

UNITARIAN SERVICE Sunday, 3 January 2010

Theme: Liberating Jesus from dogma and creed.

Part 1

My theme today is liberating Jesus from dogma and creed. This New Year 2010 we will be celebrating the bicentenary of the founding of the Unitarian congregation in Glasgow. The Unitarian tradition is a Christian one. But most of the Christian world is Trinitarian. In other words, God is worshipped as Father, Son and Holy Spirit with Jesus Christ as the second person of the Trinity. Jesus Christ was made the Son of God, with two natures, human and divine.

I was brought up from birth in the Church of Scotland. Sunday by Sunday, I shared the family ritual of church attendance, singing mostly Victorian hymns about how God came down from heaven to earth to become the man Jesus who died to save us all. And then returned to heaven, from where he watches over us and listens to our prayers.

Nevertheless, even as a child. I don't remember a time when I thought of Jesus as other than wholly human. During my school days there was a television dramatisation of the Gospels in which the role of Jesus of Nazareth was played by a Scottish actor called Tom Fleming. He portrayed a very human Jesus who was deeply compassionate with a quiet authority. He even looked Jewish with his strong straight nose and dark eyes.

The first time I ever stood in a pulpit was in my home church when I was fourteen. It was the watch-night service, and I read the Nativity story from the Gospel of St Luke, chapter 2. What a magical story it is with the song of the angels to the humble shepherds who find a newborn baby with a manger for its cot. Today many people love the Christmas legend, without ever thinking of Jesus as a real person or as someone who is in any way relevant to their lives

In my home church as a teenager, I became one of the leaders of our youth Fellowship. One of the best things we did was to present a very modern version of the Nativity scripted by one of our members called George Cloughley. This was 1963. Marie confessed to her parents that she was pregnant but she wouldn't name the father. Joe agreed to marry her but they left Nazareth because of the scandal. They were homeless in Bethlehem when the baby was born. Some neighbours celebrated the birth with them, sensing that something very special had happened. But civil war had broken out, and so Marie and Joe were forced to flee as refugees into an unknown country.

Even then, the Jesus I identified with was not an otherworldly being but one who truly belonged to the human race and was part of a suffering world. He was a prophet of peace and justice, who served the poor, fed the hungry and healed those who were sick in body or mind. He was a teacher with a unique perspective on life. He demonstrated complete integrity of words and actions. He was courageous in challenging hypocrisy and the abuse of power. In the final crisis of his campaign for change, he protected his followers from harm, by giving himself up to the authorities. Those who were inspired by him, kept alive his message and his mission.

Part 2

Jesus Christ, the name, is commonly used as if Christ was the second or surname of Jesus. It is claimed that outside of the churches, the name is most commonly uttered as swear words! Nowhere in the Gospels is Jesus recorded as claiming the title, Christ. It was Peter, his disciple, who declared that Jesus was the Messiah, which means God's anointed one. In Greek, this is translated as Christ.

The first three Gospels, Matthew Mark and Luke are called the synoptic Gospels, because of their similarities. The fourth Gospel, John was written some years after the first three and represents a much more developed theology of the claimed divinity of Christ. Within the synoptic Gospels I cannot find any evidence that Jesus claimed divinity for himself, nor that his disciples worshipped him like a god. It was Paul, who never met Jesus, who promoted the risen Christ to divine status.

Quite often the distinction is made between the Jesus of history, and the Christ of faith. There is a verse in John's Gospel that is often quoted by conservative evangelicals. In chapter 12 it is recorded that some Greeks in Jerusalem went to the disciple called Philip and said, "Sir, we want to see Jesus." But the Jesus they present is not the Galilean of 1st Century Palestine who called others to follow him and change the world, but the Pauline icon who demands that people must believe in him to be saved.

We know that none of the gospels was written as biography. They are faith documents that were written to serve the needs of the earliest Christians and to convert others. Each has a particular context in terms of authorship, of sources, of time and place of writing and of the community for which it was intended. What we know is that they were composed in their final form well after Paul had written his epistles, his letters to the various emerging faith communities in Corinth, Thessalonica, Rome, and so on. Have you noticed that nowhere did Paul refer to the words and actions of Jesus before his death? He never quoted Jesus to support his teaching. It is true that he reflected the radical ethos of Jesus to some extent regarding equality and the nature of love. But the human Jesus seemed to vanish from sight.

Jesus has been made the captive of dogma and creed. The main focus has been on his divine status as the second person of the Trinity and the importance of orthodox faith. There has been a belief in the efficacy of the sacraments that is never far from superstition and magical thinking. In the past, persecution, torture and death were justified in the cause of saving souls. Because Jesus Christ is presented as the sinless Son of God, we are not expected to take too seriously his ethical teaching or his prophetic challenge. Perhaps those with a special vocation might serve as the model for an ideal that is unrealistic and impossible for most of us. Apparently, being a "Born-again Christian" conveys a confidence that you have been chosen for rapture in heaven when the final judgment comes. And some of the "saved" in America actually believe that God hates homosexuals, socialists and Darwinians. The greatest irony is that those who claim to be bible-based in their faith and preaching are often most ignorant of biblical scholarship and research during the past century and more.

Part 3

From a psychological perspective, each of us has developed a unique frame of reference, by which we make sense of everything that we see and hear. Ever since we were little children, we have been developing our frames of reference. At first, our parents were the major influence, and then the school and the local community and also possibly the church or faith group. Our frame of reference would be expanded by what we read in books and magazines or watched on television or heard on the radio. Sometimes, spheres of influence would have conflicted with one another so that, for example, what we heard at home might not have fitted our experience of the wider world. Sooner or later, we have to decide for ourselves what we truly think and believe.

How we think about Jesus is a product of our frame of reference, as it has developed to date. I imagine that most people adopt one of four positions with reference to Jesus Christ. One is a position of indifference, of holding no particular view, except that whatever Jesus Christ means is totally irrelevant. Another position is primarily a reactive one - that whatever is associated with the name Jesus or Jesus Christ, has been rejected and that the subject of Christianity is best avoided. The third position involves some degree of positive association or identification with Jesus, without accepting all the traditional Christian doctrines. The final position would be one of more or less absolute loyalty to the creeds and dogmas of the major Christian denominations as these have been handed down from generation to generation.

What we are perhaps reluctant to admit is the degree to which any identification with a figure such as Jesus is a projection of ourselves. Recently, Ian Brown, kindly gave me a copy of a review of a new book by Don Cupitt. He is well-known as the leader of the Sea of Faith movement. By profession, he is a philosopher of religion.

The reviewer, a Unitarian called Frank Walker, remembers how Fr. George Tyrrell, famously pointed out that Adolf von Harnack, looking for the historical Jesus at the bottom of history's deep well, saw only the reflection of his own benign 19th-century liberal Protestant face. Walker mentions how Dennis Potter, in his play, 'Son of Man' depicted Jesus as a naive sixties-style hippie, not too unlike Potter and his friends! Then he suggests that John Dominic Crossan, the distinguished Irish-American, New Testament scholar made Jesus into an Irish peasant and fellow writer, EP Sanders portrayed Jesus as an earnest Presbyterian minister.

George Walker, then asks, "Does Don Cupitt, peering down the deep well, see another non-realist, religious humanist face somewhat akin to that of former Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Yes, he does, of course!"

Recently I read "Jesus for the Non-Religious" by John Shelby Spong, and (surprise, surprise!) his description of Jesus resembled a very liberal, enlightened bishop, semi-detached from his religion, just like Spong himself!

Many others have clung to a view of Jesus Christ as literally God incarnate. Sometimes he is viewed as a supernatural agent, who arrived like Superman from another planet to save the world by dying on the cross, rising again, and ascending to heaven. Some of those who most exalt Christ as God are surprisingly dismissive about the Jesus of history and his teaching. The great theologian, Karl Barth, said:

“Jesus Christ is also the rabbi of Nazareth, one whose activity is so easily a little commonplace, alongside more than one founder of a religion.”

So how can we recover the real Jesus of history, accepting that he did exist and was not a total invention? Almost a century ago, Albert Schweitzer published his famous work on “The Quest of the Historical Jesus”. He pointed out that the human life of Jesus was so deeply encased in the dogma of the two natures, the divine and the human in Christ, that it could not be historically grasped. Two conditions had to be met before the problem of Jesus could emerge as a strictly historical rather than merely religious or theological problem. Firstly, the age-old preoccupation with the doctrine of the divine and human natures in Christ had to be shattered. Secondly, critical reflection on the sources had to arise. As long as the Scriptures were revered as if dictated by the Holy Spirit as the words of God, they could not be subjected to literary or historical criticism. In the end, historical investigation of the life of Jesus took its rise from the growing revolt against the tyranny of dogma.

Meeting Schweitzer’s two conditions has proved to be a great challenge, even for the most liberal Christian scholars. We find it so difficult to let go of our preconceptions or even be aware of their influence.

One of my heroes is Geza Vermes, who was born in Hungary in 1924 to Jewish parents. Despite the fact that all three were baptized as Roman Catholics when he was seven, his mother and father died as victims of the Holocaust in 1944. He became a priest and biblical scholar but he left the Church and returned to Judaism. He followed an academic career, becoming the first professor of Jewish Studies at Oxford University. He is probably the pre-eminent expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls, and published the most complete translation in English of all the recovered documents.

Vermes has demonstrated a very special understanding of Jesus in the whole historical, political, social and religious environment of his time. My eyes were opened by reading his first book, “Jesus the Jew, a historian's reading of the Gospels”. For the first time I read about Jesus as a man of his time and place. Vermes was able to compare Jesus to other charismatic healers and teachers of that period. Through his eyes I can begin to make sense of Jesus, and to appreciate his deep humanity, his unique vision and his creative genius.

Geza Vermes, in one of his most personal books, “The Changing Faces of Jesus”, attempts to find the real Jesus beneath the Gospels. Drawing on his knowledge of rabbinic literature and other contemporary sources, he sets the scene in rural Galilee. He points up the deep cultural differences between that northern region and the city of Jerusalem with its great temple. For example, the dialect of Aramaic used in Galilee seems to have been a permanent topic of ridicule in Jerusalem circles. You may remember, the Gospel story of how after Jesus had been arrested, Peter is recognised in the courtyard, by his accent. It was not unlike a broad Glaswegian accent being picked up in the centre of London. I used to think that it was a pity that Tom Fleming dropped his Scottish accent when he played the part of Jesus!

Vermes compares Jesus to other holy men, and asserts that Jesus is the whole package: “a prophet-like holy man, mighty in deed and word, a charismatic healer and exorcist, and a teacher whose eyes were fixed on the present task”. But more than that, he states that Jesus is “second to none in profundity of insight and grandeur of character, that he is an unsurpassed master of the art of

laying bare the innermost core of spiritual truth and of bringing every issue back to the essence of religion, the existential relationship of human with human, and human with God”.

“Besides all this, Jesus was not the meek and mild figure of popular Christian imagination. He could be determined, impatient and angry. He inherited the strength, the iron character and fearlessness of his predecessors, the prophets. The face of this Jesus, truly human, passionately faith-inspired and under the imperative impulse of the here and now, impressed itself so deeply on the minds of his disciples that not even the shattering blow of his death on the cross could arrest its continued real presence. It compelled them to carry on in his name with their mission as healers and preachers of the Kingdom of God.”