

And the Word became flesh, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14)

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not "Yes and No"; but in him it is always "Yes." (2 Corinthians 1:19)

[O]ne only learns to have faith by living in the full this-worldliness of life.¹

That's the strangest thing about this life, about being in the ministry. People change the subject when they see you coming. And then sometimes those very same people come into your study and tell you the most remarkable things. There's a lot under the surface of life, everyone knows that".²

What are we saying when we confess that we believe in Jesus Christ, the son of God? What truth do the creeds help us to affirm and understand? Or, more directly, what is the point and what difference does it make to speak of Jesus as 'son'?

For some, the undeniable fact that the term is gender specific, renders it problematic, along with all such 'traditional' God-talk. The plea for new ways of talking about God is an understandable and appropriate reaction to a patriarchal culture that employs the terms 'father' and 'son' and thus envisages God in ways that simply prop up the unequal distribution of power between the sexes ('if God is male, then male is God', as Mary Daly used to say).³

The usual response to all of this (from those who understand the critique but want to affirm the importance of the tradition) is to explain that the use of the language of father and son is first and foremost a Christological affirmation. What we are saying when we confess Jesus as 'son' is something about the nature of the relationship between God and Jesus or, more specifically, about the particular form of address with which Jesus chose to speak to God; a given reality that we cannot change, but in which we are invited to participate.⁴ Alternatively, we could (and I believe should) seek to heighten our awareness of the essentially metaphorical nature of all such God-talk. As Barth put it, there is '*something like* fatherhood and sonship' at work here.⁵ If that is true, then one way of demonstrating its truth might be to call God 'mother' and even, to push the argument to its logical conclusion, to call Jesus God's 'daughter' and our 'sister'.⁶

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. De Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best et al. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 486.

² Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*; London: Virago, 2004), 6–7.

³ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*; Boston: Beacon, 1973), 19.

⁴ For one form of this argument see Paul S. Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*; London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), 89–96.

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume 1: The Doctrine of the Word of God, Part 1*, eds G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley; 2nd edn; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 363.

⁶ Other possibilities are also available, not least a recovery of the significance of Sophia-christology in the gospel tradition and, perhaps, within Jesus self-understanding. UCA

But beyond the complexities of Trinitarian relations and theories of metaphor, the creeds also point us in a further direction. For just as the confession that God is father is connected to God's work as creator in the opening clauses of the creed, so also the confession that Jesus is son directs us not only to the truth about the triune God, but also to reality of the world and our lives. Our confession that Jesus is the son of God is intimately connected in the creed to the affirmation that 'for us and for our salvation' he became flesh, became human.⁷ In this way we come to understand that confessing Jesus as son tells us something not only about God, or about Jesus, but about us, our lives, our world, our reality, our experience.

What we confess and what we learn from our confession is that only in the realm of the world, the human, the flesh, only in the realm of the personal, the particular and the peculiar do we encounter God. Sonship language is itself personal (and therefore cannot be straightforwardly replaced by an abstract noun such as 'redeemer'). It speaks of a particular life, a peculiar reality: historical in time; Jewish in ethnicity; and, yes, male in gender. As such, it is language that continually invites us to consider this world and our lives within it as arenas in which God can be found.

The four quotations I have provided above bear witness to this crucial aspect of Christian faith. For the Christian the desire to get closer to God in love and understanding should never entail a separation from the reality of life in the world. Just because something is fully human, or fully of this world, does not make it any less capable of being the place where God is found. As a result, any suggestion that a better understanding of the historical, human Jesus can liberate us from the stifling straightjacket of metaphysical dogma stands in tension with the fundamental biblical affirmation that 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us'.

Of course, there are debates about whether John's gospel does not itself fall into the same trap. When the text goes on to state that 'we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son' it is of course possible to so emphasize the otherworldly character of the notion of divine glory that the idea that it is definitively seen and known in the fleshly existence of this particular and peculiar life fades into the background. But the better reading of this text and the gospel as a whole sees Jesus as the one who not only reveals God who is out there, but God for us down here (and who is so above all at the particular point of his death in the most peculiar, cruciform, way).

Paul bears witness in another way. The promise of God to be for the world is known in the ordinary words of apostolic preaching, but even more mundanely, Paul's change in travel plans are themselves a reminder of God's decisive Yes to the world through Jesus the Son. 2 Corinthians is replete with hostile polemic against those who would seek escape from the reality of life in the world, including the suffering that inevitably accompanies it. In language that echoes and riffs on the fleshly emphasis of

minister Revd Sally Douglas is exploring this trajectory in PhD thesis at the Melbourne College of Divinity provisionally entitled 'The Scandal of the Scandal of Particularity'.

⁷ The Nicene-Constantinople does this in a rhetorically elegant way by using the terms *σαρκωθέντα* and *ἐνανθρωπήσαντα* of the only-begotten Son, as a way of spelling out the meaning of his saving work.

John's prologue, Paul makes it clear to his readers: 'We walk in the flesh, but we do not wage war according to the flesh' (2 Corinthians 10:3)

No theologian has seen this more clearly than Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Importantly, his call for a form of 'religionless' or 'worldly' Christian faith was built not simply on a particular understanding of the present state of the world (that it was 'come of age') but on a particular and fully biblical understanding of what God had done for the world in and through Jesus Christ. It is worth letting Bonhoeffer speak to the theme more fully:

Whoever confesses the reality of Jesus as the revelation of God confesses in the same breath the reality of God and the reality of the world, for they find God and the world reconciled in Christ. Just for this reason the Christian is no longer the person of eternal conflict. As reality is *one* in Christ, so the person who belongs to this Christ-reality is also a whole. Worldliness does not separate one from Christ, and being Christian does not separate one from the world. Belonging completely to Christ, one stands at the same time completely in the world.⁸

Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Gilead*, is about (among other things) the relationship between fathers and sons.⁹ The story that John Ames tells is both autobiographical and biographical as Ames looks back to the experiences, idiosyncrasies and values of his own father and grandfather as, in turn, he seeks to make sense of his own life as a testimony to his young son. Central to this testimony is Ames' sense of both the singularity of his own life as a husband, minister and, finally, father. But the novel is shot through with the conviction that it is precisely in this life, and exactly in the world in which it is lived, that one comes to know glory.

It seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance for a moment or a year or a span of life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light. ... Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration.¹⁰

So intense is Ames' sense of wonder at the world that he can imagine a thoroughly Christian reversal of the traditional idea that earth should become somehow 'heavenly'.

I feel sometimes as if I were a child who opens its eyes on the world once and sees amazing things it will never know any names for and then has to close its

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W Stott (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 64.

⁹ Readers of *Cross Purposes* might wish to consult again 'An Interview with Marilynne Robinson: Novelist and Theologian', *Cross Purposes* 23 (2011), 22–27, 29, and note that Robinson has herself written on Bonhoeffer and provided an endorsement on the back slipcover of the new DBWE translation of *Letters and Papers from Prison*. See Marilynne Robinson, 'Dietrich Bonhoeffer', in *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (New York: Picador, 1998), 108-125.

¹⁰ Robinson, *Gilead*, 279–280.

eyes again. I know all this is mere apparition compared to what awaits us, but it is only lovelier for that. There is a human beauty in it. And I can't believe that, when we have all been changed and put on incorruptibility, we will forget our fantastic condition of mortality and impermanence, the great bright dream of procreating and perishing that meant the whole world to us. In eternity, this world will be Troy, I believe, and all that has passed here will be the epic of the universe, the ballad they sing in the streets. Because I don't imagine any reality putting this one in the shade entirely, and I think piety forbids me to try.¹¹

The potential for this world to become the raw material with which we might imagine and dream of the world to come is predicated on the belief that the God whose identity is known in the language of 'father' and 'son' has reconciled heaven and earth. What glory we see in this world we are able to see because we behold the glory of a father's only son.

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¹¹ Robinson, *Gilead*, 65.