very purpose of our humanity, its stupidity, to use Nietzsche's word, needs to be subverted. The subversive intention of Jesus was probably expressed most succinctly when he warned his followers that they could not become his disciples unless they were prepared to hate their fathers and mothers. This is a profoundly counter-cultural challenge that undermines the importance of tradition in creating human stability, because it recognises its ultimately stifling effect on the creativity of the individual. Jesus is not offering us an election manifesto in the Sermon on the Mount; his purpose is not programmatic so much as subversive to the point of parody. He understands the necessity of law and knows its origin lies in our fear of the chaos of our own undisciplined passions; but he also recognises that the law itself can hobble, but can never transform the passions; and it is the transformed heart that is his ambition, because it alone can change the world. That is probably why he was loved by those whose sins were the sins of passion rather than of cruel control; he recognised in them a generosity and excess that was closer to his understanding of the nature of God than were the

gaolers of the human spirit, such as the man in the parable who buried his master's money rather than risk its loss by gambling with it. This tension re-appears in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, where the passionate nature that led to the excesses of the profligate brother do not finally prevent him from recognising the unconditional love of the welcoming father; whereas the disciplined control of the older brother may possibly have stood in the way of his understanding of the father's love, a point that is never resolved, because the parable is unfinished, probably because it is presented as a permanent challenge to us all. Something of the spirituality of human excess is captured in the Borges poem about the penitent thief, Luke XXIII:

*'Gentile or Hebrew or simply a man
Whose face has been lost in time;
We shall not ransom from oblivion
The silent letters of his name.*

*He knew of clemency what could
Be known by a petty thief Judea had
Nailed to a cross. Of the preceding time,
We can, today, find nothing. In his final*

*Task of death by crucifixion,
He heard, among the taunts of the crowd,
That the one who was dying next to him
Was God, and he said, blindly:*

*Remember me when you come into
Your kingdom, and the inconceivable voice
That will one day be judge of every being
Promised, from the terrible cross, Paradise.*

*They said nothing more
Until the end, but history
Will not allow the memory to die
Of that afternoon in which these two died.*

*Oh friends, the innocence of this friend
Of Jesus Christ, the candour that made him
Ask for and be granted Paradise
From the ignominy of punishment
Was what tossed him many times
To sin, to the blood-stained gamble'. (Jorge Luis Borge)*

The human dilemma is that we stumble between excess and deprivation in our self-management. We are animals, and our tendency is to the indiscriminating satisfaction of our natural impulses, as the life-force in all its cruel indifference pours

through us. The mystery of consciousness has brought awareness of our condition to us, and we have learned to build hedges against our own appetites and limits to our own cruelties. But we pay a price in self-consciousness and the stifling of spontaneity; we shuttle between sins of indulgence and sins of the spirit. Controlled societies may preserve order, but the price they pay is often the crucifixion of the human passions out of fear. We crucify what we fear, we condemn in others what we most mistrust in our own hearts. This dance between fascination and fear is an ancient theme in religious systems. It accounts for the periodic frenzies of internal persecution, as for instance in the various witchcraft purges that disfigure Christian history. What the genius of Jesus penetrated was the ambiguity of the law itself and the way it could operate as a cloak for spiritual cruelties that were austere and unattractive substitutes for the real passions. He called for a radical re-appraisal of the nature of law; he did not argue for its abolition, but for an honest recognition that it was contingent and relative, meant to protect not stifle human flourishing. Implicit in his denunciation of the cruelties of legalism was the recognition that the passionate sinners were usually more in touch with their real nature than those who had buried it beneath the law. The motive for this kind of repression is understandable, however, because lawless humanity is capable of terrible excesses. The point to remember is that the systems that are created to contain the excesses can themselves become excessive, so they require the constant criticism of the prophetic imagination. The eschatological vision of Jesus for a transformed humanity that is based on a perfected heart is not something that lends itself to programmes that translate exactly into reality. The ideal human life would recognise the goodness of both passion and order and would, therefore, follow a pattern of controlled passion. We would not kill off our nature and its force, but nor would we allow it to dominate and drive us to excess. One way of achieving this is through self-knowledge, the kind of knowledge that knows the truth of its own desires and speaks them honestly in its heart. The persecuting heart is the one that lies about its own longings and then crucifies them in others.

But the vision of Jesus is about more than personal integration; it is about social honesty and justice. His apocalyptic longing for a mended creation may not be something that lends itself to a precise programme; but it can bring passion to the

something that lends itself to a precise programme; but it can bring passion to the task of finding policies that will better the world. Throughout history there have been many of these eschatologies of human equality; the fact that they never entirely succeed nor entirely fail is the main point. They act as a stimulus to the work that is always to be done of bringing out of the chaos of desire and greed some order of mercy and justice. The Sermon on the Mount is not exactly translatable into complete political practice, but it can act as a stimulus to aspiration; it can create the sort of discontent that leads to action. A transformed version of the Jesus tradition, adapted for our day, would lay less emphasis on believing things about Jesus and more emphasis on imitating Jesus. It would be a practice system rather than a belief system. Of course, there is a basic core of belief at the basis of any praxis, but it can be kept simple and can be largely self-evidencing; We will attempt to follow the practice because we believe it to be good for us and for the world. The test of this faith will not be the dogmatic purity of the metaphysical convictions we hold in our minds concerning Jesus, but the evidence our lives offer of our commitment to his practise of subversive love.

Richard Holloway

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- to foster academic consideration of contemporary problems;
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