



INTRODUCTION OF THE THEME

At the outset of these studies I need to give some explanation of my choice of theme ***The Continual Coming Of The Christ***. There are primarily two reasons for the chosen theme, the first is rooted in the traditional message of Christmas - that of the incarnation or the advent of God revealed in person in the birth of the baby born to be the Christ - God in the flesh. The second is as a follow on from the Lent Studies, which focused on following Jesus. The Lent studies took their theme from the historical Jesus, the person Jesus of Nazareth and we were thinking through what it means to follow him focusing primarily on the gospel narratives, the stories of his life and teachings. In these Advent Studies I want to move us on into one of the major themes of the epistles in the New Testament, which are beginning to reveal a more theological development in response to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. These writings focus less on the *person* of Jesus and more on the *emergence* of the Christ. There is very little to be found about the historical person Jesus in the New Testament outside of the gospels. Acts concentrates on chronicling the early development of the Church and the letters of Paul and other authors focus on the developing understanding of what it means to be *in Christ*. Many have assumed that when we speak of Jesus Christ we are using the Christian name *Jesus* and the surname *Christ* which is, of course, completely inaccurate. *Jesus* is the given name but *Christ* is a title and not a surname, it means anointed one, also Messiah, and within 30 years or so of Jesus' death the term *Christ* began to take on a meaning of its own in reference to the risen, glorified Jesus and the relationship between him and his followers. It was in this context that Paul was able to say that *any person who is in Christ is a new creation (literally, a new creature - a new kind of being)*¹.

Bearing this in mind we shall be looking at the focus of Jesus as the *Christ* in order to help us understand what our relationship with, and experience of, Jesus the Christ is and can be. In other words, we are taking the natural progression from looking at what it means to follow Jesus and what it also means to be *in Christ*. These are subtle and yet vital nuances, which can help us to truly experience the reality of what it means to name ourselves as *Christ*-ians. In order to do this I have chosen three facets of *the Christ* and each of them will teach us something of the breadth, length, height and depth² of who Christ is for us today. They are;

The Cosmic Christ - Gods Hope for the Cosmos

The Affirming Christ - Gods 'YES' to humankind

The Incarnate Christ - Gods Hope for Community

The Advent theme also makes it clear that the Christ is *continually* coming to us at all times and in many different ways. We can get stuck in the idea that as we celebrate Advent and Christmas we celebrate something that happened long ago. Of course, from a historical context this is true, but from a theological context there is a very real sense of these things continually taking place, which keeps us from slipping into complacency regarding our faith and the significance and implications of the coming of the Christ. When we approach our Advent meditation with this in mind we open ourselves to new and fresh experiences of the real presence of Jesus the Christ.

THE COSMIC CHRIST - GODS HOPE FOR THE COSMOS

We begin our Advent journey with the ***Cosmic Christ***. In a sense this is to begin at the end in order to understand that the end is really the beginning. You may remember that I began the Lenten Studies with

the quotation from T S Eliot's poem *Little Gidding*,

*With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
We shall not cease from exploration,
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.*

The reason for this is that very often we need to 'read back' from where we arrive in order to understand where we began. This is certainly true of our understanding of Jesus and what it means for him to become the Christ. If we take Paul's words about Jesus the Christ from the opening chapter of Colossians for example;

*he is the visible image of the invisible God*³

this is certainly not what the first disciples of Jesus would have been thinking (including Paul initially but more about that later). In fact it is quite a foreign concept for any self respecting Jew to be speaking in terms of a human person being the visible image of the invisible God. Indeed, the second commandment forbids any visual representation of God to be made. To the Jew God was completely other and outside of the boundaries of human description or explanation. God was transcendent and *out there* - so much so that even the name of God could not be uttered by anyone other than the High Priest it was so holy. The name of God came to be represented by the consonants YHVH which, when reading the Torah, would be substituted with *the Lord* or *the Lord God* (Adonai). The understanding of Jesus as being God and yet also man is groundbreaking for a Jew if not heretical. Jesus was regarded as heretical for even suggesting that he was in a unique way an emissary of the divine being – a unique Son of God. But this is all very much embryonic during the earthly life of Jesus and comes to the fore following his death and resurrection. The two most dominant examples of the development of the divinity of Jesus are John's Gospel and the letters of Paul. In the letters of Paul we continually find him referring to Jesus as *the Christ* and a favorite theme of Paul's is to speak of the Christian as being *in Christ*. Paul has virtually nothing to say about the earthly life of the historical Jesus even though his writings predate the written gospels. Paul himself probably never encountered Jesus of Nazareth and even if he did he has nothing to say about it. His experience of Jesus begins with witnessing the death of Stephen who, as he is dying, has a vision of the risen exalted and glorified Jesus. It is highly likely that this experience made a deep impact on Paul who immediately set out to persecute the Christians into oblivion as a righteous reaction to the idea that this Jesus could be spoken of as one who was glorified with God in Heaven. This was a cosmic vision of Jesus as the glorified Christ and whilst at this stage Stephen was not proclaiming him as God the implication is certainly there, something that the dutiful Pharisee Paul would have been enraged by.

It was during this period that Paul had his own encounter with the risen Jesus. On a journey to Damascus where he intended to round up the Christians and punish them Paul has a powerful vision. All we know about this vision is that it consisted of blinding light and a voice that spoke to him. When Paul asks, "Who are you Lord?" the reply is "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting". There are a number of important things to note about this encounter, first, Paul does not see Jesus physically, he experiences the *glory* of Jesus, much the same way in which Moses saw God in the form of a burning bush. This is a post resurrection encounter unlike the encounters we read of in the gospels – Jesus does not appear to Paul in bodily form. Secondly, Jesus asks Paul why he is persecuting *him* – he does not ask, "why are you persecuting my followers?" Already we begin to see that Christ is being identified as present in the people of God – the church – hence we say in our liturgy, "WE are the body of Christ". This was an important theme of Paul and it is no surprise when one takes his encounter into account. Paul understands now that, although it may fly in the face of all that he had believed as a good Pharisee, it was possible to know the holy God as revealed in *Jesus the Christ*. In this sense Paul understands Christ in cosmic terms – the Christ above and below, within and without – the all in all – the visible image of the invisible God through whom all things were made and came into being.

John's gospel is rich with references to Jesus speaking of himself as the great *I am* – a deliberate reference to the Old Testament encounter of Moses with God when he asks God to give him his name. Indeed there are many parallels between the Old Testament and John's gospel as the writer seeks to show the connection between the two. This gospel is believed by many to be the fruit of years of practical, mystical and experiential meditation on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the Hebrew Scriptures. It is a very different gospel to Matthew, Mark and Luke. As the early Christians grew in their experience of the risen Christ they also began to understand more deeply the nature of who the Christ was and is and is to come⁴. Jesus of Nazareth becomes for them, and by inheritance for us also today, the glorified visible image of the invisible God, the all in all, the one in whom and through whom all things come into existence and find their purpose for the good pleasure of the holy one who is God, the one who was with God from the beginning, the one who was God from the beginning. These are all terms of reference in relation to the nature of Jesus as divine that are *read back* into the text, into the narrative and the early experience of the first disciples. Thus we have a responsibility to make their experience our own in the same manner in which they did - through practical, mystical and experiential meditation on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. This will be the aim of our Advent journey - our great *advent-ure* of faith as we approach one of the major Christian festivals anew so that we may *know the place for the first time*.

THE BIG PICTURE

The Cosmic compels us to begin with the big picture - God so loved the **world** (Greek – Kosmos) that he gave his unique son to demonstrate and declare the reality of his love⁵. Ever since the 18th century enlightenment western civilization has placed the individual at the centre of the universe. Man becomes the centre of the cosmos. This is referred to as *anthropocentrism*. Science became divorced from theology believing itself to be capable of mastering nature and controlling the destiny of humankind. Mastery replaces mystery as human reason rules and in the case of religion; if it did not conform to the ideas of the enlightenment then it was thrown out, baby and bathwater together. The mechanistic universe of Newton meant that reason could find the answer to understanding how all things worked and ultimately it was believed that Man was the master of the universe. This mindset then led to the emerging story of an evolving universe being understood as the ascent of man as the pinnacle of creation (the survival of the fittest). Even the creation stories themselves are interpreted as man being the master of his environment rather than the care-taker given the responsibility to honor and tend all of creation. The churches were influenced by this mindset and salvation became focused on the individual first – faith was privatized and personal salvation was the emphasis especially in the evangelical tradition. In some respects this swing to emphasizing the personal experience of God was not all bad because for many it was good news – God loves ME! However, the emphasis can and in many respects has, become divisive and a distortion of the big picture. The theologian, Krister Stendhal is critical of this anthropocentric view of salvation history when he says,

We [Christians] happen to be more interested in ourselves than in God or the fate of his creation.⁶

The overemphasis on the personal leads to a lack of care and consciousness of the universal – something that is prevalent in today's society as we systematically destroy our environment. Love for our neighbour includes love for the environment in which our neighbour lives. Matthew Fox states that,

If Newton is correct and our universe is essentially a machine, who needs a cosmic Christ? There is no mystery in a machine universe.⁷

As we reconnect with the Cosmic Christ – the all in all – the one in whom we live and move and have our being – we widen our perspective of the grace of God as demonstrated to us in Jesus the Christ. We reconnect with the sense of mystery throughout all of creation. We let go of imagining that we are in possession of Jesus and realize that Christ is in possession of us. We open the windows of our faith and as we do so the picture expands and we find freedom and liberation from the petty anxieties that can so

often plague us as we focus in on ourselves. We rejoice that God so loved the Cosmos (and that includes me of course, because I am an integral part of that cosmos) and we find ourselves part of the bigger picture in the purposes of God. It is when we understand that we are not the centre of all things that we can be liberated to be who we are truly called to be *in Christ*.

If, as Paul states, we are new creations we can have a revelation of ourselves as part of creation in an interconnected way – what some quantum physicists call *entanglement theory* – everything is deeply connected. Paul touches on this when he speaks of the whole of creation longing with eager expectation as it waits for the revelation of the sons and daughters of God. As we see ourselves as part of the big picture of God as experienced in the cosmic Christ we will become more confident in the grand scheme of our lives lived out in the power that sustains all things. When we meditate on Jesus as the cosmic Christ we are able to experience the reality of God in and through all things. It was with this in mind that Jesus himself spoke of the very stones crying out in praise⁸ and in the psalms we often read of the trees of the fields joining in to worship their creator⁹ - this is aptly summed up in the words of the poem *Suddenly* by R S Thomas,

Suddenly after long silence
he has become voluble.
He addresses me from a myriad
directions with fluency
of water, the articulateness
of green leaves; and in the genes,
too, the components
of my existence. The rock,
so long speechless, is the library
of his poetry.¹⁰

The scientist and theologian Teilhard de Chardin said of the cosmic Christ;

The cosmos is fundamentally and primarily living Christ, through his incarnation, is eternal to the world rooted in the world, even in the very heart of the tiniest atom Nothing seems to me more vital, from the point of view of human energy, than the appearance and eventually, the systematic cultivation of such a “cosmic sense”¹¹

As we cultivate this “cosmic sense” we will understand ourselves as living and moving and having our being in the cosmic Christ along with all of creation and our picture of God through Christ will expand as will our experience of God through the power of the Spirit. With Paul we will begin to grasp the length and the breadth, the height and the depth of the mystery of God’s good purposes for all of creation;¹²

He has let us know the mystery of his purpose, according to his good pleasure which he determined beforehand in Christ, for him to act upon when the times had run their course: that he would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth.

¹ 2 Corinthians 5.17

² Ephesians 3.18

³ Colossians 1.15

⁴ Revelations 4.8

⁵ My paraphrase of John 3.16

⁶ Quoted from *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* by Matthew Fox pg 78

⁷ *ibid* pg 77

⁸ Luke 19.40

⁹ Isaiah 55.12, Psalms 69, 96, 148 and others

¹⁰ *The Complete Works of R S Thomas* pg 426

¹¹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Human Energy* pg 23, 130-31

¹² Ephesians 1.9,10