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“Jesus is Lord”

BY ARTHUR MICHAEL RAMSEY

MY subject is the person of Jesus Christ, and I want to do no more than consider with you the meaning of the Easter faith “Jesus is Lord”. Jesus lived nearly two thousand years ago. Christians claim that He is alive now and that He matters immensely for the human race, but those who are not Christians say that this claim is absurd and may be ignored. I ask now : why do we believe the claim to be true, and how does it matter for the world ?

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We begin with a picture of what Jesus did and taught when He lived in Palestine. Now we face at once a question which critical study has posed. Allowing, it is said, that Jesus was a prophet who proclaimed the Kingdom of God and was a sublime ethical teacher, are we sure that the specifically Christological elements in the story are not importations from the doctrine of the post-Resurrection Church and do not belong to what Jesus actually did and taught ? I am not alarmed by this question. I would rather wish to dwell precisely upon Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom as a prophet and upon His ethical teaching, for it is within these that we find implications which are stupendous.

Yes, the theme of Jesus as he went about Galilee was the Kingdom of God. The prophets of old had taught about God’s sovereignty or reign as an eternal fact in the universe. Jesus proclaimed it as imminent, as indeed already breaking into history. “The time is fulfilled, the reign of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the good news.”

Jesus sets forward the Kingdom of God in two principal ways. There are His mighty works. And there is His teaching of the divine righteousness. Now there are a host of questions which may be asked about the mighty works, but I would dwell now on one point alone : their place in the story and their relation to the Kingdom of God which Jesus is proclaiming. They are not sporadic acts of marvel or compassion : they are works of the Kingdom setting forth the reign of God. Jesus heals the sick, so it is recorded, He gives sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, and drives out demons which possess unfortunate people and torment their lives. These unhappy phenomena are contrary to God’s reign, and God’s reign includes their conquest, as well as the assertion of His lordship over nature. Yet Jesus, finding Himself popular as a healer of men’s bodies, often withdrew from the crowds in the moments of His popularity. He is unwilling to be just the popular healer. And why ? Because the works of healing like all the mighty works are only a part of the programme of the Kingdom of God, and the Kingdom of God includes the bringing of the whole of life into conformity with God’s design and purpose. And that which is most fundamentally contrary to God’s design and purpose is the distortion of the wills of men, diseased by sin and selfishness and

acting in utter variance with God's righteousness. The bodily health of a man is not an end in itself ; it is but a part of the life of man which exists to do God's will and reflect His righteousness. So the crux of the ministry of Jesus (and while I use the word " crux " in its everyday sense I would not conceal the undertones which it carries) is that Jesus must in obedience to the Father's purpose concentrate not upon those beneficent works, which are of course near to His heart of compassion, but upon the paramount theme of sin and the forgiveness and conquest of sin. It is here that the supreme battle of the Kingdom of God must be fought, and in this the Synoptists and St. John are at one.

So we look at the other aspect of the setting forth of the Kingdom of God by Jesus, the teaching of the divine righteousness. How many of the pages of the Gospels are filled with the teaching of a new righteousness. This righteousness is not a code of law, but it does imply and indeed include divine law. Divine law is not abolished by Jesus, it is fulfilled and deepened ; and if we are faithful to the teaching of Jesus we know that divine law still has a place within the righteousness of the Kingdom of God. But the heart of the ethics of Jesus is not law, it is a relationship of men and women and children to God. They are to live towards God, with the sensitive side of their being turned towards Him ; in this nearness to God they will find themselves reflecting His character, possessed by His goodness and so living as citizens in His kingdom. It is the ethics of a Godward relationship. Men are to love their enemies as well as their friends. Why ? How ? Because God's providential goodness is quite indiscriminate, giving rain and sunshine to all alike both the good and the bad ; and if we are utterly near to God we shall find ourselves reflecting this indiscriminate love and it will go out to enemies as well as friends. Again, one of the root evils in human life is fear, the soil in which self-concern and defensive self-interest grow. But live near to God, rejoicing in His providential goodness who cares for the lilies, clothes the grass, and cares infinitely for you, and there comes the abandonment of fear and the sins which it begets. Again, we must forgive those who have injured us, reflecting the divine forgiveness of ourselves.

So then the righteousness of Jesus is the righteousness of a Godward relationship of childlike trust, dependence, and receptivity. The ethical teaching of Jesus is terribly hard. It is sometimes terribly hard because of the calls to sacrifice and renunciation which Jesus gives. But it is more often hard because of the shattering generosity of God on which Jesus insists, demanding an utterly humble, childlike receptivity. To receive like a child an unmerited and staggering gift and to be humbled in the receiving time and time again : such is the righteousness of the Kingdom of God, and the apostle who spoke of justification by faith alone was in a straight line with the ethics of Jesus Himself.

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" The Kingdom of God is come upon you." Jesus proclaims this by His works and by His teaching. According to the Synoptists Jesus teaches not primarily about Himself and His claims. No, He serves the Kingdom of God, and He is absorbed in its coming. It is His

theme, and not Himself. Yet in the midst of this absorption in the Kingdom of God and self-effacement in its service there are some stupendous implied claims being made. It seems that somehow the coming of the Kingdom of God into the world hinges upon the presence and activity of Jesus in the world : it is here, with Him, in Him, through Him. Here are a few illustrations of this. One day all men will be judged, and if they have been unfaithful in their lives they will be excluded—from the presence of Jesus. It is *He* who will confront them, and *He* will say to them “ Depart from me : I know you not.” Again, men must be ready to take up their crosses and lose their life in order to find it as the prelude to the coming of the Kingdom in power : lose their life “ *for my sake, and for the sake of the good news*”. What a claim ! Again, another instance. There will be at the heart of the Kingdom of God a new covenant, that is a new total relationship between God and men, in which His law will be in their hearts and forgiveness will come to them ; and it will be a covenant *in His blood*. It will all turn upon His death, and that will be a sacrifice achieving what the sacrifices of a thousand years could not. What a claim that is ! Most dazzling of all : while Jesus demands that all men everywhere must repent and ask God’s forgiveness, there is never on His lips recorded the language of repentance. No, is He not Himself the channel through which God’s righteousness is being not only taught about but wrought in human flesh and blood ?

Now we are on the verge of Christology. And I believe that Christology does not depend only on the use by Jesus of this or that title, but rather upon his own relation to the Kingdom of God and its coming and its righteousness, a relation for which no current messianic title was adequate. If Jesus, as the evidence suggests, used the title Son of Man in His teaching, it was a title which hinted mysteriously at both a future glorious coming and a present lowly humanity rather than supplied definitions, and indeed the subsequent general disuse of the title in the apostolic Church suggests this. But in a number of sayings of Jesus there peeps out the underlying secret—a sonship to the Father distinct from the sonship of mankind in general. It is “ your Father ” and “ my Father ” : it is “ Abba Father ” with the greatest intimacy conceivable. “ And no one knows the Father except the Son, and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him ” (Matthew 11: 27, cf. Luke 10: 22).

We must press on. The resentment of the leaders of the nation against Jesus led to their determination to get rid of Him, to destroy Him. And it is clear that if Jesus continues faithful to the divine righteousness destruction in Jerusalem awaits Him. Now comes the most stupendous thing yet. The coming death of Jesus is not in His mind a dark shadow interrupting His purpose. No, it will be used by God, and indeed it is of explicit divine purpose, in order to complete His work for the divine Kingdom. His death will not be the abandonment of His mighty works : no, it will be the mightiest of them all. It will not be the defeat or frustration of the divine righteousness but the greatest showing forth of divine righteousness in flesh and blood. The reign of God will not be contradicted by the Passion. It will

come by the Passion, and the Passion will more than all else disclose its nature and the nature of its king.

We know what followed. There was the Resurrection, attested by the evidence of the recovery of the broken and scattered band of disciples into men confidently preaching Jesus to the nation which had killed Him and demanding repentance, by the evidence of His manifestations of Himself to the apostles, and by the evidence of the empty tomb. There was the Ascension, which, while it is made known to them in a symbolic act of parting, was understood well enough to be not a departure to a local heaven but the entrance upon a new mode of sovereignty and of a presence near to believers anywhere and everywhere. There was Pentecost with its transforming effects upon the apostolic company. But just now we are concerned with one matter only, the belief of the apostles about Jesus, their attitude to Him. Their attitude had passed beyond that of disciples to a teacher, beyond that of followers to a leader : it was now that of worshippers towards one who is divine. The impact of Jesus upon them, in their knowledge of Him and His total claim, was such that—Jewish monotheists as they were—they could not withhold from Him the worship and adoration due to deity alone. So it was from the apostolic experience that there came the doctrine of the deity of Jesus. The formulations used, then and ever since, were all attempts, inadequate enough, to express that Jesus is as divine as the Father is divine. The Lord, the Son, the wisdom of God, the image of the invisible God : all these are parts of the various apostolic imagery. All sprang from the experience of redemption known to those who had felt the impact of the life, the death, and the resurrection and the present guidance of the Spirit enabling them to say " Jesus is Lord ". Only with the contemporary impact of the indwelling Spirit is the confession made.

I would dwell now upon one of the pieces of the apostolic imagery, and that is the imagery used by St. John in the prologue of his Gospel. I believe that while the Fourth Gospel includes authentic historical records its greatest significance is not that so much as the fact that the Evangelist stands enough at a distance from the events to be able to ask and to answer the question : what does it all mean for humanity down the ages ? That is St. John's question, and his answer is : " The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we saw his glory ".

" Word," " flesh " : there indeed was a shattering contrast. They are biblical terms. " Word " tells of One who is living, active, creator, divine : " the word of the Lord lasts for ever ". " Flesh " tells of what is mortal, perishing, frail, creaturely : " all flesh is as grass ". And St. John is telling how One who is divine and the creator, infinite and timeless, took upon Himself in a moment of time frail, creaturely, human existence. Is it credible ? It is credible only because the nature of deity is self-giving love beyond all the analogies known to us of what self-giving love can do, and it is this which St. John at once tells us of in the words " we saw his glory ". The glory is the divine splendour and Jesus reveals it as the self-giving love of God in eternity and He reveals it as self-giving love which clashes with the glory of human pride and self-interest. The death on Calvary was thus the supreme showing forth of the glory and the act in which the glory of

God was gripped in conflict with the false glory of man and was victorious over it. How far in language and in interpretation is St. John from the Synoptists : yet in the essence of the matter how near he is to them. To them the death on the Cross is the key to the understanding of the Kingdom and its righteousness and its coming in power. To Him the death on the Cross is the key to the depth of the divine glory, and so to the understanding of the Incarnation and the Godhead. The Cross and the Resurrection of a saviour are the heart of all Christian theology, for they are the heart of the experience from which all Christian theology sprang.

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“ Jesus is Lord.” That was the primitive credal confession. The action of the Holy Spirit enables it to be made. It affirms the existence of Jesus as an historical person. It affirms His resurrection, for the word “ is ” speaks of Him as living and contemporary. It affirms His sovereignty. Today the Church is called to live under this sovereignty and to proclaim it to mankind. Allow me some reflections about the Church’s calling today.

First, the Church’s faith and proclamation of that faith are rooted in the experience of Christ as redeemer. He redeems us *from* sin. He redeems us *by* His death and resurrection. He redeems us *into* the community in which as Christians we are to forget ourselves in the worship of God, in mutual service of one another, and in the service of humanity in Christ’s name. Our power so to serve God is always rooted in our status as men and women who receive the miracle of divine forgiveness. Without the centrality of the Cross the Church may misunderstand its doctrine, its own life, and the secret of its power. Let us, however, recognize that amongst us Anglicans some may have experienced the centrality of the Cross in ways rather different from others. For instance those who value, as others do not, such things as sacramental confession or the eucharistic sacrifice do so because they find in the one the vivid nearness of Christ as the absolver, and in the other a supreme assertion that in the Cross of Christ alone is our salvation. We are called as Christians and as Anglicans to be learning from one another as to how each of us knows in experience Christ crucified and risen.

Second, because Christianity is an historical faith, we are obliged as a Church to face vigorously and fearlessly the questions of scientific historical criticism. This obligation springs not from any idea of being concessive to the spirit of the age, but from the integrity of facing truth, since we know that all truth has God as its author. We shew the strength of our faith by facing this toil and pain. The story of the historical and critical study of the Gospels in the last hundred years has contained many erroneous positions and theories, but each one of these has its lessons to learn as well as its errors to discard. I give some instances. Schweitzer’s apocalyptic theory of the Gospel message was unaccepted as it stood, but it brought home that Jesus was strange, mysterious, otherworldly, and a new perspective came to many people in their understanding of the Gospel. The school of Form-Criticism has made arbitrary judgments on questions of history, but is it not

right in helping us to see the traditions about Jesus within the teaching and worshipping of the early Church? Jesus not only in the days of his flesh but now alive in the midst of the Christian communities feeds the hungry with the bread of life and brings forgiveness to sinners. Then there is Rudolf Bultmann. We may find fault with his treatment of history and with the arbitrariness of his philosophy, but he is not wrong in helping us to see that our knowledge of Jesus must always be in an encounter in which we do not judge Him but He judges us. Many people are puzzled by these critical questions. We shall help them and teach them by learning with them, and our evangelical calling should make us the more ready to do this.

Lastly, the assertion "Jesus is Lord" means not only that He is our Lord; He is sovereign in the universe. It is an assertion about the world, as well as about Jesus and about ourselves as Christians. It is an assertion that sovereignty belongs to the divine self-sacrificing love shewn forth in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The world was always baffling, and it seems more baffling than ever today with suffering, division, bitterness, and cruelty in so many places and with actual war and killing still continuing. So too it is baffling with the development of new sciences which are frightening not only when they have such destructive potentialities but also when while being beneficent they are so able to manipulate the life of man. Is there a sovereign power? Yes, Christianity asserts, there is, and the death and resurrection of Jesus discloses it. It is the sovereignty of divine self-sacrifice, the omnipotence of divine love. To reject this sovereignty is darkness and hell, to accept it and to share it is the way to understanding and the way to God. "Jesus is Lord." It is a very costly thing, in the loyalty of our lives and in the integrity of our minds, to say this. But as Christians we dare to say it in the shadow and the light of Calvary.
