

Understanding Jesus in the Context of Evolution

**I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full
(John 10:10)**

In 1988 Pope John Paul addressed a conference called to examine the relationship between evolution and religion. He raised a most interesting and challenging question:

Does an evolutionary perspective bring any light to bear on the meaning of the human person as the image of God, the problem of Christology and even upon the development of doctrine itself? Dialogue with evolution has on the whole been lacking among those engaged in theological research and teaching.

Such a dialogue is needed to provide some help to assist those who are "struggling to integrate the worlds of science and religion in their own intellectual and spiritual lives.

The nature of this lecture is not to offer definitive answers to all questions but rather to allow ourselves to look at our faith and our understanding of Jesus from a slightly different angle. It is speculative rather than definitive. It looks at possibilities rather than certainties. I owe almost complete debt for the substance of this lecture to a book by Jack Mahoney, written in 2010, entitled **Christianity in Evolution**.

1 ALTRUISM

As human beings we are entirely the product of divine altruism, the effect of the sheer creative generosity of God. It is the nature of goodness to communicate itself.

Originating in God, altruism also epitomises the moral teaching of Jesus, God become man, who continually proclaimed His Father's love for His human creatures, exemplified this throughout his own life, and continually inviting human beings to also exercise their own complete selfless altruism towards God and their brothers and sisters.

From this perspective, God always knew that he would send His Son to become incarnate amongst the human race, to be the perfect example of divine altruism and to show us how to transcend our natural evolutionary selfishness.

Jesus' moral teaching can thus be seen in itself as a major evolutionary step in the moral advancement of the human species.

In accepting the violent death thrust upon him, Jesus held out to human beings a wonderful example of supreme altruism in living out his unselfish loyalty to His love of the Father.

God therefore created human beings in the image of His own altruism. So, altruism can be identified as the divinely inspired moral evolutionary goal of the human species. Human altruism ushers the evolving human species to a new level of existence and moral goodness whose aim is to increase the solidarity of the human race and to show that we as individuals are created in the image of an altruistic God, and as people destined to share fully in the inner richness of the love of the Blessed Trinity.

2 THE EVOLUTIONARY ACHIEVEMENT OF JESUS

In accepting death as a human being and in his rising from the dead, Jesus achieved a new phase of evolutionary existence for human beings. In this, He would save us from individual death and extinction, which is the evolutionary fate of all living beings. So, absolutely, Jesus achieved something in His death.

In evolutionary terms, the death of Jesus brought about a cosmic change for humanity, taking us from a human life that ends in death and extinction to a new form of human living.

This might appear to be at variance with the traditional Christian understanding that what Jesus brought about by his death and resurrection was the saving of the human race from original sin and the Fall of Adam and Eve.

In this traditional view, death is viewed as God's punishment for human disobedience. But within an evolutionary framework,

the death of human beings and all living beings is rather understood as a biological necessity and requirement.

So in an evolutionary theology, there is no need for the idea of an original life of bliss shared by Adam and Eve which is then marred by the Fall, nor for the belief that God became man in order to overcome the effects of original sin on all human beings.

Again, the Resurrection of Jesus brings an evolutionary breakthrough for humanity. The profoundly Good News is that through Jesus human beings are being saved from the evolutionary fate of individual mortality.

In the light of evolution, dying is a fact of evolutionary life and does not require any further explanation, as opposed to the Jewish and Christian explanatory account of the Fall. The death of Jesus is not therefore a saving from some original sin, under which we are all bound. Rather, the evolutionary purpose of the death of Jesus, which he freely undertook, was to move us beyond individual mortality and to introduce us to the final state of our being, which is everlasting fulfillment for which we are destined by the grace of a loving God.

Jesus voyaged through death in an act of sacrifice, not to appease the Father for the original sin that supposedly marks all human beings, but so that through rising to a new life he might offer to all human beings the prospect of living beyond their own death into everlasting communion with God.

It has been a long tradition within Catholic theology, particularly strong within the Medieval period that Christ was always intended to become incarnate and to share our human condition. In more recent times, Teilhard de Chardin made the claim that "Christ is the measure of and at the head of all creation. The essence of Christianity is simply and solely belief in the unification of the world in God through the Incarnation". And again: "The primary motive of the Incarnation is not to counteract the effects of sin in the world, but to unite all reality, material, and spiritual, natural and supernatural, divine and human, in the Person of the Incarnate Word."

So it is no longer necessary within an evolutionary framework to cling to the notion that Jesus came to share our human life simply to overcome the results of the Fall, and from original sin. The traditional view that all human beings are born marked by original sin was largely the result of the views of St Augustine. It was a view developed further in medieval times by St Anselm, with his views on the reason for the Incarnation. In his understanding, the dignity of God was grievously offended by the sin of Adam and Eve, and satisfaction could only be made by Jesus, the Son of God, cancelling out the original sin, through his death on the Cross. Thus, the view developed that the purpose of the death of Jesus was Atonement, so that human beings could be restored from their state of alienation from God.

But we are left with a question raised by Peter Abelard, also in the medieval period. "Could not God just have forgiven Adam and Eve?"

We can now take the view that a connection between the Fall, and Original Sin and the Crucifixion is no longer theologically required if in fact there was no original sin, and no Fall to be compensated for by Christ. But the question then arises: What therefore was the purpose of the death of Jesus?

3 THE PURPOSE OF THE DEATH OF JESUS

In making the claim that it is no longer necessary to cling to the notions of the Fall and Original Sin, or to the idea of the death of Jesus as a great act of Atonement to the Father, one is of course not denying the harsh reality of sin and evil and suffering. Indeed, it takes only a moment of self-reflection to realise that we are morally weak, prone to sin and selfishness, and that the sin of the world brings huge anguish to individuals, as well as to society as a whole, and indeed our whole environment.

Perhaps, in evolutionary terms, built around the notion of the survival of the fittest, we can understand something of why selfishness and self-interest plays such a role in our experience of life. But we must recognise too, that the real sin of the world

is the result of human freedom. In a life where we have been given the gift of free will, all of us inevitably sometimes act against the good and make moral decisions that are both sinful and cause great suffering to others. So the horror of sin and evil is simply impossible to deny.

Coming to the question of the death of Jesus, we have to acknowledge that for those who believe in Him, this remains the central sin of the world. One might argue that Jesus died because, on the one hand he was perceived to be a real threat to the religious authorities of his tradition, and on the other, considered to be a political threat to the Roman authorities. This would tell us something of the truth.

At a deeper, and much more significant level, Jesus died because, in a sinful world, he paid the price for being a perfect human being. The good are always a threat to those who are sinful, and for Jesus, this perfection and his willingness to die for pure goodness, takes on cosmic significance. So, the element of the sacrifice of the Cross remains in all its centrality, despite the fact that we no longer need to view the Crucifixion as the means by which original sin is redeemed, or that Jesus died as a form of Atonement to the Father. In his faithfulness to His mission to be the Good News of God to the world he did take upon himself the sin of the world and in His death and Resurrection he remains indeed Our Saviour and Redeemer. Through his death, we are enabled to live in the hope that, despite all our weaknesses, sin will not be the final word in human life.

On another level, we can claim that Jesus freely accepted death at the hands of his fellow human beings to manifest his totally faithful love of the Father and to show his care for all sinful humanity. He thus expresses and exemplifies in human terms the mutual altruism, or generous love of the Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. His death also serves as a witness to all humanity that it is indeed possible for us to live a human life that shows the same altruism and love for others.

Another point of view can also be seen as significant and helpful to our life as disciples. Through his death and Resurrection, Jesus took on the harsh reality of death as an

evolutionary fate, and in overcoming it, made it possible for all humanity to be likewise saved from the evolutionary fate of death, and to thereby be offered the possibility of surviving bodily death in order to share in the eternal communion of the Holy Trinity.

4 THE CHURCH AND THE EUCHARIST IN EVOLUTION

The Question of Salvation

One of the things that has troubled many of us as Catholics is the long held view that there is no possible salvation for those who do not share our Catholic faith. That this view is still held by many Catholics reveals how deeply embedded it remains in our Catholic memory and tradition.

At the Council of Florence, held in 1442, the following position was stated with the utmost clarity:

"No one outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but also Jews, heretics and schismatics, can become sharers in eternal life, but are headed for the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels unless they join the Church before they die".

It must be wonderful to live with such absolute certainty about all those who lived before the coming of Christ, or who never had the opportunity of hearing of the Gospel in their time on earth. But then, our Catholic Church has not always been known for its faithfulness to the love and mercy and compassion of Jesus!

Fortunately, the Church itself has evolved from these kind of views. We can thank the Second Vatican Council for permitting us to view the whole question of salvation in much more optimistic terms:

"Divine Providence does not deny the aids needed for salvation to those who through no fault of their own have not yet arrived at an express acknowledgement of God, but who by the help of his grace try to lead a good life".

This view enables us to take an ethical approach to our understanding of salvation, through the notion of human altruism, which as we saw earlier is nothing other than a reflection of the altruism which marks the relationship between the Persons of the Holy Trinity. Again, from an evolutionary perspective, the overcoming of selfishness and the movement of the human heart towards love and altruism can be expressed in human behaviour in an infinite number of ways and within every religion and culture. All such forms of love and care for one another and for our planet become ways in which all people are being led into community and fellowship with the Risen Christ.

The Eucharist

We must acknowledge that, historically speaking, the Eucharist has been described in essentially sacrificial terms as a ritual participation in Christ's offering of his suffering and death to the Father, for the purpose of reconciling alienated humanity. We of course still remain conscious of the fact that the Eucharist can be described as the memorial of Jesus' sacrifice to help us overcome the effects of sin.

But, in the light of evolution, we are also being invited to understand the meaning of the Eucharist as directly related to what has been achieved for us. In the Eucharist we are not simply remembering the sacrifice of Christ, but we are ritually celebrating the freely accepted suffering and death of Christ as the divinely chosen means of enabling the human species transcend the finality of death in order to live together as a community participating fully in the life of God for eternity.

Jesus was very much aware of the fact that his life and his preaching was leading him towards an inevitable death. This he freely accepted as part of God's mysterious will for bringing in the Kingdom. The celebration of the Last Supper was intended to remain as a sign of Jesus' rejection and death, and a witness to His love for the world. The gift of the Eucharist enabled all his disciples and future followers to keep Christ and all his significance alive in their minds and hearts; in other words, to build up the Church. None of this meaning has been lost to us. But, within an evolutionary perspective, we have the added gift of celebrating the Eucharist as also a sign that in the death and

Resurrection of Jesus we are given the gift of an evolutionary leap forward. We are no longer the kind of beings who cease to exist when we die. Through the gift of Our Redeemer we are enabled to live in the truly New Covenant, to live in eternal communion with God and with one another.

Another feature of the Eucharist for us is that it remains a necessary means for us to build up the Church in the real love of God. In offering his body and blood to his disciples Jesus unites in communion with Him and with each other in a gift and invitation to share the love of God with one another and with the world. This is what is meant in that ancient text within the Church that we should become what we receive.

Baptism

A brief word needs to be said about our understanding of baptism within the perspective of evolution. Since the time of St Augustine, the major focus on the role of baptism was that it was necessary for us to be baptised in order to be washed clean from the stain of original sin. Once we accept that we no longer need to the notion of original sin as a defining factor of human nature, we are liberated to understand baptism in much more enlightening terms.

Baptism remains the sacrament of initiation into the people of God and to the community of the Church. The symbol of water remains significant in that it dramatically conveys the ideas of new life and of the power of the Holy Spirit. We can still clearly understand that baptism serves as a sacrament marking our movement from death to rebirth in Christ.

Conclusion

We began with a text from John's Gospel that states " I have come that you may have life and have it to the full. Within the evolutionary perspective that I have offered, we discover a richness that goes beyond all our dreams. The ultimate aim of Jesus' incarnation, His sharing of our human condition, including His suffering and death, allows all of us to overcome the finality of death and to lead us to an eternal life within the

Communion of the Holy Trinity. This can only leave us astounded and filled with thankfulness.