

We began the year in the Garden of Eden, trying to understand what is meant by the Fall of man. We continued last week by looking at what God began to do to help us through the law and the prophets. We looked closely at the prophecies of Christ's coming. Today we look at the Person and work of Christ himself. And so we must begin with what the Bible says about him.

He is given many titles in the Gospels. Often he is called *Son of God*. And of course this is a stumbling block to many – even to people who believe in God – people who believe in God as a supernatural being, but find the idea of God in human flesh ridiculous. But this is exactly what St John's Gospel says: *The Word was God... and the Word became flesh*. Suppose Jesus was not God. Then what was he? A good man and a great teacher, say some. But good men and teachers don't go around saying, *before Abraham was, I am and I and the Father are one*.

All the Gospels and the Epistles of St Paul tell us that Jesus was God in human flesh. They tell us that Jesus claimed this of himself. We have a choice. Such a man, making such outlandish claims is clearly not run of the mill. If he and his disciples were making it all up, then they were liars, bad men. If they sincerely believed it, but the thing is absurd, then they were mad men.

We have to make up our own minds, and we do this on the basis of the biblical evidence. Look closely at what Jesus said. Look even more closely at what he did. And I believe we hear the unmistakable sound of the ring of truth. A bad man would never do the things which Jesus did. And it would take more than merely a good man to do them. I am forced by the evidence to conclude as St John does:  
και Θεος ην ο λογος – *And the Word was God*.

But his spectacular Incarnation was not sprung on us unawares, like a practical joke. Throughout history God prepared us for it. Last week we looked at the prophecies of his coming in the Old Testament. Today we see that even his titles were prophesied long before he came to us. Son of God. Yes. And he was also called *Messiah*. *Messiah* is the Hebrew word for *deliverer*. The New Testament was written in Greek. And the Greek word for *Messiah* is *Christ*. And so we get Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi: *Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God*.

The *Messiah* was the promised deliver of Israel, the son of David, to be born in Bethlehem. The New Testament turns the Hebrew into Greek and makes the deliverer universal: Christ, the deliverer of all. In a minute we'll look at how he delivers us. But there are two other titles given to Jesus and they throw light on his person and work. Remember at his show trial when he is challenged by the High Priest: *Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?* And Jesus replied: *I am; and ye shall see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven*.

*Son of Man*. Who is this *Son of Man*? The title doesn't just mean *any regular guy, the son of his father*. No – the name for *son of his father* is *bar abbas* – Barabbas. Funny thing the Bible eh? To discover who the *Son of Man* is we have to go back into the Old Testament, the book of Daniel. Remember when Shadrach, Meshach and

Abednego are in the burning fiery furnace. Let's have a bit of the story from the Bible – it's so thrilling:

*Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished and rose up in haste and spake and said unto his counsellors, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered, True, O king. He answered and said, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt.*

And a little later we have the identification of the mysterious fourth:

*I saw in the night, visions, and behold one like the Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven.*

When God wanted to tell us who Christ is, he did not limit his revelation to Scripture. God can speak just as well outside the Bible. The word which St John uses for Christ as the Second Person of the Trinity is *λογος* – a word derived from the Greek philosophers. St Augustine was one of the first to notice this, and he was glad, saying, *For Plato, God is the cause of existence, the principle of reason and the rule of life.* Here Plato envisions something very like the Blessed Trinity. And of course the Second Person, Plato's principle of reason, is the *λογος* - St John's name for Christ. So Christianity is the synthesis of the Hebrew thought written down in the Old Testament and the idealist philosophy of the Greeks. That is to say, Jesus is both Messiah and Logos: the Christ and the Word: the Divine deliverer and the cosmic principle of reason.

Well, if Christ is our deliverer and redeemer, how does he do it? The short answer is through his Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection. But why should any of those events, astonishing as they are, be the remedy for our sin, for the Fall of man? Again the Bible has many answers. One explanation is that *He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities...* In other words, that Christ was punished in our place, as Isaiah says, *God laid on him the iniquities of us all.*

This is known formally as the theory of Penal Substitution. It is believed very strongly by Protestant Christians after Calvin. But there are objections to this view of our redemption. How can the innocent – for Christ was without sin – be morally made to pay for the sins of the guilty? It looks as if God is acting unjustly by punishing Christ in our place. But then we read St Paul, *God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.* So it was God who freely chose to bear the punishment due to us all. Even so, this view of Christ's work leaves many feeling uneasy.

Some prefer instead what is called Exemplarism. This was put forward by Peter Abelard in the Middle Ages and by Hastings Rashdall in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The idea is that Christ in going about doing good and healing all manner of sickness among the people and finally giving his life on the Cross, set us the example of perfect love and self-giving. Well, what he did was certainly the supreme example. But if we have *only* an example, what good is that? We can't live up to it. If we had been able to live up to it, there would have been no need for Christ. As William Blake put it:

*If moral virtue was Christianity, Christ's pretensions were all vanity.*

Besides, we don't even have the moral virtue. That's the problem. That's why we need the Saviour.

Another view which some find appealing is called Christus Victor – the notion that by dying and rising again, Christ won God's cosmic battle with the devil. The Book of Revelation tells us: *The devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone.* And the medieval church had a wonderful ritual which they celebrated on Holy Saturday. Christ does not lie in his tomb, waiting for Easter Day to dawn, but goes into hell and plants his Cross there as a sign of victory. This was called *The Harrowing of Hell*. I have a good mind to revive this ceremony. It sounds a bit livelier than Matins. The Epistle of St Peter tells us that Christ preached to the dead in *Sheol* – the place of departed spirits.

But these are all more or less interesting theories, diagrams if you like. And George Eliot reminded us, *We must not lapse from the picture to the diagram.* We cannot understand the mystery of our redemption, any more than we can understand our Fall. But we can approach it as the central mystery. You need to hone your imagination. Devotional theology is a great work of the poetic imagination. Literalists and diagram theoreticians are useless at it. The Christ who strides through the Gospels is the reality, the Way the Truth and the Life. Look at him. Picture him. And you will see him.

The Gospels show us his face. When we look into that face we *see* our redemption. Live your life as if it were true. And you'll find it is. Pray to him and you will find he is with you in the depths of your being.