

# THE FUTURE OF JESUS CHRIST (Finlayson Memorial Lecture 1998)

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## 1. The Strange Absence of the Parousia from Christology

My title is a phrase used by (among others<sup>1</sup>) Jürgen Moltmann in his *Theology of Hope* (see the title of chapter III). In a striking definition of eschatology, Moltmann wrote that, 'Christian eschatology does not speak of the future as such.... Christian eschatology speaks of Jesus Christ and his future.'<sup>2</sup> This is a statement about eschatology rather than Christology, but, since for Moltmann not only must eschatology be christological but also Christology must be eschatological, it is not surprising to find a substantial treatment of the parousia in his book on Christology, *The Way of Jesus Christ*.<sup>3</sup> But Moltmann is very unusual in this. The parousia is ignored or barely mentioned in most books on Christology.<sup>4</sup> Surprisingly, perhaps, this is true despite the strong sense of the eschatological nature of Jesus' preaching of the kingdom and his resurrection which much Christology in this century has recovered. It is the risen Christ, not the coming Christ, who dominates the eschatological perspective of modern Christology. If we suppose that the neglect of the parousia in Christology results from the persistent influence of traditional divisions between theological topics and turn to studies of eschatology for reflection on the parousia, the picture is not much improved. With notable exceptions (I think especially of G. C. Berkouwer<sup>5</sup> and Wolfhart Pannenberg<sup>6</sup>) treatments of eschatology tend to treat the parousia simply as emblematic

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. S. H. Travis, *Christian Hope and the Future of Man* (Leicester, 1980), ch. 5.

<sup>2</sup> J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (tr. J. W. Leitch; London, 1967), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> J. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ* (tr. M. Kohl; London, 1990), ch. 7.

<sup>4</sup> One exception is the now forgotten but excellent essay by H. Frick, 'The Hidden Glory of Christ and its Coming Manifestation', in G. K. A. Bell and A. Deissmann, *Mysterium Christi* (London, 1930), pp. 245-73.

<sup>5</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (tr. J. Van Oosterom; Grand Rapids, 1972), especially ch. 5.

<sup>6</sup> W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (tr. G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids, Edinburgh, 1998), pp. 608-30.

of the end of history and give it little attention in itself, concentrating instead on such end-time topics as resurrection and judgement. A properly christological interest in the parousia, that is, a consideration of the parousia with respect to what it says about Jesus Christ, is as rare in eschatology as it is in Christology.

I doubt that there is a single explanation for this strange absence of the parousia from Christology. The reasons may be, in part at least, as follows. Classical Christology focused in a rather static manner on the constitution of the God-man as established by the act of incarnation. This required one to think backwards to the pre-existence of the Logos but not forwards to the future of Jesus Christ. Insofar as Christology in the modern period has continued the concerns of classical Christology, even if in new forms such as kenoticism, the issue has been how to conceive of incarnation in a way that similarly has focused on pre-existence and incarnation as such (How could God become human? How can divinity and humanity be united in the one Christ?). It is significant that in such discussions, which bring to Christology a particularly modern sense of the thoroughly human nature of Jesus' human experience, it is the humanity of Jesus in his earthly and mortal life that is at stake, not the humanity of the risen, exalted and coming Christ. Kenoticism, indeed, makes the latter peculiarly difficult to conceive, a problem sometimes rightly alleged in criticism of kenotic theories. But even when the need to understand the incarnation in a way that does justice to the differences between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus has been recognized, the interest has been merely in the contrast between these two states: humiliation and exaltation. The state of exaltation itself is perceived statically, with the result that the parousia raises no questions not already raised by exaltation as such.

Looking more broadly at the context of Christology in the modern period, there are two very relevant features, both concerned with history. One is the rise of the modern understanding of history in the sense of the scientific study of the past, which has put the question of the historical Jesus and relationship of the historical Jesus to the Christ of faith in the dominant position in much modern Christology. This is a further reinforcement of the tendency for Christology to look backwards at the expense of looking forwards.

The other factor is the rise of the modern understanding of history in the sense of the modern idea of historical progress, to which Christian theological thought about history and eschatology has often more or less assimilated itself. Here the attention certainly turned towards the future in the sense of Enlightenment optimism about the historical future that arises out of the present. But this has encouraged the reduction of the parousia to a symbol of the utopian goal towards which human history, under the influence of the gospel and the Spirit, is evolving. What is here found

problematic in and therefore removed from the traditional understanding of the parousia is twofold: both the traditional reference to the future coming of the human individual Jesus of Nazareth and also the positing of a discontinuity between the course of history and the end which God gives to the world in the parousia. In a modern progressivist understanding, the goal of history is wholly continuous with the steadily increasing advance of the kingdom of God within history, and is related to Jesus only in the sense that this utopian goal is envisaged as a fully Christlike human society. Therefore, instead of the biblical parousia images of Jesus coming from heaven, which suggest a transcendent rupture of the course of history, in which the human figure of Jesus is central, the Pauline images of the body of Christ and being 'in Christ' are sometimes considered more helpful and taken to depict, not only the influence of the Spirit of Christ in the church now, but also the progressive course of history towards some kind of christification of the world. Christ here becomes, in effect, some kind of principle or form of relationship to God, exemplified in the historical Jesus and propagated through his historical influence in the church, but entirely unrelated to the 'post-existent' Christ, as Geoffrey Lampe labels the biblical picture of the risen, ascended and coming Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Lampe's own reductionist Christology dispenses with both the really 'pre-existent' and the really 'post-existent' Christ, arguing that all that matters in the traditional view of 'post-existence' can be preserved by speaking of the presence and activity of the Spirit of God who was in Jesus. Lampe helpfully illustrates how a thorough-going reconception of Christianity in terms of the historical progressivism of the modern age eliminates not only the future of Jesus Christ but also the presence of Jesus Christ, not only the parousia but also the resurrection and the ascension, as ways of speaking of the real relationship between the eternally living human person Jesus Christ and this world. This is in reality a new kind of docetism: a dissolution of the human Jesus himself into divine immanence in history.

The modern theological tendency to dispense with the parousia thus seems to me to have much to do with an inability to conceive of the human individual Jesus in an active role in relation to this world and its future and also to the enormous influence of the Enlightenment doctrine of immanent historical progress towards utopia. These issues seem to me to go much deeper than the pseudo-scientific arguments with which Bultmann, in oft-quoted remarks, dismissed the parousia as belonging to a pre-scientific worldview and as in any case disproved by the failure of the early church's expectation of the parousia in the near future. It has become clear that, in the following attempt to understand the parousia as

<sup>7</sup> G. W. H. Lampe, *God as Spirit* (Oxford, 1977), esp. ch. 6.

an aspect of Christology, two important aspects of our task will be to elucidate the sense in which Jesus as a human individual can play the role the biblical image of the parousia assigns him and to define the sense in which the parousia represents something qualitatively different from the merely continuous development of present.

## 2. The Future of Narrative Christology

In the trinitarian structure of the creeds of the ancient church, such as the two which are still in use, the Apostles' and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan, the second credal article always takes the form of the story of Jesus. The christological reflection on Jesus' relation to God, which is characteristic of the eastern creeds and appears as expressing Nicene orthodoxy in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, is placed within this narrative of Jesus and serves to interpret it. Moreover, the narrative looks to the future of Jesus as well as recounting his past. According to the Apostles' Creed, 'he will come again to judge the living and the dead', to which the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed adds that 'his kingdom will have no end'.

Thus implicitly, in the form of its creeds, the early church recognized that the identity of Jesus is a narrative identity, an identity which can only be adequately rendered by telling the story in which his identity takes place. The conceptual tools with which the Fathers could develop Christology did not easily lend themselves to expressing such a narrative understanding of identity. The Fathers give the impression that Christological definition is in principle separable from the narrative, even though it is derived from the narrative and is in turn intended to enable an appropriate reading of the narrative. We can perhaps go further in asserting that the story of Jesus is integral to his identity.

However, recent examples of narrative Christology<sup>8</sup> seem to give no more place to the parousia than other forms of Christology. Of course, the parousia cannot be narrated in the same way as the past history of Jesus. The narratives of it in, for example, 1 Thessalonians 4 and Revelation 19 are not historiography, as the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion, for example, are. This is for two reasons: the parousia is not only a still future event, but also the event which will end history and is therefore intrinsically transcendent of history. For both reasons it lacks the contingent and concrete actuality of narrated history (even the theologically interpreted history in the Gospels) and can be narrated only in symbols that convey its essential meaning. Its images depict only what, in the purpose of God, must be so, nothing of what, through the contingencies of history, may or may not be so.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., most recently, M. L. Cook, *Christology as Narrative Quest* (Collegetown, MN, 1997).

Nevertheless, the parousia is the end of the story which must be in some sense anticipated and articulated for the sake of the meaning of the rest of the story. The story the Gospels tell is, by their own testimony, an unfinished story, open not only to the history of the church as its continuation but also to this projected conclusion, the parousia, which the Gospels are able to narrate in the form of prophecies by Jesus. (Rarely noticed is the fact that the last words attributed to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, according to the best text of 21:23, are the words 'until I come' – a fact the more remarkable in that this Gospel's eschatology is usually thought to be overwhelmingly realised.) The parousia is the narrative prospection of Jesus' identity, as the Gospel histories are its narrative retrospection.

It is by no means unusual for narratives to include projects, expectations and anticipations which reach forward beyond the time frame of the narrative itself, but in this case, the story of Jesus, there is a unique aspect to its prospection. The parousia concludes not only the story of Jesus but also the story of the whole world. Though the rest of Jesus' story is implicitly related to the whole world, only the parousia makes clear its unique character as a story which will finally include the whole history of the world in its own conclusion. This is why the parousia is essential to Jesus' identity. It defines him as the one human being whose story will finally prove to be identical with the story of the whole world. In New Testament terminology, it defines his identity as that of the Messiah. Apart from the parousia he could not be called Christ in the New Testament meaning of the word.

### **3. Now and Then**

In the context of most christological work, this sub-heading would naturally be understood to refer to the 'then' of the pre-Easter Jesus and the 'now' of the exalted Christ in the present. I want to ask if there is not as important a qualitative difference between the 'now' of the exalted Christ and the future 'then' of the coming Christ. To put the question differently: is the parousia adequately understood as the completion of historical process, the outcome of some kind of incremental process of immanent divine activity in the world, such as theological versions of modern progressivism have so often assumed, or does it represent something really new, something quite different from what will have happened hitherto in the history of the world, an event in which Jesus himself relates in some important sense differently to the world? This is a critical question not only with regard to liberal theologies assimilated to modern secular progressivism, but also in respect of the tendency in Karl Barth and others to reduce the parousia to an unveiling of what is already true, a revelation of what has already been accomplished in the past

history of Jesus, new only in the sense that this is now made unequivocally known to all.<sup>9</sup>

This latter view could be supported by appeal to the way the New Testament can speak of the parousia as the 'unveiling' (or revelation: *apokalupsis*)<sup>10</sup> of Christ or his 'appearance' (*epiphaneia*).<sup>11</sup> Corresponding verbs are also used.<sup>12</sup> But in that case we must also notice that the New Testament also, and most often, refers to the parousia by the use of the verb 'to come' (*erchomai*) and by the word *parousia* itself,<sup>13</sup> which in this context must mean not merely 'presence,' but 'arrival'. In many of the texts what will be 'seen' at the parousia is precisely Jesus 'coming' from heaven.<sup>14</sup> In these usages we have, in fact, three forms of contrast between now and then: the Jesus who is now not seen will appear or be seen; the Jesus who is now hidden will be revealed; the Jesus who is now absent will come.

In the last case, we should not be troubled by the implication that Jesus is presently absent, as though this were in contradiction with the various ways in which the New Testament understands him to be present with his people now, including Jesus' promise, at the end of Matthew's Gospel, to be with his disciples until the end of the age. Presence can take many different forms and is therefore compatible with forms of absence.<sup>15</sup> When I speak to someone on the telephone I am in one sense present to them by means of my voice conveyed by the telephone line, while also being in another sense absent. To collapse the parousia into Christ's presence with us already is to evade the essential question of the form and purpose of his presence to his people and to the world in each case. From the way the New Testament texts speak of Jesus' coming at the end it is clear that it is a coming to do things that he has not done hitherto: to save (in the sense of bringing believers into their final destiny in resurrection), to eliminate

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<sup>9</sup> For a brief account of Karl Barth's understanding of the parousia, see J. Thompson, *Christ in Perspective* (Edinburgh, 1978), ch. 10: and for criticism, see Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, p. 318.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Cor. 1:7; 2 Thes. 1:7; 1 Pet. 4:13.

<sup>11</sup> 2 Thes. 2:8; 1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 4:1, 8; Tit. 2:13.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. *apokalupto*: Luke 7:30; 2 Thes. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:13; *phaneroo*: Col. 3:4; 1 Pet. 5:4; 1 John 2:2, 3:2; *opthesomai*: Heb. 9:28.

<sup>13</sup> Matt. 24:3, 27, 37, 39; 1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thes. 2:19, 3:13, 4:15, 5:23, 2 Thes. 2:1, 8; James 5:7, 8; 2 Pet. 1:16, 3:4; 1 John 2:28.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Matt. 16:28, 24:30, 26:64; Mark 13:26, 14:62; Luke 21:27; Rev. 1:7.

<sup>15</sup> See the helpful discussion of presence as a christological category in G. O'Collins, *Christology* (Oxford, 1995), ch. 14, which, however, lacks any discussion of the parousia!

the powers of evil from the world, and, most often in the texts, to judge the living and the dead.<sup>16</sup>

While the language of coming makes it especially clear that the parousia brings not just more of the same, but something new, we should not miss the fact that the language of hiddenness and manifestation or revelation also makes this point in its own way. What is hidden now is Jesus' heavenly glory, his lordship over the whole world which his sitting on God's heavenly throne at God's right hand portrays, and also his fellowship with his people in which their true nature as his people is hidden. This present hiddenness of Jesus' rule explains why, for example, in the book of Revelation the beast's power can appear godlike and invincible, triumphant over the Christians whom he puts to death. The real truth of things from God's perspective – for example, that the martyrs, by their witness to the truth even to the point of death, are the real victors – breaks through to those who have eyes to see, but it is only at the parousia that it finally prevails as the truth which all must acknowledge. This revelation is more than the unveiling of what is already true, though it is that, because the unveiling itself makes a difference: no longer can anyone pretend or be deceived, those who wield power by deceit can do so no longer, all illusions and delusions must perish before the truth of God and all who insist on clinging to them must perish also. It is in this sense that Jesus, though seated on the throne of the universe, has not yet brought all things into subjection to God. The revelation of his lordship will also be its final implementation.

From this point of view, the parousia is the event which concludes history by making the final truth of all things manifest to all. This is why the language of 'revealing' and 'appearing' is used in the texts not only of Jesus, whose true relationship to the world is made evident to all, but also of all that his judgement of every person who has ever lived will bring to light (1 Cor. 4:5). There is nothing hidden that will not be uncovered (Matt. 10:26). The full and final truth of each person's life will be made known, not least to that person. Similarly, the language of 'revealing' and 'appearing' is used of the final destiny of those who believe in Jesus, 'a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time' (1 Pet. 1:5<sup>17</sup>). The parousia is that revelation of all that is now hidden, the disclosure of the full and final truth of all who have lived and all that has happened, that determines the form in which this present creation can be taken, as new creation, into eternity. Thus in the parousia, both as coming and as unveiling, something happens which, in relation to the world as it is now, will be both new and

<sup>16</sup> The phrase 'to judge the living and the dead' is stereotyped: Acts 10:42; 1 Pet. 4:5. Cf. also Acts 17:32; 2 Cor. 5:10; James 5:9; Rev. 19:11.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Rom. 8:19; Col. 3:4; 1 John 3:2.

conclusive. As the New Testament understands it, the parousia cannot be taken as a symbol merely of the outcome of history that history itself will provide.

#### **4. Jesus' Human Identity in Universal Relatedness**

In this section and the next, I shall consider the parousia in relation to Jesus' human identity and to his divine identity respectively. This is not intended as some kind of Nestorian division of the one Christ, but simply as a matter of two perspectives on the one Jesus Christ. Jesus, as I understand Christology, is God's human identity. He is both God's *truly human* identity and *truly God's* human identity. Since this is a narrative identity, it should be possible to look at the parousia as the end of his story from both of these perspectives.

Christology involves the assertion of Jesus' universal relatedness. In the history of Christology a variety of concepts have been used to express this: representativeness, substitution, incorporation and participation, universal humanity, and others. All these concepts are attempts to express the fundamental conviction that this one human individual Jesus is of decisive significance for all other human persons, whether they are yet aware of it or not. Other human individuals, of course, have exercised very extensive historical influence, and in some cases, such as the unknown people who first discovered how to make fire or who invented the wheel, it might be said that they have made a difference to the lives of virtually all subsequent human beings. But the Christian claim about Jesus asserts something more than an historical impact of this kind. The claim is that in some way Jesus is intrinsically – in his very identity – related to each and every other human being.

How can this be said of a human individual? Some of the christological concepts I mentioned in fact attempt to conceptualize Jesus' universal relatedness by denying him human individuality. The attempt is made to view his humanity as some kind of supra-individuality in which others are included. Or his humanity is in effect dissolved in the universal presence of God. Unless we are prepared to deny individuality to all humans in the resurrection, a position surely contradictory of the very notion of resurrection, such views must be considered docetic. They fail to preserve the true humanity of Jesus, human (as the Fathers said) in every respect as we are, and no less truly human in his risen and exalted humanity than in his earthly and mortal humanity. In not maintaining the true humanity of the risen and coming Jesus, such interpretations contradict the New Testament principle that our eternal destiny is to be like him.

I suggest that a more satisfactory approach is by means of the only way in which human individuals can transcend their individuality without losing it: that is, in relationships. Human individuality is also relationality.



There are individuals only in relationships – with other humans, with God, and with the non-human creation. Such relationships are integral to the narratives in which human identity is found. We are who we are in our relationships with others and in the story of our relationships with others.

In Jesus' case – and focusing for the purpose of our argument now only on his relationships with other humans – his human individuality is unique in its *universal* relatedness. He is the one human being who is intrinsically related to each and every other. How does this universal relatedness take place narratively? It is not constituted solely by his incarnation as human, but by the particular course of his human story. We can say that in his earthly life and death Jesus practised loving identification with others. In his ministry he identified in love with people of all sorts and conditions, excluding no one, and finally in going to the cross he identified himself with the human condition of all people in its worst extremities: its sinfulness, suffering, abandonment and death. Only because Jesus died in loving identification with all could his resurrection be on behalf of all, opening up for all the way to life with God beyond death. Thus in his life, death and resurrection, the exalted Christ has established his identity as one of open identification with others, open in principle and potential to all who will identify with him in faith. Until the parousia his identification with all remains open to all. This means that, insofar as his human identity is constituted by his universal relatedness, it is open to all that takes place in relation to him. His narrative identity cannot be complete until every human story with which he has identified himself has turned out as it will have done at the end. The parousia as the completion of his own identity, as revelatory of the final truth of his loving identification with all, will be also the completion of the identity of all others. Their identity, the truth of their whole lives brought to light at the end, will be defined either by his loving identification with them or by their refusal to let it be so defined. For those who have sought their own identity in his identification with them, his parousia will be the revelation at once of who he finally is and of who they themselves finally are: 'your life is hidden in Christ with God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory' (Col. 3:3-4; cf. 1 John 3:2).

Thus Jesus' identity at the end is inclusive of others, but not in a way that dissolves his properly human individuality. As the one who has identified in love with all other humans in their own stories, his story finally includes also theirs. Since his loving identification with them is prevenient but not preemptive, that is, it is open to all but actualized only in the living of their own lives, his own identity as the one human whose identity is found in the story of his relatedness to all others remains to that extent open until his parousia.

We may perhaps take a little further this principle that Jesus' own identity is open to the future because it includes his relationships to all things (and not only to all people). We should be more cautious than many of us have been in speaking of the finality of Christ with reference to the Gospel story of his life, death and resurrection. His story will not be complete until his parousia. I would say that Jesus in his history, Jesus of Nazareth crucified and risen, is definitive for our knowledge of who God is, of who we are in relation to God, of who Jesus is in relation to God and to us and to all things. It is definitive, in the sense that anything else must be consistent with this, but not final, in the sense that there is nothing else to be known. Since Jesus' identity is in universal relatedness, Christian understanding and experience are not to be focused on Jesus to the exclusion of all else, but on Jesus in his relatedness to everything else. We shall know Jesus better as we see everything we can know or experience in its relatedness to him, just as we shall know and experience everything more truly as we see it in its relatedness to Jesus. To put the issue in relation to our theological work, neither the Bible nor Jesus in himself contains all the data of theology; rather Jesus in his relatedness to all human knowledge and experience constitutes the potentially inexhaustible data of Christian theology and by the same token requires the necessary provisionality of its conclusions. Only the parousia will reveal all things in their final truth as they appear in their relationships to Jesus and only the parousia will reveal Jesus himself in the final truth of his identity in universal relatedness.

### **5. Jesus' Divine Identity in Universal Lordship**

The meaning of incarnation – what it really means that Jesus is God's human identity – appears most clearly in the way the New Testament tells and interprets the story of Jesus in two very remarkable ways. First, Jesus' loving identification as one human being with others, taken to the depths of degradation and abandonment on the cross, is *God's* loving identification with all people. Secondly, God's universal sovereignty over his whole creation, God's uniquely divine relationship to the world, is exercised by the *human* Jesus, exalted to God's heavenly throne. It may not be too much to say that all of New Testament theology consists in the understanding of each of these two new theological truths and of the relationship between them.

In biblical thought it is intrinsic to God's identity, what distinguishes him as the only true God from all other reality which is not God, that he is the sole Creator of all things and the sole Lord over all things. But even God's identity for us is, biblically speaking, a narrative identity yet to be completed. Since his ultimate sovereignty coexists now with much in the world that opposes his will and contradicts the destiny he intends for his creation – failure and evil, suffering and death – God's rule remains to be

achieved, in the sense of implemented in the overcoming of all evil and the redemption of the world from nothingness. God's identity as the one true God of all is at stake in the achievement of his eschatological kingdom. He will prove himself God in the overcoming of all evil and in the acknowledgement of his deity by all creation. If it is in Jesus that God's sovereignty comes to universal effect and universal acknowledgement, which is what the New Testament writers intended when they depicted his enthronement and parousia, then Jesus' own story belongs to the narrative identity of God himself.

This is why a great deal of what is said about the parousia in the New Testament echoes, with verbal allusions, Old Testament prophetic expectations of God's demonstration of his deity in a conclusive act of judgement and salvation. Many of these Old Testament texts are those which speak of God's 'coming' to implement his rule in judgement and/or salvation: hence the frequency with which the New Testament speaks of the parousia as Jesus' coming. Most of these Old Testament texts speak of God's 'coming'; and even more of them speak in some way of God's action, not through the agency of a messianic or other non-divine figure, but simply as God's own action.<sup>18</sup> (Daniel's vision of the humanlike figure coming on the clouds of heaven is the most notable exception.<sup>19</sup>) Jesus' future coming as Saviour and Judge of all is God's eschatological coming to his creation to establish his kingdom. It brings to completion God's own narrative identity for us. It does so already in the sense that to believe in God truly as God we must expect it and look forward to it.

## 6. Jesus Christ the Same Yesterday, Today and Forever

The title of this section may not, in its original context in Hebrews 13, mean what I here take it to mean: the commentators disagree. But it does express succinctly what I assume is uncontroversial: that Jesus in his earthly history, in present heavenly session, and in his future coming is in each case the same Jesus Christ. His narrative identity is a narrative

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<sup>18</sup> Hos. 6:3\* (James 5:7); Mic. 1:3\* (?1 Thes. 4:16); Zech. 14:5b\* (1Thes. 3:13; 2 Thes. 1:7); Isa. 2:10, 19, 21 (2 Thes. 1:9); Isa. 40:5 (?1 Pet. 4:13); Isa. 40:10\* (Rev. 22:12); Isa. 59:20 (Rom. 11:26); Isa. 63:1-6 (Rev. 19: 13, 15); Isa. 66:15-16\* (2 Thes. 1:7-8); cf. 1 Enoch 1:9\* (Jude 14-15). (\* indicates those OT texts which include the word 'come'.) Note also the OT phrase 'the day of YHWH' appearing as 'the day of the Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 5:5), 'the day of the Lord Jesus' (1 Cor. 1:8; 2 Cor. 1:14), 'the day of Christ Jesus' (Phil. 1:6), 'the day of Christ' (Phil. 1:10; 2:16); and 'the day of the Lord' (1 Thes. 5:2; 2 Thes. 2:2).

<sup>19</sup> Dan. 7:13\* (Matt. 24:30, 26:64; Mark 13:26, 14:62; Luke 21:27; Rev. 1:7. Note also Zech. 12:10, 12 (Matt. 24:30; Rev. 1:7).

*identity*. Narrative identities of course frequently contain surprises and puzzles which put someone's identity in doubt. Yet narratives must convince their readers that their characters remain credibly the same persons. Acting, as we say, 'out of character' requires the kind of explanation which we also always seek in real life, even if unsuccessfully, when people we know surprise us. Even in people's inconsistencies we seek some degree of consistency. Random and arbitrary inconsistencies threaten our perception of personal identity. Yet in Jesus' case we expect more: absolute moral consistency, complete self-constancy in adherence to the purpose of God which he embodies and enacts. Without such self-constancy his identity could not be God's human identity.

Therefore we must seek Jesus' self-identity in the three phases of his identity which we have considered, *i.e.* his self-humiliation in loving self-identification with all, his exaltation in hidden sovereignty over all, and his future coming in manifest sovereignty over all. One way in which the New Testament texts maintain his self-identity is by insisting that the risen, ascended and coming Christ is the same Jesus who was crucified. In the resurrection appearances Jesus shows the marks of his crucifixion to identify himself. In Revelation 5, it is the slaughtered lamb who is enthroned in heaven and receives the acclamation of his sovereignty from all creation. It is the one they have pierced whom all the tribes of the earth will see at his coming on the clouds (Rev. 1:7), preceded by 'the sign of the Son of man,' most likely the cross as his sign of identity (Matt. 24:30). Even the rider on the white horse who comes to judge and to make war wears a robe dipped in blood (Rev. 19:13).

This means that Jesus' loving self-identification with all, which reached its furthest point in his death abandoned and under condemnation, is not, as it were, laid aside in his exaltation, but is established as the permanent identity of the one who rules all things from God's throne, as the permanent character of God's universal sovereignty. If the crucified Jesus rules for God, then God's rule is radical grace.

What of the parousia? This understanding of Jesus' self-identity is most easily understandable in what we might call the optimistic eschatology of the Christ-hymn in Philippians 2 and of the similar scene of cosmic acclamation in Revelation 5. There God's rule comes to be universally acknowledged when it is seen to be exercised by the crucified Jesus. But we know that in their context in the New Testament such passages offer only one perspective. More commonly the Christ who comes in glory comes to judge and his judgement includes condemnation. Is this the same Jesus as the crucified one who bore the condemnation of sinners in his love for them? Is this the faithful friend, the one who laid down his life for his friends, now become the judge who metes out retributive justice? Is the slaughtered lamb turned slaughterer? It is important to see that the parousia poses this issue very sharply. Essentially

it is the same question about God's love and God's judgement that we should have to ask even if Jesus were not depicted as the end-time judge. But since he is, we cannot divide God's activity into his love in Christ and his wrath outside of Christ. It is the crucified Christ who comes in judgement, and certainly not to avenge his blood on his murderers, but as the one who forgave his murderers as he hung dying. Should we perhaps turn our questions around: what kind of justice can it be that the crucified Jesus comes to provide? In any case, the parousia brings us face to face with one of the most difficult issues in New Testament theology and discourages too ready and easy an answer.

I leave the question open here, but my final, short section has a kind of relevance to it.

### **7. Jesus' Story as the Story of the Whole World**

In the penultimate verse of the Bible, Jesus says – his last words within Scripture – 'Behold I am coming soon' – and the prophet John answers, on behalf of all his readers: 'Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!' (Rev. 22:20). This eager prayer for the parousia sums up much of the attitude to the parousia expressed throughout the New Testament. Modern Christians not uncommonly have difficulty understanding why the parousia should be so desirable. It is, of course, because the parousia brings an end to all evil, suffering and death, the final redemption of ourselves and all creation that we know to be God's purpose in Christ. To love or to long for his appearing, as 2 Timothy 6:8 puts it, is fundamentally a response to the theodicy problem, especially by those who suffer the evils and injustices of this world, whether on their own account or on behalf of others. The Christian form of the theodicy problem is: why does God delay the parousia? Why does God not intervene at once to deliver his creation from the evil that ravages it? Why did the twentieth century, which George Steiner memorably calls the most bestial in human history, have to happen? Why must children be burned alive in Auschwitz and buried alive in Cambodia and still the Lord does not come to halt the carnage for ever and wipe away every tear from every eye?

Yet, although it is not for us to know the times and the seasons, we are not left wholly uncomprehending of the delay. God in his longsuffering mercy keeps open the opportunities for repentance; he extends the time of his grace. And therefore the patience he requires of those who wait for the parousia, that courageous holding out for God in testing circumstances, is a kind of trust in his grace, an alignment with his gracious longsuffering. Thus, with regard to the parousia, we are pulled two ways, even as we seek to share God's concern for the world. The parousia does not solve for us the agonizing problem of world history. We cannot really tell its story and reach a satisfying conclusion, as the modern myths of historical progress have all tried to do and failed. We can only tell Jesus' story as

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the story that will turn out to be also the world's story. So what we know of the end of the world's story is that it lies in the hands of the one who has lovingly identified himself with both the guilt of the perpetrators of history and the fate of the victims of history.

Jesus (c. 4 BC – c. AD 30 / 33), also referred to as Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus Christ, was a first-century Jewish preacher and religious leader. He is the central figure of Christianity. Most Christians believe he is the incarnation of God the Son and the awaited Messiah (the Christ) prophesied in the Old Testament. Virtually all modern scholars of antiquity agree that Jesus existed historically, although the quest for the historical Jesus has produced little agreement on the historical reliability