Scriptura 27 (1988), 20-28

CHRISTOLOGY TODAY *

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Abstract

Christology today should explain the universal relevance of the particular man Jesus, not by reducing his particularity, but by means of the notion of Jesus' loving identification with others. In incarnational terms, God in the particular story of Jesus enacted his loving solidarity with all humanity. This can be understood, not only as an identification with the common human condition of universal sinfulness, but also as a differentiated identification with people in all the varieties of the human condition. In this way an understanding of the incarnation as God's solidarity, especially with the poor and oppressed, can be relatively justified.

The aim of this article is not to describe the state of Christology today, but rather to attempt to bring together constructively the concerns of two different areas of recent christological work: a concern about the meaning of the doctrine of the incarnation, arising out of a long-running English debate about the validity of incarnational Christology, and a concern to put the praxis of the historical Jesus back at the centre of Christology, which is evident both in some recent European Christology, such as that of Edward Schillebeeckx, and in the Liberation Theology of Latin America. The approach will be to focus on the problem of particularity and universality in Christology, as a way of putting the doctrine of the incarnation in its proper relation to the historical Jesus. I begin with two sections about, first, the historical Jesus, and, second, the incarnation, and will then bring these two themes together in the third and subsequent sections.

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* This lecture was delivered several times during a lecture tour of Southern Africa in April and May 1987: at Rhodes University, Grahamstown; the University of Port Elizabeth; the Department of Biblical Studies, University of Stellenbosch; the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg; the Federal Theological Seminary; and the Academy of Southwest Africa, Windhoek. I am grateful to all those who made comments and asked challenging questions. Some of the material has appeared in a different form in an essay co-authored with Professor R D Williams: 'Jesus - God with us', in Christina Baxter (ed), Stepping Stones (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987), 21-41.

1. Particular history - universal significance

If there is one key christological question, around which most other christological issues revolve, it is the question of the universal significance of the particular man Jesus. The man Jesus, about whom all christological claims are made, was a specific historical individual, who lived at one time and place, about whom can be said all kinds of specific things which can be said of him and of no one else, just as any other historical individual has many features quite specific to him or her. As is well known, the early Christian creeds insist on this specific historical identity of Jesus: born of Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate. But from the beginnings of Christianity the basic and characteristic Christian claim about Jesus, however varied the forms in which it has been put, has been that this particular man has universal significance for all men and women. How this can be - how one man can have ultimate religious significance for all other men and women - and, if it can be, why it should be that this man, out of all the billions of human beings who have ever lived, who has such significance, are the key christological questions.

How is this one man of universal significance? The key to this is to realise that the universal significance of Jesus is to be found in his particular history. Christology has a perennial temptation to make Jesus' significance intelligible by reducing his particularity. But we must resist this temptation: Jesus' universal significance is to be found in his specific historical identity, not despite or outside it. If Jesus is abstracted from his particular history, made into some generalized notion of ideal humanity or divine presence, Everyman or God-Man or God-in-Everyman, if he becomes interchangeably Jew or Gentile, black or white, male or female, ancient or modern, then paradoxically his universal significance evaporates. Jesus has proved universally significant not as a universalizable myth, but as the particular first-century man Jesus of Nazareth.

My suggestion is this: that this particular man is of universal significance because he stood in a unique relation to God and in a unique relation to humanity. The only way any individual can transcend his particularity without losing it, is in his relationships. Jesus' significance for others is to be found in his relationships to others: to God his Father and to other human beings. On the one hand, Jesus enjoyed a unique relation to God: as the unique son of his Father, Jesus identified himself unreservedly with his Father's will, and so embodied God's presence in his life, deeds, words, suffering and death. As well as, in this way, identifying himself with his Father, Jesus also identified with other people. He showed a loving identification with other men and women - by which I mean not simply an abstract identification with humanity in general, but a concrete identification, something which occurred in Jesus' actual relations with other people, as his loving concern reached specific people, as he sided with them, lived his life for their sake and in the end suffered for identifying with their cause.

This loving identification with others was with the actual men and women Jesus encountered in his earthly life, and in that sense limited, but it was not limited in the sense that Jesus called a halt to it and excluded anyone. So we could say that it was

in principle unlimited and potentially universalizable - such that Paul, whom Jesus never knew, could speak of the 'the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2:20). Jesus in his earthly life displayed a potential identification in love with all humanity, but he showed it in the way in which a particular historical individual can: by concretely identifying in love with those people he actually encountered. This potential universality becomes actually so by means of his resurrection and his post-resurrection presence in the Spirit. But we shall have to return later to the way in which Jesus' loving identification actually reaches people beyond the circle of those he encountered in his lifetime.

So if we put together these two relationships of Jesus - his unique identification with his Father's will and his potentially unlimited, loving identification with men and women - together they make him the one who embodies God's loving identification with all humanity. The essential point is that this makes Jesus a man who is unique in his universal significance without abolishing his particularity. On the contrary, it is precisely as the particular man who lived his particular history that Jesus embodies God's loving identification with all humanity. His universality is found in the actual ways in which he communicated God's loving presence to men and women. It is found in his dealings with Peter and Martha, the paralytic and the Gerasene demoniac, the high priest's slave and the penitent thief, and no generality can replace the stories of these concrete relationships. It is found in the stories Jesus himself told, of the good Samaritan, the persistent widow and the labourers in the vineyard, for which no generalized instruction can substitute. God in his love reaches out to and identifies with all humanity, not by some mere doctrinal statement of the fact nor by some mere religious symbol of it, but concretely in the form of Jesus' particular human life. This particular life history is not simply an illustration of God's loving identification with all humanity, it is actually the way in which God brings his love for all humanity into actual human lives.

Finally, on this point, we may notice that this way of finding Jesus' universality in his loving identification with others frees us from a certain kind of problem about the universal relevance of Jesus which constantly recurs in Christology - but is perhaps best illustrated today by the argument of those Christian feminists who find Jesus' maleness a problem. How can Jesus as a man be the human figure of supreme religious relevance to women? But Jesus' maleness is, of course, just one aspect of his particularity. There are comparable problems in the fact that Jesus was a Jew and not a Gentile, an unmarried man who had no knowledge of sexual or parental experience, a person with no physical or mental handicap, a young man who died before experiencing old age. How can Jesus be the figure of supreme religious relevance to Gentiles, married people, parents, handicapped people, elderly people? If Jesus' universal significance for all men and women has to mean that he lived, in his own human experience, all the diversity of human experience, then he must cease to be a particular human person. A desire for this kind of universal relevance in Jesus can make him only a kind of symbolic Everyperson with whom everyone can identify because he/she is specifically no one. Jesus himself dissolves into a mere symbol. But if Jesus is universally relevant through his loving identification with others, then his particularity is no problem. Jesus practised the love which

transcends all barriers between people and all the varieties of human experience and really identifies with the experience of others. Specifically as the particular man he was, Jesus gives the lie to the claim which sectional groups are inclined to make: that only they can understand themselves. The evidence of Christian history is that people of both sexes, all ages, all races and cultures and conditions, have experienced Jesus' loving identification with them. So - in himself, Jesus is male, not female - but (we might say) he is female by identification. In himself, Jesus is Jewish, not black - but he is black by identification. And so on. In this way we do not need to reduce Jesus' particularity in order to make him universally relevant, but can find his universality in his particularity.

2. Universal God - particular incarnation

In the previous section we began with the particular man Jesus and found his universal significance in his particularity: this is the approach often called 'Christology from below'. But Christology has often begun from God and asked about his incarnation in the particular man Jesus: 'Christology from above'. The two approaches are complementary. Christology from above becomes misleading only when it loses sight of the particularity of the man Jesus.

Properly understood, the doctrine of the incarnation presupposes the story of Jesus and can never be a substitute for it. It presupposes the particular human history of Jesus and identifies it as God's human history. It claims that there, in that specific human history, God is present in the world for all of us. The doctrine of the incarnation therefore loses its real point whenever its reference to the actual story of Jesus is forgotten. When it comes to mean: God became man - rather than: God became this man - its Christian meaning is lost. The christological statement of the Council of Chalcedon - that Jesus is one divine person in two complete natures - proves misleading whenever its intended reference to the particular man Jesus and his story is forgotten. The proper function of the doctrine of the incarnation is not to abstract Jesus from his human history. Its point is quite the opposite: to point to God's utter involvement in Jesus' human history. It means: that particular history is God's own human history. It means: in Jesus God particularizes himself.

In Jesus the universal God particularizes himself as a concrete human reality in the midst of this world. This was both the difficulty and the relevance of the doctrine of the incarnation in the period of the Fathers in which it was classically formulated. The problem for the Fathers was a platonically influenced doctrine of God, which made God metaphysically wholly other than, and religiously wholly remote from this world. God defined as the opposite of all that this world by definition is - the immaterial, immutable, impassible, immortal reality contrasted with the material, mutable, passible and mortal reality - could have no direct dealings with this world, least of all could he become incarnate as physical reality in it. The Platonic definition of God made a real incarnation of God himself inconceivable. But the Fathers, resisting the pressure of their ideological environment at this crucial point, insisted that Jesus was really God himself incarnate. And it was only by challenging the

thought of their age in this way that they were able to meet its real religious need. The remote God was found to be near in Jesus. The God who was otherwise a philosophical abstraction towards which the mind could aspire only in abstracting itself from this world, was found in Jesus as a concrete, particular reality in the midst of this world. In other words, in Jesus God could become known. The particularity of the story of Jesus, so alien to the hellenistic quest for philosophical and religious meaning, was precisely the way in which the Christian Gospel made the universal reality of God real for the people of that period. The doctrine of the incarnation served to identify Jesus as God's own particular, this wordly identity, and so as the form in which God can be encountered and known.

This fundamental meaning of the doctrine of the incarnation - that in Jesus God particularizes himself - retains its relevance in other, quite different cultures from that of the Fathers, because it meets the basic religious need to specify who God is and to form a concrete image of him. Without such an identification of God it is not possible to know and relate to God in the way that theistic religion requires. And so from this need to identify God arises the inveterate human, and even Christian, tendency to idolatry, in which we project a fantasy God, God as we would like him to be, or very often God as we think we would like to be ourselves, or even God as we fear he could be. Part of the remedy for idolatry, an essential safeguard against it, is to remember that God is the transcendent mystery beyond all our images of him. But this is not sufficient because it does not meet the real religious need to identify God. The doctrine of the incarnation meets this need by pointing to God's self-identification of himself, where in the life and words and deeds of a particular man God makes himself concretely present to us. Of course, God remains the transcendent mystery, and Jesus himself still points beyond himself to this unknowable infinity of God. The incarnation does not reduce God to particularity. But in Jesus God also comes out of his mystery and gives himself a particular this-worldly identity by which we may identify hom. Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God, and as such he is the icon which smashes all our idols.

Once again it is the particularity of Jesus which is so important here. Jesus as a generalized divine symbol is no more use than any other such religious symbol. It is as the particular man Jesus of Nazareth that Jesus is God's specifiable identity in this world and the remedy for all our religious fantasies.

3. Jesus as God's solidarity with the world

We are now in a position to put the main arguments of our first two sections together. In the first section we said: Jesus is the particular man who embodies God's loving identification with all humanity. In the last section we said: the doctrine of the incarnation means that in Jesus God particularizes himself. The two statements combined become: Jesus is God's own particular human reality by which in his love he identifies with all humanity. Or we might put it more summarily and perhaps more forcefully: Jesus is God's solidarity with the world.

This then is the way in which God identifies himself for us in Jesus. He identifies himself in identifying with us. He identifies himself as love - but as the kind of love which is best described as loving identification or solidarity, not the mere benevolence of a God who holds aloof from us, but a love which God enacts in Jesus' loving identification with men and women. For the notion of Jesus as God's solidarity with the world to retain its point, we must not let it degenerate into a mere general principle. It is not a general principle, but a summary of the concrete history of Jesus, a summary which can never replace the Gospel stories it is intended to summarize. God's solidarity with the world is something which takes place in Jesus' actual encounters with the actual people he met.

However, this brings us back to the question of how this solidarity reaches other people, who never met Jesus in his earthly life. How does Jesus' potentially universal identification become actual? A way in which it may be helpful to think of this, is in terms of a narrative theology. Jesus' potential universality becomes actual as the Gospel story is told and remembered and intersects the equally concrete and particular stories of other men and women in other times and places. Of course, that occurs in the context of an encounter with the risen, living Christ in the Spirit - but through the story of his earthly history. We know who Jesus is through the Gospel stories which become relevant to us as they meet or intersect our own stories, as we find the points of connection where God's loving identification becomes loving identification with us.

By 'our own stories' I mean both our individual life stories and also the wider stories in which they belong: the stories of our society, our culture, even the story of our contemporary world to the extent that it now has a single story. The term story here should not be understood in too narrowly literary a way: it does not, for example, exclude social and political analysis of our situation. But talking in narrative terms has the value of preserving both the particularity of the incarnation - it is the actual history Jesus lived that matters - and the particularity of our own stories - for times, places, cultures, individuals have their own rather different human stories. The universality of his story is found at the points where it meets all other human stories.

If we are to take this understanding of Jesus' universality further, we need to notice that the points of intersection between his story and others are of two kinds: (1) there is one point at which the story of Jesus intersects every other human story in the same way, that is a point where God identifies with the underlying truth of the human condition as such, but there are also (2) many other varied points of intersection where God identifies with different people differently. My last two sections discuss in turn these two kinds of solidarity.

4. Jesus as God's general solidarity with sinners

If we recall one of the earliest Christologies, Paul's, we will remember that Paul refers to very little of the story of Jesus except for his cross and resurrection. Paul does not preserve the particularity of Jesus as a specific human individual - against,

for example, the Corinthian tendency to dissolve him into a purely spiritual being - but he preserves it by concentrating it into one point: the end of Jesus' life in his death on a Roman cross.

Why is this? It is because Paul is concerned with the way in which the story of Jesus intersects the universal condition of all human beings as sinners condemned under God's judgment. This is particularly explicit in Romans, where the argument is that Jews and Gentiles share equally in the universal human condition, and so are alike in need of salvation through Christ. The point is highlighted by the Adam Christology in which Christ parallels Adam in universal significance. In Paul's Christology, what matters is that Jesus on the cross, left by God to die the death of a criminal condemned by God's law, is identified with the underlying truth of all human life in its weakness and failure, its godlessness and godforsakenness. What is particular about Jesus' death makes this universal truth of the human condition unequivocally clear and at the same time makes actual God's solidarity with all humanity in that condition. Jesus on the cross is God's love reaching out in identification with all of us in our subjection to sin and condemnation. He is God's love, bringing the new life of the resurrection into the sinful condition of all of us.

In this respect, Paul's Christology is the ancestor of all those atonement doctrines which find Jesus' universality in his relevance to the human condition as such. What they say is, of course, valid and important. But if being a sinner is the underlying truth of all human life, it is by no means the whole truth. We are all sinners in different ways. There is a real sense in which some are more sinned against than sinners. And there are many other very varied factors which make up our human lives and make them very different. Christian experience is that God in Jesus meets us not only in the common condition of universal sinfulness, but also in the diversity of human needs and aspirations. And Christian experience is that this happens because the particularity of Jesus, which Paul concentrates into the cross, is also recounted for us in the diverse detail of the Gospels. This is an aspect of Christology, neglected by the mainstream tradition of christological reflection, which is beginning to be added to the christological agenda.

5. Jesus as God's differential solidarity

The story of Jesus is heard differently in different contexts, just as any other great story is. Already in the New Testament the four evangelists tell the story of Jesus in different ways, as it became relevant to their own communities in different ways. The church in different periods and cultures has had a wide variety of images of Jesus, which reflect the different points of intersection between the Gospel story and the stories of those periods and cultures. Thus my proposal of a narrative model can be seen as a warrant for contextualized and indigenous christologies. But two caveats perhaps need to be made.

First, the process of forming images of Jesus has dangers. The story can be distorted to serve other interests. A groups can develop its own image of Jesus which confirms its own identity and interests and excludes other people. Images of Jesus have been

weapons of oppression, instruments of colonialism, forms of self-expression and obsessive guilt, means of escape from the realities of life, and so on. But this danger means that the images of Jesus must be constantly referred back to the Gospel stories, checked by them, challenged by them, transformed by the constant rediscovery of the relevance of the Jesus of the Gospels. Comparison with other Christians' images of Jesus can help in this process, since it helps direct attention to neglected aspects of the Jesus of the Gospels. My proposal cannot allow Jesus to become a mere cypher, which anyone can fill with whatever content they like. Such a manipulable Jesus is only available when the actual particular humanity of Jesus, reflected in the Gospels, is not taken seriously. My proposal is that each age and culture find its own points of intersection with the story of Jesus, but they are points of intersection with the story of Jesus, not free-floating imagination.

Secondly, especially now that we live increasingly in one world, we must not allow our contextualized and indigenous christologies to create a kind of theological *apartheid* in which they cannot interact, instruct, challenge and enrich each other. After all, the stories of our various societies interact. The story of the secularized, atheistic West gradually impinges on all cultures, while the stories of suffering or oppressed peoples impinge on the conscience of the West, or should do. If our stories interact, our christologies must do so too. Otherwise, for example, European theology could make christological plurality an excuse for neglecting the concern for political liberation in the christologies of the Third World.

If we are to understand Jesus' as God's differentiated solidarity, there are two important points to remember about the story of Jesus. One is that Jesus' loving identification was with people of all types and in all conditions. It excluded no one. Jesus associated with outcasts or all descriptions: lepers, who were outcasts in one way, taxcollectors, who were outcasts in a very different way. He treated women, very much the second-class citizens of his day, with exceptional respect, and he sought out the demoniacs, who seemed no longer human at all. He healed the servant of the Roman centurion and the daughter of a Canaanite woman. He made a political freedom-fighter one of his disciples, along with the wife of Herod's estate-manager. He dined with Pharisees and counted a rich aristocrat among his loyal friends. In this way Jesus concretized God's solidarity with people not only in the common human condition, but with people in all the varieties of the human condition, people divided by all the differences - physical, social, economic, political - which divide humanity into sexes, classes, races, ages, states of health and so on.

But, secondly, Jesus did not identify with all these people in the same way. He met their actual, very different needs for God's solidarity with them as they themselves were. He touched and healed lepers. He was attracted to the rich young ruler as a good and upright person, and precisely for that reason asked him to give his wealth to the poor. He refused to condemn the woman taken in adultery, but was unrestrained in his attacks on the Pharisees. In other words, God's solidarity with us in Jesus is not a bland, undifferentiated acceptance floating serenely above the differences and divisions of human society and leaving them unchanged. Jesus was involved in the conflicts, tragedies, and antagonisms of people, and identified with

people for their healing and reconciliation. Those who were excluded from human solidarity and felt excluded from God's solidarity - lepers, prostitutes, taxcollectors - needed welcoming into both, with grace - healing or forgiveness. But religious leaders who excluded others from the solidarity of God's people, could learn God's real solidarity with them only through rebuke and challenge, so that they could accept God's solidarity not only with themselves, but also with those they despised and excluded. Because God's solidarity is with all people for the sake of human solidarity with all people, it must reach people through Jesus in a differentiated way.

Incarnational christologies which speak only in a generalized way of God's assumption and redemption of human nature have consistently lost sight of this differentiated solidarity of God in Jesus. It can be restored only by reference to the particularity of the incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth, who treated people in this way. But precisely this has happened, to an extent, in recent black and liberation theologies which speak of God's preferential solidarity with the poor and oppressed, seen in Jesus' 'option for the poor' or 'bias to the poor'. The standard objection to this, of course, has been that it is inconsistent with God's love for all people. But I think this objection can be overcome if God's solidarity with the poor and oppressed is seen as an aspect of God's differentiated solidarity.

Jesus did not simply support the oppressed against the oppressors. In that case, if the oppressed are successful, they become new oppressors. Jesus intended God's loving solidarity with all people to create loving solidarity among all people. But therefore his solidarity with all people had to take the form especially of solidarity with the excluded, the marginalized people. When American black theologians began to claim that 'Jesus is black' - which I have suggested can be understood as 'black by identification' - they did not, if I have understood them, mean only that Jesus is black for blacks. Jesus is also black for whites - just as, for the Pharisees, Jesus was identified with taxcollectors and sinners. They could, as it were, only know his solidarity with themselves via his solidarity with the people they excluded.

Thus the notion that the incarnation means God's solidarity with the poor and oppressed has truth in it: it is not the whole truth, but polemical truth needs to be one-sided. Of course, it can degenerate into an ideology, and needs to be protected from that by constant reference to the actual history of Jesus. The economically poor must not forget that Jesus also identified especially with taxcollectors. The politically oppressed should not forget that Jesus also identified with the blind and the mad and the dying. The marginalized, the weak, the forgotten to whom Jesus was especially sent were not - and are not - just one group or class, but many. God in Jesus does not identify with the exclusive sectional interests of any group, but seeks out even the victims forgotten by every group, in order to restore the solidarity of all with all.