

NARRATIVES IN CHRISTOLOGY

A paper was presented that will appear as a chapter in the forthcoming book *Story-Shaped Christology* (Paulist Press). The paper's thesis is that different kinds of narratives can fruitfully function in our attempts to understand Jesus Christ.

Narratives can be recalled in the first of three steps of reflection on the mystery of Jesus Christ. First, we can retell different kinds of narratives about Jesus. These are a scriptural story (e.g., a gospel), a historical review of Jesus' ministry, and a biography of an exemplary Christian in our time (i.e., a "saint"). Second, we allow an image of Jesus Christ to emerge from these narratives. Third, we shift from the metaphorical language of the second step to the use of more conceptual terms (e.g., "person").

This approach is demonstrated in a brief christological exercise. Step #1: Mark's Gospel, a historical reconstruction of Jesus' ministry, and a biography of Dorothy Day are recollected. According to Mark, Jesus Christ is the "Son of God," the inaugurator of God's kingdom. In a historical perspective, Jesus was a Galilean teacher who proclaimed the imminent arrival of God's reign in human affairs. Finally, according to the witness of Dorothy Day, Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the human family. He has secured the solidarity of all people with one another in union with God, so that to care for the homeless person and the stranger is to care for Christ.

Step #2: One of the images produced by the confluence of these narratives is that of Jesus Christ as the founder of the new people of compassion. The narratives give different senses of Jesus as founder, and yet these views do not stand in opposition to one another. For example, Mark's literary representation of Jesus Christ as the "Son of God" is not necessarily undercut by the historical sense of Jesus as a founder of a group that split off from Judaism. These views of Jesus complement one another, and they are filled out by the image of Jesus that is reflected in the life of Dorothy Day.

Step #3: Reflection on the image of Jesus Christ as founder leads to the view that Jesus Christ is the self-agent who realized God's intention to bring about a new creation and simultaneously fulfilled humankind's longing for God. Self-agency consists of having intentions and the ability to realize them in one's actions. Jesus Christ, as presented in step #2, appears as the individual who possesses both human agency and divine agency.

Discussion in the workshop on the above proposal included the following ideas. This way of doing christology is engaging, for it explicitly relies on narratives and metaphorical discourse. Further, it is appealing in that it recognizes the saints' witness to the risen Christ. Yet, it leaves a great deal up to the judgement of the theologian, and therefore it risks being overly subjective. Moreover, the image of

founder may in fact be a misleading one. For example, it disregards the roles of Abraham and Moses in the formation of Judeo-Christian belief, and thus the use of the image of founder could implicitly support negative attitudes towards Judaism.

The workshop concluded with the observation that this proposed approach to christology has been inspired by a number of recent works on narrative and theology, and in particular by Walter Kasper's theological method, as displayed in his *Jesus the Christ* (1976) and *The God of Jesus Christ* (1984).

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