

CHRIST, THE PERFECT WORK

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SURELY NOT? Such a title should put those with even a slight knowledge of the history of christian doctrine on their guard. It would be difficult to formulate a clearer slogan on behalf of the fourth-century arian heresy than 'Christ, the Perfect Work'. The notion that the Son of God is a creature or work – however perfect – of the Father was firmly disposed of, at least in principle, by both the creed and the solemn anathema of the first ecumenical council held at Nicaea in 325 ad.

But curt and doctrinaire reactions of this sort to an unusual title tell their own tale. They are the measure of the extent to which traditional christology, often with good reason, has been taken up with static affirmations about Christ: in other words, of how theology has put the emphasis on the personally divine *status* of Christ. It is thanks to this emphasis that we instinctively react against any expression which might seem to call in question the co-equally divine and eternally uncreated status of Christ as sole-begotten Son of the Father. But our title looks at Christ from a different point of view: not so much in terms of his eternal relatedness to the Father within the one Godhead, as in terms of his whole *function* in relation to the Father's plan of salvation and its historical realization. More, therefore, in terms of the meaning of Christ's human, incarnate existence and activity seen as willed by the Father in the furtherance of his fatherly purpose with regard to his creation. Our title looks at Christ in his function, his work as the bringer of salvation and fulfilment to the Father's world. This is the work that the Father gave Christ to do. Better, it is Christ who embodies in his life and death the doing, the accomplishment of this work. Better still, Christ is this work done perfectly at the Father's bidding. We are used to speaking of Christ as the Father's incarnate Word: how exactly can we also speak of him as the Father's incarnate Work? It is a question that calls for careful consideration.

Pious imagination has often filled out the gospel silence concern-

ing the hidden life of Christ at Nazareth by picturing him in the role of the humble worker. And justly: 'the carpenter's son'¹ was himself known as 'the carpenter'.² But Christ's working life is viewed in a different and deeper way in the fourth gospel, above all with regard to the miracles or 'signs' which Christ performed in manifestation of his true glory and to win the belief of his disciples.³ Christ emerges, in the first place, as co-worker with the Father in the execution of the Father's work of salvation. Salvation is the Father's work, and Christ performs the works which proclaim and inaugurate the Father's salvific work. In the performance of these works Christ is really the Father's co-agent.

It is this fact that endows the works of Christ with a quality which makes them witness to his person, to whom he really is. It is, of course, possible for men to fail to grasp and believe in the witness of Christ's works. His call for faith in himself as one sent by God can evoke on occasion no more than an unbelieving query about his works: 'What sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?'⁴ Even his galilean brethren, perhaps anxious to be rid of him, can suggest that what his works really demand is not faith but a wider public: 'Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples may see the works you are doing. For no man works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world'.⁵ There are times when, at best, a miracle can rouse no more than mere wonderment: 'I did one deed, and you all marvel at it'.⁶

But the real point of the works of Christ is that they serve to reveal who he really is. They testify, in other words, to him in his relationship to the Father. Christ claims to 'do nothing on my own authority'.⁷ His works are 'the works of God'.⁸ They are performed by Christ, not in his own name but in his Father's; and thus they are pointers to Christ's own person: 'the works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness to me'.⁹ So Christ can claim men's faithful allegiance on the basis of his works: 'I have shown you many good works from my Father . . . If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me'.¹⁰ No one else has ever been able to make such a claim: 'the testimony which I have is greater than that of John; for the works which the Father has granted to me to accomplish, these very works which I am doing, bear me witness

¹ Mt 13, 55.

² Mk 6, 3.

³ Cf Jn 2, 11.

⁴ Jn 6, 30.

⁵ Jn 7, 3-4.

⁶ Jn 7, 21.

⁷ Jn 8, 28.

⁸ Jn 9, 3.

⁹ Jn 10, 25.

¹⁰ Jn 10, 32, 37.

that the Father has sent me'.¹ To the doing of these works, which are, like all else in Christ, the Father's gift to the Son, his whole human mission is devoted: 'we must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes when no man can work'.²

The relationship of Christ to the Father which is revealed in his works to the eyes of faith is no distant or merely static relationship. Christ is more than a divinely fathered emissary sent from a remote God to an alien world. His works on earth are the Father's own works, and they testify to the active presence of the Father who works in and through his Christ, his incarnate Son. For 'he who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him'.³ If it is the case that Christ's works testify to the divine sonship, his eternal sending by the Father, they witness further to the intimate and dynamic relationship of mutual indwelling which exists between Father and Son: 'If I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father'.⁴ For 'the Father who dwells in me does his works'.⁵ So 'believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else believe me on account of the works themselves'.⁶ To reject Christ's works involves, therefore, the rejection of both the Father and the Son: 'if I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have seen and hated both me and the Father'.⁷

The mutual indwelling of Father and Son is what lies behind, and is manifested in, the works of Christ; and makes them equally the works of the Father himself: 'for the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing'.⁸ The Father exercises the initiative in the works of Christ: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; and whatever he does, that the Son does likewise'.⁹ And not only does the Father initiate the works of Christ; he also continually promotes and furthers them – is continuously at work in the Son: 'My Father is working still, and I am working'.¹⁰ Christ's works are divine works, the works of a God who is at once Father and Son. They are to be believed in as testifying to Christ's sonship and mission – both of which he receives eternally and continually from the Father whose works he performs on earth for the salvation of

¹ Jn 5, 36.

² Jn 9, 4.

³ Jn 8, 29.

⁴ Jn 10, 38.

⁵ Jn 14, 10.

⁶ Jn 14, 11.

⁷ Jn 15, 24.

⁸ Jn 5, 20.

⁹ Jn 5, 19.

¹⁰ Jn 5, 17.

mankind. Christ works as co-agent of the Father, performing the Father's works obediently and lovingly. His works are the works of the Son whose very 'food is to do the will of him who sent me'.¹

So much is clear from what John says about the works of Christ. But there are few, if any, negligible variations of expression in the fourth gospel. So to do proper justice to John's thought, due notice must be taken of a shift in the way in which he writes of Christ and his works. John's last-quoted statement should be given in full: 'my food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work'.² Not 'works' this time, but 'work'; not 'do' simply, but 'accomplish'. There is here a conscious widening of focus on John's part, moving from the works which Christ did in his public life on the Father's behalf as the Father's co-agent, to take in the whole work which it is his Father's purpose that he should accomplish, should bring towards its full and final perfection. The works which Christ performed are thus to be seen within the lengthened perspective of the work which it is his whole incarnate mission to accomplish for the Father. From Christ, co-worker with the Father in the works of salvation, the attention is switched to the whole life and death of Christ as the perfect accomplishment of the Father's work of salvation. This work of salvation is the 'good work' which the Jews, according to John, failed to recognize as being accomplished in their midst by Christ.³

So, in second place, the works of Christ's whole life, and most especially his death, are to be considered as elements in the wider context of the whole work which is accomplished in the incarnation of the Son. It is notably at the end of his life that Christ can, in the fourth gospel, reflect on the overall meaning of the life he lived in obedience to the Father and for the Father's greater glory: 'I have glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do'.⁴ Just as the works of Christ were not his own works, but those of the Father, so the whole work of his life and death is accomplished in utter obedience to the Father. It was the work accepted by Christ for accomplishment as a gift from the Father; the work given him to accomplish and accepted by him as from the Father's love, and responded to in the loving spirit of his eternal sonship. It was the work of becoming, in a human life and death, man in his fully accomplished perfection — man as God eternally desires and plans man to be, man fully conformed to that image and

¹ Jn 4, 34.

² Jn 4, 34.

³ Cf Jn 10, 33.

⁴ Jn 17, 4.

likeness of God which underlies his original creation. The image and likeness of God is no vaguely supernatural blueprint. God's image and likeness is the eternal Son. And in Christ, the eternal Son in person, manhood is made supremely in God's image and likeness. The deformities in man's past response to the Father are obliterated in the achieving, in Christ's life and death, of the full conformity of humanity to its basic pristine pattern, sonship of the Father. This was the work that could be accomplished by none other than him who is the Son in person. In Christ manhood is re-made to respond fully to the Father in the eternal spirit of sonship. Such is the work that Christ accomplished in his life and death. So he could say of this work as he hung on the cross: 'it has been accomplished'.¹

But, in the third place, the horizon of faith can widen once again, to take in both the works and the work of Christ as we have seen them presented by John, to a still broader vision in which we can see Christ no longer merely as the Father's co-agent in the doing of the Father's saving works, and no longer simply as embodying in his incarnate life and death the accomplishment of the Father's work of salvation. Shedding, as far as we are able in faith, the limits of historical time and place, we can begin to share the vision of Christ as himself the Father's perfect work, the Work incarnate. Christ as co-agent and incarnate accomplishment of the Father's work yields to the wider and fuller view of Christ as that work which it is the Father's eternal plan to perfect and fulfil in the whole course of history. It is the view of Christ that underlies much of what Paul saw in him.

Christ belongs, for Paul, to the eternal mystery of God's plan and will to save – the 'secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification'.² Indeed Christ *is* this 'mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints'.³ It was Paul's special grace 'to preach to the gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things'.⁴ In Christ Paul saw God's mysterious plan made plain and already approaching its fulfilment: 'For (God) has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to the purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth'.⁵

¹ Jn 19, 30.

² 1 Cor 2, 7.

³ Col 1, 26; cf 1, 27; 2, 3; 4, 3-4; Eph 3, 3-5

⁴ Eph 3, 8-9.

⁵ Eph 1, 9-10.

God works in his world's history according to a plan and purpose which has Christ as its starting-point and its end. We do little justice to the grandeur of God's loving design when we fail to see Christ in his God-given function as the Father's perfect self-expression, towards the historical realization of which all God's activity *ad extra* is planned and purposed. Christ stands at the origin of God's activity, and is the result which God aims at bringing to realization¹ through created history. Christ is, in God's design, 'the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end'.² God's wise activity *ad extra* starts with Christ, his very Wisdom,³ in mind. God's creation of reality 'outside' himself takes place through Christ, 'the beginning of God's creation'.⁴ Creation is founded on Christ.⁵ As Paul says, incomparably:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominations or principalities or authorities – all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.⁶

Such truths imply that we should view creation and all creation's history in terms of him who represents what the creator God had in mind when he created, – him whom God eternally plans to reveal in his full glory and stature and perfection through the course of history. In other words, we should view Christ as the perfect work of God: perfect now already, but still to be revealed by God in all his glorious perfection.

The eyes of faith interpret history in this sense. The world's history becomes, beginning with the world's creation, a series of divinely controlled events and direct interventions which are stages in the realization of God's eternal and overall plan. They are stages whereby God works – sin notwithstanding – to produce his perfect work *ad extra*, the perfect expression of his own divine self in created reality, Christ who is perfect man and himself God in person. As Christ lies at the root of God's original creation, so also does he stand as creation's goal. The whole of God's work is to be summed up in one word: Christ. The separate 'moments' of his work –

¹ Cf Eph 3, 11.

² 1 Cor 1, 24; cf 2, 7; Sir 1, 4, 9; 24, 9; Prov 8, 22–25.

³ Apoc 3, 14; cf 1 Cor 8, 6; Heb 1, 2–3; Jn 1, 3, 10.

⁵ Cf 1 Cor 3, 11.

² Apoc 22, 13; cf 1, 17; 2, 8.

⁶ Col 1, 15–17.

creation, salvation, fulfilment – find their meaning and their perfect content in Christ. In Christ abides that ‘fulness of God’,¹ that richness of God-given life and existence,² which God wills to impart to all that he has created. It was this purpose that led God to create; and has led him to save his creation from alien purposes, and to continue bringing it to its proper fulfilment in Christ, ‘to fulness of life in him’,³ so that men ‘may be filled with all the fulness of God’.⁴ ‘For in him’ – Christ – ‘the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily’.⁵ God’s work will be finally perfected when all creation comes to share in that fullness of life which is now held out in Christ, when all creation finds its proper and only fulfilment in him, and when Christ will stand revealed in his full glory as God’s perfect and perfected work.

To return, in conclusion, to the fourth gospel. It would be a pity to miss a further johannine elaboration concerning the works of men. The true disciple of Christ is the man who co-operates in and contributes to the work of God in Christ: ‘Then they said to him, What must we do, to be doing the work of God? Jesus answered them, This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent’.⁶ What is primarily demanded of the disciple is faith in Christ: ‘if you are Abraham’s children, do the works of Abraham’⁷ – namely, believe and act on your belief. The ‘world’ for John is mankind insofar as it chooses rather to do works which are not these ‘works’, and so opposes Christ: ‘the world . . . hates me because I testify of it that its works are evil’.⁸ And by thus refusing faith in Christ, in avoiding the ‘works’ involved in faith in Christ, the world brings down judgment on itself:

... this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his works have been wrought in God.⁹

It is for the disciple of Christ to have faith in him and to devote his activity, his works, to the furthering of that work of the Father for

¹ Col 1, 19.

⁴ Eph 3, 19.

⁷ Jn 8, 39.

² Cf Eph 2, 7; 3, 8, 16.

⁵ Col 2, 9.

⁸ Jn 7, 7.

³ Col 2, 10.

⁶ Jn 6, 28–9.

⁹ Jn 3, 19–21.

the world, which is the upbuilding and outspreading of Christ himself, until he is revealed at the end of human history as the Father's perfect work. The true disciple and believer is to continue on earth the wonderful works of Christ, and further embody that work which he accomplished for the Father on behalf of all men in his life and death. In the light of Christ, in the power of him who is now risen,¹ and following his example,² the disciple is to continue and spread and give greater depth and impact to what Christ did, until the Father's whole work, which is Christ, is revealed as perfected. As Christ himself solemnly asserted: 'Truly', truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father . . .'³

¹ Cf Jn 14, 13-14.

² Cf Jn 13, 15.

³ Jn 14, 12.