

Different Christs?

For a theological college

That vision of Christ which thou dost see
Is my vision's greatest enemy.

People who say to one another, "If you think *that*, you shouldn't be here," are, I suppose, implicitly echoing Blake's horrifying couplet. I've heard—and overheard—remarks like this too many times for comfort, and not just in matters of theology either. After all, "visions of Christ" have to do with every aspect of life in Christ, which is what we're supposed to be learning about here, believe it or not. When you have fifty or so people living more or less in each other's pockets, it will be very surprising if you find no conflicts. But what gives conflicts their bitterness? What makes them cut us to the bone so that we bleed and suffer? What gives them their resilience and permanence, their power to cloud our thoughts and prayers for weeks on end?

You know what I mean, I'm sure: the trivial remark someone makes that strikes at the ground of your faith. The surprised "You don't believe *that*, do you?"—whether uttered by conservative or radical—that suddenly devalues all your intellectual struggles and puts your integrity into question. The bright pupil in the seminar—or the bright lecturer or supervisor—who implies that *of course* this or that view is out of court, almost casually pulling away carpets from under people's feet, denying (without even noticing it) any significance to their thoughts, their struggles. I may hold to a belief as a result of long and costly wrestling with its implications; I may hold it desperately in the face of consuming doubt; I may question or abandon a belief after costly engagement, reluctantly yielding before some kind of imperative

questioning. And, if so, something very considerable is involved when someone says, "I don't see how any intelligent (or orthodox or contemporary or whatever) person can believe *that*."

The question answers itself, doesn't it, as to why these things are bitter. It's my life you're threatening, my sense and my judgment, my *meaning*, the way I painfully struggle to understand myself in the light of God and the gospel. We all have heard people say, "How can you deny this when your ancestors shed their blood for it?" Conservative Catholics say it about the theology of the Tridentine Mass, conservative Protestants say it about the rejection of the same theology. And what we are saying when people menace our beliefs in this way is a weaker form of, "I've shed my blood for this belief." Not much, and not my life's blood, probably, but it still hurts. "Do you think I *enjoy* believing this?" we sometimes want to say. "Do you think I find this easy or congenial? Do you think I *wanted* to come to this conclusion?" Perhaps you know the terrible story of the old priest who committed suicide after hearing a broadcast in which a fashionable theologian appeared to demolish a particular "traditional" doctrine. The priest felt he had pinned all his hopes on a lie and a delusion. Now I don't use that story to prove a point one way or the other about traditionalism or radicalism, but only to draw attention to the seriousness of these questions of belief. If we are even a little committed to Christ, then however our vision is organized it will have a little of our blood invested in it.

But the answer to all this isn't talk about mere tolerance (though there are, I believe, worse sins). Liberal indifference seeks to draw the sting from bitterness and conflict by suggesting that both sides should stop believing things so *hard*. If you didn't take it so seriously, you wouldn't be in such a stew about it, say the liberals. Yet that is saying even more strongly that my struggles aren't worthwhile, that my life is not at stake here. Theology *is* a matter of life and death, because in it I find my own sense and direction, however vaguely or inarticulately. If we were not hurt by the dismissive remarks of others, we should not be caring enough. At least conflict is a sign of life: dead people don't bleed.

And it won't be settled by argument, by new facts or new perspectives. People don't change their understanding of themselves overnight because one or two new bits of information are provided. ("Good Lord, I never thought of that! So God doesn't

exist after all.”) In Christian terms, it is especially hard. Visions of Christ: yes, and there is our Christ, the totally enigmatic face on the wall, the cross, the bread and wine. *Silent* signs, as silent as he was before Pilate, consistently refusing a straight and simple answer. We can’t feed him questions like a computer and receive tidy, systematic replies. He won’t let on: we can shout and wave our arms at that icon, and it stays the same, a dark expressionless face that gives us nothing but itself to think about. We can shout and wave our arms at each other, appealing to Christ, and when we turn to him and say, “There! That’s what I mean: *now* do you see?” all we meet is that silence, a kind of annihilating judgment on all we say. Christ can bear all sorts of interpretations, and we can’t expect him to tell us which he likes. We can draw little balloons coming out of his mouth as much as we like. What does that tell us? The vulgarity of the analogy underlines the futility of the exercise.

Yet interpret him we must. We’re constructive, imaginative beings, after all, and we can’t escape from language, so we must talk. As soon as we do, as soon as the balloons are scribbled over, we have visions of Christ at enmity with one another, and conflicts that can’t be resolved. The end of it all is that we are so passionately involved in staring at and hating or fearing someone else’s vision of Christ that we turn our backs almost permanently on our own. This is horrible, because one of the things visions of Christ have to do with is reconciliation, our reconciliation with ourselves and each other and God. If we are not looking at our own vision, we have stopped thinking about reconciliation; and where is our hope then? Visions of Christ at enmity with one another cease to be visions of Christ at all.

So what do we do about all this? There’s no point in trying to take the edge off the reality of the conflict, and I don’t propose to try. But there are a few things we might reflect on to help us understand and contain the pain involved. First of all, there’s one painfully obvious thought. We worry about other people’s visions when we have leisure to take our eyes off our own. If we were really preoccupied with, really in love with our vision, we’d have less time for fussing about someone else’s. This is the message in Jesus’ reply to Peter in John 21, when Peter sees the beloved disciple and asks what will happen to him. Jesus replies simply, “Mind your own business and follow me.”

But that alone can be pretty selfish and individualistic and can lead to a situation where we cease to care about truth at all. Sooner or later, Peter and the beloved disciple will have to come together and compare notes, if only because they are, after all, called to one discipleship in the one body. Then, I think, the question may be this: Can your Christ save me as well as you? Can my Christ save you as well as me? How far are our visions exclusive? How wide is our vision, how big is our God? If Christ can only save me and those who think as I do, God help us all! But if I can conceive, if I can imagine with enough sympathy how the Christ of my brother or sister can be saving and lifegiving, if I can begin to see how and why that vision is loved and trusted—then we shall have moved forward. This needs patience and care, and the refusal to assume that visions are exclusive. If I ask the question, “What is healing or lifegiving in your Christ?”, I can at least think it possible that there is Christlike reality in your thought and your life. It’s not at all an indifference to truth, but a recognition that the most important truth about Christ is that he is resurrection and life. And if I ask, “Can my Christ save you?”, I am asking how far I have distorted Christ’s face into my own unlovely shape, how far I have imprisoned Christ in me, in my exclusiveness and unlovingness. This is not mere tolerance, but active, *compassionate* understanding.

The third point relates to the first: if we have two rival visions of one thing or person, at least that thing or person is central to both of us. Somewhere we acknowledge implicitly an authority we both accept. It may be fairly notional and almost empty of content, but it is there and we both look to its “thereness.” We are all here to learn one discipleship in one body; that icon of Christ is there in front of all of us, whatever we think or talk about. As long as we’re all facing that way, something is preserved, some objectivity, some common sense of being under judgment, one judgment. We are exposing ourselves to the same signs. Like it or not, we are members of one body, and we signalize it by sharing the same sacramental life.

We all know, I think, the destructive results that follow the breaking of this aspect of the common life, the impoverishing and trivializing of belief and commitment that can attend upon the abandonment of eucharistic fellowship. At least there, at the altar, we do indeed come before our judgment, as St. Paul reminds the Corinthians. And there we show forth daily the death

we believe to be the source of all our meaning and our health: the cross with all its ambivalence and silence; its openness to what may be disastrous and deadly (or just inept and boring) interpretations; its lack of clear systematic theology; its questions to left and right alike; its *thereness*, its authority, the authority of the one whose cross it is. When the face of Christ in the gospel and the body of Christ in the eucharist have ceased to be common ground, then there will be enmity. Then there will be, finally, no Christ for us. And when we do not find unity before the cross, we have lost all our hope of reconciliation.

This brings me to a fourth and final consideration. To give the cross and the sacrament this kind of authority as *binding* realities in the community is to accept that we are to be questioned by them—that Christ (however eccentrically or obscurely we talk about him) is not just there as an object of our investigation, but is a challenging and unsettling fact for all of us, interrogating us without mercy, interrogating our understanding of God and ourselves. The truth is that God is the only real and authoritative iconoclast. If your faith seems perverse and distorted, if your understanding seems naive or obscurantist or irresponsible, the only question I can put to you is, “Are you looking *into* your vision? Are you letting yourself be shaped and changed by what you see?” I’m asking, in fact, about the precise degree to which your vision is what you live by from day to day—a matter of life and death, sense and nonsense. Are you attending to your vision? Are you stripping yourself in prayer before the terrible and searching Word of God? Are you being refined in that fire? And am I? Is my vision doing that to me, breaking and remaking my thoughts and words, my heart and mind? I have no right to destroy your vision, nor you mine. I have no business to devalue your understanding or make light of your struggles, nor you mine. But we have the right—and perhaps the duty—to put the questions to each other and hear them from each other. When all the formulae, all the slogans, all the impassioned, sincere, and no doubt inevitable theological disputation is over, then we have to get back on our knees and ask about our own fidelity to God’s questioning, our own readiness to go into the desert where the security of pictures and ideas fades away, where all theologies finally give way to God.

This may be very routine stuff—pleas for understanding, openness, praying together as a way of bearing conflicts—but I

shall not apologize for it. The wounds caused by hasty and dismissive words about other people’s theologies or spiritualities are too deep to be ignored by any of us, and the obvious has to be said from time to time. Yes, we have all shed at least a little blood or sweat over our beliefs; yes, our integrity is at issue; and yes, truth matters and doctrinal indifference is abhorrent. So these pains won’t go away, and the hurts may be deep when our creed is assaulted or—worse—just dismissed. We cannot get around it just by adopting the other person’s point of view: too much of ourselves is involved for that. But theology *must* bring us to penitence and contemplation, just as it must arise out of trust—trust in the abiding objectivity of the one in whom we have believed, trust that (in Augustine’s words) “our home will not fall down just because we are away.”

“That vision of Christ which thou dost see....” The Christ we both see, however, is the one who instructs us to love our enemies, to love even what may seem the pale shadow of his face in other people’s minds, because compared with the light of his glory all our thoughts are shadows. He is the truth we shall never own; we can only hope to be owned by him.