

What's in a Name: Christ Jesus or Jesus Christ?

Colossians 2:6-10

I don't know whether you have noticed, but St Paul uses the words 'Christ Jesus' rather than 'Jesus Christ' when referring to the figure that is central to Christianity. I have been asked why this is the case. I guess the question arises because Paul's usage contrasts with the terms we normally use, namely 'Jesus Christ', or just plain 'Jesus'.

A way of getting at the question is to ask if Elizabeth Windsor, or maybe just Elizabeth, were a wealthy London housewife, would crowds line the streets when she drove to the supermarket? Would people gather outside her up-market Kensington home when it was her birthday? If Elizabeth Windsor were wise and kind would she attract the devotion of millions of people? We would probably answer these questions in the negative. Of course if you put the word 'Queen' in front of the name Elizabeth Windsor everything changes. Everything changes because the word 'Queen' endows Elizabeth Windsor with a status and an office that involves particular powers and privileges. I have used this example to make the point that putting the word 'Christ' in front of the word 'Jesus' changes everything. It changes everything because, in a way, 'Christ' Jesus means 'King' Jesus. But having said that the point needs to be made that what the word 'King' means in relation to Jesus has to be spelt out in detail because it does not mean the same as 'Queen' in the front of Elizabeth.

The word 'Christ', like the word 'Queen', is a *title* and not a name. 'Christ' is how the Hebrew word 'Messiah' is translated into the Greek language. According to the Hebrew Scriptures God had promised that he would raise up a Messiah who would bring peace and justice to Israel, and to the world. This promise was made to a people that had time and again been conquered and humiliated by great Middle Eastern powers. According to some Jews the Messiah would be like King David who was revered in the national memory for establishing, by the military conquest of surrounding nations, a relatively large empire. The expected Messiah would, according to these Jews, bring in God's rule by conquering the other nations of the earth. Other Jews, represented in the Hebrew Scriptures by such figures as the prophet Isaiah, proclaimed a Messiah who would be a suffering servant. Both kinds of Messiahs' would, their proponents held, be the agents by whom God established his rule. As

agents of God they would exercise the power of God in the world. St Paul, who was a theologically trained Jew, knew all this and, like all good Jews, hoped for the coming of the Messiah.

It is important to know that the first Christians were Jews. It is also important to know that St Paul persecuted those Christians. He did so because they made the claim that Jesus, a self-proclaimed prophet from the backwater town of Nazareth, and someone who had been crucified by the Romans, was the Messiah. That the Christians should claim that this Jesus was the Messiah made Paul, or Saul as he was then known, furious because to him the claim was blasphemy. Blasphemy is speaking in a way that is offensive to God. In this connection contemporary Jews would still regard the claim that Jesus is the Messiah as heresy. In fact some Jews today would agree with Saul that Christianity is nothing more than an heretical Jewish sect.

However, be that as it may, whatever it was that happened to St Paul on a road to Damascus, it was something that changed him completely. He became convinced that what the Christians said about the Jewish peasant who had been crucified was true. What the Christians said was that Jesus was raised from the dead. As a consequence, and now in solidarity with the Christians he had been persecuting, Paul became convinced that the resurrection showed that the person who had been known as Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah that God had promised the Jews. Paul, the theologically literate Jew, knew that the divine power that is necessary to bring a complete new order in the world would be exercised by the Messiah, by the Christ, by the true King of God's creation which, of course, includes humanity. So just as the Queen, theoretically these days, exercises power over the UK and some parts of the Commonwealth, so 'King' Jesus exercises power over the universe. But that is the end of the comparison. Why?

As we know the Queen's regal ancestors had the power of life and death over their subjects. Anyone who opposed the sovereign in any way was either imprisoned or, more likely, executed. The power of sovereigns over their subjects was also manifested in the lavishness and pomp of their lifestyle. According to St Paul, however, the magisterial power of 'King'

Jesus is revealed to the world as the opposite to the power represented by Queen Elizabeth's ancestors. The Queen's ancestors claimed to rule by 'divine right'. In the seventeenth century Sir Robert Filmer justified this 'divine right' by arguing that all people are born in subjection to their parents. This authority of parents he called royal authority. The first father to exercise this royal authority was Adam to whom God gave dominion over the world. According to Filmer, kings were part of Adam's line and exercised, therefore, divinely sanctioned paternal authority over their subjects in the same way that Adam had. This was what constituted their 'divine right' to rule over their 'children', as their subjects were called.

Now St Paul was not alive in the seventeenth century but what he wrote completely subverts Filmer's theory of 'divine right'. This is the case because Paul characterises Christ Jesus as the new Adam to whom God gives dominion. But the new Adam exercises divine power in a manner that is exactly the opposite of what humanity knows about power. Instead of power being defined as the ability to force another another to bend to my will, St Paul saw that the power exhibited by 'King' Jesus was shown, by his death on a cross, to be a power that renounced power as sovereigns, and latterly nation states, have exercised it.

Christ is crucified because he refused to force his will and purpose upon people. He would not, as sovereigns did, treat people as subjects. Instead he renounced force so that men and women might, in the light of his love, be cured of their addiction to realise, by any means, their desires. How this sovereign power exercised by 'Messiah' or 'King' Jesus is concretely worked out physically in the world has had a chequered history because it has been connected with the life of Christian communities. On the one hand the nature of the Christ's power has been scandalously misrepresented and perverted by groups of Christians. But on the other hand over the centuries the divine power of Christ has been embodied by many diverse parts of the church - these have been groups that have renounced power and self-assertion as being acceptable.

At this point I can finish. I was asked to explain why St Paul uses the term 'Christ Jesus'. The answer is because, for him and subsequently for most of the church, the man Jesus *is*

the presence of the divine in the world. As the Letter to the Colossians puts it, “in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily.” If this is not the case then Jesus was a religiously devout and prophetic Jew who was crucified, as was the fate of many of his fellow Jews in those turbulent first century times in Palestine. But for St Paul the resurrection shows this not to be the case. God’s raising of Jesus from the dead established him as the *Pantocrator*, or universal sovereign. It is the universal sovereign who changes the destiny of the world. That is why St Paul always referred to ‘Christ Jesus’ as the central figure of Christianity.

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