

## Stature of Christ

*Attain to what it is to be a mature human being, measured by nothing else than the full Stature of Christ*

An eminent academic theologian recently described Christianity as a ‘personality cult’. He was of course being characteristically provocative and mischievous. The term ‘personality cult’ is one freighted with a heavy negative connotation. However, in many ways he is right – Christianity is a personality cult. It has at its centre the person of Jesus Christ. But, of course, for Christians Jesus is not just a human personality, he is also God. We believe that God became human in Jesus Christ; that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we see God.

No other world religion makes that claim for their key religious figures. For Buddhists, Siddhartha, the Buddha, the Enlightened one is not God. For Muslims, Muhammed is not God but only the prophet of God. For Judaism, the very idea of God becoming human is anathema, a sacrilegious blasphemy. Nowhere in the Hebrew Scriptures will you find anyone claiming to be God or any human being identified as God. This is one of the great dividing lines between Judaism and Christianity. There is a stark discontinuity, clear blue water, between the Old Testament and the New Testament on the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation which is so fundamental for Christian belief.

In the Old Testament, we have lots of portrayals of God through the words of the prophets, the writers of psalms and history, and the reflectors of wisdom. Some of those portrayals agree with one another, some are radically different. God comes across as a complex character, rather unpredictable and at times inscrutable. As we read the Old Testament we become aware of the evolution in the understanding of God over many hundred of years. In the New Testament we have a different portrayal of God. God is seen in the person of Jesus Christ. We no longer have second hand accounts from prophets or scribes about what God might have said or might have done. We now can see and hear for ourselves what God is like. As Bishop David Jenkins, the former Bishop of Durham put it so memorably ‘God is, he is as he is in Jesus, therefore we have hope’. That is to my mind one of the most attractive summaries of Christian faith.

And that of course has consequences for us. We now have a clear picture, which we never had before, of what God is like and how he expects human beings to live. And the picture is not written down in words it is lived out in the life of a human being. The Word has become flesh. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus is God’s definitive statement about what God is like and how to live a human life pleasing to God. The consequences for us are that we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus for our understanding of God and for living out our lives.

But for St Paul, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus was not enough. Christ needs to dwell within us. His life has to become part of our life. And the way that happens is through baptism. When we are baptised our life, through the Holy Spirit, is grafted into the life of Christ and his life is grafted into ours. And the way that life grows and develops is through the Eucharist. As St John puts it so clearly ‘If you eat my body and drink my blood, I will live in you and you will live in me’.

And today’s New Testament reading reveals to us what will happen if we imitate the life of Christ and allow the spirit of Christ to inform our personality and character and all our relationships. We will become like him and we will become ‘a mature human being, measured by nothing else than the full stature of Christ’. That is our purpose and goal as Christians to grow into the full stature of Christ. That involves letting go of our ego and self-regard, the me-me-me

insecurity which often underlies the desire for recognition, status and self-importance. That is no easy thing and needs to be worked on by us intentionally in co-operation with God's grace. I'm reminded by the comments I so often hear from non-Christians – we love Christ and his values. He is so impressive. But his followers the Church – now that's a different matter altogether.

The writer of the letter to the Colossians, drawing upon the Pauline tradition, gives us a wonderful definition of Christ. He says Christ is the image of the invisible God. The word image in Greek is Icon. Christ is the icon of the invisible God. That is what Christ is. And we if we are to grow into the full stature of Christ, we must be nothing less than the Icon of Christ in the world.