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How Would Jesus Want Me to Relate to Him? (Matthew 16.13-17)

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‘Who do you say that I am?’ Who do we say that he is? These are questions at the heart of Christian faith, and there are various ways we can ask them. Our first question this week comes from Jean, who has asked me to read it for her.

Jean

How does the Christ of faith (the gospel of Paul and the church he founded) relate to Jesus of Nazareth, whose message to his own people was that the promised kingdom of God had come and was among them? ... When Saul had his epileptic fit on the way to Damascus he related it to his "mission" to persecute the followers of that trouble-maker whom the authorities had punished with death, and as he slowly recovered he came to absorb the very conviction he had been trying to eradicate. Why do we take his word for it? Might it not all be illusory, following brain damage (witness his temporary blindness). I would be most interested to hear your commentary on this interpretation.

And the second is from Stefan.

Stefan

When I am thinking of Jesus I tend to see him as a human who managed to connect with God and onto whom God bestowed something through this connection. I don't see him as a God's son who was sent down from above to connect with us humans. This is not for me a matter of rational argument but a matter of my own emotional connection to Jesus. Seeing him as human allows me to identify with him, to see him as my distant 'brother'. I feel closeness to him and have a sense that in some small way I too could be like him. When I see him as a divine being he becomes more distant for me. I cannot really identify with him because I am a human being and he is almost a different species – a god's son. How would Jesus want me to relate to him?

Both these questions concern the identity of Jesus – the relationship between his historical human existence and the church's proclamation of his divinity. But they approach the issue in quite different ways. And perhaps each of us has our own version of this question! Jean focuses on the veracity of the New Testament witness, and its profound shaping by St Paul. How does the idea arise that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the 'Lord of all'? Is it possible that the entire faith of the church is founded

largely on an illusion, the fevered imaginings of a brain-damaged Paul? While Stefan's posing of the question is more personal – it's about who Jesus is 'for him'. Emotionally, Stefan says, he can connect with Jesus as a human being; but as supposedly divine, he seems distant, almost a different species. How would Jesus want me to relate to him, Stefan asks? And though these ways of posing the question of who Jesus is are different, my sense is that they importantly illuminate each other – so with some fear and trembling, I'm giving them jointly a go!

Our difficulties arise because of the sheer strangeness of ascribing to a particular human being – Jesus from Nazareth – things that would normally be said only of God. On the one hand, in the New Testament Jesus is described as having said and done things as a finite, historical agent, a human subject among others. He gathered a group of followers with whom he walked the roads of Palestine; he shared meals with his companions, he taught and performed certain kinds of cure, announcing the arrival of God's kingdom. He got tired, wept and suffered, and was handed over to hostile authorities to be killed.

On the other hand, this same Jesus is spoken of in language that goes far beyond any normally associated with a human being. He is called the Christ, the Anointed, said to be alive on the other side of death and still active in the world to judge and restore. In the Acts of the Apostles, St Luke describes the trial and execution of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who prays as he dies *to Jesus*, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit' (Acts 7.59). What's remarkable about this, as Rowan Williams has pointed out, is that 'Christians approach Jesus now as though he were completely with God, associated with God, able to do what God does, and so correctly addressed as if he were God'.¹

One strand of scholarship has tried to deal with this oddity by focusing on the search for the historical Jesus. On this kind of approach, it tends to be assumed that the human Jesus is the 'real' Jesus. The attribution of divinity is then said to be a later

¹ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p.63.

accretion deriving (perhaps) from Greek philosophy or (perhaps) from brain damage suffered by Paul. According to this view, we need to separate the historical Jesus from the subsequent Christ of faith; we need to stop making too many extravagant theological claims, focusing more on imitating his relationship with God, and on following his moral teachings and example.

The problem with this approach is that it doesn't really fit the historical evidence we actually have. Williams says there is 'surprisingly little in the New Testament of any stage of early Christian belief when people thought Jesus *just* a teacher or a prophet'.² Indeed, 'Some of the most extravagant claims [for his divinity] appear in the oldest strands of the New Testament, well within the lifetime and the neighbourhood of those who had known Jesus of Nazareth intimately'.³

Of course, it is true that *all* the New Testament texts are theologically freighted. Even those that seem most like factual narratives, the gospels, are 'already heavily interpreted'.⁴ They tell the story of someone who is already the object of religious devotion and commitment. It's also true that though the earliest writings about Jesus are within a couple of decades of his death, well within living memory, they are produced by Paul who was not among the disciples who'd known Jesus in the flesh. It's his interpretation that's hugely influential in the formation and faith of the church. But what grounds it? Why should we take his word for it?

In approaching these questions, I find an image offered by James Alison to be really helpful. Alison draws an analogy between the work of theology and the work of a group of scientists standing round the rim of a huge concavity in the surface of the earth. These imaginary scientists are trying to work out what has happened to produce this impact – what force, what dimensions, what speed must have been involved.⁵ They themselves have not seen the meteor hit (if that's what it was), but they're present to its effects. Alison suggests that theology is doing something like

² Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, p.62.

³ Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, p.58.

⁴ Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p.46.

⁵ James Alison, *Undergoing God: dispatches from the scene of a break-in* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007), p.1.

this – it's looking at a series of effects, and trying to work out what on earth could have caused them.

In the case of Jesus there *were* those who saw the 'meteor' (as it were) hit – there are sayings and actions that were remembered and passed on by oral tradition. There is, for example, a strong tradition of people remembering Jesus as engaging across social and religious boundaries, of him claiming authority to forgive sins, of his intimacy with God and his being handed over to death. But what's significant is that the earliest Christian communities don't just remember a collection of wise sayings and inspiring deeds. They are themselves embodied witnesses to the fact that because of Jesus, the whole human landscape is different. As if something has broken in, and interrupted how life used to be.

A new community has come into existence – one that prays and relates to God with a startling new intimacy. The possibilities of relationship across social and religious categories have suddenly and radically shifted. Those who belong to this new community seem liberated from the need to justify themselves by moral or religious performance, as well as from the fear of death. All this is connected, so they say, to a continuing and surprising sense of Jesus being somehow still present to them and with them, empowering them in new ways – offering what one scholar has called 'an entirely new frame of reference for perceiving human agency and human hope'.⁶

What's more, from its earliest days, this new community felt that what they were experiencing, their new freedom to be and belong, had relevance for all people. In the ancient world, religious practice was largely local and ethnic – there was very little by way of 'missionary' activity. But from the beginning, the Christian movement was a missionary movement – it had confidence that news of Jesus and relationship with him would be life-giving for anyone. Writes Williams: 'They saw Jesus as ... capable of transforming any human situation by his presence'.⁷ And all

⁶ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, p.49.

⁷ Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, pp.64-65.

this is what pushes the first Christians towards an interpretation of what had happened to them as radically distinct. In him, not just another prophet, not just a great teacher, but no less than God has been among them and at work to renew and fulfil possibilities for human being. He made the kind of difference that only God could make.

It seems to me that the reason Paul is authorized as a witness is that he testifies to this same impact. He might not have heard Jesus teach or watched him die, but his encounter on the road to Damascus drew him into just the same landscape as the disciples in Jerusalem had been drawn. As with those who had known Jesus in the flesh, Paul's whole vision of God and of himself was turned upside down. He was not (I would say) randomly brain damaged, but catapulted into a process of being transformed. From one who dished out suffering, he became someone willing to undergo and forgive it; from one obsessed with his own righteousness, he came to see his belonging to God purely in terms of gift, beyond desert or earning; and from being obsessed with the purity of his religious tradition, he became someone who radically transgressed all the old boundaries and declared them void.

The authenticity of his testimony consists in its congruence with how Jesus is remembered, and with what happened to the others who also experienced his impact. And it's in just this sense that we too may become witnesses. Not second hand witnesses who pass on historical information that may be more or less trustworthy, but people who've undergone in our own lives the Christic 'meteor strike' and who recognize in the reconfigured shape of our own way of being, the traces of encounter with Jesus proclaimed 'both Messiah and Lord'.

So I've been trying to unpack what gives content to the claim that Jesus is God. I've been suggesting that the early church comes to its proclamation, not by starting with a definition of 'divinity' and seeing if it applies to Jesus. It gets there by starting with the impact of Jesus' presence, and gradually coming to the awareness

that what has been effected and made possible must be understood as the presence and work of God's own self.

And this suggests that the same kind of process might be intrinsic to our relationship and understanding of Jesus. If we start with some general idea that Jesus is divine and somehow have to make ourselves believe it, then (as Stefan says) this can feel pretty abstract, distancing. How are we supposed to connect or even really know what we mean? But if, on the other hand, we start simply with an openness to him, if we spend time in his company in prayer and Scripture, if we discover ourselves being changed by this – well, then we may come to a point where we sense him as not only our brother, a fellow human being who knows our condition, but also as something more, someone to whom we might pray, someone whose life is no longer separate from ours but is mysteriously growing within us, manifesting through us. Gradually, surprisingly, we might find ourselves coming to the confession that what he is doing and making possible is nothing other than what God does and is.

'How does Jesus *want me* to relate to him?', Stefan asks. My sense is that how we *think* about him isn't the most important issue. I wonder if what he wants is simply that we trust him, be with him, let him draw us into the life he shares with the one he calls 'Father'? What we say *about* him, how we *express* who he is for us – well, that unfolds in its own way and its own time. Faith is not a matter of conforming to some general confession, but of discovering our own. And **you**, says Jesus, 'who do you say that I am?' If we stay with the truth of our own experience, I think we can trust that what he wants of us will be given – for it is not flesh and blood, not argument or speculation, that reveals him to us, Jesus says, but 'our Father' who is in heaven.