

Jesus and the Quest

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1. Introduction

I believe that the historical quest for Jesus is a necessary and non-negotiable aspect of Christian discipleship; that we in our generation have a chance to be renewed in discipleship and mission precisely by means of this quest; and, even, that we in the Anglican Communion may have a chance to play a significant role in this quest. I want to explain and justify each of these beliefs to you this evening. There are, however, huge problems and even dangers within the quest, as you would expect from anything that is heavy with potential for the kingdom of God, and I shall of necessity say some- thing about these as well.

Right from the start there are pitfalls in even addressing the subject, and we may as well be clear about them. It is desperately easy, when among like- minded friends, to become complacent. We hear of wild new theories about Jesus. Every month or two some publisher comes up with a blockbuster saying that he was a New Age guru, an Egyptian freemason, or a hippie revolutionary. Every year or two some scholar or group of scholars comes up with a new book, full of imposing footnotes, to tell us that Jesus was a peasant Cynic, a wandering wordsmith, or the preacher of liberal values born out of due time. Some in the church are eager to jump on any new bandwagon that's going. Some, however, react by reaching for equally misleading stereotypes. A defense of a would-be supernatural Jesus can easily degenerate into a portrayal of Jesus as a first-century version of Superman - not realising that the Superman myth is itself an ultimately dualistic corruption of the Christian story. Many devout Christians content them- selves with an effortless superiority: we know the truth, these silly liberals have got it all wrong, and we've got nothing new to learn. Sometimes people like me are wheeled out to demonstrate, supposedly, the truth of traditional Christianity, with the implied corollary that we can now stop asking these unpleasant historical questions and get on with something else, perhaps some- thing more profitable, instead.

As you may expect, I do not intend to encourage you in any of these attitudes. As I said, I regard the continuing historical quest for Jesus as a necessary part of ongoing Christian discipleship. I doubt very much if, in the present age, we shall ever get to the point where we know all there is to know, and understand all there is to understand, about Jesus himself, who he was, what he said and what he did, and what he meant by it all. But since orthodox Christianity has always held firm to the basic belief that it is by looking at Jesus himself that we discover who God is - indeed, that we discover the meaning of the word 'god' itself - it seems to me indisputable that we should expect always to be continuing in the quest for Jesus, precisely as part of, indeed perhaps as the sharp edge of, our exploration into God himself.

This, of course, carries certain corollaries. If it is true, as I believe it is, that Christian faith cannot preempt the historical questions about Jesus, it is also true that historical study cannot be carried out in a vacuum. We have been taught by the Enlightenment to suppose that history and faith are antithetical, so that to appeal to the one is to appeal away from the other. As a result, historians have regularly been suspect in the community of faith, just as believers have always been suspect in the community of secular historiography. When Christianity is truest to itself, however, it denies precisely this dichotomy - uncomfortable though this may be for those of us who try to live in, and to speak from and to, both communities simultaneously. Actually, I believe this discomfort is itself one aspect of a contemporary

Christian vocation: as our world goes through the deep pain of the death-throes of the Enlightenment, the Christian is not called to stand apart from this pain, but to share it. That is the spirit in which I offer these reflections to you this evening. I am neither a secular historian who happens to believe in Jesus, nor a Christian who happens to indulge a fancy for history, but someone who believes that being a Christian necessarily entails doing business with his- tory, and that history done for all it's worth will challenge spurious versions of Christianity, including many that think of themselves as orthodox, but sustain and regenerate a deep and true orthodoxy, surprising and challenging though this will always remain.

2. The Necessity of the Quest

I am a first-century historian, not a reformation or eighteenth-century specialist. Nevertheless, from what little I know of the last five hundred years of European and American history, I believe that we can categorise the challenge of the Enlightenment to historic Christianity in terms of its asking a necessary question in a misleading fashion. The divide in contemporary Christianity between liberals and conservatives has tended to be between those who, because they saw the necessity of asking the historical question, assumed that it had to be asked in the Enlightenment's fashion, and those on the other hand who, because they saw the misleadingness of the Enlightenment's way of proceeding, assumed that its historical questions were unnecessary. Let me speak first of the necessity of the Enlightenment's question, and then of the misleading way it has been addressed.

The protest of the Reformation against the mediaeval church was not least a protest in favour of a historical and eschatological reading of Christianity against a timeless system. Getting at the literal meaning of the texts, as the Reformers insisted we must, meant historical reading: the question of what Jesus or Paul really meant, as opposed to what the much later church said they meant, became dramatically important. This supported the reformers' eschatological emphasis: the cross was a once-for-all achievement, never to be repeated, as they thought their Catholic opponents thought they were doing in the Mass. But, arguably, the Reformers never allowed this basic insight to drive them beyond a half-way house when it came to Jesus himself. The gospels were still treated as the repositories of true doctrine and ethics. Insofar as they were history, they were the history of the moment when the timeless truth of God was grounded in space and time, when the action that achieved timeless atonement just happened to take place. This, I know, is a gross oversimplification, like almost everything I shall say in this paper, but I believe it is borne out by the sequel. Post-reformation theology grasped the insights of the reformers as a new set of timeless truths, and used them to set up new systems of dogma, ethics and church order in which, once again, vested interests were served and fresh thought was stifled.

The Enlightenment was, among many other things, a protest against a system which, since it was itself based on a protest, could not see that it was itself in need of further reform. (The extent to which the Enlightenment was a secularised version of the Reformation is a fascinating question, one for brave PhD candidates to undertake, rather than the subject for an after-dinner address about Jesus. But we have to do business at least with these possibilities if we are to grasp where we have come from, and hence where we may be being called to go to.) In particular, the Enlightenment, in the person of Herman Samuel Reimarus, challenged unthinking would-be Christian dogma about the eternal son of God and his establishment of this oppressive system called Christianity. Reimarus challenged it in the name of history, the weapon that the reformers had used against Roman Catholicism. Go back to the beginning, he said, and you will discover that Christianity is based on a mistake. Jesus was, after all, another in the long line of failed Jewish revolutionaries; Christianity was the invention of the first disciples.

I believe that Reimarus' question was necessary. Necessary to shake European Christianity out of its semi-Deistic dogmatism, and to face a new challenge: to grow in understanding of who Jesus actually was and what he actually accomplished. Necessary to challenge bland dogma with a living reality; necessary to challenge idolatrous distortions of who Jesus actually was, and hence who God actually was and is, with a fresh grasp of truth. The fact that Reimarus gave his own question an answer which is historically unsustainable does not mean he did not ask the right question. Who was Jesus, and what did he accomplish?

This necessity has been underlined in our own century, as Ernst Käsemann saw all too clearly. Look what happens, he said, when the church abandons the quest for Jesus. The non-questing years between the wars created a vacuum in which nonhistorical Jesuses were offered, legitimating the Nazi ideology. I would go so far as to suggest that whenever the church forgets its call to engage in the task of understanding more and more fully who Jesus actually was, idolatry and ideology lie close at hand. To renounce the quest because you don't like what the historians have so far come up with is not a solution.

But the Enlightenment's raising of the question of Jesus was done in a radically misleading manner. The Enlightenment, notoriously, insisted on splitting apart history and faith, facts and values, religion and politics, nature and supernature, in a way whose consequences are written into the history of the last two hundred years - one of the consequences being, indeed, that each of those categories now carries with it, in the minds of millions around the world, an implicit opposition to its twin, so that we are left with the great difficulty of even conceiving of a world in which they belong to one another as part of a single indivisible whole. Again, so much debate between liberals and conservatives has taken place down this fault line, while the real battle - to rearticulate a reintegrated worldview - has not even been attempted. But there is a deeper problem with the Enlightenment than its radically split worldview. The real problem is that it offered a rival eschatology to the Christian one. This needs a little explanation.

Christianity, as we shall see, began with the thoroughly Jewish belief that world history was focussed on a single geographical place and single moment in time. The Jews assumed that their country, and their capital city, was the place in question, and that the time, though they didn't know quite when it would be, would be soon. The living God would defeat evil once and for all, and create a new world of peace and justice. The early Christians believed that this had in principle happened in and through Jesus of Nazareth; as we shall see, they believed this (a) because Jesus himself had believed it and (b) because he had been vindicated by God after his execution. This is what early Christian eschatology was all about: not the expectation of the literal end of the space-time universe, but the sense that world history was reaching, or indeed had reached, its single intended climax.

This was, as we saw, grasped in principle by the Reformers. Luther, I grant you, saw a recapitulation of the history of Israel in the history of the church, envisaging the mediaeval period on the analogy of the Babylonian captivity. But his strong Christological focus prevented this from becoming a new rival eschatology, divorced from its first-century roots.

With the Enlightenment this further step was taken. All that had gone before was a form of captivity, of darkness; now, at last, light and freedom had dawned. World history was finally brought to its climax, its real new beginning, not in Jerusalem, but in Western Europe and America. Not in the first century, but in the eighteenth. It is wryly amusing to observe the way in which post-Enlightenment thinkers to this day heap scorn upon the apparently ridiculous idea that world history reached its climax in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, while themselves holding a view we already know to be at least equally ridiculous. Thus, as long as the necessary question of the Enlightenment (the question of the historical Jesus) was addressed within the Enlightenment's own terms, it was inevitable not only that Christology would collapse into warring camps of naturalist and supernaturalist, that Jesus-pictures would be produced in which the central character was either an unexceptional first-century Jew or an inhuman and improbable superman-figure, but also that liberal and conservative alike would find it hugely difficult to reconceive the first-century Jewish eschatological world within which alone the truly historical Jesus belongs. Jesus was almost

bound to appear as the teacher, and perhaps at most the embodiment, of either liberal timeless truths or conservative timeless truths. The thought that he might have been the turning-point of history was, to many on both sides of the divide, almost literally unthinkable. Even Schweitzer, who of course brought the eschatological perspective back with a bang, radically misunderstood it.

I believe, then, that within the multiple tasks to which God is calling the church in our own generation there remains the necessary task of addressing the Enlightenment's question, as to who precisely Jesus was and what precisely he accomplished. And I believe that there are ways of addressing this question which do not fall into the trap of merely rearranging the Enlightenment's own categories. We have a new opportunity in our generation to move forward in our thinking, our praying, our whole Christian living, no doubt by many means, but not least by addressing the historical Jesus-question in fresh and creative ways. That is the task I now wish to address.

3. New Opportunities in the Quest

Journalists often ask me why there is anything new to say about Jesus. The answer, actually, is that there both is and isn't. Mere novelty is almost bound to be wrong: if you try to say that Jesus didn't announce the Kingdom of God, or that he was in fact a twentieth-century thinker born out of time, you will rightly be rejected. But what did Jesus mean by the kingdom of God? That, and a thousand other cognate questions, are far harder than often supposed, and the place to go to find new light is the history of Jesus' own times. And that means first-century Judaism, in all its complexity, and with all the ambiguities of our attempts to reconstruct it.

And, of course, there are all sorts of new tools available to help us to do this. We have the Scrolls, all of them at last in the public domain. We have good new editions of dozens of hitherto hard-to-find Jewish texts, and a burgeoning secondary literature about them. We have all kinds of archaeological finds, however complex they may be to interpret. Of course there is always the danger both of oversimplification and overcomplication. Our sources do not enable us to draw a complete sociological map of Galilee and Judaea in Jesus' day. But we know enough to be able to say quite a lot, for instance, about the agenda of the Pharisees; quite a lot, too, about what sort of aspirations came to be enshrined in what we call apocalyptic literature, and why; quite a lot, too, about Roman agendas in Palestine and the agendas of the Chief Priests and of the Herodian dynasty in their insecure struggles for a compromised power. Quite a lot, in other words, about the necessary contexts for understanding Jesus.

We can perhaps say something, too, about Galilaean peasants. Not, I think, all that some current writers would like us to. There are those who see the peasant culture of ancient Mediterranean society as the dominant influence in the Galilee of Jesus' day, with the Jewish apocalyptic colouring decidedly muted; so that Jesus' announcement of the kingdom has less to do with Jewish aspirations and more to do with social protest. Let me stress both that this is a mistake and that showing it to be so does not lessen the element of social protest which is still to be found within the much wider-ranging and more theologically grounded kingdom-announcement which we can properly attribute to Jesus. Equally, I emphasise that one of the things we can know about peasant societies like that of Jesus is that they were heavily dependent upon oral traditions, not least traditions of instant story-telling. When we get this right, we avoid at a stroke some of the extraordinary reductionism that has characterised the Jesus Seminar, with its attempt to rule out the authenticity of most Jesus-stories on the grounds that people would only have remembered isolated sayings. But my overall point is simply this: there is a great deal of history-writing still waiting to be

attempted and accomplished, and we have more tools to do it with than most of us can keep up with. If we really believe, in any sense, in the incarnation of the Word, we are bound to take seriously the flesh which the Word became. And, since that flesh was first-century Jewish flesh, we should rejoice in any and every advance in our understanding of first-century Judaism, and seek to apply those insights to our reading of the gospels.

As we do so, please note, not in order to undermine what the gospels are saying, or to replace their stories with quite different ones of our own, but to understand what it is that they are really all about as they are. It is a standard objection to historical-Jesus research to say that God has given us the gospels and that we cannot and should not put a construction of our own in their place. This misunderstands the nature of the historical task. Precisely because these texts have been read and preached as holy scripture for two thousand years, all kinds of misunderstandings have crept in, which have then been enshrined in church tradition. Let me give you an obvious example. When Martin Luther rightly reacted against the mediaeval translation of *metanoieite* as *paenitentiam agere*, and insisted upon the repentance of the heart, he could not, perhaps, see that his reading would be used in turn to support an individualistic and pietistic reading of Jesus' command to repent, which does no justice at all to the meaning of the word in the first century. Jesus was summoning his hearers to give up their whole way of life, their national and social agendas, and to trust him for a different agenda, a different set of goals. This included, of course, a change of heart, but went far beyond it. This illustrates a point which could be repeated dozens of times. Historical research, as I have tried to show in my writings, by no means tells us to throw away the gospels and substitute a quite different story of our own. It does, however, warn us that our familiar readings of those gospel stories may well have to submit to serious challenges and questionings, and that we may end up reading even our favourite texts in ways we had never imagined. Since this agenda is thus truly Protestant, truly Catholic, truly evangelical and truly liberal, not to mention potentially charismatic as well, I am sure that an Episcopal audience will not fail to recognise it as its own true vocation. It takes a certain courage, of course, to be prepared to read familiar texts in new ways. Let me assure you that it is abundantly worth it, and that what you lose in terms of your regular exegesis will be more than made up for in what you will gain.

4. False Trails in the Quest

In order to understand where we are in the bewildering options in today's quest, it helps to see the state of play a hundred years ago. Three figures stand out. William Wrede argued for consistent scepticism: we can't know very much about Jesus, he certainly didn't think of himself as the Messiah or the Son of God, and the gospels are basically theological fiction. Albert Schweitzer argued for consistent eschatology: Jesus shared the first-century apocalyptic expectation of the end of all things, and, though he died without it having come about, he started the eschatological movement that became Christianity. What is more, the synoptic gospels more or less got him right. Over against both these positions, Martin Kähler argued that the quest for a purely historical Jesus was based on a mistake, since the real figure at the heart of Christianity was the preached and believed Christ of the church's faith, not some figment of the historian's imagination.

All three positions are alive and well as we come to the end of the twentieth century. The Jesus Seminar and several writers of a similar stamp stand in the line of Wrede. Sanders, Meyer, Harvey and several others, myself included, stand in the line of Schweitzer. Luke Timothy Johnson is our contemporary

Kähler, calling down a plague on all the houses. Since I have been criticised, sometimes quite sharply, for offering this sort of analysis, I want to say a word or two of explanation and perhaps even justification.

Schweitzer's construction of Jesus, as is well known, was so unwelcome to the theological establishment that there followed half a century of little serious Jesus- research. The so-called 'New Quest' of the 1950s and 1960s made some progress at getting things started again, but never really managed to recover a serious historical nerve. Books and articles spent more time arguing about criteria for authenticity than offering major hypotheses about Jesus himself. By the mid-1970s there was a sense of stalemate. It was then that quite a new style of Jesus-historiography began to emerge, explicitly distinguishing itself from the so-called 'New Quest'. For my money, the best book of that period was Ben Meyer's *The Aims of Jesus*, which received less notice than it should have precisely because it broke the normal mould - and perhaps because it made quite heavy demands on a New Testament scholarly world unused to thinking through its presuppositions and methods with high philosophical rigour. Six years after Meyer, Ed Sanders' *Jesus and Judaism* continued the trend. Both books reject the New Quest's methods; both offer reconstructions of Jesus which make thorough and sustained use of Jewish apocalyptic eschatology; both offer fully-blown hypotheses which make a fair amount of sense within first-century Judaism, rather than the bits-and-pieces reconstruction, based on a small collection of supposedly authentic but isolated sayings, characteristic of the 'New Quest'.

In this light, I believed in the early 1980s that we were witnessing what I called a 'third quest' for Jesus. This was simply a way of saying that what Meyer and Sanders and several others were doing was significantly different, in several ways which can be laid out unambiguously and reasonably non-controversially, from the 'Old Quest' of the pre-Schweitzer days, and from the 'New Quest'. In this light, when the Jesus Seminar, then Crossan, and then particularly Funk himself, explicitly continued the work of the New Quest, in Funk's case making quite a point of doing so, I believe that I am justified in continuing to distinguish these movements in this way. Of course, contemporary history refuses to stand still and be cut up into neat pieces. Several writers cross over the boundaries this way and that. But I persist both in maintaining the distinction between the Wrede-route and the Schweitzer-route, and in arguing that the latter offers the best hope for serious historical reconstruction.

I have argued in detail against the Jesus Seminar, and Crossan in particular, in various places, and it would be tedious to repeat such arguments in a context such as the present one. But I want to make it clear that if I disagree with Crossan, Funk and the Jesus Seminar, and in different ways with Marcus Borg, as I do, it is not because I think they are wrong to raise the questions they do, but because I believe their presuppositions, methods, arguments and conclusions can be successfully controverted on good historical grounds, not by appealing to theological a prioris. It is not enough (nor would it be true) to dismiss such writers as a bunch of disaffected liberals or unbelievers. We must engage in actual argument about actual issues.

One of the best arguments, however, is the offering of an alternative hypothesis which actually does the job that a successful hypothesis must: make sense of the data, do so with an essential simplicity, and shed light on other areas. This, I believe, is what can be accomplished by some such construct as I have offered in my recent writings. Obviously there isn't time to do more than summarize a few points, and in moving now to the new opportunities in the Quest, I choose three central features which I think show most clearly the ways in which the Third Quest can stimulate and re-invigorate our view both of Jesus and, ultimately, of God. I want to speak about the kingdom of God, the meaning of the cross, and the question of incarnation.

5. New Opportunities in the Quest

a. Kingdom of God and Eschatology

The starting-point for serious Jesus-reconstruction is to grasp more clearly than we have before the fully Jewish and fully eschatological meaning of Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom of God. As I have argued at length elsewhere, the Jews of Jesus' day for the most part believed that the exile, the punishment for Israel's sins, was not yet over. If it were, the Romans would not be ruling Palestine, and nor for that matter would Herod or Caiaphas. To this extent, Reimarus was quite right. The context of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God was the Jewish hope for liberation.

The apocalyptic announcement of the Kingdom of God, when we place it in its first-century Jewish context, was not, then, about the end of the world. It was about the great actions within history, whereby the one true and living God would act within Israel's history, and so within world history as a whole, to bring Israel's long and chequered story to its appointed climax, to liberate her from oppression, and to deal once and for all with the evil that had oppressed her. When we meet kingdom-announcers in the pages of Josephus, we are not in the presence of end-of-the-world dreamers, but of political revolutionaries, people who today with our confusing categories we would call right-wing extremists. They believed, quite simply, that there was 'no king but God'; and they translated this directly into action, first into a tax revolt and then into armed rebellion. These people, whom we often think of as 'zealots' (though Josephus doesn't use that term until later), included the hard-line Pharisees, the Shammaites who would stop at nothing to bring about the purification of Israel both from Gentile oppression and from renegades within the ranks.

Political aims and goals, and the means thought fit to attain them, were no doubt every bit as complex in the Middle East in the first century as they are today. But this strand of expectation constantly recurs, in text after text and movement after movement. Three features, which are enormously important for understanding Jesus, emerge as central to the apocalyptically-expressed Kingdom-dreams of first-century Palestinian Jews. These three features are drawn together in several prophetic passages, not least the well-known kingdom-passage in Isaiah 52.7-12.

First, they hoped that the real return from exile would happen at last. Second, as the necessary corollary of this, they hoped that evil would be defeated once and for all - and by 'evil' they would mean not only the pagans, not only compromised Jews, but the dark power that they conceived to stand behind all earthly manifestations of evil. Thirdly, they hoped for the return of Israel's God himself, in person. What form this return would take is quite unclear. Some may have supposed that when YHWH appeared it would be, once more, like the pillar of cloud and fire in the wilderness. The great coming event would be, after all, a new exodus. And central to the whole expectation was of course the Temple. YHWH would return to the Temple. He would defeat the nations that were oppressing Jerusalem. He would liberate his people, so that they could build the Temple properly and worship and serve him in peace and freedom.

Notice carefully what follows. The expectation of the Kingdom of God was not a matter of abstract ideas or timeless truths. It was not about a new sort of religion, or a new moral code. It was not a general statement about how one might go to heaven after death. It was a matter of a story that was reaching its critical moment; a history that was moving towards a climax. When Jesus announced to his contemporaries that 'the Kingdom of God is at hand', he was telling them that the new chapter had opened in the story they were all familiar with.

Reimarus, then, was right to locate Jesus on the map of first-century Jewish kingdom-expectations. But what Reimarus and his followers to this day never grasped was that Jesus, in announcing the Kingdom, consistently and radically redefined it. The Kingdom was indeed breaking in; but it didn't look like people had thought it would. Rather than the sort of revolution that the Maccabees had engaged in so successfully two centuries before, Jesus looked back to the prophetic paradigms, not least those in Isaiah, and made all three of the kingdom- themes central to his own work, both in action and in teaching. Where he was, the renewed, reconstituted Israel was being formed, as he healed, feasted, forgave, challenged existing slaveries. Where he was, the powers of evil were being defeated in a way which implied that they were suffering more than a mere temporary setback. Where he was, though I think this remained at most implicit until near the very end, YHWH was present, reconstituting his people, establishing his sovereignty in symbolic actions, bringing about the long-awaited fulfilment of prophecy, the climax of Israel's long and tortuous story.

In all of this - which we have no time to study in any depth or detail here - Jesus was not so much like a wandering preacher preaching sermons, or a wandering philosopher offering maxims, as like a politician gathering support for a new and highly risky movement. But we should not imagine that politics here could be split off from theology. Jesus was doing what he was doing in the belief that in this way Israel's god was indeed becoming king. Everything pointed to the basic announcement: the Kingdom of God was present, but it was not like what Jesus' contemporaries had imagined.

This strange announcement is focussed in certain key sayings: 'The Kingdom of God is at hand'; 'the kingdom of God has come upon you'. Scholars have debated endlessly whether Jesus thought of the kingdom as present or future from the point of view of his ministry. This discussion has recently been hijacked into the discussion of whether he spoke of an apocalyptic kingdom (future) or a non-apocalyptic kingdom (the supposed 'present kingdom' of Cynic or wisdom or gnostic teaching, which I have argued is a figment of the scholarly imagination). Once we learn to think in true first-century Jewish kingdom-categories, however, there is no problem, not even a logical oddity, about embracing both present and future elements within the one apocalyptic scheme.

Consider the case of Simeon ben-Kosiba, hailed by Rabbi Akiba as bar-Kochba, the son of the star. Bar-Kochba announced the revolution against Rome in 132 AD. He declared a new Jewish state, and minted coins carrying the new date: the year 1. If anyone had asked one of his followers whether the kingdom of God had indeed arrived at that point, the answer would be, Yes of course! To say 'no' would have been utterly disloyal to the great leader, to the new movement. But if anyone were then to ask, is there then nothing to work for, to fight for? Is the kingdom completely and purely present? The answer would again be obvious: of course there is still a battle to fight! Precisely because the kingdom is present, has truly been inaugurated, we are now committed to fighting the battle; and we shall win it. In first-century Jewish categories, then, it is no problem to think of the Kingdom as present and future. It is actually a problem to think of it in any other way within the ministry of Jesus.

What, then, was Jesus' aim and intention? Where was his kingdom-announcement leading? What was he going to do next? That is the question we must glance at in a moment. But before we leave the topic of the kingdom, please note. If we begin at this point in our understanding of Jesus' announcement of the kingdom, all sorts of features of the canonical gospels come up into three dimensions and make striking historical sense. Jesus' welcome to outcasts, his healing of the sick, and his celebratory meals with all and sundry, were not mere examples of a general principle, for instance the love of God for sinners. They were the reality of which such generalisations are pale abstractions. This was what the climax of history would look like. And, please note, if this was the climax of Israel's history, the whole point of the story was that it was also the climax of the world's history. Israel's covenant God was the creator of the world; therefore, when he finally did for Israel what he was going to do for Israel, the world as a whole would be brought within the reach of his saving justice and sovereignty. If we can recapture the historical particularity of Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom, rather than leave it vague or generalized, or suppose it to be a cipher either for the hope of post mortem heaven or for the church itself, I believe we have a clear road into an

evangelism and mission which will bring back together what the Enlightenment so successfully split apart: the personal challenge of God to every man, woman and child, and the social and political challenge of the Kingdom of God to all the world.

b. The Meaning of the Cross

The historical argument for Jesus' kingdom-announcement forces us towards another key question. What did Jesus think would happen next? More specifically, did he think it was part of his vocation that he should die a violent death, and if so how did he construe that death, that vocation? This is perhaps the deepest and strangest of all the questions about Jesus, and in *Jesus and the Victory of God* it took me the longest of my chapters to get to the bottom of it. Let me simply summarize a much longer argument.

I shall assume, what I have argued fully elsewhere, that Jesus believed he was Israel's Messiah. That word does not, of course, denote a divine incarnate being. It denotes, rather, Israel's anointed king, the one in whose fate Israel's own fate reaches its climax. So it was with Jesus. In his great symbolic act of entering Jerusalem on a donkey and cleansing the Temple, he declared, for those who had eyes to see, that he was staking a messianic claim, albeit a strange one in view of post-Maccabean expectations of a warrior king whose cleansing of the Temple would accompany the military overthrow of the gentile oppressors.

The strangeness of Jesus' claim is then focussed on his other great symbolic action, the Last Supper. Carrying all the overtones of Passover, in other words, of freedom from slavery and exile, of covenantal redemption, this meal was transformed by Jesus so that it pointed not simply back to the Exodus but on to his own approaching death. He interpreted this action with a range of cryptic sayings, designed to evoke several other complementary Jewish traditions: the so-called 'messianic woes'; the suffering righteous one; the martyrs; and above all the whole context of Isaiah 40_55, not least, but not exclusively, the figure of the Servant. In drawing these themes together into an unprecedented new configuration, and in applying them to himself, Jesus was announcing, again for those with ears to hear, as belief which we can summarize in five sequential points, and which I suggest makes perfect sense historically:

- a. that God's purposes for Israel, and hence for the world, would be effected by means of Israel's history reaching a strange but decisive moment of fulfilment and climax;
- b. that this moment would consist in a time of intense suffering, through which Israel and the world would pass to God's new age;
- c. that this suffering would not only be the dark path through which redemption would come, but would actually be the means by which it would be effected, by which the stranglehold of evil on Israel and the world would be defeated;
- d. that this intense suffering would itself be focussed on one individual;
- e. that this individual would be himself, Israel's anointed representative.

Jesus' intention vis-a-vis the cross is thus correlated closely and exactly with his kingdom-announcement. His death would be the final means by which his kingdom- announcement would be validated. This would be the defeat of evil that would explain and undergird his implementing of the return from exile, the call of the renewed Israel. This would be the means by which God would judge and save his people Israel, and so would in principle accomplish his purposes for the whole world.

This baldest of summaries of a long and intricate argument may at least alert us to a further point at which the serious historical quest for Jesus can be of enormous value in the church's growth to maturity in our own day. Discussions of atonement theology regularly get stuck between those who think that on the cross God put into effect an abstract system of punishing evil vicariously and those who think that the cross is simply an example of the wonderful lengths to which divine love will go, an act which changes people's hearts by calling forth the response of grateful answering love. I suggest that even those who consider themselves biblical theologians have ignored the historically grounded starting-point of atonement theology in the self- understanding of Jesus himself: that he would go to the cross, to take upon himself the literal and historical judgment that he had predicted for the nation of Israel, to do (in other words) for Israel and the world what Israel and the world could not do for themselves. This way of approaching the cross offers, I believe, the starting-point for an atonement-theology which is both rich and satisfying in itself, true to all the major historic strands of subsequent thinking about the cross, and which points beyond itself, beyond the realm of ideas, to the practical vocation of those who claim to follow Jesus the Messiah: that we should be the people in and through whom is lived out and worked out the vocation, as Paul put it, to bear in our bodies the dying of Jesus, so that his life may also become manifest.

c. Jesus and the God of Israel

We come at last to the great central issue. How did Jesus conceive of his relation to the one he called Abba, Father? Here, again, there are false trails to be shunned, and, I suggest, a historically grounded way forward towards a restatement, and more than a restatement, of what we have come to call the incarnation.

The clue to it all, I believe, has once more been overlooked by would-be orthodox theologians eager for prooftexts and not interested in the realia of first-century Judaism. At the heart of the Jewish kingdom-expectation lay the passionate hope that YHWH himself would at long last return to Zion. I am not aware that this line of thought has been explored anywhere in contemporary writing about Jesus (apart, of course, from my own). Let me attempt to persuade you that it should be.

Post-enlightenment Christology has of course polarized, with many variations and nuances, between those who see Jesus as basically God incarnate, and then are tempted to treat that incarnation docetically, and those who see Jesus as basically the supreme human being, revealing God perhaps but not exactly being God. The problem is that in neither case do people regularly stop and ask what they mean by the word 'god' itself. I suggest that it is far better, as a matter of method, to start at the other end. What did Jesus do and say that help us see how he thought of himself and God?

My proposal, though large, is quite simple. We have seen that Jesus' actions in the Temple and the Upper Room functioned as symbols, explained by various riddles, whereby Jesus announced both his messianic vocation and his intention of bearing Israel's fate on her behalf. I suggest that these two, taken together and placed within their larger context, constitute a single, though complex, further symbolic action. Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, climaxing in his actions in the Temple and the upper room, and undertaken in full recognition of the likely consequences, was intended to function like Ezekiel lying on his side or Jeremiah smashing his pot. The prophet's action embodied the reality. Jesus went to Jerusalem in order to embody the third and last element of the coming of the kingdom. He was not content merely to announce that YHWH was returning to Zion. He intended to enact, symbolize, personify and embody that climactic event.

Jesus went to Jerusalem to act out, dramatically and symbolically, YHWH's judgment on his rebel people, and his strange salvation of them from the fate he had announced. Unlike the Essenes, he was not content to wage a war of words against the Jerusalem hierarchy from a safe distance. He saw the present regime in

dual focus: in terms of a servant who had buried the master's money, and in terms of rebel subjects refusing their rightful king. The only appropriate response was judgment. His parables of a returning king or master were not, then, about his second coming. They were designed to explain Jesus' actions: he saw his journey to Jerusalem as the symbol and embodiment of YHWH's return to Zion. But who would abide the day of his coming?

Within Jesus' prophetic and messianic vocation, we can trace the outlines of a deeper vocation that would remain hidden, like so much else, until the very end. He called the twelve into existence; he was not himself *primus inter pares*. He invoked the image of the shepherd: a royal symbol, of course, but one which also spoke of YHWH himself as the shepherd of his people. Jesus used this image to explain what he was about, to interpret his characteristic actions and words. He spoke and acted as if he were the new lawgiver; as if he were the embodiment of the divine Wisdom. And, above all, he behaved as if he had the right to do and be what normally the Temple was and did: to be the place where and the means by which fellowship between God and Israel was restored.

How then did Jesus think of himself? He was aware, I suggest, of a vocation to do and be for Israel and the world what, according to scripture, only Israel's god can do and be. He wasn't, in the normal sense, 'aware of being God' in the way one knows one is male or female, or hungry or thirsty. He had what we may call a faith-awareness of vocation. He believed himself called, by Israel's god, to evoke the traditions which promised YHWH's return to Zion, and the somewhat more nebulous but still important traditions which spoke of a human figure sharing the divine throne; to enact those traditions in his own journey to Jerusalem, his messianic act in the Temple, and his death at the hands of the pagans (in the hope of subsequent vindication); and thereby to embody YHWH's return. As part of his human vocation, grasped in faith, sustained in prayer, tested in confrontation, agonized over in further prayer and doubt, and implemented in action, he believed he had to do and be, for Israel and the world, that which according to scripture only YHWH himself could do and be. He was Israel's Messiah; but there would, in the end, be 'no king but God'.

I suggest, in short, that the return of YHWH to Zion, and the Temple-theology which it brings into focus, are the deepest keys and clues to gospel christology. Forget the pseudo-orthodox attempts to make Jesus of Nazareth conscious of being the second person of the Trinity; forget the arid reductionism that is the mirror-image of that unthinking would-be orthodoxy. Focus, instead, on a young Jewish prophet telling a story about YHWH returning to Zion as judge and redeemer, and then embodying it by riding into the city in tears, symbolizing the Temple's destruction and celebrating the final exodus. He would be the pillar of cloud and fire for the people of the new exodus. He would embody in himself the returning and redeeming action of Israel's covenant God.

I hope you can see the outline of the picture that is beginning to emerge. We still, in our culture, live with the shadow of the old Deist view of God: a high-and-dry God, a God who is so transcendent that we find it difficult to think of him acting in the world at all, let alone acting with deep compassion and self-giving love. If we are orthodox Christians, living within that worldview, we struggle to say that, well, Jesus is the Lord of Glory, but somehow despite all that he came to live and to die for us. What I am suggesting is that the view of God in this traditional Western picture is quite wrong. When we address the question, is Jesus God? Is Jesus divine?, we all too often start with the Deist picture of God, and then try to fit Jesus into it. As a result, we end up with a docetic Jesus-figure, who simply strolls around being God all over the place in a way which leaves no room for vocation, for choice, for obedience, above all for Gethsemane and the cry of abandonment on the cross. Instead, the whole New Testament invites us - no, urges us, insists to us - that we should start with Jesus and rethink our view of God around him. And when we do that, then of course what we find is the Old Testament picture of YHWH with a human face. This is the God who says 'I have heard my people's cry, and I have come, myself, to save them.' This is the God who says, 'behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands.' This is the God who, like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, says 'You would rather I were dead? Very well, here you are'; and who we then find running down the road, throwing his dignity to the winds, to welcome us, his prodigal children. The God who

would not show his face to Moses has shown it to us on the cross. The face is wounded with the wounds of the world's pain and grief, scarred with the marks of the world's sin. It is the face which says: this have I done for my true love. On the cross, the living God says in action what Jesus said at his last great symbolic supper: this is my body, given for you.

Conclusion

Three remarks by way of conclusion. I have tried to show that when we study Jesus as a figure within first-century history we emerge with a better grounding for our Christian faith than we do if we ignore history in case it threaten that faith. But of course everything depends on the resurrection. If this Jesus didn't rise again, then his sense of vocation is proved to be an utter self-deception. I am in the process of developing a historical argument about the resurrection elsewhere; the Quest for the historical Jesus has not usually taken very much notice of this question, so I have deliberately excluded it from our discussion here. But it is only because of the resurrection that we have any reason to suppose that what Jesus thought he was to accomplish on the cross has any validity at all. It is because of the resurrection, as Paul says, that he is marked out as son of God in power. Frankly, if Jesus of Nazareth did not rise from the dead on the third day, in a transformed but still physical body, leaving an empty tomb behind him, I as a historian simply cannot explain why the early church began, and why it took the shape it did. Here, as elsewhere, the study of first-century Judaism is invaluable: since all the early Christians were Jews, we must ask, why would a bunch of Jews, who had cherished messianic hopes to do with a particular figure, say after his shameful death that he really was the Messiah?

Second, more briefly. I have argued tonight that the historical quest for Jesus is necessary. It is necessary for the health of the church. I grieve that in the church both in England and in America there seem to be so few, among a church that is otherwise so well educated in so many spheres, with more educational resources and helps than ever before, who are prepared to give the time and attention to these questions that they deserve. I long for the day when seminarians will again take delight in the detailed and fascinated study of the first century. If that century was not the moment when history reached its great climax, the church is simply wasting its time.

Thirdly and finally. All our historical study must be done in and for the church in its mission to the world. This is not to say that we are not open to following the argument wherever it goes, not open to reading all texts, both canonical and non-canonical. On the contrary. It is because we believe we are called to be the people of God for the world that we must take the full historical task with full and utter seriousness. Study all the evidence; think through all the arguments. There is, as I hinted at the start, a long and noble tradition of Anglican theologians doing just that. It has ever been part of our tradition that we are prepared to think through our traditions afresh. I urge you to make this tradition, too, live more fully in our own day. But as we do so we must remind ourselves again and again - as our own liturgy does in so many ways - that when we are telling the story of Jesus we are doing so as part of the community that is called to model this story to the world. The more I take part in the quest for Jesus, the more I feel challenged both as an individual and as a churchman. This is not because what I find undermines traditional orthodoxy, but precisely because the rich, full-blooded orthodoxy I find bubbling up from the pages of history poses challenges to me personally, and to all the congregations I know, challenges which are extremely demanding precisely because they are Gospel challenges, Kingdom challenges. At this point, being a Quester is simply the same thing as being a disciple. It means taking up the cross and following wherever Jesus leads. And the good and the bad news is that only when we do that will we show that we have truly understood the history. Only when we do that will people take our arguments, whether historical or theological, seriously. Only when we do that will we be the means whereby the Quest, which started so ambiguously as part of the Enlightenment programme, have performed the strange purpose which I believe, under God, it came into being to

accomplish. Don't be afraid of the Quest. It may be part of the means whereby the church in our own day will be granted a new vision, not just of Jesus, but of God.