



## Who is Jesus Christ for us today?



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# St Mark's Review

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# Editorial

“[W]hat is Christianity,” wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1944 while in prison for his uncompromising stand against Nazi idolatry, “or who is Christ actually for us today?” Bonhoeffer’s provocative questions, as well some of his suggested answers, form a common thread in the first three articles of this number of *St Mark’s Review*.

Thorwald Lorenzen’s article is an attempt to tease out, in dialogue with Bonhoeffer, some answers to those questions for contemporary Australians. With one foot we “stand in the ‘Jesus Story;’” argues Lorenzen, and “with the other foot we stand in the world.” But the challenge for us as Christians is “to remain balanced with our weight on both feet.” Faith in Jesus Christ, he contends, is our ultimate concern, but the content of that faith has to be comprehensive in understanding Jesus as revealer, reconciler, role model, and judge. Living in to that reality of Jesus, as the ground and content of our faith in God, in turn enables us to grapple with the moral challenges that face our generation, not least the profound challenges of war and the need to protect the integrity of creation.

John Moses, an Anglican priest and historian of modern German thought, locates theological and ethical resources in Bonhoeffer’s “mandates”. The mandates are Bonhoeffer’s admonitions on key elements and institutions of human life in this world, namely work (labour), marriage and family, church, culture, government, and the preaching of the Gospel. All of these aspects of life are under pressure in our day, just as they were for Bonhoeffer and fellow Germans under Hitler’s godless utopia. Once more Bonhoeffer urges encounter with Jesus and the redemption he brings to humanity, rather than mere injunctions to try to solve the world’s problems. Gospel encounter and proclamation remain the touchstones for preserving and sustaining the institutions that constitute civil society.

Peter Hooton is another Australian theologian who has engaged extensively with Bonhoeffer’s theology. His article considers the “public value” of Christianity—that is, its generally recognised and universally available goods or benefits—in an increasingly secularised Australian society. While such benefits are immediately evident in the church’s embodied forms of sociality in spheres such as health, social welfare, education, social justice, and moral and intellectual life, Hooton observes that the church is also beset by “grave weakness,” not least in relation to the subordination of women, tendencies toward self-preoccupation and self-preservation, and a “too frequent failure to ‘speak truth to power.’” There will be public value in Christianity, argues Hooton, “as long as Christians and

the Church may be said visibly to embody Christ's commandments—imperfectly but to some generally convincing degree.” But if the time comes “when this is no longer true, then it is not only the public value of Christianity that will be lost.”

The echo and force of this argument can be heard in Mary Manickam's sobering consideration of intimate partner violence and Australian Christian women. Manickam highlights the inadequacy of both secular and faith-based providers in addressing the spiritual needs of Christian women who have experienced intimate partner violence. Drawing on Nancy Nason-Clark's model of collaboration between the sacred and the secular, Manickam argues for a collaborative model in which secular and faith-based agencies work together and take seriously the spiritual and theological dimensions of intimate partner violence.

Jill Lovett's article brings the New Testament into conversation with missiologist Hendrik Kraemer and theologian Yves Congar to reconsider the nature and role of the laity in the church. Lovett's call is for a more rigorous and thoughtful theology of the laity, grounded on the recognition that all Christians—whether lay or ordained—constitute the laity (*laos*) and possess a vocation to be deacons (*diakanoi*) and a true priesthood of believers.

Finally, academic and former master of ANU's Burgmann College, Philip Dutton, offers some personal reflections on his encounter with the life and legacy of influential Australian theologian and bishop (and founder of this journal), Ernest Burgmann. Dutton draws on Burgmann's formative contribution to a tradition of “cultural liberalism” in Australian intellectual life, as well as conversations with those who knew “Burgie” personally, to explain why the bishop remains the “best friend I never met.”

The articles in this number offer provocative resources for critical reflection on a range of perennial and contemporary issues for Australians. I commend them to the readers of *St Mark's Review*.

Dr Michael Gladwin  
Editor, *St Mark's Review*  
April 2022

# Who is Jesus Christ for us today?

Thorwald Lorenzen

Who is Jesus Christ for us today? Such questions have often been asked, most famously by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who, being imprisoned by the Hitler regime, wrote in a letter of April 30, 1944 to his friend Eberhard Bethge: “What keeps gnawing at me is the question what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?”<sup>1</sup>

## Relevance

Faith in Jesus Christ has survived for two thousand years in all corners of the globe. Although The Beatles claimed that they were more popular than Jesus, and some say that the Coca Cola sign is in more places than the cross, it is interesting to reflect on why Christian faith has fascinated human hearts and minds for such a long time. This is especially true at a time when:

- in the western world, we suffer cultural and historical amnesia, forgetting that our cultural roots are grown in and are nourished by the Christian narrative;

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- in the academy, we have failed to understand that the enlightenment, with its liberating and humanising impulses, did not originate in the Middle East or in Asia, but on Christian soil in Europe;
- most journalists who write in our media are ignorant of the true meaning of the Christian narrative;
- the new atheists are aggressive, intelligent, and media savvy, but their message is shallow and fails to satisfy the human mind and feed the human soul;
- the churches and most Christians have a truncated view of their origins and therefore a diminished view of the grand Christian narrative;
- even in theological circles there is a widening gulf between conservative evangelicals and the so-called progressives over the identity of Jesus Christ and his relevance for today.

Some say that it is the institution, the church, that keeps faith alive and focussed. While there is some truth to this view, for many the church has lost its moral compass and spiritual integrity. Scandals like child abuse, subordination of women, support of militarism, and internal divisions have sapped the churches' credibility. It is time to return to the roots of the Christian narrative!

The church is like a tree with many branches. Its survival depends on its roots and the soil in which it grows. If the soil is no longer nourishing and the roots dry up, the tree will wither. It may live on, but its future is bleak. Very early on in the journey of faith, Christians therefore reminded each other that before the church is an institution and organisation, it is a community, a *koinonia* of women, men, and children who have a living faith in Jesus Christ. And they have confessed the soil that sustains and nourishes the community of faith by naming the church the "church of God"<sup>2</sup> with *Jesus Christ* as its head<sup>3</sup> and the *Spirit of God* as God's empowering presence.<sup>4</sup>

## Prelude

The Christian Bible contains the confession that "*Jesus Christ* is the same yesterday and today and forever," and it immediately links that promise with social-ethical issues of *the day*—like mutual love, showing hospitality to strangers, remembering those who are in prison and are being tortured, holding marriage in honour, and keeping oneself free from the love of money (Heb. 13:1–16).

In other words, when we speak of Jesus Christ being the "same yesterday and today and forever," we must link our commitment to him with *our own journey* and with the challenges that are pressing *in our time*. So, "*Jesus Christ*" and "*today*" belong together. With one foot we stand in the Jesus Story, and with



the other foot we stand in our world. The challenge for us Christians is to remain balanced with our weight on both feet.

That sets the agenda for us today. We shall first discuss faith in Jesus Christ as our ultimate concern. Then we shall outline the content of that faith in four steps: Jesus Christ as Revealer, as Reconciler (*sacramentum*, at-one-ment), as Role Model (*exemplum*), and as Judge. And finally, we shall ask what all that means for our own journey today.

### **“Jesus is Lord!”**

“*Jesus is Lord!*” was one of the earliest confessions when Christian faith found its way into language.<sup>5</sup> Not Caesar, but Jesus; not Caiaphas, but Jesus; not Pilate, but Jesus; not the empire, not the state, not the church, not religion—but Jesus. For the friends and followers of Jesus, faith in Jesus Christ is—as Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer have taught us—our “ultimate concern.”<sup>6</sup> He, Jesus, is the focus, the guide, the ground, and the content of Christian faith, and therefore the Christian conscience. With the confession that “*Jesus is Lord,*” Christians of all ages and of all cultures have voluntarily, but with intention and enthusiasm, joined the Christian narrative.<sup>7</sup>

Christian life is therefore grounded in *Jesus Christ*. It is centred in him. It is focussed on his Story. From him we get our name. He, Jesus Christ, “is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15); in him “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3), and “through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:20). He, Jesus Christ, is therefore “for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

The ultimacy of focus in Jesus Christ is aptly illustrated in the Johannine Easter Story where Jesus asks Peter—the same Peter who had refused to show his solidarity with Jesus at a critical time—“do you love *me*?” (John 21:15–17). Such a personal, voluntary, and intentional focus on Jesus is central for the flourishing and survival of Christian faith, the Christian churches, and the Christian religion.

*Not: do you love the Bible?* The Bible is important. It is the Holy Scriptures of and for the Christian churches. It is a literary classic, admired and revered by the believer, the sceptic, and the unbeliever. It is a treasure that has shaped the identity and morality of the western world. But it is not an object of worship. Its dignity and integrity consist in leading us to Jesus as the ground and content of our faith.

*Not: do you love the church?* Again, the church is important. We humans are social beings. We need each other. Therefore, when we believe in Jesus Christ and are baptised into his reality, we find ourselves with fellow travellers in the

community of faith. But the church is not an object of worship. It is the gathering of fallible humans who try to follow Jesus. It is the community of faith where we “feed on Christ” by hearing his story, celebrating the Eucharist, and trying to be the body of Christ in sharing his life and our life with others.

*Not:* do you love your *Christian experience*? We are grateful for our experiences of God, of Jesus Christ, of the Holy Spirit. But experience is fragile. It needs to be refocussed and nourished all the time, and at all times.

So, the question “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?” is not just any question. For the Christian believer, it is the central question. It defines our identity. It tells us who we are, where to go, and how to live. It leads us to lean into “God’s mystery” as it has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ (Col. 2:2).

So far then, I have suggested that not the Bible, nor the church, nor our experience deserves our first attention. They are important. We cannot imagine our Christian life without them. But they are not our ultimate concern. Our ultimate concern is Jesus Christ. In him God has said “yes” to us. He is the Word that underlies all our words. In an early Christmas hymn, the Christian communities, in which the fourth Gospel and the Johannine letters originated, confessed that Jesus Christ is the light that shines (continuous present tense!) in darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (John 1:1–18).

At a time when many Christians have lost their focus in Jesus, when the media no longer knows the Christian narrative, and when the sceptics have the ear of the populace, there is some urgency to ask ourselves where we come from, who we are, and what our contribution can be to a world that is falling apart.

### **Jesus as revealer, reconciler, role model, and judge**

Christian faith, indeed, the identity of Christianity, and the credibility of the Christian narrative, stands and falls with Jesus of Nazareth. More precisely, it stands and falls with whether in and through Jesus Christ, God has done something *special*, something *new*, something that justifies and verifies the genesis and emergence of another, a new religion, and with it a revised understanding of God.

Did God, in and through Jesus of Nazareth, do something that needed to be done, that humanity could not do by itself, but that God did for us and for God’s creation as an act of God’s unconditional and divine generosity? Only if that is the case is the Christian narrative authentic, credible, and true. The apostle Paul is therefore correct when he claims that our words and our faith would be “in vain”; indeed, that we would be “misrepresenting God,” if we cannot affirm that what God has done in Jesus Christ is special and is the ground and content of Christian faith (1 Cor. 15:14–17).

I shall try to name the ground and content of faith by discussing *Jesus Christ as Revealer, Reconciler, Role Model, and Judge*.<sup>8</sup>

## **Revelation**

God elected Jesus of Nazareth to make manifest in history *who God is* and *what God does*. This divine *self-revelation* in Jesus Christ is God's invitation to be understood *on God's terms*. It should guard against any and every attempt to use the word "God" to serve our personal, social, ecclesiastical, or cultural self-interests.

Jesus was the messenger of the "reign of God," the *basileia tou theou*. Being grounded in an intimate relation to God—whom he called "Abba/Father"—and in continuity and discontinuity with his Jewish tradition, he fleshed out God as a *compassionate* and *personal* reality.

He stands in continuity with those parts of the Jewish law that eased the burdens of slaves, widows, orphans, and foreigners. He followed the prophetic tradition that emphasised beating swords into ploughshares (Isa. 2:4), and he tuned into the prophetic encouragement "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8). In contrast to John the Baptist, he spoke of a God who does not frighten people, but who in word and deed leads people into the safe spaces of freedom and joy.

In short, Jesus of Nazareth revealed God as a *compassionate* parent whose passion is to find, heal, and liberate those who are beaten and lost in the stony wilderness of life. The Jesus story is the grand narrative in which the stranger is welcomed, the lost are found, the sick are healed, demons are exorcised, the poor are given hope, the rich are called to responsibility, and the unjust are called to repentance.

In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Jesus was "the man for others."<sup>9</sup> Some of the "others" found hope and healing in Jesus' presence, while others supported the religious elite that accused Jesus of blasphemy and leading people astray, handing him over to the Roman occupation forces for crucifixion as a criminal.

## **Reconciliation (at-one-ment, *sacramentum*)**

If Jesus' revelation of God as a compassionate and personal reality would have been all, then the Jesus Story would remain in the Jewish tradition of righteous sufferers who lived, suffered, and died for a worthy cause.

History is replete with such people. In my own tradition we remember the suffering and death of thousands of *Täufer* (baptisers) who in sixteenth century Europe were hunted down by church and state because they read their Bibles differently than the magisterial reformers and chose to obey what they found there. In modern times we think of people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Scholl

siblings, Martin Luther King Jr, and Oscar Romero who were willing to die for their faith. All this is honourable, but it is not enough to start a new religion!

We therefore need to open a further chapter in the Story of Jesus by recognising that Jesus was not only revealing who God is and what God does, but also the *reconciliation* (“at-one-ment”) that God provided to bring together what belongs together.

The classic formulation comes from the apostle Paul: “in Christ God was *reconciling* the world to himself.”<sup>10</sup> This marks the *birth of Christianity*—and yet, this event has remained controversial to the present day.

So-called *progressives*—often named “liberal” theologians—have a problem with God doing something *new*, something that escapes their rational control. They follow Ernst Troeltsch’s “omnipotence of analogy”<sup>11</sup> and only give serious attention to what the *historian* can empirically verify. Real is only what we humans can experience and control. This excludes any novelty in principle. Here we can only exclaim with Karl Barth: “*Kritischer müssten mir die Historisch-Kritischen sein!*”<sup>12</sup> The event of reconciliation is real, but it happened in *God’s* economy, and as such is not accessible to historical verification and human control.

*Conservative Evangelicals*, on the other hand, develop complicated theories of atonement that may have made sense in a feudalistic society where feudal lords get offended and need to be pacified, but they no longer make sense to us today. For some evangelicals, intellectual assent to such outdated theories is a touchstone for genuine faith, and thereby they transfigure the joy of faith into intellectual achievements.

The danger is, however, that the baby may be thrown out with the bathwater! The question behind all atonement theories is whether in and through Jesus of Nazareth, God did something decisive, something new, something unique—something that needed to be done, something that humans could not do by and for themselves, something that only God can do—and in fact God has done to manifest God’s faithfulness to God’s creation. The identity and integrity of the Christian narrative stands and falls with the answer to this question. Let me try to capture the nature of reconciliation in a few sentences.

God is the subject of reconciliation. God, as the creator “of heaven and earth,” has displayed in covenant after covenant that God is passionate and focussed to restore God’s relationship with God’s estranged creation.

Human *sin* has made God’s intervention necessary. Sin is not in the first place a moral failure. It is a *relational betrayal*. Humanity “curved into itself” (*incurvatus in se*, as Augustine of Hippo and Martin Luther put it) and worshipped the creature rather than the creator (Rom. 1:18–25). The symbolic manifestation of this betrayal is that those who lost sight of God “crucified the Lord of glory.”<sup>13</sup>

They opposed, sentenced, tortured, and executed Jesus of Nazareth—the same person who had no other passion than to worship God and make human life truly human.

By electing Jesus, and by raising from the dead this particular Jesus, who was charged with blasphemy and leading people astray, God triumphed over the powers of sin and death that estrange creation from their creator. *This triumph of God's love over the forces of estrangement is the birth of Christianity.*

Since God is the *all-encompassing reality*, what God did at this one point of reality God has done for all of creation. What God has done “in Christ” applies to *all of creation*. “As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

The event of reconciliation includes the *ministry of reconciliation*: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”<sup>15</sup> The resurrection of the crucified Jesus is therefore portrayed as an *open* event in which people can *participate*. It sets a process in motion which reaches its *telos* in God being “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28).

But the shape of the ministry must reflect the nature of the event. Since Jesus stands for *nonviolence*, therefore the authority form of the ministry cannot be coercive: “we *entreat* you (*deometha*, beg, woo) on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20). Christians should therefore reject all authoritarian and manipulative forms in their mission, evangelism, and church structures.

By faith and baptism, we tune into the event of reconciliation and take our place in the Christian narrative.

The event of reconciliation cannot be historically verified. It can be believed and confessed—and its consequences can be experienced and investigated. It was the genesis of Christianity when through the resurrection appearances of Christ in the power of God's spirit the event of reconciliation became historically manifest. Christians celebrate this every Easter and Pentecost.

Jesus therefore is not only God's revelation, but also God's reconciliation. We do not make a sacrifice to God. God makes the sacrifice of love for us! God is the One who “desires *everyone* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human, who gave himself a ransom for *all*.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Role model (*exemplum*)**

There is a *third* dimension to the Jesus Story. Jesus is not only God's *revelation* and *reconciliation* (at-one-ment), but also our *example*, our role model, guiding us into a meaningful life. Jesus' vision of God and of life provides *analogies* that help us in shaping our own visions of life. Since God is the creator of heaven and earth, therefore everything in God's creation can become an analogy to God's

ways. At the same time, since God has revealed in Jesus Christ who God is and what God does, therefore he, Jesus Christ, is the measure as to what corresponds to God's nature and God's ways.<sup>17</sup>

It is not possible to copy or imitate Jesus. He lived in a totally different time and culture. But it is possible to join the Jesus narrative, be inspired by him, and take him as a role model. From his vision of life, we can receive guidelines—like worshipping God, being committed to nonviolence, privileging victims, respecting nature—that can guide us in our spiritual and moral decision making.

Christians through the ages have often overlooked the fact that Jesus of Nazareth did not die of old age or of a heart attack. He was opposed, captured, tortured, and executed by the religious and political authorities of his day in response to his vision of life and of God. As a direct consequence to the kind of life he lived, Jesus was charged with blasphemy and with leading people astray. Jesus, therefore, was a catalyst. While some people responded to his call and followed him, others opposed and schemed against him.

Jesus was the messenger of God's reign, the *basileia tou theou*. God's reign is marked by love and compassion, freedom and liberation. In word and deed he made God's ways manifest. He told performative stories that spoke joy, hope, and forgiveness into people's lives. He touched untouchables, cast out demons, and healed the sick. In his passion to make *human life truly human*, he even suspended social norms and religious rules. Indeed, he was "*der Mann, der alle Schemen sprengt*" (the man who transcended all categories).<sup>18</sup> In all of this he remained committed to nonviolence. In a world where violence reigns there are good reasons to take Jesus as a role model.

## Judgment

There is yet another dimension to the Jesus Story. The Christian Scriptures say that we must all "appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil."<sup>19</sup> The Ecumenical Christian Creed concurs: Jesus Christ "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead." Here we are at a delicate point!

We probably all wish that the Hitlers, Stalins, Pol Pots, and Putins of this world will be held to account and will not ultimately triumph over their victims. Don't we all hope that there is some sort of meaning and purpose in history? Many of our thoughts and actions are based on Martin Luther King, Jr's eloquent reminder that the arc of the moral universe may be long, but it bends toward justice.

At the same time, we confess that "God is love," that God does not frighten people, and that we gain access into God's hospitality by grace *alone* (*sola gratia*) through faith *alone* (*sola fide*).

How do we deal with this apparent conflict?

Let us acknowledge, first, that *the judgment motif* is important. It assigns value, meaning, and purpose to the process of history, and to our involvement in it. We are taken seriously. Our thoughts and actions matter; they make a difference. Life is a gift. What we do with it is, at least in part, our responsibility. If there were no evaluation and judgment, then the injustice that we experience and cause and that we see all around us will never be dealt with. Then the countless victims of the Hitlers, Stalins, Pol Pots, and Putins of this world would never find justice; and we would have no criterion to claim that the Gandhis, Bonhoeffers, and Mandelas of this world are on the side of truth, fairness, and justice. There would be no accountability for our action or inaction. Then the justice of God would ultimately be an illusion. Therefore, referring to the judgment of Christ gives dignity, moral guidance, and seriousness to human life in the historical process.

The second point is that *Jesus Christ* is named as the judge. The final judgment is not controlled by a code of law, by moral book-keeping, or by a system of retaliation and pay-back. It is determined by Jesus Christ! The same Christ who encounters his friends with the assuring “do not be afraid” and “peace be with you.” The same Christ whose life issued the invitation, “come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). The same Christ “who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). It is the same Christ who revealed God as a compassionate parent, and by whom God reconciled the world to God’s self. The judgment will therefore be in analogy to the story of Jesus. It will be a judgment of grace and it will bring to completion and fulfilment what God has created.

A third dimension is the Jewish-Christian *distinction between the sinner and the sin*. The apostle Paul presents a suggestive word-picture about a foundation and what is built on it. The foundation is Jesus Christ. It is secure. It will last. But what is built on it will be tested: “If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, *the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.*” Here, the last judgment is portrayed as a fire that will burn up what separates a person from God, so that the person him- or herself can be saved (1 Cor. 3:10–15). This suggests that a cleansing will take place in which the truth of our lives will be revealed and evaluated in light of God’s divine hospitality.

Finally, we note that Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount suggests that the judgment includes an element of compensation:

Blessed are those who mourn,  
*for they will be comforted.*



Blessed are the meek,  
*for they will inherit the earth.*

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
*for they will be filled.*

Blessed are the merciful,  
*for they will receive mercy.*

Blessed are the pure in heart,  
*for they will see God.*

Blessed are the peacemakers,  
*for they will be called children of God (Matt. 5:4–9).*

We don't know what such compensation will look like. But we hope that it may bring to completion what was left incomplete in this world.

## **Today**

Who is Jesus Christ for us *today*? Keeping in mind the four dimensions of the Jesus Story—Jesus as revealing of who God is and what God does; Jesus as reconciler/at-one-ment who breaks the power of sin and death and makes reconciliation with God a promising event; Jesus as example who provides the vision to shape our life; and Jesus as judge who provides evaluation of the historical process—we ask what it means to believe in Jesus Christ *today*.

## **We are part of the narrative**

It means, first of all, that people of faith in Jesus Christ are part of his Story! The event of reconciliation includes the ministry of reconciliation, and the ministry should reflect the nature of the event. “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18). We are taken seriously; we have the privilege of being “witnesses” to the event of reconciliation.

## **Faith in God**

At a time of increasing secularism where media savvy atheists dominate the scene, it is important to confess our faith in God. Every culture needs a songline, a narrative that both sustains and critiques it. The Christian narrative is characterised by freedom, compassion, inclusiveness, and nonviolence.

When we take our place in the narrative, when we believe in Jesus Christ and are baptised into his name, the plot of the narrative begins to shape us.



Jesus' ministry was grounded in a *personal attachment to God*. He prayed to God as "*Abba/Father/Daddy*". With inner sovereignty (*paresia*) and divine authority (*exousia, gravitas*) he proclaimed (parables) and enacted (exorcising demons, miracles) the nearness and presence of God's reign, the *basileia tou theou*.

In analogy to Jesus, we are called to develop a *healthy spirituality*. Those who have no wells to drink from become thirsty, lose hope, give up, and die. The "God is dead" theology of the 1960s was short-lived because it tried to hang on to a Jesus without God. In the same decade, liberation theology in Latin America, feminist theology in Europe and America, Black theology in South Africa, and *Minjung* theology in South Korea were followed by spiritualities of liberation because the agents of liberation needed food and drink for the journey.

As Christians we long for a living faith in God. Not narrow, provincial, and tribal, but a faith that reflects the "wideness in God's mercy," the "kindness in God's justice," and the freedom and the compassion of God's reign.

### **Engagement for justice**

We said that the event of reconciliation includes the ministry of reconciliation, and that therefore the early Christians tied together their faith in Jesus Christ with their involvement in the world. This is classically demonstrated in two narratives.

There is, firstly, the interlocking of the biblical resurrection narratives with the call to mission: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."<sup>20</sup>

And, secondly, there is the Matthean eschatological judgement story which says that Christians need to go where Jesus would be found: feeding the hungry, providing shelter for the homeless, caring for the sick, welcoming strangers, and visiting prisoners: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."<sup>21</sup>

It is generally accepted among Christians and churches that their core business is mission and evangelism. But even that is controversial among many Christians today, and the churches' loss of credibility does not help.

Within the churches the main problem is related to the vestiges of patriarchy and the felt need of men to control. The subordination of women in many churches is a scandal. The churches will not gain the respect of people until women can have access to all offices in the church (priest, bishop, cardinal, pope).

When it comes to the churches' public ministry, sexual ethics and beginning and end of life issues dominate. Most churches are also heavily engaged in making poverty history and showing compassion for the millions of displaced people.

All of that is important and not really controversial.

But I think, there are two moral challenges concerning which many Christians and churches have not read the signs of the times and have therefore failed to place them on their *theological* agenda.

There is, first, the global struggle to protect biodiversity, clean up the rivers and oceans, and support attempts to reduce climate warming. We humans are responsible for the paradigm shift from the Holocene to the Anthropocene. We are approaching the point of no return. The young people of “Fridays for future” have understood this. In some countries federal courts have forced politicians to protect the future of the younger generations. Christians and their churches have good theological reasons to protect and restore the integrity of creation.

The second issue has to do with war as a means of solving human conflicts, and the related possibility of nuclear confrontation. The industrial-military machine lobbies politicians to increase military budgets. Australia aims to belong to the ten largest weapons exporters. But if we look into the eyes of mothers and fathers who have lost their sons and daughters in the war arena, and when we consider the recent military failures in Vietnam, Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, we need to wonder whether war is the most effective way to solve human conflicts.

The churches can remind us that a commitment to nonviolence is part of the Christian narrative that undergirds our culture, and at the same time help to fulfill the aim of the United Nations “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war.”<sup>22</sup> That does not mean opting for a life without defence, security, and military. But it can help us to unmask the massive economic pressure to keep the military machinery going and to opt for effective and competent diplomacy. Furthermore, the churches need to revise outdated “just war” theories. They were created not to justify but to constrain militarism, and they are no longer relevant in an age of nuclear and biological weapons. Christians worship the “God of peace” and follow the “Lord of peace.” It would be part of their core business to develop theories and strategies of waging peace, rather than war.

## **Outlook**

Who is Jesus Christ for us today? The Jesus Story provides the ground and content for our faith in God. He, Jesus Christ, is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6) because he guarantees that at the centre of reality there is peace and generosity: “God is love!” (1 John 4).

To believe in Jesus Christ today means two things: faith and action. We experience the privilege of faith in God, and we follow the calling of creating analogies to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ in a needy world.

## Endnotes

- 1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Eberhard Bethge, April 30, 1944, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8: Letters and Papers from Prison*, trans. Isabel Best, Lisa E. Dahill, Reinhart Krauss, and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 361–7, at 362. He sought for a “religionless” but life-affirming answer, and he focussed on a positive exposition of the Jesus Story, rather than the religious need of people. For Bonhoeffer “in Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered the reality of this world.” See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Works, vol. 6: Ethics*, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 160–84, 54 (original in italics).
- 2 Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 1:2, 10:32, 11:16, 11:22, 15:9; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:13; 1 Thess. 2:14; 2 Thess. 1:4.
- 3 Eph. 1:22–3, 4:15–16, 5:23; Col. 1:17–18.
- 4 Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 12:1–11.
- 5 Rom. 10:9, 1 Cor. 12:3, 2 Cor. 4:5, Phil. 2:11; also 1 Cor. 8:6, Col. 2:6.
- 6 For Paul Tillich our “ultimate concern is that which determines our being or not-being.” See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, vol. 1* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 14. For Bonhoeffer, see the essay “Ultimate and Penultimate Things,” in Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 160–84: “Christian life is the dawn of the ultimate in me, the life of Jesus Christ in me” (168).
- 7 A little anecdote: shortly before his death on December 10, 1968, Karl Barth gave an interview on Swiss radio about his love for the music of Mozart. During the interview he said that he was not really “at home” in theology or in the church or in the political arena, but “*auf den, bei dem ich eigentlich daheim bin . . . das letzte Wort, das ich . . . zu sagen habe, ist nicht so ein Begriff wie ‘Gnade,’ sondern ein Name: Jesus Christus. Er ist die Gnade . . . wir können ihn nicht einfangen, aber haben es mit ihm zu tun.*” (“The one with whom I really am at home . . . the final word that I . . . have to say, is not a concept like ‘grace,’ but a *name*: Jesus Christ. He is grace . . . we cannot get hold of him, but he effects our life”). Barth added that his whole life had striven to exalt this one name and to say: “*dort!*” (*there!*). See Christiane Tietz, *Karl Barth. Ein Leben im Widerspruch* (München: C. H. Beck, 2019), 413–14.
- 8 For details see Thorwald Lorenzen, *Yes! A Christian Vision of Life* (Adelaide, ATF Press, 2021), chapters 4, 5, and 12.
- 9 Bonhoeffer used this designation of Jesus—indeed, this Christological title—throughout his academic life. See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, trans. Eric Mosbacher, Peter and Betty Ross, Frank Clark,

- William Glen-Doepel, ed. Edwin Robinson, revised edition ed. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 135, 878, 885.
- 10 2 Cor. 5:19 in the context of vv. 17–21.
- 11 “Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology” (1898), *Religion in History*, with an introduction by James Luther Adams, trans. James Luther Adams and Walter F. Bense, *Fortress Texts in Modern Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 11–32, at 14.
- 12 Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 2nd edition (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1924), XII. The English translation fails to convey the pathos: “The critical historian needs to be more critical.” Compare Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, preface to the 2nd edition, in 6th edition (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 8.
- 13 1 Cor. 2:8; also Acts 4:25–8.
- 14 1 Cor. 15:22; Rom. 5:14–21.
- 15 2 Cor. 5:18; Col. 1:13–23.
- 16 1 Tim. 2:4–6 (emphasis mine).
- 17 For the idea of analogy or correspondence between the Jesus Story and our lives see the important essay by Karl Barth, “The Christian Community and the Civil Community” (1946), in Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968), 149–89. I also find interesting and helpful what Dietrich Bonhoeffer said from his prison cell during August 1944: “We must immerse ourselves again and again, for a long time and quite calmly, in Jesus’s life, his sayings, actions, suffering, and dying in order to recognize what God promises and fulfils. What is certain is that we may always live aware that God is near and present with us and that this life is an utterly new life for us; that there is nothing that is impossible for us anymore because there is nothing that is impossible for God . . . To all this, God has said Yes and Amen in Jesus.” Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 515.
- 18 Eduard Schweizer, *Jesus Christus im vielfältigen Zeugnis des Neuen Testaments* (München und Hamburg: Siebenstern, 1968), 18.
- 19 2 Cor. 5:10. Other texts that make the same point include Rom. 2:16; John 5:22, 27, 42; Acts 10:42, 17:31.
- 20 John 20:21; see also Matt. 28:19–20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46–9; Acts 1:8; Gal. 1:15–17.
- 21 Matt. 25:40 in the context of 25:31–46.
- 22 Preamble to the *United Nations Charter*.