

Faith Within Reason

Herbert McCabe OP

Edited and introduced by Brian Davies OP



continuum

Son of God

What are we to make of the Christian tradition that Jesus was and is Son of God? Well, first of all, what are we *not* to make of it?

We will get absolutely nowhere if we compare it to stories about gods appearing in human form. But we might get somewhere if we start by contrasting it with them.

When Pallas Athena appears to Odysseus she is a goddess, normally resident on Olympus, who occasionally comes down to appear to him in human guise – or, more accurately, human disguise.

Now whatever else the church has been preaching for two thousand years, it is not that Jesus was a god, and not that he appeared disguised or disguised as a human being. Jesus was one of us, a human being in a perfectly ordinary sense. So far as being human goes, the only difference between Jesus and me is that he lived out his humanity more consistently than I do.

I am occasionally tempted to pretend to myself that I am some kind of god. Jesus never for one moment had the illusion that he was a god. Pallas Athena belongs to myth – a perfectly respectable literary genre, largely about gods and such. Jesus belongs to our history, which is almost exclusively about sinners. Christianity comes from Jews; and they had hardly any use for myth because they had no use for gods. True, their attempts at historical writing were often as imaginative as, say, Shakespeare's *Richard III*. But they were not meant to be myths.

One important bit of history is the extraordinary effect that Jesus had on his followers after he had been killed. They were

convinced that Jesus, whom they had lost in death, had returned to be present to them. They were also convinced that somehow because of this they had been filled with the spirit or breath or life of God himself.

The presence of Jesus after his death was not like being haunted by his ghost: it was almost exactly the opposite. For the culture of those who first came to believe in Jesus's return, you would be haunted by a ghost if you had failed to carry out the proper funeral rites for the dead – if, for example, the corpse was not properly buried. A ghost is a chilling reminder of death and the obligations it lays upon the living. This is not at all what Mary Magdalene and the others experienced, as the Gospel stories insist. What they encountered was the living Christ, present (and more present) than he had been before. They encountered not his ghost or his dismembered spirit, and certainly not just his memory (all of which would imply his actual absence), but himself as bodily present. Theologians dispute about the extent to which the stories of the appearances of Jesus narrate what brought about this conviction, and to what extent they are an expression of it. Common sense suggests a bit of each. Anyway, the conviction was powerfully there.

And what does this say about Jesus? There was a difference between what could be said about him before his death and what has to be said about him if you share the conviction of his followers. The first is accessible to all historians (and today's historians seem to find it rather more accessible than some Christian theologians used to think). Historians now know enough about the Jewish milieu of Jesus to be able to assert that he was a prophet and, in any ordinary sense, a saint – with only this little niggling worry: that he seemed to find himself more important than most saints would do. You see, once we have got rid of the ludicrous idea put about by quite a lot of Christians that the Pharisees and other Jewish contemporaries of Jesus hated him because they didn't believe in God's love and mercy and grace, but instead worshipped a set of regulations,

once we have demonized the enemies of Jesus, we have to look elsewhere to explain their hostility. And the most plausible answer seems to be that, while of course Jesus was in no way opposed to the Law, the Torah, God's own word of righteousness, he did seem to suggest that to follow him, even if you were wicked, was even more important than being devoted to the Law. So, understandably, some pious, educated Jews found him a subversive egotistical nuisance. There is no doubt that they did oppose him, and very little doubt that this was what gave Pontius Pilate an excuse to have him executed.

So: Jesus had the generosity, insight and courage of a saint – but maybe flawed by a streak of egotism. Or, again, maybe it was something else. I suppose that is as far as a historian could go. But after his death there were some Jews who were convinced that it *was* something else. Convinced that Jesus was not dead but once more humanly, which is to say *bodily*, alive (only more so), and that this bodily presence is the source of divine life for his followers, they said he was, in truth, more important than the Law because he was the fulfilment of the Torah, the embodiment of the righteousness of God.

The earliest Christians began to see Jesus not just as *preaching* the imminent coming of the divine kingship of love, but as *inaugurating* it in his own person. Not just a prophet and saint, but the source of the Spirit, the source of all prophecy and sanctity. Not just as one who received the Spirit, but one through whom the Spirit gave life to others; and not just to the community that had been blessed with the earlier revelation of God's love, the Jews, but even to those outside, to all the people of the world.

The phrase 'Son of God' had hitherto been a fairly normal way of describing a person or community that was sacred, set apart by God, or holy. But, by at least the time of Matthew, it had become not a general term to say what sort of person this is, but an answer to the question: 'Who do you say that I am?', and Matthew has Peter saying: 'You are the Messiah [the

Spirit-bearer], the Son of the living God.' And Jesus responds: 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood [we might paraphrase this as 'historical research'] has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven' (Mt. 16.16–17). A son of God is no longer *what* someone is; the Son of God is *who* Jesus is. And for Matthew, this conviction is the 'rock' upon which the church is founded (Mt. 16.18).

This church thought long and hard about what this meant. Already Matthew has Jesus saying, 'All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Mt. 11.27; this sounds like something from John, but it's much earlier). Already the first generation of Christians saw in the person – not the doctrine, but the historical person of Jesus – the revelation of the Father.

'Faith' was not just a matter of agreeing with what Jesus said – as you might agree or disagree with what Aristotle said. It was a matter of recognizing the personal life, death and resurrection of Jesus as showing us what we worship: not a god but the eternal explosion of love which is at once Father, Son and Spirit. Jesus is a revelation of the Father because he is the Son come amongst us, as one of us.

I am human in exactly the same way as my parents – but it was they who made me so. I didn't make them so. That is a distinction between us. Christians came to see that the Child of God is just as divine as God the Parent. But he is divine because of the Parent and not the other way round. And this is the only distinction between them. Of course he could not be truly divine, as his Father is, if he were a creature: and so an early creed says, 'begotten, *not* made'.

Now, with us, there is another distinction between me and my parents: I am a distinct, separate individual, having my own share in the same human nature. This kind of separation/distinction could have no place in the godhead, for God

Forgiveness

is one. God is the whole of Godness. And so the creed goes on: 'Begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father'. So, said the Christians, Jesus is the Son, the reproduction of the Father. Not an *image* of God, for that is just humankind – through which we express our idea of God. 'Who Jesus is' is God's idea of God. In Jesus it is not just that we have a clue to understanding God: in Jesus God understands himself; he is, as John was to put it, the Word of God. And not just the Word of God to us, but the Word of God to himself. In understanding his divine life the Father has unfathomable joy and delight, and this divine delight and joy is the Holy Spirit that is poured out upon us when the Word or Son of God is made flesh and dwells amongst us.

Christians saw the concrete historical life of Christ as bringing us into the Love which we worship. To be filled with the Spirit that comes to us from the Father through the Son is to be taken up to share in the eternal exchange of love we call the Trinity.

The early Christian poem quoted by Paul in Philippians (2.6–11) shows us in our history the eternal relations of Father and Son. The human obedience of the Son to his mission from the Father to be one of us, an obedience unto death, is rewarded in his being raised up and established in his kingdom, which is nothing but the outpouring of the Spirit amongst his fellow men and women. Of course the eternal love is enacted in our world in the crucifixion, in blood and torture and death, because that is the sort of world we have made of God's creation: a tragic world in which loving obedience and faithfulness mean suffering and persecution. If we have faith in Christ, as John warns us, the world will hate us, because we challenge the illusions and lies and cruelties by which the powers of this world are sustained. But the heart of the Gospel is that in this faith we are taken up into the eternity of love in which the Father says, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased' (Mt. 3.17). That is why we speak of Jesus as Son of God and source of the Spirit.

It is very odd that people should think that when we do good God will reward us and when we do evil he will punish us. I mean it is very odd that Christians should think this, that God deals out to us what we deserve. It is not, I suppose, really odd that other people should; I suppose it is the commonest way of thinking of God, for God tends to be just a great projection into the sky of our moral feelings, especially our guilt-feelings. But I don't believe in God if that's what he is, and it is very odd that any Christian should, since there is so much in the gospels to tell us differently. You could say that the main theme of the preaching of Jesus is that God isn't like that at all.

Take the famous parable of the prodigal son (Lk. 15.11–32). In this, the younger son goes to a distant country far from his father and squanders all his father's gifts in debauchery and generally having a high old time. After a bit he sees himself for what he is, so as to say, 'I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.' What his sin has done is to alter his whole relationship with his father; instead of being a son he now should be treated as one who gets his *wages*, gets exactly what he deserves. But there are two things here; there is the fact that this is what his sin has *done*, and there is the fact that he *recognizes* this. To make sure you see that this is the crucial point of the story, Luke has it repeated twice. The vital thing is that the son has recognized his sin for what it is: something that changes God into a paymaster, or a judge. Sin is something that changes God into a projection of