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## **The Finality of Christ (John 14. 1-6)**

### **Emmanuel Series V**

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This week and next will be the last of our series on Christology – the meaning of Christ for us. As I reflect on the themes that have emerged over this time, I notice that when I think of Christology I encounter what feel like a series of problems or difficulties.

For many, this difficulty with Christological doctrine is simply a sign of its nonsensicality, a sign that it's not even something worth wrestling with. But we could equally understand it as an aspect of the very truth our faith is trying to express: *God* has entered the human realm. And if that claim means anything, why on earth should we think it could be assimilated and encompassed without struggle into our concepts and our frames of reference? If it means anything, isn't it always going to sit at the edge of our grasp and comprehension and systems of meaning? And yet, like Jacob wrestling with the angel, isn't it through the very struggle to know and come to trust this proclamation that we may find ourselves blessed by its always strange, never to be domesticated, truth?

So this week, we turn to one last Christological conundrum. It is the difficulty, at least for our post-modern global consciousness, of accepting the claim that Jesus is '*the way, the truth and the life*', that 'no one comes to the Father except through him'.

When I was in theological college I had an argument with a fellow student around this topic. He maintained that unless you were explicitly a follower of Jesus you could not be 'saved', while I insisted with increasing desperation that the Dalai Lama was not

going to hell. It wasn't exactly sophisticated! So let me have another go at engaging this theme.

Undoubtedly, various scriptural passages can be cited in support of my fellow student's position. There's the reading we've just had; there's Peter's preaching of the risen Christ to the council of priests and elders in Jerusalem, in the Acts of the Apostles: 'This Jesus [raised from the dead] is "the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone". There is salvation in no one else. For there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved' (Acts 4.11-12). And there are many citations possible from the letters of Paul.

Equally, however, there are scriptural passages that may be cited in support of my defence of the Dalai Lama. There's the parable of judgement in Matthew 25, with those who receive eternal life not necessarily knowing that it was Christ they had been serving – 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? (Matt.25.37). And there's Matthew's earlier warning to the religiously complacent: 'Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven' (Matt.7.21). So simply quoting Scripture in an argument of this kind, doesn't necessarily get us very far.

Let me suggest that we need to distinguish two issues. One is to do with the question of religious self-identification and discipleship of Jesus. Do we need to be able to believe, to say that Jesus is Lord? And here, it seems to me incontrovertible that Jesus cares about our deeds and our journey of transformation, much more than about our consciously held beliefs and belonging. Think of the Good Samaritan who was a neighbour when the religious Jews were not, of the son who said 'no' to his father but went to work in the fields after all, of the publican who went home justified from his prayers where the Pharisee did not. In parable after parable, Jesus makes plain that

living according to God's will can happen both within and outside the self-identifying people of Israel, and so, by implication, within and outside the self-identifying church. This aspect of the witness to Jesus, I think, rules out any form of Christian exclusivism that insists that, by definition, non-Christians do not belong to God or participate in God's life and truth.

And yet, the New Testament does insist that the call to follow Christ involves a radical commitment, a conversion which is not simply co-extensive with a life of generic good will – as if all decent people are really 'anonymous Christians' (sheep without knowing it). And I suspect this call to radical discipleship was the truth that my fellow student was trying to be faithful to. So – how do we honour this feature of the proclamation of Christ as 'the way, the truth and the life', without being forced into what seems to me the unpalatable and un-Christlike stance of religious exclusivism and triumphalism.

We begin by paying attention to what kind of a way, what kind of a truth, Jesus was and is.<sup>1</sup> And the way of Jesus is not triumphal and not exclusive. It is a way of failure and poverty, a way that draws him into radical solidarity with the victims of religious and worldly systems of goodness and power. The way of Jesus is a way to life through death – the death, first, of the ego-dominated, separate self driven by care for its honour and shame, success and failure, security and need for control. Remember that following his baptism by the Holy Spirit, Jesus is sent into the desert where he must confront the temptation to source his life in these false obsessions of the ego, and where he yields himself into radical receptivity to the will, the way of God. Through this self-yielding, Jesus is filled with the power of God which is inclusive, healing and merciful, a power recognised and welcomed not by the self-righteous and self-satisfied, but by the poor in spirit, the defeated, the humiliated.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Rowan Williams' fine essay 'The Finality of Christ' in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp.93-106.

And it *is* true, I think, that this is the way to God, to life, to truth. We don't get to share in or participate in the love that is God by domination, but vulnerability; by getting the rules right, but by grace; by status or prestige or making it, but in humility. We know this from our own experience – we know that when we are trying to pull ourselves up by our spiritual bootstraps, or trying to generate a 'goodness' or 'righteousness' of our own, then we are far from the trustful, humble, vulnerable receptivity that can accept ourselves and others and so share forgiveness and life. It is always in the failure of our ego projects, the death of our self-justifying self, that we discover ourselves held by and recipients of new life and freedom from God. And for Christians, it is the story and friendship of Jesus that empowers us to entrust ourselves to this counter-cultural, counter-intuitive way, to undergo for ourselves the journey from death to resurrection life.

But if this is the way that Jesus is, then to seek to turn the 'good news' of the gospel into yet another form of religious righteousness and ideological domination, as if we Christians now *possess* exclusive access to God, is completely to miss the point. The way is a way of dispossession. It works always to undo and dissolve our tendencies to define God as belonging to us and our interests, to fix God and other people according to terms we have set.

'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'. Jesus speaks these words to his disciples at the beginning of the long Farewell Discourses in John's gospel. He has set his face to Jerusalem and the journey to the Cross – he is teaching them what participating in the life of God looks like in a world of fear and lies. But the *practice* of this truth and life leads not to exclusivism and triumphalism, but love for the world – a love which celebrates God wherever God is found, a love which heals and will not condemn.