

The Beauty of Jesus—1

*Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me
All His wonderful passion and purity
Oh, Thou Spirit divine, all my nature refine
Till the beauty of Jesus be seen in me.*

This old song is now rarely sung. It is probably also almost completely unknown by most Australian Christians under 50 years old. There is no particular reason why this should not be the case; musical fashions change rapidly. But the matter I wish to address concerns the substance of this little song. I want to ask us if we are consumed with what Jonathan Edwards called ‘The Excellency of Christ’.¹

One thing is clear: if anyone does not love the LORD, let him be accursed (1 Cor. 16:22²). This declaration seems drawn from Deuteronomy 6:5³ and reflects the truth of the covenant people, namely, that for them obedience to the law, obedience rooted in their experience of redemption (Deut. 5:1–6:3), was to be understood as the response of love to love (Deut. 7:7–8). Outside of this is only the curse. On the other hand, to love the LORD is to know and live in the blessing (cf. Deut. 30:19–20). Of course, to love the LORD is also to love one another (Lev. 19:18), which includes the ‘alien’ within Israel (Lev. 19:34). Interestingly, the Greek text of Psalm 116:1, following the Hebrew order, instead of representing the more familiar English translation, ‘I love the LORD’, has ‘I love, because the Lord has heard my voice . . .’. It is quickly obvious that Israel was to be the community of love, loving the LORD and each other.

When we turn to the New Testament, and that meaning also ourselves as Christians, we see the same thing, with one modification. That is that for us ‘the LORD’ of Israel, *Yahweh*, is now known in a new way. 1 Corinthians 8:6 puts it:

... yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

In Deuteronomy, Moses said: ‘Hear O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD’. Paul responds, in the light of all that has happened in Christ by saying that our God is ‘the Father’, and the LORD, *Yahweh*, of Israel is now known in the person of Jesus Christ, Jesus the Jewish Messiah. This understanding is the result of the action of the Holy Spirit, so that ‘no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit’ (1 Cor. 12:3). The implications of submission to his rule, his lordship, being declared are not being

¹ In *The Works of Jonathan Edwards—vol. 1*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, (1834) 1979, pp. 680–9. cf. ‘Christ [is] the very essence of all delights and pleasures, the very soul and substance of them. As all the rivers are gathered into the ocean, which is the congregation or meeting- place of all the waters in the world: so Christ is that ocean in which all true delights and pleasures meet . . .’ John Flavel (1628-1691), Sermon XII from *The Method of Grace*, in *The Whole Works of the Reverend Mr. John Flavel*, v. II, London: J. Mathews, 1799, p. 215.

² Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version or are my own translation or paraphrases.

³ I understand the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4) to lie behind Cor. 8:6. The only difference would be that in Deut. 6:4 the Greek has ἀγαπήσεις whereas here Paul uses the less common (for him, elsewhere only at Titus 3:15) φιλεῖ. John seems to use both words synonymously (see John 21:15–18, also, especially, John 3:35; 5:20). If there are distinctions being made they are not always immediately obvious. But see Richard C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids (1880), pp. 41–4.

denied in this, but first there is Jesus the man⁴, who is Jesus the Lord of Israel and of all creation. And there is something about this which caused Paul to insist that ‘the whole spiritual blessing’ (Eph. 1:3) is to be found and known in him. And what is more, that means we love this Lord, as Israel was expected to love the LORD their God.

It is not surprising, then, that Peter says:

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy (1 Pet. 1:8).⁵

Peter writes to people who did not live anywhere close to Palestine (1 Pet. 1:1), yet they *love* Jesus Christ!

We must recognise that pastorally we may face situations where the people we teach are likely to be more confused than were Peter’s readers. Generally they will have been told that Jesus is really God in the flesh. They will hear phrases such as ‘Jesus came to earth . . .’ and believe that all that Jesus accomplished was on the basis of his deity. Such beliefs are bolstered by the arguments of those who engaged in the discussions concerning the incarnation that were in vogue in the middle of the twentieth century.⁶ Then, and I know I am generalising, Evangelicals came out of their previous isolation and began to take the argument to the liberals (modernists) who had hitherto dominated. Evangelicals began to display their scholarship, as evidenced by the *New Bible Commentary* (1953) and the *New Bible Dictionary* (1962) and began to argue powerfully and cogently for the truth of the incarnation of the Word, over against the various ‘quests’ for the historical Jesus which had reduced Jesus to a person to be admired and perhaps copied, but hardly to be loved. But the result was that the true humanity of Jesus was not as fully presented and so did not grip the affections. And often, although the scholarship has moved on, the concern is still in terms of the deity of Christ.

Peter knew Jesus *the man*. So did John, as we read in 1 John 1:1–3:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—²this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—³we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

They knew that the man Jesus was not ‘just a man’ but was born with a unique relationship with God; he was the ‘only begotten (*monogenēs*) son (John 1:18)’, whose conception was also quite strange: he ‘was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary’.⁷ But he was a man: ‘The Word was God’ and ‘the Word became flesh’ (John 1:1, 14). The gospels insist on this: ‘touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have’ (Luke 24:39).

⁴ I would argue that every reference to ‘Jesus’ in the New Testament is to the man Jesus and not, for example, to any ‘Christ of faith’ or such conceptual person.

⁵ 1 Peter 1:8 forms the basis for Jonathan Edwards’ *Treatise Concerning The Religious Affections*.

⁶ For a ‘feel’ of the Evangelical position, read Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1994 and the biographies of John Stott (Timothy Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: The Making of a Leader* and *John Stott: A Global Ministry*, IVP, Leicester, 1999, 2001) and James Packer (Alister McGrath, *To Know and Serve God A Biography of James I. Packer*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1997). I want to stress that ‘Evangelical’ does not refer to any particular outward forms of ‘church’.

⁷ The Apostles’ Creed.

So what was it that made them love Jesus? What is ‘the beauty of Jesus’? The reference is plainly not merely to his bodily appearance: as Isaiah says:

... he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him (Isa. 53:2).

This may be an anticipation of the suffering he would endure, but it does imply that it was not some personal charm which was attractive. Writing to Christian wives, Peter warns against that sort of appeal (1 Pet. 3:3–4).

To love Jesus is our response to him as he is *revealed* to us. It is an evoked response and not a self-generated response, even though we are obligated to habituate it. If this is so, then we need to examine the nature of Jesus’ humanity. ‘Deep calls to deep’⁸ and so we must ask concerning the depths of Jesus which call out such deep responsive love. The Spirit who reveals ‘the deep things of God’ (1 Cor. 2:10) does so by showing us the deep things of the Son (John 16:14) so that we may participate in them. He leads us *in* (Gk. *en*) all the truth (John 16:13).

THE WORD BECAME FLESH

As I indicated above, ‘The Word was God’, and the New Testament gives not even a hint that his deity ceased at his incarnation. It may be surprising, though, that there are probably only three instances in the New Testament where Jesus is actually called God. They are John 1:1; 20:28 and Hebrews 1:8. There are other possible statements which point in that direction, but they all are open to other interpretations and we must be honest and recognise that.⁹ More common, though, are the numerous references to Jesus in terms which either allude to various Old Testament statements about God or which are used in parallel to statements where God is spoken of. An example of the latter would be Revelation 1:8 and 21:6 which use the title ‘the Alpha and the Omega’ to refer to God, and Revelation 22:12 where it refers to Jesus.

An interesting example of human logic accepting the truth of the deity of Christ and then imposing the conclusion on the use of scripture, is in Mark 2:1–12. Addressing the man let down through the roof, Jesus said ‘Son, your sins are forgiven’, which provoked the hostile response of some of the scribes. Their fixed position was: ‘It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’ Therefore, if we do not accept the accusation of blasphemy, the conclusion must be that Jesus is God. But that was not a conclusion accepted by Jesus himself. He said that the healing of the man indicated ‘that *the Son of Man* has authority on earth to forgive sins’.¹⁰

‘The Word became flesh’ (John 1:14) and as the Lamb of God ‘takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29), but this translates into ‘no one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up’ (John 3:13–14). The only begotten Son of God (*monogenēs*) of John 3:16 is ‘the Son of Man’. And there is more to it than mere titles, since it is the Son of Man who forgives our sins.

The ‘Son of Man’ (Heb. *ben adam*) is a phrase or title which occurs in three contexts in the Old Testament. The first is as a form of address to the prophet Ezekiel,

⁸ I suspect that the intention of Ps. 42:7 is different from my use of this phrase.

⁹ See Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*, Paulist Press, New York, 1994, pp. 171–195, and Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 1992.

¹⁰ For a fuller discussion see Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1994, pp. 279–94.

and carries the simple implication that the prophet is not God. Hence the NRSV uses the word ‘mortal’. The second context is found in Psalm 8:4, where the reference is to created Man and *ben adam* stands in parallelism with *enosh*, which also means ‘man’ (see also Num. 23:19). In this context the contrast is not between mere human weakness and God’s majesty and power¹¹ but points to the high exaltation of the *ben adam*. It is in this way that Hebrews 2:6–9 uses the psalm.

There is a contrast in Hebrews 2, but it is between the ‘not yet’ of the high standing of the *ben adam* and the ‘already seen’ of Jesus (2:8–9). And it is this contrast that leads us to the third context. That is in Daniel 7:9–14.

As I watched,
thrones were set in place,
and an Ancient One took his throne,
his clothing was white as snow,
and the hair of his head like pure wool;
his throne was fiery flames,
and its wheels were burning fire.
¹⁰ A stream of fire issued
and flowed out from his presence.
A thousand thousands served him,
and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him.
The court sat in judgment,
and the books were opened.

¹¹ I watched then because of the noise of the arrogant words that the horn was speaking. And as I watched, the beast was put to death, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. ¹² As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

¹³ As I watched in the night visions,
I saw one like a human being [*ben adam*]
coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient One
and was presented before him.

¹⁴ To him was given dominion
and glory and kingship,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that shall not pass away,
and his kingship is one
that shall never be destroyed.

The context is that of fearful world chaos. Hebrews 2:8 summarises it well—we do not yet see all things in submission to men and women (v. 8). But then ‘one like a Son of Man’ is presented before the throne, and all the lost dominion, glory and kingship is given to him and will not and cannot be taken away. He is king and none can successfully oppose him. The significance of this cannot be underestimated¹², since the passage continues:

¹¹ Contra McGrath (*Christian Theology*, p. 278), who says the use is ‘to emphasize the contrast between the lowliness and frailty of human nature and the elevated status or permanence of God and the angels (Numbers 23:19; Psalm 8:14 [*sic*]).

¹² Christians in Australia may be a little unimpressed, sedated perhaps by our relative social comfort, but, at the time of writing this paper, Christians in Nigeria, Iraq and Iran, Syria, Egypt, India and many other places are living in constant fear for their lives. I have been with believers as they (we) have had to flee the imminent arrival of the police. We may well appreciate the suggestion that Daniel was written at the time of the persecution under Antiochus IV (c. 215–64 BC).

²¹ As I looked, this horn made war with the holy ones and was prevailing over them,
²² until the Ancient One came; then judgment was given for the holy ones of the Most High,
and the time arrived when the holy ones gained possession of the kingdom...
²⁶ Then the court shall sit in judgment,
and his [the arrogant horn's] dominion shall be taken away,
to be consumed and totally destroyed.
²⁷ The kingship and dominion
and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven
shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High;
their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom,
and all dominions shall serve and obey them.” (Dan. 7:21–22, 26–27)

The coming of the Son of Man means that the dominion of ‘other lords besides thee’ (Isa. 26:13) will be broken and the saints will have their dominion restored.¹³

In the Son of Man, who is Jesus, the Word become flesh, there is more than just the restoration of Israel; there is the restoration of all humanity. Psalm 8:4 links ‘the Son of man’ with created man as does Hebrews 2. But Hebrews, as we have seen, notes that the dominion and glory given to the first Adam is now only seen in Jesus, whom Paul calls ‘the last Adam’ and ‘the second man’ (1 Cor. 15:45–47).

This contrast between the two Adams is vital, because in the first Adam all die, whereas in the last Adam all will be made alive (1 Cor. 5:22). Paul’s ‘adamology’ is strong. Romans 5:12–21 sets out the way sin and death came through one man and justification and life came through one man (Rom. 5:18). We are justified because we have been baptised into Christ and his death (Rom. 6:1ff.), and because in his death ‘our old man was crucified with him’¹⁴ so that ‘the body of death’, i.e. the Adamic remnant, can no longer control our destiny (Rom. 6:6–7¹⁵). Our destiny has been determined by us being chosen in Christ (the Lord Jesus Christ) before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:3–4).

At last there is an Adam who does not pass death on to those in him. Indeed, in the last Adam we see ‘new creation’ (2 Cor. 5:17) and we are participants in it (Heb. 6:5) because we are participants in him. And because he was raised from the dead, we too have a hope of resurrection. Stupid questions concerning the kind of body are out (1 Cor. 15:35). We are anticipating something far greater than new earthly bodies.

So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable.⁴³ It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.⁴⁴ It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.⁴⁵ Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.⁴⁶ But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual.⁴⁷ The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven.⁴⁸ As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven.⁴⁹ Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.

We are anticipating having bodies like Christ’s (Phil. 3:21¹⁶); his body is now heavenly. It has all the characteristics of the dwelling place of God. Our Adam has ascended to the right hand of the majesty on high (Heb. 1:3) and his body is now

¹³ NIV has in verse 27, ‘His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom . . . obey him’.

¹⁴ It is sad that such rich understanding is obscured by the modern tendency to replace ‘man’ with ‘self’ here and also in Eph. 4:22–24; Col. 3:9–10.

¹⁵ Verse 6, ‘so that the body of sin might be destroyed’: the verb καταργέω does not mean ‘to obliterate’ but ‘to render inoperative, invalid’ cf. Heb. 2:14 etc.

¹⁶ Note, too, the allusion to Psalm 8.

‘spiritual’ (v. 44) which does not mean incorporeal. It does mean it is qualitatively different from that which is subject to decay.

Obviously, such a hope needs to be put in language which is easy to understand, but clichéd expressions such as ‘we’ll to heaven when we die’ will be less helpful than the way the apostles have given it to us.¹⁷ Hebrews 10:19–25 exhorts us:

Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus,²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh),²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God,²² let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.²³ Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.²⁴ And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Therefore:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us,² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

The man Jesus is now seated at the right hand of God—and we are with *him* (Eph. 2:6)! ‘We are God’s children now what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed we will be like him, for we will see him as he is’ (1 John 3:2). This is the transforming hope given to us; ‘Christ in [us], the hope of glory’ (Col. 1:27), ‘Christ Jesus our hope’ (1 Tim. 1:1).

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¹⁷ I have been to funerals where the best that could be offered to grieving believers was more akin to a vision of the deceased presently running through the Elysian Fields than to the picture in Revelation (as well as Isaiah and 2 Peter) of the new heavens and new earth, under the loving rule of the last Adam and his bride.