

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

The Christ of God

In all of the Gospels there comes a moment where Jesus asks the disciples in a very specific way to say what they believe about him. In each of them the disciples respond dramatically - which sets up a kind of watershed in the Gospel. We can remember the way in which these fishermen were called from their boats. They gave Jesus a great deal of trust, arising and following as they did; now they are asked to put into words what he means to them: "Who do you say I am?"

Act of Faith

The only parallel I can find for this situation is that moment where a friendship seems suddenly to deepen in significance, and someone who has been close to us asks for a new commitment. This moment seems to provide our times with a uniquely difficult challenge: it seems that people are finding it increasingly difficult to belong to one another, or to others, or to God. "Let's keep it superficial," they seem to say, "let's see how things go." So we have arrived at a time when people lurk about *on the fringes* of churches, *drift* into "open ended" relationships, and *keep an open mind* about what's happening (the more important the issue, the more open the mind). There is, to me, a sense of withdrawal in the air of our century. We are windy about accepting any value as absolute, any bond as final, any relationship as trustworthy. This gives our community its overwhelming belief that privacy is the most sacred possession, that personal choice is the highest of all values, that individuality is the most vital sphere of life and growth. It is not at all marvellous that such a civilisation should be completely bemused by the question of Jesus of Nazareth; such a direct demand for response is the very thing that paralyses us. We even feel that it is bad manners to ask for such a judgment: it is a blatant invasion of privacy. But Peter doesn't say: "Let's wait and see...". He speaks out with firmness and a full sense of the centrality of Jesus in the plan of God. Immediately Jesus begins a new theme of teaching: he predicts the Passion, and insists that the Cross is not just for him but for his followers, and that it does not come once-for-all at the end of their career as disciples, but *every day*. Here, if you like, is a prediction that *cannot* come true if we hold to our privacy, our distance from the event, and our lofty refusal to commit. No-one, we feel, will get crucified *as long as we don't get involved*.

The Future for Love

To return to that relationship which suddenly demands to be something more than friendship: I

think that what is at stake is the whole cause of love in the world. Jesus gives us a prediction of the end of the world, where "*Many false prophets will arise, and many will be deceived by them, and, with the increase in lawlessness, love in most people will grow cold. But whoever stands firm to the end will be saved.*" The word for lawlessness seems to me to capture exactly the spirit of our age: *anomia* is not just the absence of rules, but a revulsion against the very concept of a law. In the fourth Gospel Jesus gives us a new Law, that we should love one another as he loves us. That means that the law of the New Testament is not an exaltation of the self, but an enthronement within us of the love of Jesus. So we have a Law which makes great demands on us. We can only fulfil it if we respond generously, like apostles. I am afraid that this is just the kind of demand that our times are not ready to receive. Jesus does not give any alternative, however. This isn't a place where personal taste comes into it. "Anyone wanting to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake will save it." There is no place here for debates about the lifeguard's responsibility for our privacy, or the colour of the lifebelt. There is death with salvation, or death without it. The difference is the kind of faith that sets out to trust Jesus. What does it profit us to gain the world, if it is at the price of our own life? Salvation and resurrection are realities which reduce all others to merely relative importance. The measure of our believing must take account of this primacy, and be worthy of Jesus.

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