

Easter 3
5/5/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 9:1-6
Psalm 30
John 21:1-19

The inversion of Saul

In a sentence:

Conversion to Christ is an inversion of the world as we know and expect it to be

Saul's Damascus road experience has long stood in the church as the archetypal conversion experience, looming large in the church's imagination of what conversion is, at heart: sudden and ironic. Saul, the henchman of the religious authorities, suddenly finds himself in the employ of the enemy. But what *does* he now believe?

His new faith is summarised in what he declares to the surprised synagogue, 'Jesus is the Son of God.' To have become a Christian is to believe this.

I suspect that if there is anything which catches our ears in this six word sermon, it is not 'Jesus' but 'Son of God'. This will be the case for believers and non-believers alike, although for different reasons. For those who consider themselves non-believers, the problem is 'God', to say nothing of 'Son of God'. Among the various types of believers it is not 'God' but the 'Son of' which tends to cause a problem. These objectors might include Muslims, or Christian Unitarians, or Christians who are not Unitarian but wish that they were, for simplicity's sake: God is a 'simple' concept which 'Son of God' seems to complicate unnecessarily.

For Saul what catches the attention is *Jesus*: '“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” ... “Who are you, Lord?”, ... “I am *Jesus*...”’

'Son of God' was an idea Saul knew very well, but to join 'Son of God' and 'Jesus' was to link apparently mutually contradictory terms. From this cultural and religious distance, we miss the contradiction and the scandal; it has become a merely 'doctrinal' point to assert or deny. 'Son of God' was originally a title of the king of Israel and so was easily transferred to the figure Israel came to expect from God, who would set right what was clearly wrong in the world. To suggest that a man who had been crucified was the Son of God was to say that God had failed. That is, God failed, unless something like a resurrection contradicted what was seen in the crucifixion. This would then be to say that Israel's leaders had failed when they crucified him. Neither of these options was palatable, for obvious reasons. And so there is no godly place for either a crucified *or* a resurrected Jesus.

(It is in fact the same with most of the other titles used by Jesus – 'Lord', 'Christ', and so on. 'Jesus is the Son of God', or 'Jesus is Lord', or 'Jesus Christ' are all contradictions-in-terms of the same order. They originally were addressed to the hopes and fears of the whole Jewish community. To fit 'Lord', 'Christ', 'Son of God' terms together with the crucified 'Jesus,' then, is like saying that black is white, or up is down – and believing this to make sense).

Saul, then, doesn't simply come to have a new thing to believe about Jesus. Rather, if the *crucified* Jesus is the *Son of God* – the 'king' – then a serious shock is felt, with the effect that all things are now seen radically differently from how once we saw them. We could begin to imagine that God might be found in the brokenness of one of our discarded ones – the foundation of Christian ethics. God might be seen in the unclean person of the infidel. The whole, dirty world might be God's. Thus begins the ministry of the Apostle to the Gentiles, and we are seated here this morning because of it.

Yet the contradiction between Jesus and 'Son of God' is scarcely an interesting one *today*. Who cares about the Creed? In the days after the resurrection – for the first few centuries even – the controversy between the synagogue and the church (and the academy, in a different way) was clear: accept the contradiction of terms, or not. After that, religious authority held sway on the identity of Jesus for a thousand years. Today, however, the average person in the street (and often enough, in pews) simply couldn't care less: 'Son of God' is dead in the water.

Still, if we have no common sense of a messiah or anything comparable today – of which the nastiness of the election campaign is evidence enough – there are universally held values, of which our election campaigns are also evidence.

One of these values – very strong with us – is that we are, each of us, the most important person in the world, without reference to the importance of everyone else. This lurks everywhere. We see its effect in modern school principals living in fear of the next phone call from little Cklancy's parents (now wondering why some other child was chosen for student representative), or in the very fact she is even called Cklancy, or in that her name is spelled with a K (granted, a silent K – you only pronounce the C). (At this point I ought to acknowledge that I'm called 'Craig' for similar kinds of individualist reasons, if now rather weak by comparison!) We see how important every individual is in the campaign propaganda requirement that *everyone* gets a tax cut in order to fund the increased services to which we have a right. We see it in the assumption that because I've got it I can spend it on anything I like. We see that I matter most in the otherwise contradictory rights to demand medical treatment for as long as I can breathe, or to demand that I be treated with death-dealing substances long before I would otherwise stop breathing.

The apparently 'doctrinal' question of whether or not Jesus is the Son of God seems to come nowhere near to this crucial engine of modern identity – the centrality of 'I'. And yet, nothing 'cruc-ial' – even such a godless thing as the individualism rampant in us all – is ever far from the 'crux', the cross (Latin).

If the shock Saul felt was the tying of the most important of things to the least important, then for us perhaps the shock of the gospel lies in the opposite: the separation of *ourselves* from the most important. To say, then, that *Jesus* is the Son of God, becomes saying that *we* are *not* divine progeny, to do and be as gods like to do and be. While the New Testament speaks occasionally of us as 'children of God', we are not *directly* so. Ours is only an *adopted* relation; only Jesus is a 'natural' Child. Jesus is the Child of God, and you and I are not.

To land it in relation to I-matter-most thinking: this is to say, Jesus matters more than you do. That Jesus lived matters more than that you have lived, and so also his death matters more than yours. The New Testament hints at this in its linking of Jesus to creation and salvation: this one is more important than all the rest, in the same way that the beginning and end are necessary for there to be a middle.

Saul went about the synagogues saying, 'He is the Son of God.' This can't have meant very much to him at that early stage, other than that it turned his world upside down.

But evangelism does just this. It turns a world upside down. For some, this is immediately good news – 'Jesus is Lord, and I don't have to try to be'; this is the hallelujah of the broken-hearted. For others, it's Saul's punch-drunk, '*Jesus is Lord?*' This is the disorientation of the proud, I've-got-it-all-together victim of God's blinding love.

We might wonder what the world would look like – or even what the election campaigns might look like – if our political stars didn't know that we know we matter most. Perhaps the struggle for the common good – which is surely somewhere close to the heart of our politics – would be articulated in a way to moderate our sense of need, rather than pander to it. Perhaps what always seems scarce might be shown to be more abundant than we're usually told, if only others mattered a little more than we do. Perhaps our competitors, even our enemies, might begin to take on the form of 'brother, sister.' For Jesus, as the Son of God, matters most because such a Son of God as a crucified denotes one given for the life and well-being of others.

The church still says 'Jesus is the Son of God', even though it no longer has the cultural sense it did for Saul, but this is less a statement of a metaphysics than of the new order breaking into the world. To say 'Jesus is the Son of God' is simply to put him first, in order that we might come in a very close second.

To speak about Jesus in this way is to show forth a world

upside down, inside out,

back to front and,

for all that,

now just how it is supposed to be.

For the gift of such a renewing, re-creative word, all glory and thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, how and always. Amen.
