

The Son of Man: A Meditation upon Psalm 8

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Son of Man. Christ Himself used and loved this title above all others to express His work as Messiah and Redeemer, and His relationship to our human kind, to our history and to our purpose upon earth. It is a title whose full and thrilling depths are only now, after two thousand years, coming to be appreciated in Western theology. It is said to be a somewhat mysterious title, Messianic indeed, occurring in Daniel and Ezekiel especially, but rather rare. It is difficult therefore to see why it should so dominate the self-proclamation of Christ. There is good reason to challenge this assumption of obscurity and mystery if we read more deeply into those prophecies and psalms which speak of the Christ as the King of Israel.

The tradition of the Eastern Fathers of the Christian Church shows a much livelier understanding of the richness of that title and the wealth of doctrine it contains. From the time of Irenaeus onwards the Christology of the East is dominated by the vision of Christ common to St John the Evangelist and to St Paul, especially in the epistles to the Colossians and the Ephesians. Christ, the Eternal Word of the Father, holds the primacy over all things, over the invisible order and over the visible order, because *in Him* they were all decreed and created. In Him they all cohere together in unity like a great equation of life and being. Through Christ the Eternal Word they form one vast economy and communion of joy and praise: an economy coming from God to the angels, and then to man, and through man to the elements of matter, the world of the galaxies, and the universe around. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... All things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made.” (John 1:1,3)

The Divinisation of the Spiritual Creature

In this vision of Christ we are divinised and made co-sharers in the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4) as *humankind*—creations of matter and spirit—through the decree of the Incarnation, in exactly the same way as the angels of God are divinised by the communion with their totally spiritual natures of the knowledge of God and the love of God. The totality of God’s gift of being, God’s own spiritual being, is poured upon the angels directly: Pure Spirit upon pure spirits. There is no matter in between to hinder the direct work of God, so to say. Thus the angel is beatified into the order of the full and perfect possession of God. In the West we speak of this as the elevation into the ‘supernatural order’. The East speaks more beautifully and perhaps more accurately of a ‘divinisation’ of the creature, brought about through its creation by, and its communion with, the Word of God, the Logos, through Whom all things are made.

In the Eastern theology of Christ, and later in the Scotist school of the West, this theology of the *Eternal Word*, upon whose likeness all things are made and through whom all things are made, takes on a very profound beauty. For the angels of God are not divinised and beatified in the Logos by a decree of *redemption*, which is consequent upon a Fall in their nature by some sort of original sin. There was sin even in the angels, but those who sinned passed beyond the possibility of redemption into an eternal condemnation. (Just why redemption is not possible in the angelic nature we cannot now ponder.) Those pure spirits who are the blessed and holy angels of God are beatified, and the totality of their nature is made one in perfect communion with God, by their being created into this order. And they were created into this order because they were known and willed in the Word of God: that Word through whom was made *everything* that was made.

The Greek Fathers of the Church see the divinisation of the angel as following the gift of perfect and total 'sonship' of God in the Eternal Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, pre-existent before time and before any Incarnation in our order of reality. But they also see man as having in Christ the same perfection of sonship, in spite of the fact that our nature is compounded of matter and spirit, whilst in God there is no material energy at all. If the thought of the Greek Fathers is carried through logically, it seems to mean that *man's kind* is willed and decreed unto the beatific vision, unto the divinisation of both spirit and matter, in the Incarnation of the Son of God made the Son of Man; and this Incarnation must have been decreed before time and matter. This gives us a certain equality and parallelism with the angels of God, and makes sense of the creation of matter. For matter is not meaningless if it too can be brought near to the Divine through the flesh of the Word made Flesh.

This vision of Christ does seem to be the doctrine of the Gospel of St John (1:1-18), of St Paul in his epistles, especially to the Colossians (1:15-20) and the Ephesians (1:3-10), and of the letter to the Hebrews (1:1-4). The Greek Fathers are very fond of speaking of Christ as the *Universal Man*, in whom the whole creation is focussed, recapitulated, and centred in meaning. According to this vision of creation, the angels of God are created by the Father, through the *most pure spirit of the Word*, in the love of the Holy Spirit. It would mean that humankind is created by the Father, through the *Word made Flesh*, in the love of the same Holy Spirit. Thus the whole of our nature, the body as well as the soul, is 'taken up' into the divine or supernatural order of God's being in the Word made Flesh. The flesh is no longer an irrelevance in a creation otherwise wholly spiritual in order.

In this vision of Christ, the Fall and the decree of the redemption of man are not the primary motive of the Incarnation of God. It does follow, however, that if we were originally willed and loved in the Christ, God Incarnate, then we are *still* willed, wanted, and redeemed in Him after the incursion of original sin. And it follows that this redemption must take place in the very bosom of the Divine Being, in those relationships of the Persons of the Holy Trinity to each other, which define the being of God as Unity and Trinity. It cannot be meditated in this article, but this view of the meaning of the Incarnation will throw further light upon the whole meaning of Christ's sacrifice, and upon the nature of the *satisfaction* or *full communion of love*, which it restores for us and in us. There are exciting and beautiful depths here for theology to ponder and further develop.

The Living Image of God

When we say that God has made us to His own likeness, or in His own image, we can so easily miss a very profound point. We think perhaps of an image as light is reflected from an object, as an image is seen in a glass. Or we think of a likeness by comparison, the likeness of similarity. Thus we say to ourselves, "God has intellect and will, and He has made me with intellect and will ... That is what it means to say that I am made to His image." The *Penny Catechism* of my boyhood did not go any further when it said, "This likeness to God is chiefly in my soul."¹ In other words the body, matter, is something of a leftover, and if God had never intended to assume human kind apart from its fall into sin, you wonder why He made it sinless and called it into the order of divinisation at all! When in Rome years later one studied *De Verbo Incarnato* (Concerning the Word made Flesh) in Cardinal Billot in lovely Latin, neither His Eminence nor one's professors added anything intrinsic to the *Penny Catechism*.

Yet being made *to the likeness of God* is much more than a reflection of being or a comparison based on the analogy of a spiritual nature with the nature of God. For the *image*

¹ *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine*, Question 4.

of God and the likeness of God is *a living Person*. It is not an abstract relationship, that Image of God; it is the Eternal Word, the Logos, the Personal Content and Reflection of all that the Father has and is in God's own reality of nature. This is what is meant by saying that we are made to the image of God: we are made to the likeness of Christ, and made through Christ and by Christ, who is that *Image consubstantial with the Father* through whom were made not only the angels, nor just ourselves, but *everything* that was made. How much more magnificently this is true if the material in man is made and decreed in the likeness of Christ as *Son of Man* as well as Son of God. Then Christ is King of all creation by right of being, by right of perfection in every sphere, and not simply by right of redemption from sin, which was an evil, a disfigurement of God's good creation, and which God can indeed redeem but never intrinsically will.

If this vision of our creation and status is true, then, in the very decree of the supernatural order—the order of the divinisation of the creature in the knowledge and love which exists between the Persons of the Holy Trinity—the Father has crowned humankind with glory and honour in the Christ, our Prototype, the *Son of Man*. Through Christ God has made us indeed “just a little less than the angels” (Ps 8:5) in order of being and nature. In our solidarity with Christ, the origin of our stock, He has set upon our heads a crown of precious stones. We reign with Christ because we are membered into His Kingship, first by creation in original holiness, and now, in the order of redemption, by that holiness restored. We are a holy people because we prophesy or proclaim Him and sing His praise. We are a royal priesthood because we are membered into Him, the source and head of our kind. So membered we share through Him, as Son of God and Son of Man, one mediation, one communion of being, and one communion of reparation of the whole order of the material creation in Him and with Him. In the words of St Paul,

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” (Rom 8:22-23)

A Psalm Quoted by Christ Himself

The thought came to mind that this theme of man's creation and glorification in Christ, by the gift of being created in the Son of God made Son of Man, might well be adumbrated more than is commonly taught in Psalm 8.

After all, this psalm was quoted by Christ against the sneering rejection of the chief priests and the scribes at the time of His entry into Jerusalem and cleansing of the Temple (Matt 21:16). This was indeed the solemn entry of Jesus as Messiah into His own city, the city of the Messianic expectation. Its very name means ‘vision of peace’, and it was founded to be fulfilled in the Prince of Peace. In the teaching of St John in his Gospel, its very Temple foretold and represented the body of the Christ: “Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” (John 2:19) All the solemn feasts celebrated there, even the details of the liturgy itself, prophesied by types the Person of the Christ and the work of the Christ for mankind. The entry into Jerusalem then, on Palm Sunday, was a momentous event; and in evaluating one's Christology it remains a momentous event. The striking meaning of Christ's reply to the authorities when they say “Teacher, rebuke your disciples” (Luke 19:39) has already been briefly indicated elsewhere:² Christ clearly implies that His entry into Jerusalem is the solemn liturgical fulfilment of the text. He also makes the psalm mean that God, in the Person of Christ, is so mindful of the son of man, that He Himself *visits* humankind as *Son of*

² E. Holloway, *Catholicism: A New Synthesis*, Faith-Keyway, second edition 1976, p. 239.

Man, and that as this He was the Expectation of all the material creation. If the children acclaiming Him along the way had held their peace, then inanimate nature, nature which had never known sin, would recognise its God and its Saviour, the reason for its very creation, and “the very stones would cry out”. (Luke 19:40)

The Translation of the Psalm

One found, on a little study, that the text is startlingly clear and thrilling in its magnificence. And let us bear in mind that, whatever the details, the basic exegesis of this psalm is given to us by Christ Himself. This not only affirms its prophetic meaning; it also indirectly educates us in the manner of scriptural exegesis itself—an education which will throw into clear relief the miserable inadequacies of most modern scriptural exegesis. For most modern exegetes, even those who are or who want to be fully orthodox and loyal to the mind and Magisterium of the Church, are so blinkered by the secularist concepts behind modern biblical translation that they have emptied out the claims of prophecy to contain the meaning intended by God. That meaning of God, living in the Church’s revealed Tradition, *gives us the translation* to be understood, as well as the principal theological meaning. God is, begging everybody’s pardon, in spite of being terribly old and out of date, and lacking a decent degree in scripture studies, still the main author of the text and the only determinant of its actual meaning and relevance.

The text one chose is the Vatican edition of the Greek Septuagint. This text, going back to 250 BC, must be judged of very respectable antiquity. While the text used in our modern Bibles seems to differ marginally from the Septuagint, it is the Septuagint which is the text of the Church’s liturgy and doctrinal development, from the beginning of her history to the latest official revisions of, say, the Roman Divine Office. It is also the text which appears most naturally to imply the interpretation Christ puts upon Psalm 8. So we can safely believe the Holy Spirit to have indicated that we will find the full, developmental meaning of this psalm in our *textus receptus* in the Roman edition of the Septuagint Greek.

The writer takes responsibility for the translation given, after comparing some eight English translations, ancient and modern, and doing a little work of his own. It reads:

1. Oh Yahweh, our King,
How wonderful is Your name in all the earth!

Above the high heavens is Your majesty exalted.
2. Out of the mouths of babes, sucklings at the breast,
You have restored Your praise, and perfected it beyond measure
To confound Your enemies,
Thus You make an end of rebellion and baleful vengeance.
3. When I look upon the heavens, the work of Your hands,
The moon and the stars which You have set in order,
4. What is man’s kind that You should be mindful of him,
The Son of Man that, Shepherd and King, You should visit him?
5. For You have lessened Him only a little less than Your angels,
You have crowned his head with glory and with honour:
6. Lord, You have placed him over the works of Your hands.

You have made all things subject beneath his feet,

7. All sheep and cattle, wild things that roam the fields,
8. The birds of the air, the fishes of the sea,
All life that moves along the highroads of the sea.
9. Oh Yahweh our King,
How wonderful is Your name in all the earth!

Verse 2: Salvation and Redemption in Christ

The first striking point one notices is that Yahweh, King of Israel, brings forth perfect praise against the faces of His enemies. This exactly parallels the dramatic confrontation of Jesus Christ and the chief priests, when He, Priest-King of the new order of Melchizedek, comes as the Heir of the Ages to lay claim to His own. It is Christ who points out this text as fulfilled in Himself in this confrontation. It also parallels His own exclamation: “I thank you Father ... that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.” (Matt 11:25-26)

One could also add that the verb used in this phrase (*kateptiso*) means in fact both to repair what is crumbled and also to furnish completely or to the fullest measure. It does not seem exaggerated then to include both senses: to repair the glory of God repudiated by the power of sin in Christ’s enemies, and also to perfect it beyond measure. Thus the ideas of both redemption and salvation are found in the psalm.

One must make the point too that the word often translated as “destroy” (*katalusai*) means really to dissolve utterly. The sense can well be “in order to make an end of all enmity and the vengeance due”. While most commentators seem to make this mean “in order to wipe out hostility and utterly defeat baleful enemies seeking vengeance against the Christ”, it could also mean the working of a perfect redemption, wiping out (in the phrase of St Paul) “the handwriting which was against us” (cf. Col 2:14, Douay translation) and, in that perfection of salvation, making an end of the vengeance due from God upon all power of sin and hostility against His Kingship. At least one does not see why not from the text—and this is just what Christ as Redeemer has done for us.

Verse 4: The Visitation of God

Much more exciting is the phrase, “What is man’s kind that You should be mindful of him, the Son of Man that You should visit him?” In Greek the final verb is *episkeptei*; and while it does mean ‘to care for’, it means to care for as one having an office of care, and is often used in the sense of ‘to visit’, as a king visits or as a bishop makes a visitation. The full and surely stupendous significance of this verb, and one totally overlooked by all the modern translators and commentators, is that this word is the root of the noun *episkopos* (bishop), as any good lexicon announces quite casually. This type of *caring* is the whole heart of the ministry of the New Testament, and this name is given to its priest-overseers, the *bishops* of the New Testament.

It is in this sense, then, that Yahweh *visits* the kind or nature of man, visits humankind and, as Son of God and Son of Man, comes as Priest, Prophet and King to claim His own and to fulfil His own. If we want to know the godly, divine and prophetic sense of this line, we must observe that the psalm is addressed to Yahweh as Universal King. The New English Bible for instance translates the first line as, “Oh Lord, our Sovereign”. It does not make sense to understand this psalm simply as treating of the glory of mankind’s *nature*, set over the material creation by virtue of his intellect and spiritual nature, made in the general likeness of God. Even in the average modern translation—like the Jerusalem version for

instance, which translates, “the son of man that You should care for him”—Yahweh is caring and looking after in some way, not simply granting a dignity of status in creation.

But beyond this blinkered anaemia in translating is the thrilling sense of *episkeptei*: that Yahweh comes as Priest, Prophet and King, in a word as the *Messiah*, and comes on a visitation of His People. This is an echo of St John’s Gospel, that “He came to His own home (*eis ta idia*), and His own people received Him not.” (John 1:11) And note that the earlier passage, in which the same Lord utterly destroys the enemy and the avenger, also has overtones of St John’s sequel, “But to all who received Him ... He gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12), which is the setting aside of enmity between God and men, and the stilling of all vengeance towards men of goodwill. It also, of course, most perfectly foreshows the prophetic, spiritual and historical meaning of the entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and the final convulsion of rejection by the authorities which precipitated Christ’s seizure, trial and crucifixion. One can have little doubt that this psalm also prefigures what we call ‘the end of the world’: a manifestation given to men, its rejection, and the final persecution and crucifixion of the Church, with what we name the ‘second coming’ as the final end of the history of man and of the Church. But that is quite another story, not now to be followed through.

One cannot avoid a sense of anger at the failure of the modern translators to see that the old and traditional sense of *visit* should have been retained in this psalm. Why, not only do the ordinary Greek lexicons give this sense, but one of them at least even indicates that it has a religious sense and meaning, as in the phrase ‘unvisited by dreams’ of a seer rejected by the gods! But what does that matter, when the very verb used in the Greek is the root of that sense of *episcopate* which is at the heart of the very Priesthood of Christ, as a new and messianic priesthood of the order of Melchizedek, setting aside in fulfilling the old priesthood of Aaron? This meaning of *episcopate* defines the very constitution of the Church in this the final and messianic age. It defines the fact and meaning of the Eucharist. It defines above all the salvation and redemption of the Christ, *and the Magisterium He exercises over mankind*. It defines also that Magisterium, ministerial but actual and divinely protected, of the episcopate of the Church and the episcopal office of that bishop who is, as it were, the ‘re-incarnation’ of Peter in the Church in every age.

There is no way one can translate scripture accurately *without* reference to the former and the latter history of the Church. The history of the Church is the history of Jesus Christ, the Lord of History. In setting His own finger as pointer to this psalm and its meaning, what a wealth of wonder and prophecy fulfilled in the past and in the *future of His Church* has He revealed! You cannot rightly understand the meaning of scripture unless you bear in mind *always* that the transcendent God is the principal author of the Holy Writ, and His meanings are evinced in her past, her present, and her developmental life among mankind.

Verse 5: The ‘Sacred Head’ of Christ

The sense of this psalm too, as it applies to the Christ decreed before time to become Incarnate, must mean that, in deciding to visit man’s stock as God and Shepherd and King, Yahweh has given man an equality of order with the angels. The angels are given the totality of God totally, into all their being, and this has supernaturalised or divinised them in their being and order. In the decree to visit man’s kind as Son of God and Son of Man, Yahweh has decreed our creation into the same supernatural order through the Word made Flesh. In this parallelism with the angels, God has “made us in creation only a little less in nature than the angels of God”. This line refers primarily to *the Christ*, not primarily to man as the rational creature. It means that *in the Christ*, as Son of God and Son of Man, we are crowned with glory and with honour, for we share in His Kingship and His Sonship of God. It is

human nature and its status which is crowned in the visiting of flesh and blood in the Son of Man. No wonder Jesus Christ so loved and so used this title. It says all that He is and works and means to us until now. It says all that He is in His priests, His *episkopoi*, even until now, as well as in the membering into Himself of all His faithful people in a royal priesthood of mediation for all mankind.

Finally, may one add one last thought? Inasmuch as we may read first and primarily of Christ, and not of ourselves as men, “you have set upon His head a crown of precious stones”, we can and we ought to pay reverence to the *Sacred Head of Christ* as the seat of all wisdom, human and divine, natural and revealed. One thinks that the humble Anglo-Irish schoolteacher, Teresa Higginson, was right about this, and that her message has a relevance to the Church in this age, and to our own hopes for the reunion of faith between England and the Holy See of Rome. It is a thought and a devotion which parallels the Sacred Heart of Jesus as the seat of an infinite, compassionate and ever-redemptive love. If the Church comes to see the significance of this revelation of the Sacred Head of Christ, perhaps it will be better to focus it through the majesty, the power, the beauty and the integrity of the *face* of Jesus in the crowned head of Christ the King.

Perhaps also it will bring home to many the majesty of a vision of Christ in which this Sacred Head of Christ also enfleshes in human nature the Image of the Sonship of God, the Image of the Eternal Word, through whom all things were made and who holds the primacy in all creation. This title means that all fullness dwells in Christ most literally and quite apart from sin; it means that after sin, through His passion, death and Resurrection, all fullness of life restored dwells in Christ in surpassing measure. Literally, and without stint, in all things Christ holds the primacy of creation and of redemption and of all Magisterium in heaven and on earth, over the invisible order and over the visible order. (Cf. Col 1:15-20)

Oh the poverty and the wretchedness of the Bultmannite mind, even as scholarship! We who are the little ones of Christ, the unlearned rabble that knows not the law (cf. John 7:49), we give thanks to Him who is the source of our life, its status and its redemption. We give thanks to Him who has crowned us in Himself with glory and honour, and manifested to us the truths that He has hidden from the sophisticated and the arrogant (cf. Matt 11:25), with the joys of sonship and daughterhood in the beatitude they contain and in our communion with Him!