

CHRIST THE LORD

By LEONARD JOHNSTON

THEN SUDDENLY, when they looked round, they saw no one with them any more but only Jesus'.¹ For those who lived with our Lord, the most obvious thing about him was his 'normality'. There was indeed a certain mystery about him: no man ever spoke as he did, the crowds were astonished at his teaching and at some of the things he did, his closest followers were occasionally seized with something like fear at a momentary apprehension of hidden depths in his personality. But they were merely momentary, these flashes; and for the rest, he was 'only Jesus', a man like us. This was in fact the scandal: 'This is Jesus son of Joseph, they said. We know his father and mother. How can he say, I have come down from heaven?'² 'What is this wisdom that has been granted him, and these miracles that are worked through him? This is the carpenter, surely, the son of Mary, the brother of James and Joset and Jude and Simon? His sisters too, are they not here with us?'³ They recognized that he was someone outstanding; they called him rabbi, or teacher, or master, or 'sir'; but they knew that he was a man, he was only Jesus.

He was a man; and like other men he died. But unlike any other man he returned from the grave, alive; so that when next he stood before his friends, he stood not transfigured but transformed. The figure who stood by the lake-side after the resurrection, cooking fish, would seem to have been less visibly glorious than the one at the transfiguration; but then it was only Jesus. Now, in a tone of awe, they say: 'It is the Lord'.

The title 'lord' carries a wide range of meanings – it could be used, for example, merely as a courtesy title, equivalent to 'rabbi' or 'teacher'; but the basic meaning is that of ownership or possession. And in a society where absolute monarchy was the rule, it implied above all royal power; the lord was the king. The proclamation of the risen Jesus as 'the Lord' was in the first place an acknowledgement of his title to royalty. Through a series of alien regimes and make-shift substitutes, the jews had clung to the hope

¹ Mk 9, 8.

² Jn 6, 42.

³ Mk 6, 2-3.

that God would raise up a new David, an anointed king, through whom God's kingdom would be established over the whole world. For a moment they thought that Jesus might be the one, but his death had crushed those hopes. Now, however, God had indeed 'raised up' a king for them.¹ The resurrection was not simply the miracle of life after death. It was an elevation, a victory, a triumph. It was a reversal of judgment: 'You betrayed and denied him; God has glorified him; you handed over this just man in return for a murderer; God brought him back from the dead'.² The glory which surrounds the risen Lord is the kingly glory of the Lord's anointed: 'Let all the house of Israel know most surely that God has made him Christ and Lord, this Jesus whom you crucified'.³

But the minds of the apostles did not stop there. For one thing, the idea of the Messiah was not limited to the political aspect. Perhaps the distinction between political and spiritual 'salvation' was not as clear-cut as we would make it, but it had certainly come to include 'remission of sins'.⁴ It had come to imply the summing up of all the hopes of Israel, the hopes of all mankind: the hope of perfect happiness and liberation from all our pain and suffering and fear, all that is summed up in the fact of death. And now the resurrection proclaimed Jesus not only victor over those who had condemned him, but also conqueror over this last enemy, death.⁵ And if he had thus overcome death, what could it mean but that he had the fulness of life – that he shared the Spirit of life which belongs to God?⁶

Moreover, even the Lord Messiah in Israel was not the first or only king. God was the Lord; he alone had full claim to that title of royalty. Indeed, the greek translation of the scriptures used the title as a translation of the proper name of God, Yahweh. He was not one lord among many or lord above others, but the only Lord as he was the only God.

And now Jesus too is Lord. That he was David's heir could be shown simply by his descent; the resurrection was only splendid justification of it; but, while doing this, at the same time it showed much more: 'the son of David according to the flesh, he is constituted son of God in power by the holy Spirit through the resurrection'.⁷

¹ Acts 3, 26.

² Cf Acts 3, 13-14.

³ Acts 2, 36.

⁴ Lk 2, 77. *The Benedictus* in fact gives us a fair summary of ideas which might be called 'messianic' – the redemption of his people, salvation from our enemies and from all who hate us, the fulfilment of the promises, the coming of God, peace on earth.

⁵ 1 Cor 15, 26.

⁶ Acts 2, 33.

⁷ Rom 1, 3-4.

This was the answer to the puzzle that Jesus himself had posed, of the prophetic psalm in which God called the Lord Messiah to sit, not on the throne of David, but at his own right hand.¹ It was in this way that the apostles, in the face of ingrained monotheism and without benefit of philosophical terms like 'person' or 'nature', came to some understanding of our Lord's real nature. He had conquered death, he shared the Spirit of life which belongs to God; he was raised up to the right hand of God, he shared God's throne; he was the Lord. 'God has raised him up and given him the name which is above every name, and at that name every knee must bow'.²

Every knee must bow: our risen Lord is judge of the living and of the dead.³ 'He is', says St Peter with a glorious simplicity and absoluteness, 'Lord of all'. This is the full extent of the victory of the resurrection. It is not just the miracle of life from death; it is not just his vindication as Messiah; it is not just his victory over sin. It is the manifestation of his divine dignity, his share in the power of God, a power which is total and absolute. 'All power is given to me in heaven and on earth; go therefore and teach all nations, teaching them my commandment'.⁴ This is our Lord. There is no question of sectarian loyalty or personal faith; it is not we who accept him as master and honour him as leader; he *is* the Lord, lord of the world, lord of all. 'All things have been put under his feet'.⁵ 'He rose up, but he had first gone down to the depths; and he who went down is the one who rose up above all the heavens, that he may fill all'.⁶ 'God raised Christ from the dead and set him at his right hand in the heavens, above all principality and power and lordship, above every name in this world and the next; he put all things under his feet'.⁷ 'God has raised him up and given him the name which is above every name; at this name every knee must bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is the Lord, in the glory of God the Father'.⁸

Jesus is the Lord. We have come a long way from the humble Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter's son; but the jubilation of the resurrection, the faith of the apostles and ours, is that the two are the same; it is *that* Jesus who is *this* Lord. We do not make a distinction between our Lord who is God and Jesus who is man. Jesus is the Lord. He is transformed, but he is still the same person,

¹ Mk 12, 36; cf Acts 2, 34.

⁴ Mt 28, 18-19.

⁷ Eph 1, 20-21.

² Phil 2, 9-10.

⁵ 1 Cor 15, 27.

⁸ Phil 2, 10-11.

³ Acts 10, 42.

⁶ Eph 4, 9-10.

Mary's son, the friend of the apostles. He has gone through the gates of death and emerged on the other side; but he is still the same person. Death has no more dominion over him, he can come and go at will, he can move through closed doors; but his hands and feet still bear the marks of his wounds, he can eat and talk with his friends, he is not a ghost or a disembodied apparition. A new thing has appeared on the earth, but a new thing has also appeared in heaven – a human being has ascended above the heavens, above all the angelic choirs and sits at the right hand of God, towering in majesty above the whole of creation whose nature yet he shares. This is the glory of the vision of the Apocalypse, the vision of 'John, your brother, sharer in your tribulation', which he had seen Jesus too share with him. But it is the same Jesus whom he now sees: 'I saw seven golden candlesticks and in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks one like a son of man, dressed in a long robe girt at the waist with a golden cord. His head and his hair were white as snow, his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet like bronze glowing from the furnace, his voice like the thunder of rushing waters. In his hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth a two-edged sword came forth'.¹ The language is indeed the language of the Old Testament; for in him the scriptures are fulfilled: 'I am the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the alpha and the omega'. But it is no mythical figure; the eyes are the eyes that had smiled at him in friendship over a meal, the feet are those which had walked the roads of Palestine, the voice is the voice he had so often listened to. This is Jesus, and Jesus is the Lord – *Christos Pantokrater*, the Lord of all, the Almighty.

And Jesus *is* the Lord. This is what he is now and forever. The temporal dimension for a christian is highly mysterious; past, present and future are not for us what they are in our non-christianized state. But no matter how different our relationship to past, present and future, these terms and these moments still do have a real meaning, and we must not allow the eternal dimension of our christian status to be confused by over-imaginative devotion. What is past is past. The very reality of our Lord involves his subjection to the laws of time, of history. What he did once in human history, he did once and for all. 'Once and for all'; this is the repeated message of the Epistle to the Hebrews; never again. 'We have a high priest who is higher than the heavens, who, unlike the priests of the

¹ Apoc 1, 12-16.

old law, offered himself *once* only . . .';¹ 'he entered once only into the Holy of Holies, and his redemption is eternal'.² 'He died to sin, and died once; sin has no more dominion over him; now he lives and lives to God'.³ The present state of our Lord is that glorified, risen state. It is true to say that he was born; it happened once and he will never be born again. It is true to say that he did die, and he dies no more. It is true to say that he rose from the dead; but his risen state is then his permanent state and this is the Lord who is with us now. 'I am with you all days'; and the 'I' is the Lord to whom all power is given in heaven and on earth.

So in the eucharist we do indeed commemorate and recall – in the strongest sense of the word – the sacrifice of Christ; but it is the glorious Lord with whom and through whom we do so. The real presence is the presence of the Lord who died once and for all, and who is now ever living to make intercession for us.⁴

The eucharist is the sacrament of redemption achieved and triumph won, our share in the joy of our Lord, presence and pledge.

So it is with baptism. It is into our living Lord, our risen Lord, that we are baptized. We experience the power of his death to sin, but we live by the power of his risen life. 'Just as Christ rose from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also walk in new life'.⁵ The Spirit of life which is shown to be his by his conquest of death becomes ours too: 'Raised by God's hand and having received the promised holy Spirit from the Father, he has poured him forth, as you have seen'.⁶ Our Lord lives now by the Spirit; 'and he who is joined to the Lord is one Spirit with him'.⁷ 'Spiritual life' sounds so refined, so immaterial – a touch of grace diluting the grossness of our carnal state. But our spiritual life is in reality the life we share with Christ, 'the second Adam, a life-giving spirit'.⁸ It is the Spirit who would not let the holy One see corruption but broke the chains of death, triumphant and glorious. The end to which our 'spiritual life' is directed is not an even more immaterial state in heaven, but the resurrection of our body: 'God has raised up the Lord and he will also raise us through his power'.⁹ 'If the Spirit of him who raised up Jesus lives in you, he will raise up your mortal bodies through the Spirit who dwells in you'.¹⁰

But here we must surely pause. Our first reaction on contemplating the splendour of the risen Lord was one of wonder and joy and

¹ Heb 7, 27.

² Heb 9, 12.

³ Rom 6, 9–10.

⁴ Heb 7, 25.

⁵ Rom 6, 4.

⁶ Acts 2, 33.

⁷ 1 Cor 6, 17.

⁸ 1 Cor 15, 45.

⁹ 1 Cor 6, 14.

¹⁰ Rom 8, 11.

humility at the glory and grandeur of Jesus seated in majesty on the throne of God, triumphant and all-powerful. To him we come with awe and reverence – with love and confidence, too, for he is our Saviour; we submit ourselves to him – gladly, for his yoke is sweet and his burden light; but humbly, for he is the Lord and all power has been given to him. But our further reflection on the resurrection has led us to realize that this is not only a glory which we adore, but a glory which we share: 'We behold the glory of the Lord, and we are transformed into the same image, from glory to glory'.¹ He is higher than the angels, judge of the living and the dead; but we too will judge the angels and all the world.² We are called to enter into the glory of our Lord, not as servants but as friends.

The normal english usage in referring to Jesus is 'our Lord'; and this, like the title 'our Lady', probably goes back to a medieval, courtly, feudal world. But even the scriptural use of the term 'Lord' is linked with a certain social and political situation; and we must not be misled into accepting implications or drawing conclusions which may in fact be merely due to the historical accident of a particular time and place. To speak even more plainly, some of the ideas which come to mind in association with terms like 'Christ the King' or 'God, the almighty Lord' are distasteful to modern ears, savouring unpleasantly of despotic tyranny on God's part and craven subservience on man's. And when we say distasteful, it must be clear that we mean not so much distasteful to us as distasteful in relationship to God. That God is in fact almighty Lord is of course obvious. If God is anything, he is everything: sole creator, supreme Lord from whom and for whom all exists. Any movement of resentful rebellion pales into absurdity before it even reaches the level of consciousness, so evident is the truth. It is not that a christian could think it beneath his dignity to acknowledge the absolute and total power of God. It is rather that it seems beneath God's dignity to assert it.

With this in mind, there seems room for further thought about the term and concept of 'lord', so as to see where exactly the stress comes.

We might begin with the simple fact that this *is* the term we use; we speak of 'the Lord God' and 'the Lord Jesus'; it is precisely not 'despot' or 'tyrant', though terms like these were open to the inspired writers if they had wished to convey merely the idea of power, rule, dominion. The connotation of 'Lord' which these other

¹ 2 Cor 3, 18.

² 1 Cor 6, 2-3.

terms do not have is one of personal relationship; that we are not objects in his sight, nor are we in a purely physical, material, objective relationship to our Lord. He is our Rock, he is first uncaused Cause, and these terms too have their value; but to call him 'Lord' brings us into a personal relationship with him. It can even imply some sort of claim on the part of the subject: to say 'my Lord' is to recognize his rights over us; but it is also a suggestion of his willingness to hear, of some care and concern with us. It may not in fact be verified, but at least it gives us grounds for appeal. One does not cry out to 'fate'; but we can say, 'Lord, hear us'.

It is exactly this personal relationship which determines the Old Testament use of the word. God is the holy One, the 'other', the terrible unknown; but the point of the bible is that God has revealed himself, that he has taken the initiative in breaking through the cloud of unknowing and has entered into communication with us. He not only allowed us to know that he exists, but he came closer still, in a relationship of personal friendship which we call covenant. All of this is summed up in the personal name by which Israel knew God, the name Yahweh. 'I am Yahweh; I did not make my name known to others'.¹ God is the terrible unknown, but Yahweh is God with us; and Yahweh and God are coterminous. Yahweh denotes the total reality of Godhead in a personal Being.

'Lord' is the term chosen by the greek translators to render the holy name of Yahweh. It is not strictly or simply a title; it stands for the proper name of God, in which all godhead is contained. We have not many lords and many gods; all lordship is possessed by him, just as he is the only God. All that we mean by God and all that we mean by Yahweh is contained in the name of 'Lord': almighty power and also the service we owe him.

All of this is verified in our Lord Jesus Christ. When the apostles proclaimed him as 'Lord', it was not a political term which they were adapting to this situation. It was a 'recognition' – they recognized in the risen Jesus the Lord of the Old Testament – God revealing himself and revealing himself as saviour. God's lordship is dominion, but dominion at our service. The 'glory' of God is the visible manifestation of his hidden holiness, a holiness which we share; and Christ is the glory of God, and through him we enter into that holiness: 'son of God in power by the spirit of holiness',² 'he has become for us our wisdom and our justice and our holiness'.³

¹ Exod 6, 3.

² Rom 1, 4.

³ 1 Cor 1, 30.

'We have seen his glory, full of grace and truth' – the complete manifestation of the divine reality, which is love. The fourth gospel shows a profound awareness of this by moving the moment of Christ's glorification back from the resurrection to the crucifixion; because it was there that Christ revealed the Father to us, revealed him as love. This is not an alternative theology to the theology of the resurrection, but a complement to it; it helps us to realize more exactly the lordship of the risen Jesus. He is son of God in power, he sits at the right hand of the Father, all things are under his feet – all things, our moral conduct and our social relationships, our most secret thoughts and the vast sweep of history – all power is his, total, absolute, cosmic power. But it is the power of love, which with outstretched arms calls us to share the glory of our Lord.

'God has spoken to us through his son, the son that he has appointed to inherit everything, and through whom he made everything there is. He is the radiant light of God's glory and the perfect copy of his nature, sustaining the universe by his powerful command; and now that he has destroyed the defilement of sin, he has gone to take his place in heaven at the right hand of the divine majesty'.¹ 'He is the image of the unseen God and the first-born of all creation, for in him were created all things in heaven and on earth . . . As he is the beginning, he was first to be born from the dead, so that he should be the first in every way; because God wanted all fulness to be found in him and all things to be reconciled through him and for him, everything in heaven and on earth'.² In such texts as these³ we have the full exposition of what has been suggested above. We realize that the resurrection cannot be separated from the passion of Christ; but neither can it be separated from the creation, nor from the processions of the blessed Trinity. It is all one continuous sweep, a circle, a parabola, from God and back to God.

The second Person of the blessed Trinity is the 'image' of God, God's perfect self-expression, his word, the brightness of his glory. As such, it is to him that God's outward expression in creation is attributed; but we mistake 'creation' – and the nature of God – if we think of it as a solid block of matter placed somewhere outside of God. 'Outside of him there is nothing';⁴ 'In him all things were created';⁵ 'He upholds all by his mighty word';⁶ he is even, according to the bold phrase of Colossians, 'the first-born of creation'.⁷

¹ Heb 1, 2-4.

² Col 1, 15-19.

³ Cf 1 Cor 15, 20-28; Eph 1, 4-14.

⁴ Jn 1, 3.

⁵ Col 1, 16.

⁶ Heb 1, 3.

⁷ Col 1, 16.

God the Son then entered creation in human form; and 'redemption' consists in his restoring to creation the form it had in him, the first-born, the perfect image of God; and not merely 'restoring', but grappling it to God by his identification with our created state: 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself'.¹ This he does, and then returns to the Father.

This is the sweep and circle shown in the texts just quoted. It is precisely as second Person of the blessed Trinity that our Lord is creator; it is in virtue of this role as creator that he becomes man; it is in virtue of the incarnation that he is redeemer; it is in virtue of the redemption that he takes his place at the right hand of God – a circle, in which each segment is not a separate stage but intimately connected to the others.

So, the return to the Father is not simply a transition; it is a return, a return to 'where he was before'.² 'Father', he prays on the eve of his departure, 'Give me back the glory which I had with you before the world began'.³ But in the meanwhile – between the time before the world began and the time when he resumes his place at the right hand of God – something has happened, and that happening, the incarnation, cannot be undone. The Son of God now has a human nature. And it is in this human nature, something which he shares with us, that he goes back to the Father. Something created – transformed, glorious, triumphant, but still created – now sits at the right hand of the Father, the fulness of him who fills the whole creation.⁴

And this is 'the Lord'. Our use of this title is not an acknowledgment of the gulf between God and man, but precisely a glad appeal to that gulf bridged. This is the full stature of Christ the Lord, this is the full scope of the resurrection; it does not end with a world simply made subject to his sway, but with a world reconciled, a world united, united with the Son of God in loving adoration of the Father, when God is all in all.⁵

¹ 2 Cor 5, 19.

⁴ Eph 1, 23.

² Jn 6, 62.

⁵ 1 Cor 15, 28.

³ Jn 17, 5.