Comment: *Jesus as Lord*

When we reach Whit Sunday, this year on 19 May, we shall listen once again to the story of the very first Pentecost, celebrating and renewing our continuity with that little group, gathered 'all with one accord in one place', hearing the sound from heaven, 'a rushing mighty wind', filling the house where they were sitting, and, as it seemed, disclosing 'cloven tongues like of fire' on each of them, so that they began to speak 'with other tongues', as the Holy Spirit inspired them.

How the Church began, what 'church' essentially is, who the Jesus people are, first and foremost, is revealed in this moment, this event, this outburst of speaking in many tongues the 'wonderful works of God' — speaking in one sense unintelligibly, even sounding drunk on 'new wine', but bringing to pass what had long been promised: the days when the Lord God's sons and daughters prophesy, see visions and dream dreams (Acts 2: 1-18). People who are 'inspired' to follow Jesus cannot but celebrate. Their imaginations are opened to endlessly new ways of seeing the world, of being in the world.

Fine. Yet, as we always hear in the second lesson at the Pentecost liturgy, no one can even begin to say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12: 3). You can read the Bible, you can study the gospels, you might find the story of Jesus, his sayings, his actions, interesting, even exciting. You could write a book, you could pass exams in Greek, you could deal with the Synoptic Problem (did Matthew borrow from Mark, did Luke ever read Matthew, etc.) — but none of that will ever bring you to acknowledge Jesus as Lord — *Jesus* as Lord — Jesus as *our Lord*. That is something you can ever do only because you are inspired to do so.

Which means, at least, that you have to have some notion of what it might be for you to acknowledge anyone as Lord. Basically, it is for you to be accountable. People believe in God, and fail to believe in God, with all kinds of notions of who and what this 'God' might be. If you are Jewish or Christian or Muslim, anyway, God for you is 'judge of all the earth', your judge, the one to whom you are ultimately accountable.

The Bible is dominated by the picture of God as Lord, as king and judge. The imagery, the metaphors, that play the key role in the biblical experience of God are legal ones — covenant, judgement.

The Lord God revealed over many generations to Abraham and Jacob and Moses is the Lord God whose justice and mercy are proclaimed by the prophets: the God who sends his word to the prophet Zechariah, saying 'Execute true judgement, and show mercy and

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compassion every man to his brother; and do not oppress the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor, and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart' (Zechariah 7: 9-10) — a thousand commandments like that.

If you are drawn to call Jesus your Lord, then you are agreeing to live in the light of commandments like these. What is new, for those who call Jesus their Lord, is that he is also always already their Saviour, their advocate as well as their judge.

Fine. But we listen also to the Gospel of St John (John 20: 19-23). How the Church began, what 'church' essentially is, who the Jesus people are, according to St John, is revealed in this moment when the Lord Jesus, breathing on the disciples, gave them the Holy Spirit, so that 'if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'.

These are awesome words: certainly not to be treated (as they have been) as a proof text for the practice of giving absolution in the sacrament of penance. This is another moment in which Christ's people are created, not now to praise the wonderful works of God, but to forgive sins, and to refuse to forgive sins, in the Lord's name. All the way through his gospel, St John presents Jesus as 'the true light', the light which the darkness never overcomes, 'the light of the world', the one in whose light deceit, lies and hypocrisy show up for what they are, the one in whose light the world so often condemns itself, the one in whose light we see light.

Thus, Christians are not authorized to go around 'forgiving' everything and everyone, however evil. Certainly, since there is remorse and repentance, however infrequent and reluctant, there are times for forgiveness and reconciliation, hard as these often are. Yet it is surely clear enough in the sayings of Jesus, just as in the words of the Lord God for whom the prophets speak throughout the Bible, that there are evils we can identify and can simply do nothing about. If and when we find it in ourselves to say Jesus is Lord, that is the insight, inspired in us by the gift of the Holy Spirit, which renews in us the authority to judge, to see the difference between evil and good, to be the people in whom the light keeps shining, confident that the darkness will never overcome it, but not pretending there is nothing in the world but happiness and light. When we find it in ourselves to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, and thus rejoin the original Pentecost community in praising the wonderful works of God, we have also to be ready, without flinching or fudging, to face evidence of deeds so evil that, by us at least, they cannot be forgiven.

F.K.

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