



## On Christology in Culsalmond and Rayne and Daviot

*Mary M Cranfield*

The purpose of my Doctor of Ministry project was to encourage and enable those involved in the congregations of Culsalmond & Rayne linked with Daviot<sup>1</sup> to review their understanding and experience of Jesus Christ and to be challenged to explore aspects of the significance of an appropriate Christology for their personal lives and the ongoing life of the two congregations. In practice these goals were worked out through the creation, launch and review of the congregations' mission statement, a series of united services focused on the Gospel according to Mark and prepared by an especially established group, and the establishment of a lay pastoral visiting team.



### Origins

The project originated in my own study of the identity and significance of Jesus Christ during a Doctor of Ministry course on recent developments in New Testament Christology and through a subsequent opportunity to write a critique of the work of John Dominic Crossan<sup>2</sup>.

Crossan states his intention to assist readers to discover not just what early believers wrote about Jesus but also what a 'more or less neutral observer'<sup>3</sup> might have seen and heard in the early decades of the first century. He then asserts that the only way to pursue this more objective approach is to 'raise most seriously the problem of methodology and then follow most stringently' the chosen 'theoretical method'<sup>4</sup>. Crossan then describes an extraordinarily complex methodology which consists of inter-related layers of investigation of cross-cultural and inter-disciplinary material and also an attempt to prioritise strata of material 'according to chronological hierarchy of attestation'<sup>5</sup>.

Crossan's commitment to his methodology leads him to reject the pre-eminence given by the Christian Church to the four canonical Gospels and to focus instead upon the presentations of the life of Jesus in extra-canonical gospels, such as *The Gospel of Thomas*.

The picture of Jesus that emerges is of one who advocates 'open commensuality', 'the symbol and embodiment' of 'radical egalitarianism'<sup>6</sup> in direct opposition to the widely accepted notions of 'honor' and 'shame', 'those basic values of Mediterranean culture and society'<sup>7</sup>. But, as Crossan puts 'Jesus' vision and program back into the matrix from which it sprang, the ancient and universal peasant dream of a just and equal world'<sup>8</sup>, I believe that he inappropriately restricts the meaning and purpose of the Kingdom of God<sup>9</sup>, and even more significantly, omits to pay adequate attention to the theological perspective of the divine origin of Jesus' vision.

Even more disturbing are Crossan's views on the New Testament's passion and post-resurrection narratives. Crossan is convinced that Jesus' first followers knew 'almost nothing whatsoever about the details of his crucifixion, death or burial'<sup>10</sup> and sees the detailed passion accounts which now exist, for example, in the canonical gospels as 'not *history remembered*, but *prophecy historicized*'<sup>11</sup>. For Crossan there is the '*historical passion*'<sup>12</sup>, what actually happened to Jesus, the '*prophetic passion*'<sup>13</sup>, the search by scribally learned followers to find basis or justification in the Hebrew scriptures for such a shocking event, and then the '*narrative passion*'<sup>14</sup>, which he describes as 'the placing of such prophetic fulfilments into a sequential narrative with its origins well hidden within a plausible historical framework'<sup>15</sup>.

Turning to the post-resurrection narratives, Crossan accepts that for Paul, whose particular theological vision, according to Crossan, included the '*imminent*' general resurrection, 'bodily resurrection' is the only way Jesus' continued presence can be expressed<sup>16</sup>, but concludes that this is but 'one way of expressing early Christian faith'<sup>17</sup>, and just 'one of the ways to express faith in the continuing power and presence of Jesus in the world.'<sup>18</sup>

Crossan himself understands Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 15:8, 'Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me', as being 'not primarily interested in trance, ecstasy, apparition or revelation, but in authority, power, leadership and priority'<sup>19</sup>, and clarifies that 'what are taken, in the last chapters of the New Testament gospels, as entranced revelations, simply because of the analogy with Paul, are not such at all...' because 'they bear no marks of such phenomena' as blinding light and heavenly voices, but then concludes that such stories are 'rather quite deliberate political dramatisations of the priority of particular leaders... They presume rather than create the Christian community; they are about how it will continue, not how it began. They detail the origins of Christian leadership, not the origins of Christian faith'<sup>20</sup>. Perhaps even more telling are remarks from the final pages of *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, about how the early Christians 'tried to express what they meant by telling, for example, about the journey to Emmaus... The symbolism is obvious, as is the metaphoric condensation of the first years of Christian thought and practice into one parabolic afternoon. Emmaus never happened. Emmaus always happened'<sup>21</sup>.

I acknowledge that Crossan is a highly skilled communicator who is able to express his interpretation of the life of Jesus using a vivid and imaginative style which, particularly in *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*<sup>22</sup>, makes use of a confiding tone which draws the reader into the debate. I believe, however, that, behind many of Crossan's superficially plausible arguments, is a striking arrogance.

There are serious questions regarding the way in which Crossan prioritises texts according to his dating of them. The arbitrary nature of many of his interpretative principles may, for example, be illustrated by the '*bracketing of singularity*'<sup>23</sup>, by which he ignores materials which lack independent attestation from at least one other source, a ruling which seems specially inappropriate in dealing with events which took place almost two thousand years ago. In a similar vein, I regard it as perverse for Crossan, despite his convictions about the significance of multiple attestation, largely to ignore the fact that seventeen of the twenty-seven New Testament books refer to Jesus' resurrection explicitly and with emphasis, whilst those with no explicit references

may be considered to imply it<sup>24</sup>. Crossan's view of the passion narratives is clearly seriously distorted by his wholesale rejection of significant sections of the New Testament sources and by an insistence upon the significance of apocryphal materials.

It would appear from Crossan's comments on the Gospel of Thomas' use of the title, 'the Living Jesus', that he is open to the possibility of Jesus' ongoing presence with his disciples<sup>25</sup>. Revealingly, however, he comments that as Jesus' missionaries 'participate in that divine Wisdom...They do not speak of resurrection but of unbroken and abiding presence'<sup>26</sup>. In the same section Crossan refers to the *Epistle of Barnabas* in which disciples could 'imagine Jesus being with God and returning in triumph but never have to mention resurrection at all'. The prominent role of such texts, in isolation from the New Testament Gospels and other canonical material, and an examination of all that Crossan omits, gives me the strong impression that he leaves readers with very little substance regarding the vital fact of Jesus' resurrection.

It thus seems to me that there is very little of substance in Crossan's presentation of the historical Jesus. Although, in Luke Timothy Johnson's words, Crossan 'cunningly combines impressive heaps of data with an air of utter reasonableness'<sup>27</sup>, ultimately, as both Johnson and Bockmuehl<sup>28</sup> comment, Crossan's arguments are circular. The result of Crossan's endeavours is a Jesus who bears little relation to the Jesus of the New Testament Gospels and the Jesus of Christian faith.

By contrast, the purpose of this project was to assist those involved with our local congregations in their knowledge and exploration of the Jesus of the Gospels, the Jesus of Christian faith.



## Christology in Mark

Recognising that a complete understanding of christology is unattainable, and, more practically, the desirability of developing a more clearly focused short term goal, we decided to concentrate our explorations upon one Gospel. The Gospel according to Mark was

chosen because of the sharpness and directness of its narrative, and because it is considered, by most scholars, to be the earliest of the canonical Gospels.

A fundamental issue for this project was therefore what the Gospel of Mark reveals regarding the nature and identity of Jesus Christ.

Since we intended to draw attention to the internal message of Mark concerning Jesus we decided, in preparation for the implementation of the project, to use some of the hermeneutical principles of those, such as proponents of narrative theology, who emphasise the narrative significance of Biblical literature. Particular use was made of some of the emphases developed by those involved in ‘narrative criticism’, defined in *Mark & Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, by Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (1992)<sup>29</sup>, as ‘a term coined by New Testament critics to refer to analysis of each Gospel as a literary whole. Deeply influenced by secular narratology, it focuses on character, plot, setting, and point of view’. Through careful application of these different aspects to the Markan account, we gained a new appreciation of the significant contribution that the flow and content of the Markan narrative give to Christology. Unlike narrative critics, however, who try to restrict as much as possible their focus to the narrative, we recognised that much could be learned about the significance of Jesus by studying ‘Christ’, ‘Lord’, ‘Son of Man’ and ‘Son of God’ and other such titles and their historical, cultural and linguistic origins.

As we explored Markan Christology, moreover, we considered it important to be open to external information about Mark, such as the fact that Mark wrote in the context of persecution within the early Church.

Historical background information and comparisons with other biblical texts are also significant with regard to the question of the historicity of Mark. There are, for example, within Christian communities of faith, contexts in which important questions are asked concerning the extent to which the Gospels may be regarded as reliable accounts of events that really happened. The answer to such questions may have a direct

influence on people's understanding of their ongoing faith and their attitudes towards the authority of the scriptures and, as such, need to be taken seriously.

Although the Old Testament is used in an authoritative way by Mark, and he himself is perceived within the Gospel as having significant authority, it is unlikely that an exclusive reliance upon the tools used by narrative critics, or even some of the more affirmative theories concerning God's action in history of narrative theologians, would provide adequate answers.

Although belief in the resurrection of Jesus is ultimately a question of faith, there are, for example, helpful contributions to a discussion of the historical reliability of the resurrection accounts to be found in the Gospels. In particular, some arguments in favour of the reliability of the narratives are based upon a detailed examination of attitudes towards women in first century Palestine, from which it would seem exceedingly improbable that Gospel authors would give women such a prominent role as early witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus (Mk16:1-8), had they been inventing their material.

'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. Through the fast moving and vivid internal narrative of the Gospel of Mark, the author has used many different techniques, as well as his own theological perspective, to not only tell the story of Jesus from Nazareth, the one who is 'the Christ' and the 'Son of God', but also to engage hearers and readers in an adventure of discovery, an adventure in which Jesus is placed for them within the context of the whole story of God's action in history.

By focusing upon Mark during our series of united services we hoped to encourage members and friends of the congregations of Culsalmond & Rayne and Daviot to participate in this adventure of discovery as they review their understanding of Jesus' identity and significance.



## Christian Pastoral Care

Throughout our preparations for this project it was always important that there would be a further strand which would in a very practical way illustrate the significance of a balanced christology for Christian life, namely the establishment of a pastoral visiting team and the training of a group of volunteers. We now turn to the theoretical foundation of this part of the project and the biblical and theological issues which it involves.

It was obvious that any care that our congregations would be able to provide through this new structure would be only one option amongst others available. Whilst we recognise the significant healing and empowering potential in alternative provision for assistance or counselling, our purpose is to provide care that may be distinguishable as *Christian* pastoral care.

For our purposes an important issue is therefore to define what is distinctive about Christian pastoral care, defined in connection with our project as care and nurture motivated and shaped by the Christian Gospel and directed towards mutual encouragement in the knowledge and sharing of the love which God has shown us in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We recognise that part of the distinctiveness of Christian pastoral care has to do with the motivation of those who participate in such care. Although, as with any part of people's lives, such motivation is often rather more complicated and confused than participants would like, it is Christian faith which is the most fundamental inspiration for Christian pastoral care, even though this motivation will be articulated in a variety of ways.

In our reflections on Christian pastoral care, we recognised that much could be learned from secular care and counselling methodology. It is important, however, that those involved in Christian pastoral

care are faithful to the values and perspectives of the scriptures, so long as the complexities of biblical interpretation are given adequate consideration.

It became clear that these distinctive foundations for pastoral care were profoundly relevant to the way in which the Christian pastoral carer regarded, approached and treated those whom they encountered. In this connection, we found illuminating a model of pastoral care based on Christian friendship, developed by John Swinton in *Resurrecting the Person: Friendship and the Care of People with Mental Health Problems* (2000). Swinton sees such friendship, described as ‘*messianic friendship*’, as the gift of the Christian community in that ‘inspired by the power of the Spirit, it takes its shape from the relationships of Jesus the Messiah, and seeks to embody and act out something of his life and purpose<sup>30</sup>’.

We also considered that a responsible model of Christian pastoral care must take seriously its ethical dimension, which reflects God’s own desire for justice and righteousness, and also the socio-political context of those cared for.

Other absolutely crucial dimensions of Christian pastoral care arise explicitly out of the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection triumph of Christ. As Christopher Jones comments, in *Tomorrow is Another Country* (1996), ‘It is in his particularity, and not in any abstraction from or denial of it, that Jesus of Nazareth becomes ‘the Man for Others’ and ‘God for all’. For Christian faith, the ultimate truth and meaning of life is found not in a set of universal principles but in an individual person, situated in time and space and bounded by a particular set of principles, through whom the character and purpose of God are communicated<sup>31</sup>’.

Amongst the implications for Christian pastoral care of Jesus’ sacrificial death and resurrection triumph are most crucially both the powerful truth that God himself chose Jesus to experience on behalf of humanity the very depths of human suffering and also Jesus’ ultimate victory



over both sin and death, by which the faithful are offered the gifts of forgiveness, reconciliation with God and one another, and the promise of eternal life. As Pattison reminds us, for those themselves experiencing profound feelings of failure and defeat, there may well be particular strength to be gained from contemplation of Jesus' own failure on the cross<sup>32</sup>.

In conclusion, the distinctiveness of the Christian community's ministry through pastoral care, which has, as we have seen, many and varied aspects, comes from the uniqueness of the Christian Gospel of God's love for the world revealed in his Son Jesus Christ.



### **Implementation: The Mission Statement**

The production of our congregational mission statement through a process of discussion and consultation involving both congregations was itself an important aspect of our ongoing christological reflections and was relevant to the work of our pastoral team.

*As part of the worldwide church,  
we, the congregations of Culsalmond and Rayne and Daviot,  
seek to work together  
with the help of the Holy Spirit  
to know and witness to  
the love of God in Jesus Christ, our Lord.*

In these words we found a concise and Trinitarian expression of our purpose, together and as part of the worldwide church, to witness to the love of God, that love for humanity which God has revealed to humanity in and through the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ, and which he mysteriously yet powerfully enables us to experience through Jesus. The last phrase *our Lord* moves deliberately beyond the Jesus portrayed in the Gospels with the temporary limitations of his earthly ministry to Jesus, raised and exalted, 'far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come' (Eph1:21).

Since we intended to include the mission statement in future publicity and ongoing communication materials we recognised that it had the potential to encourage future reflection upon the identity and significance of Jesus Christ.



### **Implementation: The United Services**

Our six consecutive united services were designed to offer a public and easily accessible opportunity for reflection upon the identity and significance of Jesus. The services were planned by a specially established worship group whose discussions had an intrinsic worth as part of our corporate christological reflections and whose members played a vital part in encouraging others from a wide variety of age groups to participate and assist in the conduct of worship.

The services were focused on the Gospel according to Mark and took as their overall theme Jesus' question to Peter and the other disciples on the way to Caesarea Philippi (Mk 8:27-29), 'Jesus said to his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"' Endeavouring to provide a balanced view of Jesus and to include an adequate proportion of the material in Mark we chose the following inter-related themes for the first five services, *Jesus of Nazareth*, *Jesus the Teacher*, *Jesus the Christ*, *Jesus Christ Crucified*, *Jesus : Risen Lord*.

We were also however keen to make use of the insights of narrative criticism into the skill of Mark as narrator and communicator. In order to draw attention to Mark's internal message and to allow his narrative to speak for itself we sometimes enlisted a reader to read those parts of our teaching message which came directly from the Gospels. For the same purposes we also chose, for example in connection with the theme of *Jesus the Teacher*, to make use of a relatively large selection of Markan passages.

For the last of our united services, which included a celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion, and focused on the theme of discipleship, we returned to the encounter between Jesus and his

disciples on the way to Caesarea Philippi and applied Jesus' challenge directly to ourselves.

At the close of this service copies of the Gospel according to Mark were distributed in order to invite and assist further reading and reflection.



### **Implementation: The Pastoral Care Team**

It was recognised that the establishment of a team of pastoral visitors whose task it would be to supplement existing visits and pastoral care by minister and elders would provide a valuable means of enabling others to participate in our pastoral care and witness to God's love. We therefore paid careful attention to details regarding the future administration of the scheme and fully discussed vital issues such as confidentiality and communication.

In our gatherings for volunteer visitors there was however a particular emphasis upon the motivating factors behind Christian pastoral care. Through a number of Bible studies which, in the interests of breadth of understanding, focused upon material from Gospels other than Mark, those involved concluded that ultimately the nature and extent of our pastoral care is very much shaped by the way in which we respond to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?"



### **Evaluation**

The primary purpose of our project was to encourage and enable members and friends of the congregations of Culsalmond & Rayne and Daviot to review their understanding and experience of Jesus Christ and to explore the relevance of an understanding of the identity and significance of Christ for their lives and the life of both congregations. Due to the reflective nature of our objectives there are obvious challenges regarding their assessment and evaluation.

We can however be certain that my own thoughts regarding christology and my desire to enable and encourage reflection upon this and related topics in others were stimulated through my initial studies on the work

of John Dominic Crossan, Christology in Mark and the distinctive nature of Christian pastoral care. We can further be certain that opportunities for thought were provided and that at least some reflections took place during the discussions and planning of the three strands through which we pursued our aims, that is, the creation and launch of the congregations' mission statement, our series of united services and the establishment of our pastoral care team.

We also have direct evidence that at least two members of the congregation had been inspired by the project to read through Mark's Gospel with serious thought and have seen direct benefits in terms of our congregations' outreach to the communities in the increase in pastoral care through the ongoing work of our pastoral care volunteers.

Shortly after the completion of our project we also became aware of a number of significant by-products of which the most significant are the growth in friendships across congregational boundaries and the increased cooperation between our two congregations<sup>33</sup>.

We were delighted that in their evaluations of our project our local support committee concluded that they had 'all gained from the experience' (of the project) and trusted that they had become 'better servants of Christ<sup>34</sup>'. In conclusion we hope, in the words of our mission statement, that 'the congregations of Culsalmond and Rayne and Daviot' will continue 'to seek to work together' 'with the help of the Holy Spirit' 'to know and witness to the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord'.

<sup>1</sup> This is a rural linkage within the Presbytery of Gordon some twenty-five miles north west of Aberdeen.

<sup>2</sup> Most particularly as presented in *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant* (1991), London: Harper Collins, and *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (1994). Harper San Francisco.

<sup>3</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, xi.

<sup>4</sup> Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, xxviii.

<sup>5</sup> Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, xxxii.



- <sup>6</sup> Crossan, *A Revolutionary Biography*, 71.
- <sup>7</sup> Crossan, *A Revolutionary Biography*, 70.
- <sup>8</sup> Crossan, *A Revolutionary Biography*, 74.
- <sup>9</sup> For example, understanding Jesus' healing miracles wholly in a social and political sense. See also, Crossan, *Jesus : A Revolutionary Biography*, 82.
- <sup>10</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 145.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 165.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 169-170.
- <sup>21</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 197.
- <sup>22</sup> An example of this style may be found in Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 85, 'Let me explain...'
- <sup>23</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, xxxii.
- <sup>24</sup> C.E.B. Cranfield, *On Romans and Other New Testament Essays* (1998), London: Continuum, T & T Clark 137.
- <sup>25</sup> Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 163.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup> L.T. Johnson, *The Real Jesus ; The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1996). harper San Francisco, 49.
- <sup>28</sup> M. Bockmuehl, *This Jesus: Martyr, Lord, Messiah* (1994), London: Continuum, T&T Clark, Footnote 14.
- <sup>29</sup> P. 165.
- <sup>30</sup> J. Swinton, *Resurrecting the Person ; Friendship and the care of People with Mental Health Problems* (2000), Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 39.
- <sup>31</sup> P. 22 of C. Jones, "The good, the bad and theology" in *Tomorrow is Another Country: Education in a Postmodern World*, C. Jones, Church of England Board of Education, 1996, cited in D. Lyall, *Integrity of Pastoral Care* (2001), London: SPCK.