

The Imitation of Christ

Sermon preached at the Chapel of Jesus College on Sunday of 4th Week, Hilary Term 2007

It is quite remarkable that fascination with the person of Jesus of Nazareth has so far stood the test of secularisation. While many other aspects of the Christian tradition have been subject to a substantial decline in Western Europe, the individual at the centre of the faith and overall the religious life of Christianity has largely retained his position of perhaps the most talked about person in human history. Promising the revelation of some hitherto unknown features of his life, his message, his religious, ethical or political views still provides the recipe for a bestseller. Unearthing literary or archaeological remains that might elucidate his historical existence is still likely to grab the attention of a public that is not normally bent on the results of scholarly work.

Admittedly, much of this interest coincides with the strong reaction against traditional and organised Christianity so typical for modern culture. Headlines will most easily be made by the claim that Jesus was quite different from the Christ whom the Church has venerated over the centuries: he was a revolutionary; he was married; he was merely a rabbi among rabbis. This certainly is one reason why Jesus can remain of interest even to those who take issue with traditional Christianity. He can, apparently, be framed in a way that makes him almost a witness in the case against traditional Christianity. 'There was only one Christian, and he died on the cross,' was the judgment famously passed on the Christian religion by one its most vehement critics, Friedrich Nietzsche.

It will not be too controversial to say that the historical value of many or most of those revelations about the 'different' Jesus is rather limited, and the venom with

which such reconstructions are employed to attack Christian traditions, values and institutions often are as lacking in charity as those aspects of the Christian history which those same critics cite to justify their rejection of Christianity. Nevertheless, the idea that looking back to and thinking about Jesus coincides with a sharply critical awareness of the shortcomings of the Church and individual Christians is not a notion with whose invention the latter-day critics of Christianity ought to be credited. This, rather, has been a permanent and fundamental feature of the Christian faith itself whose reference to Jesus has always been coupled with the insight of the radical insufficiency of all those who are meant and supposed as his followers to be *like* him. This is already strikingly apparent in the New Testament where a man like Peter, who was clearly held in highest esteem by the Church at the time the gospels were written, is constantly depicted as failing and weak: lacking in faith, failing to understand Jesus' mission, even betraying him in his hour of need. There is little or no heroism displayed by him or the other disciples throughout the passion narrative, and the willingness of the gospels to relate this embarrassing truth is an impressive lesson in critical Church History.

Yet at the same time there is no obvious reason why they could not have behaved like him; indeed they ought to have done so, and Peter's tears after the cock had crowed for the third time are testimony to his awareness of this obligation. Whatever Christians had to say about the divinity of Jesus, it never suffered any doubt that his conduct during his earthly life was an aspect of his full humanity, and indeed in the complex workings of the later doctrine of salvation it was seen as necessary that Christ's fulfilment of God's commandments was attributed to his human, not his divine nature. This is not surprising given the unequivocal picture the gospels are offering in this regard.

This realisation that the humanity of Jesus can reasonably be expected to form the pattern of Christian life together with the awareness of the difference between one's own imperfection and the exemplary person of Jesus creates a tension for the idea of the imitation of Christ. Following in his footsteps is both something that we ought to do and can be expected to do, *and* something that we will never be able fully to achieve. Often enough and indeed in the case of the disciples' behaviour during much of the time of their community with Jesus it is even worse than that: those who ought to follow Jesus' example go hopelessly astray, act to the contrary of what could have been expected of them, choose the wrong over against the good.

In a sense this tension in the idea of imitating Christ should not surprise us. Human desire to imitate others who serve as our examples generally is deeply ambiguous. We emulate someone because we consider him superior to ourselves and for this reason a paradigm to be followed. Yet such recognition rarely is wholehearted. We do not like accepting that someone else is better than we are ourselves. Our admiration therefore is always coupled with envy; our example is at the same time our rival; alongside our desire to be like someone else there is our wish to be there instead of him. It is for this reason that human relations based on the desire to imitate are always precarious: children and their parents; academic students and their teachers; junior and senior politicians provide for an endless succession of stories where attraction and repulsion, imitation and rivalry, love and hatred go hand in hand as the example gets in the way of an ambition which it itself had been fostering.

The imitation of Jesus is not as such exempt from this Janus headed nature of imitation, and therefore it has been looked at with suspicion by some. Is it not inevitably thrusting Christians into a dynamic vacillating between the hubris of perfection and the despair of total worthlessness? Will it not encourage them to think

of themselves either as on a par with God or as totally removed and estranged from communication with him? Will it not, by the same token, fail to strike a wholesome psychological balance educating humans to improve themselves within the space allotted to them?

Few will perhaps deny that Christianity in past and present offers examples enough of hubris and resentment to sustain such a charge to some extent. Yet it is equally clear that they represent failings, based on a misapprehension of the fundamental relation between Christ and the believer. While Jesus is an example to be followed and imitated, this is not his only, in fact it is not his primary, role. He is in the first place Christ, the saviour, and the relationship between himself and the believer is based on their faith that in encountering him they themselves and their desires can be transformed. Christ, as St Augustine has taught, is sacrament and example, gift and model, for the believer but he is first sacrament, then example. If this first step is omitted, Jesus simply becomes one of the many aptly so called 'idols' of human desire. If it is maintained, on the other hand, the task of modelling one's own life on the example of perfect love is defined and fuelled by the awareness that it is only made possible by the liberating experience of being loved.