

9 The Question

It happened while John was still in prison. The son of Zechariah had grown up to be a prophet, preaching repentance and urging his people to be redy for the day of God. And he had seen the imminent coming of the Messiah with the tools of God in his hands, redy for work in the Day that was about to break upon them all. That burning Today of God's judgement, that unstoppable Now would very soon be – and just ahead of it, John had been urging the people of Israel to change:

crying out in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of God is near.” His was the voice shouting out in the desert, “Get the Lord’s highway redy; straiten out his road!” (Matt 3: 1 – 3, quoting Isaiah 40:3)

John had his followers, who shared his hopes, but now, with his time running out in Herod’s prison, the prophet was pondering his own message and wondering what his hopes had come to. Were they real? If God did not act, if God’s Messiah did not come now, what was the value or meaning in anything he had done? As he heard of the work of Jesus, whom he himself had baptised at the Jordan River, he wondered. Was this man in fact the Messiah he hoped for? Had God’s Day come with him?

But the Messiah, when he came, would be King. He would rule Israel in God’s name with all God’s authority – an Israel in which evil men like Herod could not possibly rule. So how could the Messiah have come, if the world was not yet changed? But if this man was not the Messiah, how long must they still wait? Had he been wrong after all – a barren, mistaken voice crying out in the wilderness? Was God’s time not now, after all, and was Israel still bound in its sins and its misery?

He could not bear not to know. He sent word by some of his followers, asking Jesus: “Are you the one we are all waiting for, or do we still have to wait?” (Matt 11:3)

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Two thousand years have shown that John’s question is the hardest one of all. It goes to the very cutting edge of the challenge. It is easy enough to believe many things about Jesus: that he is the Son of God, the Savior, our loving friend; even that he is the second Person of the Divine Trinity. We have well-thought-thru and manageable doctrines about the nature of God, the divinity of Jesus and the accomplishment of our salvation through his death. These doctrines challenge our imagination, to be sure, and baffle our intellect, but they are “manageable” in that they don’t really challenge or upset our world. As long as the world allows us to believe and preach them, it can get on with its own affairs in its own way, ignoring us.

At least, that’s how it seems to me from what I know of the long history of Christianity. We learn to believe something about God, and something remarkable about a man who lived two thousand years ago, and about his present reality in heven, and maybe something about his role in the future, when he will come again; but it is all about somewhere else and some other time, doctrines to contemplate for comfort in a hideous world where God does not yet rule, where Jesus’ manifesto is powerless, where God has not yet sent the one who will actually change the world.

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Or else it is all about something private. Ethical and psychological elements of Christian faith bear on our interior lives and shape our moral behaviour towards our immediate neighbours. There is a transformation, but it is within, and it stays within. Jesus' message of forgiveness and freedom transforms many a life, but the Baptist's question was about something more, something for which that inner transformation – which after all had been the object of John's own message – was the preparation. John's question was about the coming of God's rule into the world – it was about the Messiah. It would not have been answered by any of our favourite doctrines. If his followers had come back with the reply: "Jesus is the reconciler who touches our hearts and heals them, the Savior who will bring everyone who believes in him to Heaven and to God," they would have puzzled him with a wonderful answer to less than half of his question.

The question he sent to Jesus was: "Are you the Messiah we're waiting for – or are we still waiting?" John had wanted to know if Jesus was the one who comes into the world with all God's authority and God's ultimate answer to the wrongs and suffering of his people. It is the crucial question, because it's the one that tests the reality of all our other beliefs about Jesus. All those doctrines and expressions of faith - are they real enough to challenge the reality of this world, to shake and transform it, as it must be transformed if the world's ultimate ruler is now with us and already in charge?

It is the answer to that question that matters critically, for it is in that dimension that the doctrines of Salvation, Incarnation and the Trinity - the doctrines of God and of Jesus the Savior which are easy enough to believe when they stay located in another world - become relevant to the world we live in now and its people. Without that dimension, of Jesus as our Messiah and ruler now, his story and message drift further and further into irrelevance, as the churches are finding out: a doctrine for theologians, a private comfort, an esoteric mystery of salvation into some future reward.

Wherever Jesus is relevant he is a challenge, and that Jesus is the Messiah is the one dimension of God's revelation in him that radically challenges us now. It calls in question every government, every economic system and even every church that now exists. And that is the problem - especially for the churches. We don't want to end up in prison like John. John's question, and the answer Jesus gave him are so subversive that the Church has never built them into a doctrine, like it has built the other doctrines. "Christ" is so challenging a concept that Christianity has ducked the issue and instead of spelling it out as an article of faith, it has let the word degenerate into a mere surname – J. C., Jesus Christ, as if it might have been Jesus Cooper.

Some time ago I read a book called "The Resurrection of Jesus" by the Orthodox Jewish Rabbi Pinchas Lapide. In this book he explains how he differs from Christians, and what he does not accept in our beliefs about Jesus. He acknowledges that Jesus is a great prophet who was unjustly put to death, and he sees no reason why, as a Jew, he should reject the belief that Jesus was raised from the dead. He believes that Jesus was God's instrument for spreading the knowledge of God and obedience to him among the nations of the world. Lapide also acknowledges, in a conversation with the Christian theologian Jürgen Moltmann, that any Jew would welcome Jesus as

sent by God if, when the Messiah finally does come, the one God chooses to send is the risen Jesus, who would then be the Messiah.¹

But what he does not and cannot accept is that Jesus is the Messiah already, and that the Messiah has already come. The existence of a broken, cruel and unjust world is incompatible with the presence of the Messiah, and while the world continues evil as it is he cannot say, and we should not say, that Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus should be “Jesus of Nazareth” and not “Jesus Christ”.

Of course, Pinchas Lapide is right. He shows a more profound understanding of Jesus, of God’s purpose, and of the challenge written into Christian belief than most Christians have achieved. We Christians for the most part believe in Jesus only to the extent that we have not faced up to Lapide’s problem. We believe in the Messiah and proclaim “Jesus is Lord” only in the illusion that “Messiah” and “Lord” have been so safely reinterpreted in God’s plan as to have no impact on our secular realms of politics, economics, property and nationhood. All those things, which make up and shore up our security and sense of identity in the big world, are safe from God’s interference. We can believe in the Savior and Messiah, because “Messiah” and “Savior” have been so spiritualised and elevated in theology and popular devotion, that they have no critical bite into this world, impinging only on doctrine and personal morality.

We can believe. The Messiah can reign. And governments, even those elected by Christians, and business conducted by Christians, can carry on pursuing its own interests in a world untouched by the Messiah’s rule.

When Jesus sent an answer to John, he did not say “Yes, tell him I am the Messiah.” It’s quite possible that Jesus never told anyone “I am the Messiah”, for unless we can recognise the purpose of God for our own present world and reality, we can’t understand what “Messiah” means. Even to speak of the Messiah, Jesus knew that he first had to show what was God’s purpose for the world – what kind of world God meant it to be - for it would be the Messiah’s role to fulfil that purpose. Rather than identifying himself or any other as the Messiah, Jesus knew that he had to show his people what “Messiah” would mean.

So Jesus’ answer to John was not a bald claim, but an invitation to see and to judge: “Look at what I am doing. If this not the rule of God, what will be? And if this is the rule of God, you have your answer.”

“Go and tell John what you have seen: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are clean again – and at last there is good news for the poor.” (Matt 11: 4 - 5)

I think that Jesus believed what Pinchas Lapide believes – that no-one could be the Messiah until, in him, God’s rule is effectively established. It’s a matter of seeing whether the rule of God is now and already operational, in all its power and authority. Then, in the light of God’s decisive action, you can recognise the Messiah. For any of us to say that the Messiah is already come, already identified, is to make an unbelievable claim about the reality of power and authority in this world.

¹ Jewish Monotheism and Christian Trinitarian Doctrine (1981)

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And yet I believe it. Unlike Pinchas Lapide (though I wish I had his wide understanding and knowledge of the issue) I believe that Jesus is the Messiah, that God has raised him up and made him, not in the future but already, Lord and Christ. That belief has many implications for my personal life and hope, implications which are clear to most of my fellow Christians, but there are also implications for the whole world which far too few of us have understood.

“Jesus is Lord.” When the first Christians said that, the alternative was “Caesar is Lord”. And all the world’s military power, all its technology, business, finance and industry affirmed that alternative. You had to be both foolish and dangerous to say “Jesus is Lord.” You had to have the Spirit of God in you to say something as wild as that.

If it’s not to be an empty formula, we who believe that Jesus is the Messiah now, in our world, must know that we are challenging the legitimacy – even the reality – of the political and economic systems in which we live. For they produce, they resolutely defend and justify, a world order which is in denial of the Messiah, which is anti-Christ.

Look around you at the events of the past fifty years and see the stark wickedness of what has been done, not by vicious dictatorships but by respectable governments acting in their own “legitimate” interests. In the 50’s, while German war criminals were still being tried in Europe, British officials were setting up their own concentration camps and committing the same kind of atrocities in Kenya. In the 60’s, the British government carries out the total ethnic cleansing of Diego Garcia to make it available for an American naval and bombing base. In the 70’s Henry Kissinger and the American President give the go-ahead for an Indonesian invasion of East Timor and 200,000 deaths. And Australia takes its part. In the sky above the Timor Sea to the clink of glasses an oil deal is clinched, and Timorese friends who once gave their lives to defend Australia are dumped for a bankful of dollars. In the 80’s the United States supports terrorism in Angola and Nicaragua, and protects Saddam Hussein while he bombs and gasses his own nation and Iran.

And now as we enter the 21st century, the world’s most powerful nation refuses to be held accountable to international law or treaties; the world’s poorest people are burdened with debts for money they never received. Defenceless labourers are crippled, starved or poisoned in the mines, factories and plantations of the world’s richest corporations and their trading partners, while the world’s economic system and the International Monetary Fund prevents developing nations from prioritising food, health and education for their poor. Governments from Riyadh to Managua, from Lagos and Brazzaville to Jakarta are bribed or bullied to put the interests of global corporations before those of their own people. Yet all this is done by governments and leaders to whom Christian people feel a loyalty, and whom they have not yet called to account - as if Jesus’ reign had not yet begun, as if effective justice was not yet an issue, the Messiah not yet come and his authority not yet a factor in our reckoning.

Those who perpetrate or condone this world order (the order promoted by our governments of all political shades) deny that Jesus is the Messiah and that he is in

this world as its Lord. Those especially who say that the affairs of states have to be arranged outside of moral and spiritual considerations, in the interests of those states and with a pragmatic acceptance of power “realities”, do not believe, and are telling us not to believe, that Jesus is the Messiah. Those who insist on an international law for trade, money and the rights of property, without an international law protecting those who work, who suffer, who lack, who need land, who have no voice, they are in denial of Jesus’ rule as Lord. That they do so, that they can do so, and especially that believers in the Messiah do not stand up to a person against them, (and perhaps believe themselves powerless to do so) is the most compelling evidence that the Messiah has not come.

If I believe that Jesus is the Messiah, I can only stand in the conviction that, in him, the reign of God is already and real, that the governments and the systems now presiding over greed and injustice, and the churches failing to cry out against them, are trapped in illusions and continue to exist only by hiding from the truth, because they do not know that Jesus is Lord and their power finished. If I believe that Jesus is the Messiah, I can only let my voice and my life be committed in determination to change, and if possible to save, a world sunk in such arrogant and reckless delusion. Because that’s the commitment of the Messiah.

To affirm that Jesus is the Messiah, that Jesus is Lord (rather than saying he will be Messiah and Lord when he comes again) is to commit ourselves to an effective rebuttal of all those anti-Christian assertions. And, just as the assertions are not verbal but in act and practice, it’s a matter for committed action. To affirm that Jesus is Lord will be to act even against our own governments - to whom we do not accord any absolute sovereignty - risking the charge of disloyalty and treason to affirm that the world is not as they are making it, that we do not recognise their claims of legitimate interest, and a world order which only pride and desperate illusion could seek to maintain.

Not that even this would be a sufficient answer to Lapide’s and the Baptist’s question – but it is the beginning of an answer.

The question is Can Jesus be the Messiah? The answer is: What power now rules in the world? Is it money, property, corporate influence, national interest and military force, or is it the ruling and redeeming power of the Messiah? The Christian who believes that Jesus is the Messiah will not easily answer the Baptist’s question or Pinchas Lapide’s objection. However, they will want to answer it, and, because they believe, they will be glad to dedicate their whole lives to the answer: to Messianic action, in the firm belief that all the power they need is already available for them in Jesus, for the changing of the world and vindication of the Messiah’s claim.

It is a measure of the Church’s apostasy that we have to look outside the body of believers for a well-known example of the conviction I mean. (Of course, there may be some unseen, unknown, unsung heroes among us Christians too – but if there were many, the random tumbling out of events would have thrown a few into the public eye.) Gandhi led the people of British India to independence because he believed and showed that he knew where their true power lay. The power was there and it was real, even while British guns and British money and prestige denied it and put forward a more “realistic” claim to power. In fact, the money and the guns and the prestige

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were unreal – they were not enuf to go on ruling India. Tho Ghandi was not a Christian, he teaches those of us who imagine we know the Messiah what it is to believe in such a thing. It is to see thru the pretensions of the world's most impressive power structures and to have the courage to call their bluff.

To the question “Is Jesus the Messiah?” the only answer is one of demanding faith - faith which recognises the authority of Jesus in spite of the massive and sophisticated forces which appear to decide without him what can and cannot be done in our world. It is faith which is not afraid to face the economic, political and social systems that appear to establish the world in favour of the rich and powerful, because it knows that even if they can kill us, they cannot stand up to the power of the Messiah whose rule has already annulled them. Such faith recognises not only that those powers should not rule, or would not in a perfect world, but that they do not rule. It's not a faith which can answer the doubters, for their doubts are very well founded, but it's a faith which changes the world, and, changing the world, will point those doubters to the One who puts his own question to us.

For that, finally, is the question: not the question any of us put to Jesus, but the question he puts to us.

I mentioned previously that time in Caesarea Philippi when Jesus put the question to his disciples, “What are people saying about me? Who do they reckon I am?” The disciples had heard several answers – all complimentary and all looking back to the prophetic tradition. “Some people say you're John the Baptist come back to life. Some say you're the prophet Elijah returned from heven. Others just say you're one of the prophets.”

Then Jesus put to them a question which still overshadows every other question - personal, moral, political, theological: “Who do you say I am?”

It was the disciple Simon who answered him “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

When Matthew tells of this episode he tells us that Jesus recognised it as a dramatic new beginning. If Simon recognised him as the Messiah, he must have begun to see how the kingdom of God is coming about in him, and this he could only have realised at the prompting of God. Godself had touched his mind and heart, opening up to him what others had not yet seen: that Jesus of Nazareth was, is, the Messiah. Such knowledge can only come as the gift of God:

Blessed are you, Simon Jonasson. For nothing of this earth has taught you what you've just said. It was revealed to you by my Father in Heven.
(Matt 16: 17)

Simon, as the first of many who would come to recognise and acknowledge the Messiah, was a man of special blessing: the first of a whole vast assembly of people like the assembly of Israel, the people of God. As thousands of stones begin with the first, the foundation stone, and are built into a huge building, so a new community and nation was about to be built, starting with Simon. Jesus renamed him Peter, the

Stone; and with Peter would be everyone who, after him, will recognise and make the declaration that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of all the power and authority of God.

“You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my assembly, and all the power of hell will not hold out against it.”
(Matt 16: 18)

The victory is to be. The Messiah is not come in vain and his rule will be the rule of the whole world. And it will come as the victory of his followers, of all those who recognise and believe in him; for he promises Peter, the first of them: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you decide on earth, that shall be the decision of heaven.”

It is a great shame that this text has been taken up and lost in an argument about who should be boss of the Christians, so that its first and vitally important meaning is lost. For whatever else it might tell us, it is first of all about the authority (and therefore the responsibility) of those who believe in the Messiah. The blessing pronounced on Peter is for the first of many believers in the Messiah, and the authority given to him is universal – as wide as the rule of the Messiah himself. It is the beginning of that authority with which the Messiah will rule the world, active and effective in all his followers. When it is narrowed down to a hierarchy, and even to the head of a hierarchy, it can no longer mean that universal authority over people and governments, morals, economics and politics that the Messiah actually exercises and shares with his followers. It has to be limited to a “religious” sphere and the very idea of Messianic rule is lost in the process - enthroned above the clouds or postponed into a very distant future.

That is not what Jesus meant when he spoke of Peter’s commissioning.

The question Jesus puts to every generation of his followers, to each one who comes face to face with him is: “Who do you say I am?” If we can truly answer, like Peter, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God”, it will be because Godself has moved us, and we will find that promise of Jesus being fulfilled in us too: power over the very powers of death; authority to pronounce, speak out and speak up, to proclaim, to act and to enact. The word that declares the rule of Jesus Messiah will be spoken in our actions, our voices, our lives, and the unreserved authority of God, the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” will be entrusted to us. This is a breadth and a power of authority that no merely ecclesiastical institution, no hierarchy or head of hierarchies can ever hope to contain.

The whole world, because we are in it and because we, like Peter, are taught by God to recognise and believe, will not be able to hold out as the empire of death. We will be there to uproot and to plant, to bind and to loose, to affirm and to overthrow, for we have been renamed and reconstituted in power as the people of God by Jesus the Messiah himself. It will be our task and our authority to declare what goes and what doesn’t go on earth as much as in heaven, for the kingdom of heaven, the sovereignty of God, does not recognise any locked doors. There are no autonomous or secular domains where the remit of the Messiah, and therefore of his followers, does not extend. Its scope is universal and neither money, market, military nor national government will be able to claim independence or alternative rules and principles to

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be governed by. They too are subject to God, and so will be subject to the Messiah and his followers.

And yet, we are what we are and the world remains what the world is. Nothing has been magicked away, and the power of lies on which the world is built will not just lie down or go away. Jesus will, and we will, suffer the fate of all those who go against the controlling powers of this world. For Jesus, and for us too, the exercise of rule in the Messiah's name will lead into suffering and death. Even the power and the authority of God does not escape rejection, betrayal and pain. Momentous tho Simon's answer was, it was not something to be broadcast then to the world. It was not something for anyone to be told until Jesus himself had shown – to the very end – what it means to be the Messiah and to rule as Messiah. Jesus began to tell them what the end of it would be: that there was pain, defeat, death in the way ahead.

It was not what they had expected, and Peter, for one, did not want to hear. He left in with confident authority to declare that nothing like that could happen to Jesus. His Master would be beyond defeat – and Peter would make sure he remembered it. Just when everything seemed to be taking off so well, a voice had come back to mock Jesus in the mouth of Peter. He had not heard it since he defeated it in the wilderness, but here it was again, speaking up as boldly as ever. Satan, the smug and grinning cynic who knows he can corrupt even the blessings of God and every authority that is entrusted to humankind, lurks as corruption in everything human – even the human that is chosen and enlightened by God. That evil now shows itself as protective concern for the Messiah, and Jesus, who rejected the malicious encouragement of Satan at the outset, now rejects his support in all those misguided, wise and realistic human counsels that know so much better ...

Get out of my way, Satan. Your way of thinking is human, not God's. (Matt 16: 23)

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Jesus is the Messiah. Not could be or will be, but is the Messiah. If he had come simply as a pointer to another world, even if he has risen from the dead in vindication of that other world, he would not be the Messiah. He mite be many things inspiring and uplifting, but we could not call him "Christ".

But Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, and if, like Peter, we recognise that and believe in him, then it is here, in this world, that we will acknowledge his rule. We will believe, in spite of all the power and persuasion massed against it, that his teaching is the express will of God for the world we live in and for all its systems. We will live and act in that belief, and in our action we, like Peter, will have the authority of God to judge and transform the world, to be already in this world the new community of God's people.

The world does not take to the Messiah, and will kill his followers rather than accept that his teaching mite be definitive for here and already. True followers of the Messiah live always in that danger, but they live in the authority of God, against which the world will not succeed. It is the authority of Jesus the Messiah, in which the very rule of God is established on earth.