

Jesus, Son of God

Edward Walker considers whether the 'Son of God' idea might have its origin in the baptismal experience of Jesus and what it might mean for us today.

The presence in our country of an ever-increasing number of Muslims confronts Christians with the question 'What do we mean by calling Jesus Son of God?' This is the big stumbling block for Muslims; as the Koran says (XIX.35), 'It is not for God to take a son unto him.' But it is not only a stumbling block for Muslims.

It was a question faced by John Hick twenty-three years ago in his book *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (SCM 1993). 'The dogma of the incarnation,' he writes, 'implies the unique superiority of Christianity and of Christian civilisation. But that supposed superiority seems to many of us today to be very dubious. And when we look critically at its religious validation we find it to be shaky indeed. The idea lacks a secure historical basis in the teachings of Jesus' (p.162).

One of the most thorough examinations of the development of the dogma must surely be Geza Vermes' last book, completed not long before his death, *Christian Beginnings* (Allen Lane, 2012). With his characteristic attention to detail, he traces every stage in the development (as the book's subtitle puts it) 'from Nazareth to Nicaea'. The Jesus of history, Vermes declares, 'played the role of the man of God *par excellence*, the prophet of prophets, the shepherd of the flock, the leader, revealer and teacher without being himself in any sense the object of worship as he later became in the fully fledged Christianity created by Paul and John, and especially from the second century onwards' (p.60). The book ends with the suggestion that a new Reformation is now called for, 'zealous to reach back to the pure religious vision and enthusiasm of Jesus, the Jewish charismatic messenger of God, and not to the deifying message Paul, John and the church attributed to him' (p. 242).

Believing Vermes' claims to be irrefutable, I yet retain an affection for the Fourth Gospel, and I wonder if the 'Son of God' idea, however encrusted by subsequent dogma, might have its origin in the baptismal experience of Jesus, attested by all four gospels. The overwhelming conviction of being the beloved son of God with which he emerged from that event, and its renewal in his times of prayer, were undoubtedly the source of that authority, so utterly unlike that of the scribes, with which he taught and acted. And John's Prologue speaks of its effect on Jesus' disciples: 'We have beheld his glory, glory as of an only Son of a Father' (no definite articles in the Greek text). Furthermore, the Prologue affirms, 'to all who received him... he gave power to become children of God' – daughters and sons, in other words – such as he was himself. Certainly the Prologue reflects the process of inflation to which Vermes refers; but through it seems to shine the simple early experience both of Jesus and of his disciples.

How are we to account for this development, from the original intense experience of sonship to the dogma at which the church eventually arrived? I have pondered a remark of Jung which offers a comment on this process. 'The deification of Jesus, as also of the Buddha, is not surprising, for it affords a striking example of the enormous valuation that humanity places upon these hero figures and hence upon the ideal of personality' (Jung, *Selected Writings*, edited and with an introduction by Anthony Storr, Fontana, 1983, p. 205). To succeeding generations both Jesus and Gotama became something more than Gandhi or Martin Luther King or St. Francis: 'the paradigm,' as one writer has put it, 'of the individuating ego.' To their devotees, each became a symbol of one who had lived his life to the utmost, who had responded wholly to the vocation to which every human being is called.



Andrea del Verrocchio and his pupil Leonardo da Vinci, *The Baptism of Jesus*, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, 1472-1475

The unique divine sonship of Jesus can now be seen not as fact, but as myth; a myth expressing the disciples' experience. The question for us, of course, is how this might relate to our own experience of living in the 21st century. As I looked through the old burial registers in my last parish before I left the ministry, I was struck by the enormous difference of the world which people of those times inhabited from the world

in which I lived. Perhaps a third of every page recorded burials of children under five. The remainder recorded adult burials, but mostly of people who had died before the age of seventy. 'Brief life is here our portion, brief sorrow, short-lived care,' sang the Victorians. There is furthermore the heavy preoccupation with sin by which previous generations of Christians seem to have been obsessed – to be found, for example in the

arias and chorales of Bach's superb Passion music. Is Luther responsible? St. Augustine? We live in a different world. As science has transformed our physical experience, so surely psychoanalysis has transformed our mental and emotional experience. We no longer look for, yearn for, an endless life of bliss after our deaths.

The novelist and psychotherapist Sally Vickers well expresses our modern concern. 'The people we were treating,' muses Dr. David McBride in her novel (*The Other Side of Life*, Fourth Estate, London, 2006, p.20), 'were not so much looking for a remedy for anxiety and depression, they were looking for a reason to be alive... For these hesitant souls it is life and not death that holds the terrors, and if I recognised the feeling it was because I shared it.' And then her novel goes on to suggest, through the mouth of the maverick psychiatrist Gus Galen, the role the church might play: 'See there,' he said, stabbing with a burly finger in the direction of the old church [Westminster Abbey], as if he were about to accuse it of some serious misdemeanour, 'that's what places like that should be for. To help us live. There's no cure for being alive.'

St. Paul may have played his part in the process described by Professor Vermes, but he seems to have held on to the humanity of Jesus too when he asserts that, 'God ordained that [we] should be shaped to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the eldest among a large family of brothers' – and sisters, we must add – (Romans 8:29). This suggests a more helpful image than that provided by the Nicene Creed. In pondering, praying, the Lord's Prayer we stand alongside, not below, the archetypal son.

If Jung is right, that the deification of Jesus expresses the enormous value we place on the ideal of personality, then we might go on to wonder how this archetypal Son might relate to our desire to be alive. Some words of the American psychologist Abraham Maslow seem to me to give a clue: 'Every human being,' he writes, 'has two sets of forces within him. One set clings to safety and defensiveness out of fear, tending to regress backward, hanging on to the past... The other set of forces impels him forward to wholeness of self and uniqueness of self, toward full functioning of all his capacities, toward confidence in the face of the external world' (*Towards*

a Psychology of Being, Reinhold 1968, p.46). The Jesus portrayed in the gospels is precisely one who, since his baptism, committed himself wholly to that second set of forces. And to us hesitant souls Saint Paul writes, in that same chapter of his letter to the Romans: 'The Spirit you have received is not a spirit of slavery, leading you back into a life of fear, but a spirit that makes us sons (and daughters), able to cry: Abba! Father'

Jesus is for Christians the archetypal son, and can we not also say 'archetypal daughter'? This raises the issue of whether it is appropriate still to refer to God as 'Father' to describe the creative Source to which, in prayer, human beings respond. But whatever the significance of Jesus for Christians, it must be insisted that in terms of humanity as a whole, Jesus does not have a superior, 'divine' status above that of Muhammad or the Buddha. And sadly, tragically, as the dark shadow of jihadism demonstrates, it will take a long time for that superiority claimed by the Christian crusaders to be forgotten.

Edward Walker's most recent book is *Treasure Beneath the Hearth* (Christian Alternative, Alresford 2015).

From: The Everlasting Gospel

If he'd been Antichrist, Creeping Jesus,
 He'd have done anything to please us -
 Gone sneaking into the Synagogues
 And not used the Elders and Priests like dogs,
 But Humble as a Lamb or Ass
 Obeyed himself to Caiaphas.
 God wants not Man to Humble himself:
 This is the trick of the ancient Elf.
 This is the race that Jesus ran:
 Humble to God, Haughty to Man,
 Cursing the Rulers before the People
 Even to the temple's highest Steeple;
 And when he humbled himself to God,
 Then descended the Cruel Rod.
 'If thou humblest thyself, thou humblest me;
 Thou also dwellest in Eternity.
 Thou art a Man, God is no more,
 Thy own humanity learn to adore.
 For that is my Spirit of Life...'

William Blake