

Teacher's Notes Film Two

The Coming of the Christ

Background Notes

Why is it even possible to suggest that Jesus didn't think of himself as God? Why, when you have Him healing people and at the same time taking on God's role of healing sin, declaring himself 'the Way the Truth and the Life' and referencing Himself uniquely as the Son of Man? Mark's Gospel opens with the bold statement 'The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God' and Matthew talks in similar language, John's gospel is even more explicit – so why is there any doubt? The evidence of the Gospels surely points to Jesus believing that He was the Messiah sent by God.

The doubt arises on many levels. Firstly the gospels are not the earliest writings and do not purport to be historically accurate in a neutral, disinterested way. This was a new kind of writing – “*Good News*” writing. They could, therefore, be reflecting a different, evolved understanding of who Jesus had been – not one that He Himself shared. To find the earliest known writings we are better placed by looking at other evidence - that pre-dates the apparent 'lateness' of the Gospels. Secondly even if Jesus had seen Himself as the Son of Man/Son of God – those terms do not mean the same as saying 'the second person of the Trinity.' That was a later belief – the Son of God simply does not necessarily mean 'God the Son.'

So let us look first at writings other than the gospels, starting with the Acts of the Apostles? Here we read an account of the disciple, Peter's words, after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Peter stands to address the crowd. 'Jesus was a man.... With the foreknowledge of God he had died. Now "*God has raised him to life and you are all witness to it. Exalted to the right hand of God ... he is both Lord and Messiah*'. So isn't that an unequivocal claim that Jesus was God? And weren't there others – hadn't Peter said much the same thing before at the Transfiguration when asked by Jesus who He was – an exchange reported in all three synoptic gospels? 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,' Peter had replied. It's not surprising he says it again at Pentecost.

But then we realise that Acts, of course, is written by the same hand that penned the Gospel of Luke and is therefore quite late - probably c. 70 AD. But more importantly, the title 'Christ' is not unambiguous. 'Christos' is Greek for anointed one and Kings – even High Priests were anointed. It is the title Jews gave to their expected Messiah who would rescue them from oppression. Even talking of the 'Son of God' is not necessarily claiming kinship (let alone shared nature) with God. The title was used frequently in the Greek speaking world and also in Jewish scriptures. It is not – by and in itself – a claim to *be God* and this is important to understand. The title Son of God is simply different to God the Son – the second person of the Trinity.

So did the early Christians *not* think of Jesus as God? They were monotheists after all, would it not have been anathema to say that God was suddenly two persons not one? And yet, that is what the earliest writings of Paul do seem to say. St Paul does appear to believe that Jesus is God. At the time everyone was interested in the twin concerns of eschatology (end of time) and soteriology (being saved before the end of time) and the earliest beliefs seem to link Jesus with God as an instrument of the end of Time. The trouble is that for the Jews, the God who oversees the end of time is also the God of creation and if Jesus shared God's identity at the end, He must also have done so at the beginning - and hence eternally. Time and again Paul quotes from the Old Testament and substitutes Jesus for Yahweh. In Romans 10¹³ 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' is a quote from Joel 2³² where the text also reads 'Where everyone who calls on the name of the Lord (Yahweh) will be saved.' This substituting of Jesus for Yahweh is clear, internal evidence as to who St Paul was proclaiming Jesus to be. Paul understands Jesus to be God, included in the unique identity of God.

The result of this is that it perhaps matters less than we thought that the Gospels are not eye witness accounts and are later than might be imagined. It may not matter if the Gospel writers inserted their post resurrection understanding of who Jesus was into what appears to be a historical account of who He *said* He was. Nowhere is Jesus more emphatically conscious that He shares in the identity of God than the Gospel of John. Here, fascinatingly, we learn that He is the Logos of God. It is widely known that Logos is a Greek concept meaning 'reason' (the Stoics had taught the Logos spark was present in everyone as an emanation from the impersonal godhead) but Logos can also be translated Wisdom – and Wisdom is an important female figure within

Judaism, a force that shared God's creative energy and brought it to fruition..

The Gospel of John is so different to the synoptic Gospels that it cannot help but be seen as distinct. Here we find miracles that are unreported elsewhere and the seven 'I am' sayings that mark Jesus' distinctive vision of Himself as God.

The ongoing Quest for the Historical Jesus

Early attempts to discern what is historically accurate compared to interpretation and additions by the Gospel writers were highlighted by the 19th century German theologian David Strauss (1808-1874). Strauss argued that the Church had interpreted Jesus' life in the light of Old Testament prophecies and fabricated stories like the Virgin Birth to fit in with messianic expectations. By the 20th century, more and more scholars adopted the findings of biblical criticism as the historically accurate Jesus appeared to retreat. Scholars differ widely over which parts of the New Testament narratives (particularly the Gospels) are 'true' in the sense of being authentically coming from the mouth of the actual Jesus.

Not surprisingly, this had an impact on faith, including the ministry of the Church. The so called 'secular theology' of the 1960s saw Bishop John Robinson describing a new vision of God for man 'come of age'. In 1985 a group of American academics calling themselves 'The Jesus Seminar' ruled that Jesus had not thought of himself as divine, did not walk on water or perform miracles and was not raised from the dead. In the 1990s the Bishop of Durham denied the literal truth of the Virgin Birth and the Anglican clergyman Don Cupitt embraced a powerfully post-modern vision of God in which He could not be said to 'exist' in any normal sense of the word. There is ongoing division within academic theology as to the extent to which normal language can be applied to talk about God and indeed the event of Jesus. Meanwhile congregations all over the world continue to worship the Christ of faith little knowing (or perhaps caring) how much debate goes on.

Activity

Time Codes & Questions: *The Coming of the Christ*

00:00 - 00:55: Describe what the title 'Son of Man' had meant for the Old Testament psalmist and how that had shifted in recent years.

01:50 - 02:24: What happened at 'Pentecost'?

02:28 - 03:29: Paraphrase what Peter said about Jesus

03:30 - 03:58: List the three Synoptic gospels

04:00 - 04:35: What was the single biggest stumbling block for Jews in trying to believe that Jesus was God?

04:40 - 06:25: Summarise the early beliefs expressed in St Paul's hymn

06:28 - 07:24: Explain why the "*I am*" statements in St John's Gospel are so important

07:28 - 09:40: How does the author of St John's Gospel depict Jesus?

09:44 - 11:15: Summarise the principle concerns of Arius

11:17 - 12:07: What became orthodox Christian belief at the Council of Nicaea?

12:08 - 13:10: Write out the '*Filioque Clause*'

13:11 - 13:55: If the Filioque Clause is not included in the creed does this mean that the speaker does/does not believe the Holy Spirit comes through Jesus?

14:00 - 14:35: Find out what the word 'incarnation' actually means.

ACTIVITY

Watch the film *The Coming of the Christ* and read through the Background Notes.

1. Invite students to make a timeline of how beliefs about Jesus developed from earliest events to evolved belief in the Trinity including the following:
 - A) Jesus' death and Resurrection
 - B) Pentecost
 - C) Peter's claims
 - D) Paul's Hymn

- E) Writing of Synoptic Gospels and Acts
- E) Writing of John's Gospel
- F) Arius' concerns
- G) Council of Nicaea

2. The theologians of the Jesus Seminar voted on the reliability of the sayings of Jesus according to certain factors – for example

Does it (the saying) have the ring of an oral phrase?
 Does it contain irony or some idea turned on its head?
 Does it depict Jesus making claims about himself?
 Does it appear to support a particular agenda (e.g. Jesus fulfilled prophecy)?
 Is the main point of the passage to set the scene for something else to happen?

Discuss with a partner which of these might make a particular saying 'authentic'. Why?

(NB teachers - the last 3 statements were all counted as evidence that a particular passage might not be authentic).

3. If you were God what kind of Messiah/Christ would you send to heal today's world. Write a paragraph describing Him/Her/It and defend your example to the rest of the class. You may wish to consider factors such as war, famine, global warming, animal suffering, cancer and untreatable illness and anything else about which you feel passionate.

- 4a) Christians believe that God is certain things. Match the word with the definition

Immanent	Able to be known by individuals
Transcendent	Father
Personal	Father, Son and Holy Ghost
Of one substance	Not able to be divided up like a thing with parts e.g. humans with feet
Numinous	Calling things into being from nothing
Creator ex nihilo	Totally 'other' and awe inspiring
Abba	Beyond the range of normal experience
Trinity	Something that is within everything

- b) Which of these appear to contradict?
5. In Jewish literature the Greek idea of Logos has a female equivalent personified as Wisdom. Wisdom is the creative force of God. Make a list of ways in which Christianity personifies God as male and a further list as to how the female side of God may be depicted in Christianity (think Virgin birth, Mary Magdalene, women at the tomb etc). Then take the opening to the Nicene Creed (or the Lord's Prayer) and replace all reference to God as male and father with the Godhead as female and mother. Read to the class and debate how the shift in gender allows you to respond.
 6. The '*I am sayings*' in John's gospel are huge claims for a Jewish man to make. Summarise in a sentence of exactly 20 words (neither 1 word more or less!) why this is so.
 7. Arius accepted that Jesus was of the same substance as God but argued that he could not have existed for all time as Jesus is recorded as saying 'the Father is greater than I'. Imagine you can meet Arius and rank order the following statements as to how *you* might respond.....
 - a) Modern criticism has revealed that many sayings in the Gospels may not be authentic. Jesus may not have actually said those words
 - b) The only thing we can say about God is what he is not. Anything else is too dangerous and too limiting.
 - c) If you believe in Christ you may have to accept that that belief may not be open to literal or fully rational debate.
 - d) Does it matter? It's Jesus' example that matters more than who He was.
 - e) If you say that Jesus was with God at creation you cannot also say that God is of single substance
 - f) What does it mean to say either God or Jesus existed for all time – these things are beyond our comprehension and should be beyond our debate
 - g) Everything is possible with God. It is entirely possible that one essential Being could comprise three expressions of Itself.
 8. The Filioque clause was inserted into the Creed.
 - a) What is a creed and why does it matter?

- b) 'Who proceedeth from the father and the son' highlight/underline the actual Filioque clause.
- c) The Trinity is often described as being like water – it can become ice and steam but both are still water. Draw a picture or diagram illustrating your understanding of the Trinity as 'three in one'.
- d) Which characteristic is each person of the Trinity (Father/Son and Holy Spirit) known for – Sustainer/Redeemer/Creator?
- e) Look up the word 'Paraclete' and fit it to the correct Person in the Trinity. What is its symbol?

9. Jesus of History or Christ of Faith

Working in pairs read through the statements below

- a) Mark each statement H or F according to whether it is talking of Jesus as depicted in the Gospels, or whether it would still make sense if the historical Jesus could no longer be found. Some may be both!
- b) Chose the one that means most to you. Working either individually or in pairs devise a presentation (poem/art/drama/song) that *explains in your own words* what the statement is saying.

"It is a very good thing that you read the Bible... The Bible is Christ, for the Old Testament leads up to this culminating point... Christ alone... has affirmed as a principal certainty, eternal life, the infinity of time, the nothingness of death.... He lived serenely, as a greater artist than all other artists, despising marble and clay as well as colour, working in living flesh. That is to say, this matchless artist... made neither statues nor pictures nor books....(for) ... he made... living men, immortals".
(Vincent Van Gogh)

"But they all stood beneath the cross, enemies and believers, doubters and cowards, revilers and devoted followers. His prayer, in that hour, and his forgiveness, was meant for them all, and for all their sins. The mercy and love of God are at work even in the midst of his enemies. It is the same Jesus Christ, who of his grace calls us to follow him, and whose grace saves the murderer who mocks him on the cross in his last hour".
(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

“Jesus’ healings are not supernatural miracles in a natural world. They are the only truly ‘natural’ things in a world that is unnatural, demonised and wounded.”

(Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*)

“I know men; and I tell you that Jesus Christ is no mere man. Between Him and every person in the world there is no possible term of comparison. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have founded empires. But on what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force but Jesus Christ founded His Empire upon love; and at this hour millions of men would die for him”.

(Napoleon)

“When Plato describes his imaginary righteous man...he describes exactly the character of Christ. ...If the life and death of Socrates are those of a philosopher, the life and death of Jesus Christ are those of a God”.

(Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), French philosopher)

“Jesus’ friends and enemies were staggered again and again by what he said and did. He would be walking down the road, seemingly like any other man, then turn and say something like, ‘Before Abraham was, I am.’ Or, ‘If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.’ Or, very calmly, after being accused of blasphemy, he would say, ‘The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.’ To the dead he might simply say, ‘Come forth,’ or, ‘Rise up.’ And they would obey. To the storms on the sea he would say, ‘Be still.’ And to a loaf of bread he would say, ‘Become a thousand meals.’ And it was done immediately.”

(John Piper, *Pleasures of God*)

“Jesus Christ knew he was God. So wake up and find out eventually who you really are. In our culture, of course, they’ll say you’re crazy and you’re blasphemous, and they’ll either put you in jail or in a nut house (which is pretty much the same thing). However if you wake up in India and tell your friends and relations, ‘My goodness, I’ve just discovered that I’m God,’ they’ll laugh and say, ‘Oh, congratulations, at last you found out.”

(Alan Watts, Philosopher)

“It is Jesus who stirs in you the desire to do something great with your lives, the will to follow an ideal, the refusal to allow yourselves to be ground down by mediocrity, the courage to commit yourselves humbly

and patiently to improving yourselves and society, making the world more human and more fraternal.”

(John Paul II)

“There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment.

Christ certainly as depicted in the Gospels did believe in everlasting punishment, and one does find repeatedly a vindictive fury against those people who would not listen to His preaching, an attitude which is not uncommon with preachers, but which does somewhat detract from superlative excellence. You do not, for instance find that attitude in Socrates. You find him quite bland and urbane toward the people who would not listen to him; and it is, to my mind, far more worthy of a sage to take that line than to take the line of indignation”

(Bertrand Russell)

“If the resurrection of Jesus cannot be believed except by assenting to the fantastic descriptions included in the Gospels, then Christianity is doomed. For that view of resurrection is not believable, and if that is all there is then Christianity, which depends upon the truth and authenticity of Jesus' resurrection, also is not believable.

(John Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?*)

“Among these Jews there suddenly turns up a man who goes about talking as if He was God. He claims to forgive sins. He says He has always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time. Now let us get this clear. Among Pantheists, anyone might say that he was a part of God, or one with God: there would be nothing very odd about it. But this man, since He was a Jew, could not mean that kind of God. God, in their language, meant the “Being” outside the world, who had made it and was infinitely different from anything else. And when you have grasped that, you will see that what this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips. I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic, on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg, or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him

as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to”.

(C. S Lewis, (1898-1962), author of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*)

The Coming of the Christ

FILM SCRIPT

In three of the four gospels Jesus appears not to know he is God.

He calls himself many things including, frequently, the Son of Man, using it in the way the Psalmist had meant stand for everyman – him and you and me – but, he is aware too, of the tension in the title. The Son of Man who Jesus refers to is *also* the product of those tense, occupied times – a saviour whose appearance will usher in God’s Kingdom on earth.

After his ignominious and agonizing death on the cross and the unique events of the resurrection people who’d known Jesus gathered in Jerusalem in an upstairs room.

There, in what became known as the Pentecost, his friends and disciples experienced something extraordinary; an event they thought of and what felt like an emanation from God; the coming of the Holy Spirit. It was an intense understanding.

Afterwards Peter, Jesus’ disciple, stood to address the crowd. This Jesus, he said, was a *man* who had worked miracles. With the foreknowledge of God he had died.

“God has raised him to life and you are all witness to it. Exalted to the right hand of God ... he is both Lord and Messiah”

(Acts 2:33)

The early claim that Peter was making was still not that Jesus was God. He was the Jewish Lord and Messiah – the one the prophets had promised.

Then, as now, Jewish people are strict monotheists – with a profound belief in the indivisibility of God. God was whole; He could not have a Son.

In the Synoptic gospels, the three earliest narratives of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus calls himself ‘Son of Man’, ‘Son of God’ occasionally – but that was a general term for a good and holy man. Scholars often argue that he did not think of himself as literally related to God – or if He did, he didn’t proclaim it.

After his resurrection, people grappled with the language in an attempt to try and explain what they meant. Forced to reshape their vision of what was possible and who this man had been, they bent the boundaries of their Jewish faith; expanding their language and their concept of God. For non-Jewish Christians, many schooled in Platonic ideals of impersonal godhead, it was a journey just as challenging, being more personal and less abstract than any of their Greek ideas.

Fortunately for us, there are clues to both those journeys. Hidden inside one of the letters of St Paul who travelled the first century world promoting the Gospel of Christ is a hymn – much earlier than any of the gospels and believed to be datable to within 10 or 15 years of Jesus’ death. It’s important because it’s one of the earliest expressions of how belief in Christ as *God* was taking shape. It’s describing the man they had known:

“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage, rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man...”

(Philippians 2: 6-11)

Being in very nature God? Being found *in appearance* as man? What do these statements mean? Was Jesus just pretending to be a man? Did he make *himself* into a man, or did God do it to him?

The early Christians who composed that hymn didn’t care – they were not tied up with literal niceties in the way that would later be important. What mattered to them – beliefs they expressed in bold, uncomplicated language - was that the Jesus they were experiencing – felt very close to how they perceived God.

Around the end of the 1st century, some seventy years after Jesus’ death, an anonymous author, wrote the extraordinary Gospel of John. And the Jesus we find within it is no longer so ambiguous: *‘I am the way the truth and the life’* he says: *‘No one comes to the Father but by me’.* Or again: *‘Truly I tell you, before Abraham was, I am’.*

This is a staggering claim. Here we have a 1st century Jew using the title reserved for God alone; *I AM*; the sacred mysterious title by which Yahweh once described himself to Moses. Only God was pre-existent; only God could bear that name.

The author of the Gospel of John lived in a world where belief in the divinity of Jesus was growing and evolving. People were *experiencing* the risen Christ, while the writer, steeped in both Jewish and Greek thought, is very clear about who and what Jesus was - the Gospel of John unapologetically bears this out in words of profound mystery, depicting the man as the Christ...and more:

'In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made and without him was not anything made that was made'

And then – a few verses later:

'The word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.'

(John Chapter One)

The Incarnation

If there is one passage in the whole of the New Testament that sums up the core belief of Christianity – that is it. The Prologue of John's Gospel read every year at Christmas spells out the Incarnation: Christianity believes that God become a man. God is not only Logos, but the Logos is fully God. And Jesus was that thing.

The word 'Logos' is the same that the Greeks had used to mean 'reason' but it was a Jewish concept in its own right. By the "*Logos*", "*The Word*" of the Lord, the heavens were made' sang the Psalmist. It was an ancient concept, a powerful concept - a magnificent expression of the creative part of Him-self that God had used to call the world into being. By the time John had written his Gospel, Jesus was no longer simply the Jewish Messiah, but the incarnate *Logos* of God.

Times changed and the centuries moved on. By the third century common-era the Apocalypse – the end of the world – that the early Church expected simply had not come.

Christians were beginning to ask what exactly the idea of Jesus as God's only Son meant.

So, when Arius, a young priest living in Egypt, wrote to his bishop with questions, those questions fell on pricked ears. Everyone had an opinion. The Arian controversy was trending.

Arius was concerned with what exactly being the Son of God meant. God had existed for all time, *God* was eternal, uncreated, without start. So, Arius wrote to his Bishop and to the Pope:

*“Is Jesus the same as God? Or has he somehow proceeded from God?
I can accept that Jesus was begotten not created in that He shared a similar substance to the Father and flowed from him. But, could there not have been a time that Jesus had not been, and so, the divinity in Him was distinct from that of God Himself?”*

The controversy became so heated (and Arius’ followers so many) that in 325 Constantine the Roman Emperor called a Council in Nicaea in present day Turkey, with a great gathering of Bishops.

Arius argued that Jesus had specifically said: ‘The father is greater than I’. Athanasius and opponents countered that Jesus was consubstantial, co eternal, of one Being with the father by whom all things are made.’ Those words are recited every Sunday in Christian services as people say the Nicene Creed. How many know that by saying them they’re taking sides in a very old debate. At Nicaea, Jesus’ complete Divinity became orthodox Christian belief.

The ‘Filioque Clause’

It took yet another meeting of Bishops at the Second Council of Constantinople in 381CE to thrash out what place the Spirit had as the third person of the Trinity. They decided to state plainly that the Spirit proceeds from the father *and the Son*. The ‘Filioque Clause’ is that essential addition – the Spirit comes from Christ as much as it does from the Father. Whether or not to include that clause has divided Christians ever since – Roman Catholics say it in their version of the Nicene creed, Protestants generally don’t, while the more mystically minded Eastern orthodox church was so determined not to, that in 1054, in what became known as the Great Schism, it separated itself from Western Christianity.

So why on earth does it matter? Why is it included in A Level specifications and why have modern theologians such as Karl Barth written about it? Why are you studying the ‘*Filioque Clause*’? It matters because it helps to iron out belief.

Many people nowadays say they are 'spiritual' they believe in something – they're not sure what. They could even say that they are guided by the Spirit and feel that that's enough. The controversial Filioque clause is asserting that only when the Spirit is anchored in what we know of Jesus can people be sure they're using it as a legitimate guide from God.

In other words the Spirit divorced from the person of Christ – imagined as coming straight from God – can be manipulated, misinterpreted and bent to fit agendas. Only when it is anchored in the Jesus of the Gospels can we be sure we're hearing it right.

Dusty books, old men, people fighting to the death, heretics, creeds, words and the meanings of words; all this arising from the life and death of one man who may or may not have ever thought - of himself - as God. For every scholar who argues that Jesus didn't claim to be divine, there are others who see the understanding of who exactly he was as absolutely central to his life: the second person of The Trinity and none other than the unique incarnation of God.



Ethics Online