

Sermon preached at St John's, Devizes, 30 July, 2017, 7th after Trinity

What think ye of Christ?

The question arises in a discussion about Psalm 110 between Jesus and the Pharisees. My context today is quite different. I want to consider how much help we get from the Gospels and indeed from the letters of Paul to answer this question. What do they tell us of the nature of our Saviour?

Until quite recently I shared what seems to be the general view that the four Gospels are more or less of equal value. I no longer think so. I find St. John invaluable together of course with St. Paul.

By contrast I do not believe that Matthew understood Christ. I know that the four Gospels are a protected species: to be criticised perhaps in detail but each to be treated with respect as fundamental to our faith. To me Matthew is the exception. I do not recognise the Christ he portrays. We have in today's Gospel reading the parable of the net. At the end of the age angels will distinguish the good from the evil and throw the evil men into the furnace of fire, where they will weep and gnash their teeth. Matthew is very fond of this ugly phrase. He uses it five times. No other Evangelist uses it at all. We have the similar parable of the wheat and the tares, or weeds. Those represented by the tares meet the same fate. He is keen on hell. Hell as a place of punishment or its equivalent crops up frequently in Matthew. The vile, contemptible, concept of a hell, a place of everlasting torture, has disfigured our faith for centuries, and was generally accepted until very recently. A poignant example is that of the great and good Dr. Johnson. He confessed to a friend that he was afraid of death. "I am afraid I may be one of those who shall be damned." The friend asked: "What do you mean by damned?" "Sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly."

This attitude of Matthew's —Christ the judge, Christ the tyrant —reaches its climax in the Great Assize in his Chapter 25, when Christ separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep are those who have helped various categories of needy people. They go to heaven. The goats are those who gave no such help, and are sent to — where? — the "eternal fire prepared for Satan and his angels."

I don't begin to accept this. First, because I am entirely with those scholars who believe that the story is a concoction of Matthew's: the words are not those of Jesus.

Second, it is said that there are two types of people in the world. Those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don't. I cannot believe that once we are labelled as belonging to a particular category we are fixed there permanently. We are susceptible to change: otherwise what is our faith for? In Matthew's first Chapter the angel explains to Joseph in his dream the unexpected pregnancy of the Blessed Virgin, and says of Mary's coming son "He shall be called Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins". Matthew seems to have forgotten this. He never recognised Christ as our Redeemer, nor does he seem to be aware of God's love for us his children

If Matthew had heard Luke's parable of the Prodigal Son, I can imagine his reaction: "That Father made a fool of himself. He should have dealt with the boy firmly and made him weep, and gnash his teeth".

Shakespeare, not exactly a holy man but so often one of profound insight, summed up the essential character of Christ's redeeming work in three lines from 'Measure for Measure':--

“Why, all the souls that were forfeit once,  
And he that might the vantage best have took  
Found out the remedy.”

To explore that remedy we move on to the broad sunlit uplands and find St. Paul of course.

After he was arrested by the risen Lord on the Damascus road Paul's monumental task was, in Rowan William's words, “to resolve the appalling paradox that the fulfiller of God's Law had been condemned and killed by the people of God under the Law of God. The new age of the Messiah had dawned in the slaughter of the Messiah at the instigation of the Messianic people”.

Paul countered this with his own paradox. The Cross was not disaster but triumph — the ultimate encapsulation of God's love for us His children. Paul told the Corinthians “We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ the power of God and Christ the wisdom of God”.

Paul's motto could have been “Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative”, as in these examples:-

From Romans “While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man – though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us”.

From 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them”.

From Galatians “My faith is in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”

From Romans again “Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption which is in Jesus Christ”.

Grace. Irresistible grace. God's gift of oceanic unconditional love. Grace runs like a golden thread through the letters of Paul. He would have loved the Prologue of John's Gospel: “The word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”

I finish by repeating the climax of today's Epistle reading:-

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, for thy sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, not things present, nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

Thanks be to God.