

Incarnation And Image Of God

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One of the high points of St John's Gospel comes near the end, in chapter 20, in the confrontation between Jesus and the disciple Thomas. Jesus, crucified but now risen from the dead, has already appeared to his disciples as a group, sending them out as the Father had sent him, and breathing out the Holy Spirit upon them (20: 19 – 23). But on that occasion Thomas was not there. When the others tell him: 'We have seen the Lord', he will not believe them. 'Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe' (v 25). Now, eight days later, Jesus appears to them all again, and this time Thomas is with them. Jesus takes up the challenge made by Thomas to the other disciples: 'Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing'. Thomas answers: 'My Lord and my God', and Jesus finishes the encounter with the words: 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe' (vv 26-29).

One of the reasons, and perhaps the most obvious one, why St John tells this story is to provide some help for Christians who, living years after the events of Easter, and never having seen the risen Lord, have difficulty in believing that Jesus really did rise from the dead. Those who were not there at the time, whose faith does not rely on the evidence of their eyes, are not, John is saying, any worse off than the original disciples. On the contrary, they seem almost to be in a privileged position: for them is reserved one of only two beatitudes that Jesus pronounces on his followers in this gospel. But although these words of Jesus were obviously thought of as important in their time, and have been since, and although they occupy, coming at the end, the most prominent place in this scene, yet Christians have always been equally if not more struck by Thomas's outburst, his confession of faith: 'My Lord and my God'. That Thomas should confess the figure before him to be his lord is not surprising. In this part of the gospel 'Lord' is used more than once as a title for Jesus. When Jesus comes to the disciples,

'they were glad when they saw the Lord' (20:20); and when they report their experience to Thomas, they tell him: 'We have seen the Lord'. For Thomas to say now 'My Lord' is for him to acknowledge that the one he sees really is Jesus; it shows that he now believes what he formerly refused to believe, that Jesus is risen from the dead. Thus is the story of his doubt satisfactorily rounded off. But he says also: 'My God', and this is what is so striking, for the confession of Jesus as God seems to go far beyond what is required of Thomas in this story. And these words of Thomas also go beyond, in their boldness and simplicity, anything that has been said by any of the disciples or by Jesus himself so far in the gospel. Coming right at the end of the gospel (the doubting Thomas episode is the last incident related in the original form of the gospel, before Chapter 21 was added), they express the fulness of faith in Jesus that the disciples have been working towards throughout. That it is fitting to address Jesus as God is not something that the disciples could just have been told. It has required the education of sharing in Jesus's life and ministry, through to his death and now finally his resurrection.

We, the readers, have an advantage over the disciples. We have known about the divinity of Jesus right from the beginning of the story, or even before the story started, for the gospel opens with the words: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God'. And it is this Word, who is God, who becomes flesh as Jesus: 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father' (1:14). What we see as the story of Jesus's earthly life unfolds throughout the gospel is how the primitive church, in the person of Thomas, finally comes to behold his glory, to recognise him as God. Though this process is presented as involving the first disciples of Jesus, it in fact spanned the first few generations of the church's existence. The idea that Jesus could be referred to simply as God was not one that was explicit in the first years of the church. It is possible to guess that if anybody had proposed it in the earliest years it would have been rejected out of hand, as too sharply at variance with the church's inherited monotheism. Be that as it may, it remains true that it is only in the johannine writings, among the very latest of the New Testament books, that Jesus is referred to simply and unequivocally as God. And it should be remembered too that the johannine writings, including the gospel, had some difficulty in being accepted as authoritative by the church at large. The position that John's gospel assumes at the outset, that Jesus is God the Word made flesh, was perhaps one that the church as a whole could accept only slowly, by going through the same process of education, doubt, incomprehension

and finally belief that is portrayed in the gospel itself.

It is in fact an oversimplification to say that the church as a whole came to this belief. There were many who sincerely called themselves Christians who, then as now, could never believe that Jesus was God, and there were many whose thought about Jesus developed along quite different lines. But the approach of John's gospel became the model for those Christians who were later to be regarded as orthodox, those who, in opposition to all the other Christian groups of the centuries, succeeded in establishing themselves as the mainstream. John set the tone. 'He came to his own home', the prologue says, 'and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God' (1:11f). For the orthodox, the model of what it was to receive him, and so to become a child of God, was to confess with Thomas: 'My Lord and my God'. And that is what we still do now. Every Sunday we say that we believe in 'one Lord, Jesus Christ . . . God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God'.

But it is one thing to subscribe to a formula like that and another to be able to say what it means. What do we mean, if anything, when we recite those words of the creed, when we say that Jesus Christ is God? It is a formula that can be understood in a number of different ways, and a good many of them were given a trial run in the first five centuries or so of the church's existence.

One of the first ideas to become popular took its cue, like so much later thought about Christ, from the prologue of John's gospel: Christ was God, the Word of God, incarnate. Though he appeared in human form, and though the uninstructed or unspiritual believed him to be a man, yet really he was not a man at all, but God clothed in flesh, a visitor to earth from heaven, fundamentally alien, not truly of earth, not really human. He may have taken on human shape, but this was mere appearance, only a disguise, something to enable him to communicate more easily with people, or to fool his opponents. This kind of view has remained popular throughout the church's history. Many, if not most, Christians today who seriously want to say at all that Jesus is God would probably think in roughly that way about him. And there is a certain amount in scripture to support such a view, particularly in St John. Think, for example, of 3:31 – 'He who comes from above is above all; he who is of earth belongs to the earth, and of the earth he speaks; he who comes from heaven is above all'. But despite the popularity and in some ways the attractiveness of this view, it was rejected by the mainstream of Christian thought. In the first place, to adopt it would have been to involve God in deception. Without doubt, Jesus had appeared to be a man, eating, drinking, weeping,

dying, and so on, as men do. If he was no man but simply God, who can neither hunger nor thirst nor sorrow nor die, then the whole of his life on earth was a charade. Secondly, there is the testimony of scripture that Jesus really did suffer and die, and that he really was a man, and the church had always understood that he was a man in reality and not just in appearance. Whatever else was to be said about Jesus, it could not be denied that he was truly and fully human. There were, then, only two routes open to subsequent christology: either you had to say that Jesus was simply a man and give up saying that he was God, or you had to maintain that he was both God and man. By the time the topic came to be discussed on a large scale, in the fourth century, the first possibility was no longer a real option. To give up saying that Jesus was God would have been to abandon what was really distinctive of Christianity, and to relegate Jesus to the level of the *merely* human; and that was a prospect that was unacceptable to most of the influential Christians of the time. So they were left with the second option: it had to be maintained that Jesus was both truly God and truly man. That is not an easy thing to do. How can one and the same individual be both divine and human, omnipotent because he is God and weak because he is man, omniscient and yet ignorant, immortal and yet mortal; how could he be eternal and eternally everywhere, as God was supposed to be, and yet be born at the beginning of our era in Judaea? But that is just what a lot of orthodox Christians did want to say, and a great deal of energy and ingenuity was devoted to trying to make such an idea intelligible. Actually, without much success. The pronouncements of various councils did little more than affirm that Jesus was both God and man, without shedding much light on how such a thing was possible. The Council of Chalcedon produced the basic formula by which the church still stands. The bishops there said: 'In agreement, therefore, with the holy fathers, we all unanimously teach that we should confess that our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son, the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the same of a rational soul and body, consubstantial with the Father in Godhead, and the same consubstantial with us in manhood, like us in all things but sin; begotten from the Father before the ages as regards his Godhead, and in the last days, the same, because of our salvation begotten from the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, as regards his manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, made known in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the difference of the natures being by no means removed because of the union, but the property of each nature being preserved and coalescing in one person'. There is a great deal

of technical language in this, and much of what is said reflects the history of the continuing debates about Christ within the Church, being designed largely to exclude certain earlier patristic views of Christ. But, without going into that, it is fairly clear that what is going here is assertion rather than explanation. We are told that in the one person of Jesus Christ two natures, of divinity and of humanity, are united without division or confusion in one person, but we are still not told how such a thing might be possible. But that, at any rate, is what the Church has traditionally insisted upon. Traditionally, Christians have been committed to a doctrine of the incarnation that says, not just that in Jesus God became flesh, but that Jesus is God made man. So today we still say in the creed that 'he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man'.

What are we, then, to make of this doctrine? There cannot be many people nowadays who are so at home with the terminology of the patristic age, so sympathetic with its philosophical temper, that they find no problem at all with the formula of Chalcedon or with the many patristic writers who wrote in similar terms about the incarnation. And even if there are such people today, people who can readily understand what the fathers were trying to say, there still remains the problem of whether the fathers actually got it right. The doctrine that Jesus is both God and man is one they felt driven to, driven both by the evidence of scripture, which spoke of Jesus as God and as man, and by horror of the awful doctrinal consequences that they feared would follow from its denial. But though it was one that they clung to fiercely, they did not claim that it was particularly intelligible. They were well aware of how paradoxical, not to say incoherent, it sounded. If the orthodox doctrine was attacked on logical grounds, the defence, as often as not, was not to demonstrate how coherent, clear and consistent it really was, but to accuse its opponents of presumption. The doctrine of the incarnation expressed a divine mystery which we mere mortals could not expect to understand, and it was bordering on the blasphemous for any feeble, logic-chopping human intellect to attack it. A defence like that surely has a lot to recommend it: it might be an exaggeration, but you might be able to make quite a good case for saying that any reasonably interesting religious doctrine must turn out in the end to be incoherent, easy prey for secular-minded logicians. Certainly, Christianity is full of doctrines that do not obviously make sense. But still, in this particular case of the doctrine of the incarnation there remains the sneaking suspicion that its appearance of such startling paradoxicality stems not from the fact that it expresses a divine mystery but from the muddle-headedness of its authors. Is there anything that can be done to make it more readily comprehensible, or at least to

justify its incomprehensibility? Or should we just be content to repeat the old formula: Jesus is God and man? And if we cannot nowadays be content to do that, might we do better to stop talking about incarnation altogether and try to reconstruct Christology along other lines?

There have probably always been people who thought the doctrine of the incarnation a mistake; and certainly in recent years, most publicly among Anglicans, there has been some disquiet about it, a feeling that it might be better, less embarrassing, to drop it. But tradition is an important element of Christianity. Part of what makes us Christians is the continuity of our faith with that of Christians of earlier centuries. Catholics in particular, it seems to me, should need little convincing of this. Before we start abandoning or reforming our traditional doctrines we should make a genuine attempt, if they are initially unintelligible to us, to restate them in terms we can understand. That is what I want to try to do with the doctrine of the incarnation.

Many of the difficulties that the doctrine, as traditionally stated, raises are connected with its use of the term 'nature'. It is claimed that in the one person of Jesus Christ there are united the nature of divinity and the nature of humanity; Jesus has two natures. Further, he possesses each of these natures perfectly: he is wholly God and wholly man. The first and most obvious difficulty with this way of putting it is that it makes it look as if the humanity of Jesus is in competition with his divinity. We normally think that things can have only one nature each, and that is not an accident. To describe a thing's nature is to describe the sum total of the qualities that are essential to it; if we leave anything out, our description of the nature is incomplete. Conversely, if our description is complete, then there is nothing essential left out. What the definition of Chalcedon seems to do is to say that Christ's qualities can be summed up by attributing human nature to him, and then immediately to go to say that that is not a complete summing up at all: it leaves out a whole other nature, his divinity. Trying to get two natures into the same individual is like trying to get a quart into a pint pot. Something has to give, so it seems. You have to say either that Jesus is wholly human but not divine, or that he is wholly divine but not human, or that he is partly divine and partly human, a kind of hybrid, or that he is in reality not one person but two, one of whom is divine and the other human. All of these views were espoused by theologians at one time or another before Chalcedon, and we can surely be sympathetic to them. If we think in terms of natures, it does seem that we are forced to take up one or other of these positions. Chalcedon tells us we mustn't, that we must hold on to the view that the one Jesus is both fully God and

fully man, but doesn't tell us how we are to manage it. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that the attributes normally associated with divinity are quite the opposite of those associated with humanity. For it is of the nature of God in traditional thought to be immortal, invisible, eternal, changeless, and so on; while to man it belongs to die, to be physical, temporal, mutable, and so on. Chalcedon seems to be asserting the impossible, that in the one person of Jesus all these contradictory qualities are combined.

One way to make the doctrine of the incarnation more immediately intelligible is, then, to express it, if possible, without making use of the idea of a nature. What I shall do in what follows is to sketch out briefly one way in which this might be done, one way of making clear the assertion that Jesus is both God and man. The way I am proposing, and it may be only one among many possible ones, is to think of the life of Jesus as analogous to a theatrical performance.

First, back to the New Testament. I mentioned earlier that it is only in the latest portions of the New Testament that Jesus is expressly referred to as God. That is not to say that the earlier New Testament writers did not think of Jesus as related to God, that is the Father, in a unique way, or as divine. Many titles are given Jesus throughout the New Testament, among them 'Son of God', 'Word of God' and 'Image of God'. There is no reason to think that in calling Jesus 'God' *simpliciter* Thomas is going beyond what is implied in these other titles: to say that Jesus is the Son of God or the image of God is not to say anything weaker than that he is God *simpliciter*. However weak or qualified the sense of these expressions may have been in the Jewish circles in which they originated, they were given a much fuller significance by Christian writers. In being prepared to call Jesus 'God' the Johannine corpus is bolder in its language than the rest of the New Testament, but it hardly goes beyond it in substance. For John to say that Jesus is God is not to say *more* than that he is the Son of God. This is evident from the original ending of the gospel in chapter 20. Immediately after Thomas's confession of Jesus as God, the chapter closes: 'these things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the *Son of God*'. There can be no doubt at all that the majority of New Testament writers, along with John regarded Jesus as in some way divine; the question was how they could find a way of expressing their conviction without offending too harshly against their own monotheism or that of the Jews. It was by using titles like 'Son of God', 'Image of God' and so on, as well as in other ways, that they managed this. We can put it simply this way: what was later expressed by calling Jesus 'God' was earlier and at all times expressed by calling him 'Son of God', 'Image of God', and

so forth. That means that we can use these titles of earlier origin to explicate what was later meant by calling Jesus 'God'.

The titles to which I have drawn attention – Son of God, Image of God and Word of God – are only a few among the many that are applied to Jesus in the New Testament, but they are especially important in that they link Jesus with God in a direct and intimate way. To Christian ears at least, 'Son of God' and 'Word of God' both carry the implication of derivation from God in a special way, while 'Image of God' carries the idea that Jesus shows exactly what God is like. All three are titles that in a sense refer us directly back to God, in contrast with titles like 'Messiah' and 'Son of David', which do not. It is by looking at how these titles refer us back to God that we can get some idea of what it means to call Jesus 'God'.

All three of these titles carry with them the idea that in one way or another Jesus reveals or displays God. It is obvious enough that this is part of what is involved in claiming that Jesus is the image of God. An image of somebody shows you what that person is like. To the extent that, say, a photo or a painting of someone fails to show you what he is like, to that extent it is a poor image of him. In the same way, a man's word, the way he communicates with you, shows you what he is like, it reveals him. The sort of thing a person says, the sort of thing he finds worth saying, in its turn says something about him. So the Word of God to us, especially the Word made flesh, God's communication to us in human form, tells us about God.

When we come on to the idea of Jesus as Son of God, we seem to be on different ground. Sonship seems to be at once a more intimate and a more distant idea than that of image or word: more intimate, because a son derives from the very substance of his parents, but more distant because the relationship of son to parents can be one of *mere* derivation – the son can turn out to be quite different from, even alienated from, the parents. But in fact, the idea of resemblance, of revelation, is central to the sonship in many of the most important places where it occurs in the New Testament. In Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples: 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy"'. But I say to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust'. The disciples can truly be called sons of God, indeed, will become sons of God, by becoming like God, by doing as he does, by loving all indiscriminately. Again, in John, the Jews Jesus is disputing with claim to be sons of Abraham. Jesus answers them: 'If you were Abraham's

children, you would do what Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God; this is not what Abraham did. You do what your father did ... You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning' (8:39ff.). We can note in passing here that this passage from John shows how the idea of filial obedience is not unconnected with that of revelation. It seems that here sons, almost by definition, do the will of their fathers: 'You do what your father did ... You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires'. Hence a son, in being obedient, is not just exhibiting a virtue proper to a son, but also reveals what his father is like. But the main point is this: the idea of sonship in the New Testament is not confined to, or even concerned with, matters of biological or quasi-biological derivation, but is used in such a way that the son may be said to be like or to reveal the father: like father, like son; and so also, like son, like father; the father may be known from the son.

So we find, again in John, 'No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known' (1:18). And neither is it surprising to find the title of 'Son' used together with those of 'image' and 'word'. So in Colossians we find Paul thanking the Father, 'who has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation' (1:13ff.). And in the prologue of John: 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father' (1:14).

So Jesus, then, reveals the Father, God, to us, shows us what God is like. But that hardly seems to take us anything like far enough. It in no way justifies us in saying that Jesus himself is God, surely; or rather, in the terms in which I have been speaking, it does not take us very far in understanding what is meant by calling Jesus God. For you don't have to be God yourself in order to reveal God to others. The prophets, to take an obvious example, can perfectly properly be taken as revealing God to us, showing us how God is, and we would never dream on that account of calling Isaiah or Jeremiah 'God'.

All that is very true; we cannot be calling Jesus 'God' just because he shows us what God is like. But the revelation suggested by the titles 'Son', 'Image' and 'Word' goes far beyond that; there is a much stronger notion of revelation involved here. The point can be made most simply by sticking to the single idea of Jesus as the image of God. Jesus, as the image of God, does not just show us what God is like: he shows us God; he presents or displays God

to us. What makes one thing the image of another is not just that the one resembles the other or shows what the other is like. If we have a photographic image of Fred, what makes it a photo, an image of Fred, is not that it is like Fred, resembles him. In many ways it is completely unlike him. It is flat, made of a stiff kind of paper, rectangular and shiny. Fred, on the other hand, is three-dimensional, fleshy and squashy, warm and with rounded corners. Fred also moves around and speaks, goes on holiday, works, is alive and will die. His image is cold, stationary, inert. An image may in some ways be totally unlike what it is an image of. Even if we want to say that in other and rather obvious ways it resembles it, yet that is still not enough to make it an image. A photo of Fred is an image of Fred, not an image of Fred's identical twin brother Henry. Though an image of one may look exactly the same as an image of the other, though they may have all their physical properties the same, yet they show us different people. A photo of Henry may show us what Fred is like, since Fred is in fact like Henry, but it will not show us Fred himself. So what is essential to an image is not that it resembles what it is an image of, nor that it shows you what the thing is like, but that it shows you the thing itself.

In the case of the photos, what makes one photo an image of Fred and another an image of Henry is not any discernible difference between them, something that can be discovered by inspection; it is a matter rather of who the camera was pointed at. That is to say, who the photo is an image of depends on facts external to the photo itself. We can make a similar point if we speak of a painted image, a portrait. What makes a portrait a portrait of Fred is not that it resembles Fred; like a photo, any painting is in many and obvious ways different from its subject. Further, it may hardly resemble Fred in any way at all. It may be a cubist portrait, or simply a bad portrait. It may look more like a portrait of Fred's sister Mary, but what makes it a portrait of the one rather than of the other is just that the artist says so. This portrait presents us with Fred because the artist wanted to present Fred to us; he stuck a label under the painting saying 'Fred'. If it looks more like Mary than Fred we might advise the painter to take up some other hobby instead, but we cannot simply tell him he is wrong when he says it is a portrait of Fred. Once again, who the image is an image of cannot be determined just by an inspection of the image itself. That might help us, narrow down the options, but what determines the question is something that lies outside the image itself, in this case an intention, or a declaration.

So an image is not something that just resembles somebody, shows us what he is like, but it presents us with somebody, shows

him to us; and who it shows, who it presents is something we have to learn, get information about, even though we might on our own make an intelligent guess. But we can only make that guess in the first place if we also know that what we have before us is an image, is meant to show somebody to us. And this is itself something that has to be learnt. There are, apparently, even today peoples, tribes, in which the idea of an image has no place. Show one of these people a photo or a painting of Fred and he will not see an image of Fred at all, but just a jumble of blobs, lines and colours. To see an image as an image is not something that we can all do naturally; it is something we have to learn, to pick up from the society in which we live. We learn to use images in the same way that we learn how to use knives and forks, or road signs. When we see an image as an image, we do so because we have learned to see in a particular way, to look at it and interpret it in the appropriate way.

What, then, is the appropriate way to look at an image like a photo or a painting? An image invites us to concentrate our attention on what it represents rather than on the substance of the image itself, to see it as representing and to look at it as if looking at what it shows us. If I am shown a photo of Fred and I say: 'It's a piece of stiff paper with squiggles and blobs on it', then I show by that response that I have no idea how to look at an image. Normally, the substance of the image itself, in this case the paper and the chemicals, is of no concern, and it is inappropriate to draw attention to it. I show that I understand what is going on if I say: 'It's a photo of Fred' or simply 'It's Fred'. And if you then say to me, 'Don't be silly. Of course it's not Fred; it's only a piece of paper', then you show that you don't know how to look at an image. Of course you can insist that you are right, that it is after all only a piece of paper with marks on it, but still that doesn't mean that I am not perfectly right in saying that it is Fred, for I am talking within the context of the image, a context that you do not understand, or refuse to understand. There are situations where the answer 'It's a bit of paper with marks on it' would be quite appropriate. You might imagine a teacher giving a course on the elements of photography saying just something like that in order to make a particular point about some photo or other, or about photos in general. But in other situations, and in our society normally much more common situations, it would be appropriate rather to say something like 'It's a photo of Fred' or simply 'It's Fred'. In fact, it is the second, simpler response that is normally the more appropriate. If somebody asked: 'What's on the table?' I might answer 'It's a photo of Fred'; but that is a case when it is not clear that the thing in question is a photo. More often, the question is not 'What is that?' but 'Who is that?' And then the res-

ponse: 'It's Fred' is the right one. Not: 'It's a photo of Fred' and certainly not: 'It's a piece of paper with lots of marks on'.

And the same goes for a painted image, a portrait. The artist might say 'This is a portrait of Fred', and in saying that he invites us to see Fred when we look at the painting. If we already understand that it is a portrait, have learned what portraits are and how to look at them, then all the artist need say to us is: 'This is Fred'. Except in very special circumstances, say in art school, it would be quite wrong, it would show a failure of perception or of learning to say of a portrait: 'This is a piece of canvas with blobs of paint on it'. If somebody does say that every time he is confronted with a portrait, if he says: 'That's not Fred, it's just a piece of painted canvas', then he does not know how to see portraits; he does not understand the invitation of portraits, as of images generally, to see them as presenting, showing people, and to see people when you look at them. Confronted with a portrait of Fred, one man may say: 'It's Fred' while another may say: 'It's a piece of canvas with paint on it'. It is not that the first man has access to some secret information that the second does not share; it is not that he has inspected the canvas more closely and made some further discovery about it; it is not that he is stupidly mistaken in thinking that a piece of canvas is a human being. It is that he has learned a mode of perception that the other has not; he has learned that a portrait carries an invitation to look at it in a particular way, and he is ready to respond to that invitation.

It will, I hope, be very obvious where all this is leading. Just as a photo is an image, just as a painted portrait is an image, so too is Jesus, and specifically the image of God. If somebody says to us: 'This is a picture, an image of Fred', he is inviting us to look at the piece of paper or of canvas and to see Fred. So, when scripture and tradition say to us: 'Jesus is the image of God' they are inviting us to look at Jesus and to see God. If we are presented with a photo of Fred, among the proper responses in most situations is: 'That's Fred'. In the same way, among the proper responses in most circumstances when we are confronted with Jesus is: 'That's God'. In some circumstances it is appropriate to say of an image of Fred: 'It's a piece of paper with lines and squiggles on' or 'It's a piece of canvas with blobs of paint on'. In the same way, it is sometimes appropriate to say of Jesus, the image of God: 'That's a man'. If we say of Jesus: 'He is God' and others say: 'Don't be silly. He is not God; he is just a man', it is not that we have access to some secret information that they do not share; it is not that we have looked at Jesus more closely than they have and have discovered his divinity through our minute examination; neither is it that we are hopelessly deluded, that we have stupidly mistaken a

human being for God. It is rather that we have learned to look at Jesus in a particular way that they have not. We have learned from scripture and tradition to see Jesus as bearing the invitation to look at him and see God, and we are ready to respond to the invitation.

It seems to me that if we take seriously the idea of Jesus as the image of God, in the way I have been suggesting, then we avoid the difficulties I mentioned earlier involved in talking of the incarnation in terms of the union of two natures. If we talk in terms of images rather than of natures, then we can make good and *obvious* sense of the doctrine that Jesus is both God and man. That sense is this: in some contexts it is appropriate to say when confronted with Jesus: 'He is God', just as it is sometimes appropriate when confronted with a photo to say: 'It's Fred'. It is sometimes appropriate to say of Jesus: 'He is the image of God', just as it is sometimes appropriate to say of the photo: 'It's a photo of Fred'. And it is sometimes appropriate to say of Jesus: 'He is a man', just as it is sometimes appropriate to say of the photo: 'It's a piece of paper with lines and blobs on'. Just as with a photo there is no question of combining two incompatible natures, no problem of how one and the same thing can be both a square piece of paper impregnated with chemicals and at the same time a human being; so there is no problem how Jesus can manage at the same time to be both God and man, both immortal, omnipotent, and so on, and yet mortal, weak, and the rest. To be able to call Jesus 'God' with any degree of intellectual honesty, we do not have to know how to reconcile the apparently incompatible; we have to learn that there are different ways of looking at Jesus. Just as we can look at a photo either as a piece of paper or so as, looking at it, to see Fred, so we can look at Jesus either as a man or so as, looking at him, to see God. We have to learn both to say with Pilate: 'Behold the man' and to confess with Thomas: 'My Lord and my God'.

This way of putting the matter has a couple of other advantages over the traditional one which are worth mentioning briefly. First, it does justice to our feeling that to confess Jesus as God requires insight. It is not that we just have to inspect the man Jesus more closely, to perform a kind of metaphysical autopsy on him, to discover his divinity, as the language of natures would suggest. His divinity does not lie alongside or underneath his humanity waiting to be discovered by the appropriate techniques. Rather, to see the divinity of Jesus requires faith, the transformation of our perspective or way of looking.

Second, if we speak of the incarnation in terms of the union of two natures, it is not clear how and whether the divinity affects the humanity. If it affects it at all, then the autonomy and integrity

of the humanity is impaired, and in particular the freedom of Jesus's human will seems endangered. But if there is no such relation, if it makes no difference at all to Jesus's human nature that he is also divine, then Jesus could be any kind of man at all, even the worst of sinners, and still be God. But if we think of Jesus rather as the image of God, then the problem does not arise. We can say that Jesus could not have been just any kind of man because an image, to be a convincing image, must have certain features which correspond in an obvious way with those of the original. If the portrait of Fred is to be recognisable as Fred, then the blobs and lines of paint on the canvas must resemble Fred's features; the portrait must show what Fred is like. If it does not, then it will not be taken seriously as a portrait of Fred, it will be rejected. And so with Jesus. He is the image of God, and we accept him as such, because of the kind of man he is; certain features of Jesus correspond in an obvious way to features of God; he shows what God is like. If that were not so, if he were a villain, then we could not take him seriously as the image of God; and if the church or anybody else still insisted, like a bad portrait-painter, that he was the image of God, then we would have to say that he was a very poor image. This raises the question what our grounds are for claiming that Jesus is a good image, indeed the very image, of God. But that question is not strictly relevant here. All I am saying here is that, given that we do in fact as Christians make such a claim, that claim can be used to explain the sense of our belief that Jesus is both God and man; and further, that if we do this we avoid some of the difficulties involved in explaining it in terms of the union of divine and human natures.

But Jesus is not a photographic or a painted image; he is a man, the living, moving image of God, and it seems to me we can approach more closely what we mean when we say that he is God incarnate by looking at a context in which we regularly encounter human images: the theatre. An actor performing on stage presents to us a character; in looking at the actor we see the character he is playing. I can perfectly properly point to somebody on stage and say: 'That's Hamlet', and if you countered: 'No it isn't. It's Fred Smith, the famous tragic actor', that would show that you did not know how to look at a theatrical performance. In the performance, Fred Smith *is* Hamlet. He speaks and acts in the person of Hamlet. It is important to note that he is not *pretending* to be Hamlet; there is no deception going on. There is sometimes deception in the theatre, as when Viola pretends to be a man in *Twelfth Night*, but the pretence is directed at other characters in the play, not at us, the audience. And if the actor is not pretending to be Hamlet, neither are we pretending that he is. Neither are we 'suspending

disbelief'. What we do when we go to the theatre is to recognise that we are going to take part in a particular kind of activity, and we have learned the correct way to look at what is going on in that context, just as we have learned the right way to look at a photo or a painting. The right way of seeing in this context normally involves, not pretending or 'suspending disbelief', but letting ourselves be taken up by what is going on in front of us, letting ourselves be drawn into it, affected by it. We do not watch passively, but ourselves take active roles. This is normally part of what is involved in seeing the characters in a play when we see the actors who are playing them. If Fred Smith is playing Hamlet, then, if we see properly, when we see Fred Smith, we see Hamlet.

It is important that this is just as true when actors are not playing human characters. In morality plays, virtues and vices are personified: one actor might play Chastity, another Gluttony, and so on. In one sense virtues and vices are invisible, and they are certainly not human beings. Nevertheless, in the context of the play, they are visible, and if Fred Smith is playing Gluttony, then, if we know how to see properly, when we see Fred Smith we see Gluttony.

At the last supper, Jesus says to his disciples: 'I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also; henceforth you know him and have seen him'. Philip says to him: 'Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied'. Jesus answers: 'Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:6ff.). These last words are the crucial ones; if we have learned to see Jesus properly, then in seeing him we see God. And this is despite the fact that God cannot be seen, that God is not a human being, not an individual at all. We can see God when we look at Jesus just as we can see Gluttony when we look at Fred Smith. In Jesus, the invisible becomes visible. So John can not only give us the words of Jesus: 'He who has seen me has seen the Father', but also say in the prologue without contradicting himself: 'No one has ever seen God; the only Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known' (1:18).

I don't want to say that Jesus was just acting, just playing at being God. There are many differences between Jesus and an actor. Most importantly, the actor himself puts himself in a special context when he gives a performance; he goes to the theatre, goes on stage, puts on special clothes, says words devised especially for that context, performs actions appropriate only in that context. Afterwards, he goes away, puts his feet up and has a drink; now, he is no longer Gluttony, but just plain Fred Smith. In the life of

Jesus there is no special context separate from his normal life; he has not learned any special words and actions that he would not normally speak and do. His whole life is a display of God. My purpose in using the analogy with the theatre is to bring out the element of display or presentation of God in the life of Jesus, and to show how this can help us understand how it is possible for us to say two apparently incompatible things of him: both that he is God and that he is man.

But if there is no special context for Jesus, no special place he has to go to give his 'performance', no lines he has to learn, yet there must be some such context for us. There must be for us some equivalent of going to the theatre. We have to learn the appropriate way of seeing Jesus if we are to be able to make sense of the idea that he is God, if we are to be able to see God in seeing him. It is tempting to say that what enables us to do that is faith – faith, not as the ability to believe unlikely or unintelligible propositions, but as a way of seeing: we can say Jesus is God because we see with the eyes of faith.

This is surely right, but it moves too quickly. I would like to press a little further the analogy with the theatre. Seeing properly in the theatre requires, as I said, an active participation on the part of the audience; it is not enough to be passive spectators, watching the action as if observing something alien. It involves allowing ourselves to be caught up in the action, affected by what we see. In fact, this comes so naturally to most of us that we hardly notice it as anything special; just think of the way we react sometimes even to television programmes despite television being a very impersonal medium. We can laugh with the characters in a comedy or be horrified and terrified by a late night film, even though we are securely in our own homes. A writer or producer for the stage has to set out deliberately to alienate us if he doesn't want us to let the play work on us in that way, if he wants us to bear in mind all the time that we are watching a work of fiction being performed by actors.

We can say that in a similar way to perceive Jesus as God, to understand his 'performance' properly, we have to let ourselves be taken up by it, affected by it; we must let it work upon us. That is, we must allow ourselves to be changed, transformed by it. For we are not dealing here with a mere evening at the theatre, after all. Jesus's 'performance' is not a performance at all but his life, and we as Christians are confronted by Jesus for the whole of our lives. What has to happen to us if we are to see Jesus properly is not just a temporary change of perspective but a change of vision that affects our whole lives. The transformation of ourselves, then, and our seeing Jesus properly, as God, go hand in hand. So Paul conjoins the two when he writes to the Corinthians: God, he says,

'has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ'; and 'we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another' (2 Cor 4:6; 3:18). The first epistle of John makes a similar point, though it puts the whole process in the future: 'Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is' (3:2). So the perception of Christ as he is, as God, means our transformation. And Paul and John also tell us here in what that transformation consists: it consists in becoming like him. This is the way in which we must let the life of Jesus work upon us. We understand that Jesus is God, we believe in the incarnation, to the extent that our lives match his life. It is impossible for us to believe it just by reading it in a book; it is not a piece of information such as we might find in a biology textbook. So the doctrine of the incarnation is an example of a general truth in theology: that theology, Christian doctrine, imparts to us spiritual truths, truths that cannot be understood or appreciated by us except to the extent that we have the right spiritual vision; that is, except to the extent that we ourselves live Christian lives.

I have attempted something very limited here. What I have said amounts to nothing like a theology of the incarnation. It is at most only a preface to or a preparation for such a theology. I have simply tried to make reasonably intelligible the central Christian doctrine that Jesus is both God and man, to show one way this might be done so as to enable us to say that the man Jesus is God without becoming prey to confusion, dishonesty or mental cramp – to enable us to say it if we want to. I have not at all touched on the question why anybody should want to say such a thing, why it might be at all interesting or exciting to say that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. I have not talked about the consequences the doctrine of the incarnation has for our view of ourselves, the world and God. That is where the real theology lies. All I have tried to do is to show that such a doctrine is possible.