

# Christ the Universal Humanity

Dinah Livingstone considers the Christ Epic as a vision of human fulfilment.

A fair number of books have appeared recently – quite often inspired by the Jesus Seminar – arguing that Jesus was a sage, an ethical teacher of a superb personal morality, who taught in pithy sayings and vivid parables. These books quite often go on to say that the deification of Jesus into the ‘Christ of Faith’ was an undesirable later addition, a falling away from the original purity of his message.

I wonder about that. I think the heart of Jesus’ preaching was the coming of the Kingdom of God, a kind society that is good news for the poor and oppressed. Rather than a sage he was a prophet, in the line of Old Testament prophets – perhaps even ‘a prophet and more than a prophet’. Indeed, in Luke’s account he opens his ministry by quoting the prophet Isaiah in the Nazareth synagogue:

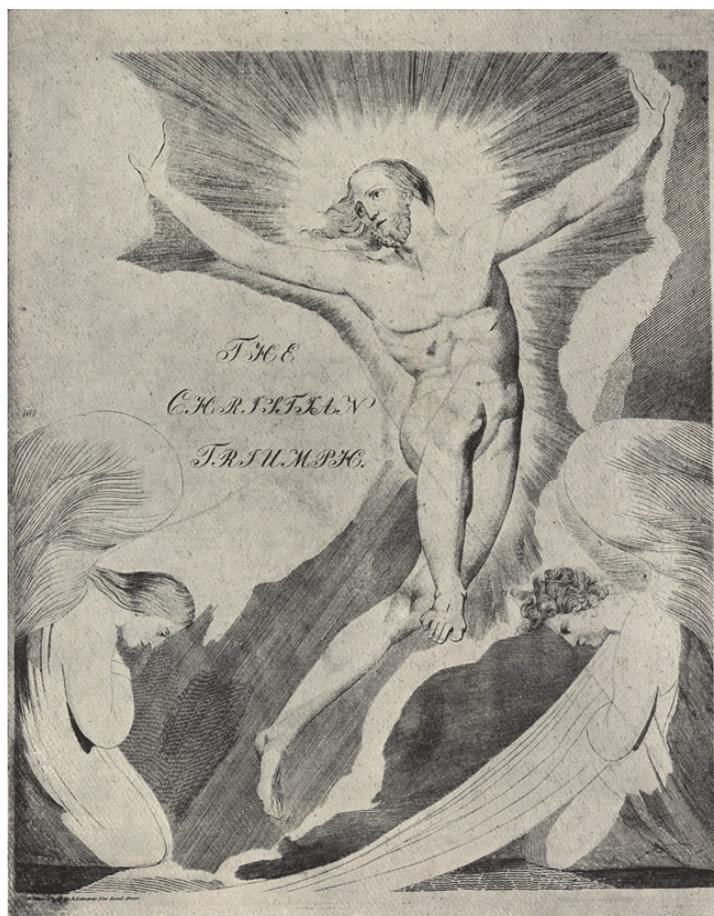
The Spirit of the Lord  
is upon me  
because he has  
anointed me  
to bring good news to  
the poor.  
He has sent me to  
proclaim release to the  
captives  
and recovery of sight  
to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go  
free – (Lk 3: 18).

Jesus goes on to say ‘Today this is fulfilled’. He claims that this longed-for reign of justice and peace has now been inaugurated with him. The Kingdom is announced and before long will come in power. This kind society requires us to behave to one another in a certain way and his pithy ethical sayings, for example in the Sermon on the Mount, are illustrations of ‘kingdom’ behaviour, for those who are with it rather than against it. The Kingdom comes first and the generous behaviour it requires follows from it. The first Beatitude is: ‘Blessed are the poor for theirs is the Kingdom.’ And indeed most of Jesus’ graphic parables

are ‘parables of the Kingdom’. He was more interested in a better world than in personal enlightenment. The heart of salvation is *κοινωνία*: *koinonia* – fellowship – rather than *γνῶσις*: *gnosis* – knowledge – although ‘Lord, that I may see!’ is also important. ‘Seek first the Kingdom of God... and all these things will be given to you as well’ (Mt 6:33)

Jesus felt very close to God his Father and he also thought he himself had a special role in the inauguration of God’s Kingdom.

His Nazareth hearers recognised that bold claim. When Jesus said: ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled,’ they tried to throw him over a cliff. Although Jesus probably did not claim to *be* God, I do not think this is a reason to jettison the ‘Christ of Faith’, the cosmic Christ epic that is a vision of humanity fulfilling its potential. If we think of divine beings as metaphors, as poetic tales created by the human imagination, if we think the divine name I AM (probably an archaic form of the Hebrew verb ‘to be’) could also be translated ‘I WILL BE’, then, as the Catholic poet Sebastian Barker said to me, ‘God has much better things to do than exist.’



William Blake: *The Christian Triumph*

When Jesus died on the cross he left history and entered into myth. He was seen (*ὄφθη*: *ophthe*) by some of his followers. His exaltation into the Christ begins very early, for example the hymn in *Philippians* is probably pre-Pauline and *quoted* by Paul (who, perhaps interpolated his own bits):

Christ Jesus,  
who though he was in the form of God  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave...

Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend and every tongue confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord. –

(Phil 2: 6-11.)

The figure of this epic hero develops, so that by the time we get to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 he is wholly human and wholly God: ‘our Lord Jesus Christ, one and *the same* Son, *the same* perfect in humanity, true God and true man, *the same* of a rational soul and body, consubstantial with the Father in deity, *the same* consubstantial with us in humanity.’ If we think that divine beings are poetic creations anyway, we have now entered mythology. But in this myth of Christ as the epic hero of the human project, it is the full-blown orthodox statement of him as wholly God and wholly man that leads to the most humanist outcome. Human *potential* is seen as all we can imagine in a being who is perfect Love. As Don Cupitt puts it, God is a ‘leading idea’ by which we construct ourselves.

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Epic and myth are poetic tales. Even in SOF we encounter people who dislike poetry or at least are deeply suspicious of it. I think the Protestant tradition has developed a certain literalism – something is either true or not. That is of great benefit to the scientific spirit. But supernatural beings are never empirically verifiable and perhaps this literalism may entail a loss of poetic insight, an unwillingness to risk that ‘willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith.’ It is interesting that most of the fellows in the Jesus Seminar engaged in their (perhaps unending) quest for the historical Jesus seem to come from a Protestant background and, as has been noted, the Jesus they reconstruct is often someone rather like themselves.

A cardinal rule of good theology is to go first, not for what Karl Rahner calls ‘the polemical *either-or*’ but ‘the synthetic *both-and*’ (and then probably enter a few *caveats* after that). I think we need *both* the prose and rigour of the brave and lonely Protestant individual conscience: ‘Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise...’ and the Catholic sense of sociability and sacrament, of

rhythm, colour and grace that does not destroy nature but perfects it. In the theology of the Incarnation we need *both* the painstaking scholarly effort to get as close as possible to the man Jesus in his lifetime *and* the Christ epic with its tremendous mythological and poetic power. In each case we need to be aware of the genre we are involved in.

For we find that the Christ epic gives us, in a very rich and moving way, the same gospel message Jesus preached. (Of course epics and myths are polyvalent; they can and have been used for more nefarious purposes.) Because we know we are dealing with a ‘poetic tale’, the myth does not lose its power when we realise the divine beings in it are fictional.

In William Blake’s *Jerusalem* Jesus is called ‘the Lord, the Universal Humanity’ who says:

Fear not Albion: unless I die thou canst not live.  
But if I die I shall rise again and thou with me.  
This is Friendship and Brotherhood:  
without it Man Is Not. –  
(*Jerusalem*, Plate 96.)

Jesus himself said to those who had behaved kindly: ‘Come you blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me...’ (Mt 25:14). When these people ask, ‘Lord, when was that?’ Jesus replies, ‘Truly I tell you, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.’ Jesus is to be found in ‘the least of us’: here he is indeed ‘the Universal Humanity’.

Paul speaks of us being ‘in Christ’: ‘The bread that we break, isn’t it a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body because we all share in the one bread.’ (1 Cor 10:16-17). As Anthony Freeman – a good theologian as well as an honest man – puts it:

In communion, no less than baptism, we are confirmed in our membership of Christ’s body. Partaking of the body of Christ does not mean ‘sharing it out’, like a cake cut into slices, but ‘sharing in it’, being part of it. It is not the bread which is magically changed into the body of Christ: it is the worshippers sharing the bread who are confirmed as the body of Christ. –

(*God in Us*, p. 56.)

That sound theological insight of how we can share in a new ‘kingdom’ humanity in Christ, through the ritual drama of the Eucharist, persists strongly and proactively in Freeman, even though he describes himself as a Christian humanist with no supernatural beliefs.

That actually does not make much difference.

In the Christ epic, Christ dies on the cross, a victim of the powerful negative forces dominating our world. He descends to the lowest depths and then rises again, exalted 'on high'. He is the eponymous hero, the Universal Humanity, a humanity which seeks to overcome its negative aspects and become members of a Kingdom, a reign of justice and peace, thus fulfilling its own highest potential.

Christ is to be found today in people struggling now – in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, as he said – and in those who are trying to bring about the Kingdom on Earth. For we know now that there has been no cataclysmic divine intervention to establish it and if we want it, we have to make it ourselves.

Liberation theology has a humanist agenda. In a recent interview on the resignation of the Pope, Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff says that Ratzinger – first as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (ex-Inquisition) and then as Pope – has silenced 100 liberation theologians, including for a time, Boff himself, a former colleague. In El Salvador the liberation theologian Jon Sobrino says that Christ is to be found today in the 'crucified people' – those who are suffering oppression, hunger and injustice – and that their struggle for a better life is Christ rising again. This idea is expressed in the words of the Creed of the *Nicaraguan Peasant Mass*:

I trust in you, comrade,  
human Christ,  
Christ the worker,  
death you've overcome.  
Your fearful suffering  
forged the new human being  
formed for freedom.  
You are rising again  
in every arm that's raised  
to defend the people  
from profiteering dominion,  
because you're living on the farm  
in the factory and in school.  
Your struggle goes on.  
I trust in your resurrection.

In England too our government is inflicting appalling suffering on the poor and disabled, rather than making the rich pay, who can better afford it and some of whom caused the current economic crisis. The gap between the rich and poor is now the widest it has been since the 1930s. As well as homelessness increasing, many people in private rented accommodation are being exiled from London, their homes, schools and families, because of the cap on housing benefit, whereas no attempt whatever is being made to cap rents. Here the Market becomes an idol with a 'divine' will that cannot be gainsaid. London weeps for her Londoners whose tremendous human richness and diversity make her what she is.

The Christ Epic of the whole divine word becoming wholly human is a tremendously rich imaginative resource. Not only is it a poetic way of representing Jesus' gospel of the Kingdom of God and the struggle for a human world of justice and peace, but it resonates in many other ways. For example, Christ is the Incarnate Word and *Ephesians* says of him (4:7): 'He ascended on high, leading captivity captive and gave gifts...' The author glosses: 'When it says "he ascended" what does it mean but that he had also descended to the lowest parts of the Earth?' A good poet or writer needs to descend into the 'underworld', the inchoate, the chaotic in order to reclaim it, then 'rise' and give it expression. T.S. Eliot called this 'a raid on the inarticulate'. The Epic is also a powerful image of the quest for integrity of personality. As Bobbie Stephens Wright puts it in her SOF Sift column in this issue: 'I was thrust into the business of discovering the darker side of my much fragmented personality.' (see page 19).

I think it is very important that, as well as the lifestory and teaching of Jesus, this Christ Epic should be kept alive and active in our culture. Christ the Universal Humanity is a superbly imaginative humanist vision, which can encourage us to go on struggling to become more humane, both in our political and personal lives. It has inspired a tremendous liturgy with great art, poetry and music, which in itself is part of what we mean by the fulfilment of human potential. By contrast, one of the 'Jesus was a Sage' books I read recently offered a 'Jesusian liturgy' whose language was so numbingly flat and 'correct' that, rather than a liturgy, it sounded more like a well-meaning local council committee hammering out an equal opportunities policy document. If we want to keep moving 'towards Humanity' we need to keep our liturgical treasures and see them for what they are, a tremendous humanist resource.

I salute those who continue to celebrate the Christian liturgy, even when they have had trouble with the authorities – whether as liberation theologians serving humanity in the least of these my brothers and sisters, or as Christian humanists, particularly those who have the guts to say plainly that God and Christ are poetic tales and that such tales are necessary.

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Dinah Livingstone's latest poetry collection is *Poems of Hampstead Heath and Regent's Park* (Katabasis 2012). Her latest prose book is *Poetic Tales* (Katabasis 2010). Her recent translations include *The Eye of the Needle* by Jon Sobrino (Darton, Longman and Todd 2008) and Walter Kasper's new introductions to his re-issued books *Jesus the Christ* (Continuum 2011) and *The God of Jesus Christ* (Continuum 2012).