

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The Primacy Of Jesus Christ

I often blush when I read about the excesses of the Christian past. It would be nice if we could simply disown them, and say, *I wasn't there, that wasn't me*. But there is something in all of us of our disreputable past, and we can't turn our backs on it so easily. We all try. To listen to some Anglican historians and theorists, you'd think Anglican history is a snow-white story of sweetness and light, always proceeding from moderation and a kindly regard for the individual, and as much zeal for the truth as any gentleman could be asked to cherish. Those of us hanged, drawn and quartered in the Protestant Reformation might be forgiven for failing to recognise our *quondam* persecutors in this portrait. In turn, we English Catholics can loudly deplore the long period of our history (1535–1829) when we were formally oppressed, keeping quiet the while about the fact that Catholic Queen Mary set fire to as many Protestant martyrs in her four years as Protestants killed over three centuries.

Let's Be Honest

Our faith does not leave room for fudging the central claim we make for Jesus Christ. If it is true that he is the Son of God incarnate, then we can't live with any kind of optional form of faith which allows that there are "other ways to God". Christ is too central for that to be acceptable. Other things are negotiable. You can go to heaven if you don't believe St Francis was a good thing, or if you don't think Peter was the first Pope, or if Ignatius of Loyola makes you think of white slugs. But if you want to go to heaven without meeting the Son of God, then I'm afraid you need an alternative reality, in fact an alternative god. Setting-up alternative gods is called idolatry, and it does not lead anywhere.

Thus The Zeal Of Crusaders

It was this that made people set off to get the world baptised, if necessary by force: a mad idea, which has sullied the Christian record. Behind its apparently charitable concern is not only deep distaste for other civilisations, but misunderstanding of God. Is God really obliged to sentence Hindus and Buddhists to hell for not being baptised? *I think not!* Does the presence of many billions who do not know Christ invalidate the Christian creed? *I am sure it doesn't*. We need to assert Christ's divine primacy over all forms of religion – *even our Christianity*, which has itself

fallen so short of him so often. The worst favour we could do to the cause of Christ would be to limit him to his image amongst Christians.

He Is Our Lord

Paul says, *We are those who have the mind of Christ*, and he also says that he counts all else as rubbish if he can only *have Christ*; but these words of possession are not to be misunderstood. We do not *possess* Christ; rather, he is said to have *bought us and paid for us*, and he is our Lord in a more than earthly dominion. We obey him with an utter obedience, because he is the divine Word, against whom no alternative wisdom could prevail. *Knowing Christ* did not deliver a permanent certificate of authenticity to Paul. Quite the reverse: it threw his Pharisee faith into complete convulsion. He showed his faith in Jesus by accepting the loss of everything - even the previous certainties he had always relied on.

The Tenth Leper

This, I believe, is what the tenth leper in the Gospel story realised, and the others did not; he came *back to Jesus* to give God glory; they went on to the Temple to fulfil the law of Moses. In this they epitomised the slowness of the Jews to see Jesus the Messiah, compared with the single foreigner, who typifies the relative freedom of the only Gentile to *throw himself at Jesus' feet*. Luke's mind was obviously resonating with the story of Naaman, the Syrian who acknowledges the God of Israel because he has found healing. He already knew that Naaman was not alone. He himself was a foreigner who had found salvation in Jesus. So Luke must have seen his Gentile brothers and sisters experiencing the joy of their Christian conversion, with a ready generosity and sense of wonder which made a strange contrast with the suspicion and anguish expressed by the Jews. Paul is our patron: he struggled to make his new relationship with Jesus fit in with all that he had learned. We know his hardship. We too are disciples, pupils, apprentices to the Lord. We too need open minds.

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