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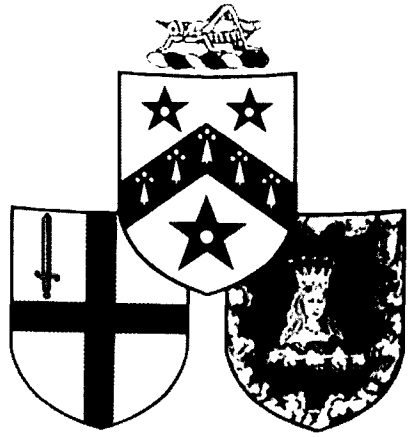

LIVING THEOLOGY

Lecture 2

LIVING WITH JESUS

(First of two lectures)

by

THE MOST REVD PROFESSOR RICHARD HOLLOWAY
Gresham Professor of Divinity

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II

Living with Jesus - 1

Christianity has been described as a religion for slaves, and this was the main reason that Nietzsche despised it. He claimed that what he called 'slave morality' emerged from the resentful revolt of the weak against the strength of the noble and their ethic of ruthlessness. It is an insightful criticism, and I'd like to explore it briefly. Nietzsche was an etymologist, a student of language and its origins, and he was certain that many terms in common speech derived their original meaning from the ancient social order of the warrior aristocrat. The word 'noble', for instance, with its dual use, suggesting both an adjective meaning fine, admirable, and a noun conveying the idea of an elevated person, he compared with the word 'base', which suggests the opposite, both adjectivally and nominally. Nietzsche developed an interesting idea from this difference. He said that in early societies the warrior class created standards of value, of good and bad, by their own will: what they willed, how they acted, was good, hence the tag 'noble'; what was furthest from their way was bad, hence the tag 'base'. Here are his own words:

> 'The essential characteristic of a good and healthy aristocracy is that it experiences itself *not* as a function (whether of the monarchy or of the commonwealth) but as their *meaning* and highest justification - that it therefore accepts with a good conscience the sacrifice of untold human beings who, *for its sake*, must be reduced and lowered to incomplete human beings, to slaves, to instruments. Their fundamental faith simply has to be that society must *not* exist for society's sake but only as the foundation and scaffolding on which a choice type of being is able to raise itself to its higher task and to a higher state of *being (cf. the outlook of the heroes of the Iliad)* - comparable to those sun-seeking vines of Java - they are called *Sipo Matador* - that so long and so often enclasp an oak tree with their tendrils until eventually, high above it but supported by it, they can unfold their crowns in the open light and display their happiness'.[1]

For Nietzsche, the Roman ideal was the greatest exemplification of this warrior morality of power. He had an enormous admiration for these exemplars of the will to live, with their capacity for ruthlessness, their ability to be cruel, not for its own sake, but in order to keep their place at the top of the tree. This drive to lord it over others clearly has its origins in the sheer will to live and rule that marks the dominant male in the animal species. There is an obvious line between the warlike behaviour of the alpha male among primates, who have to battle to achieve and maintain supremacy, and the warrior leaders in early societies who lived by conquest and assertion. There is a marvellous passage in George Steiner's, *Errata*, which perfectly captures this warrior ethic and its sublime cruelty. He describes how his father read to him a translation of Homer's *Iliad* from Book XXI, and he continues:

> 'Crazed by the death of his beloved Patroclus, Achilles is butchering the fleeing Trojans. Nothing can impede his homicidal fury. One of Priam's sons crosses his path. The wretched Lycaon has just returned from Lemnos to help defend his father's imperilled city. Earlier, Achilles had captured him and sold him into slavery at Lemnos, thus ironically consigning him to safety. But Lycaon is back. Now the appalled youth recognises the blind horror storming at him'.

Steiner reads what happens next from Robert Fagle's version of the Iliad:

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[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil, from, What is Noble, section 258,* Basic Writings of Nietzsche, The Modern Library, New York, 1992, p, 392

"...He ducked, ran under the hurl
And seized Achilles' knees as the spear shot past his back
and stuck in the earth, still starved for human flesh.
And begging now, one hand clutching Achilles' knees,
the other gripping the spear, holding for dear life,
Lycaon burst out with a winging prayer: 'Achilles!
I grasp your knees - respect me, show me mercy!
I am your suppliant, Prince, you must respect me!
And it's just twelve days that I've been home in Troy - all I've suffered!
But now again some murderous fate has placed me in your hands, your prisoner twice over - Father Zeus must hate me, giving me back to you! Ah, to a short life you bore me, mother, mother...
Listen, this too, take it to heart, I beg you -
don't kill me! I'm not from the same womb as Hector,
Hector who killed your friend, your strong, gentle friend!'"

Steiner goes on, 'At which line, my father stopped with an air of considered helplessness.... What, in God's name, happens next?' His father took up the original Greek text and, placing his son's finger at the place, translated what came next from the mouth of Achilles:

'"...'Fool,
don't talk to me of ransom. No more speeches.
Before Patroclus met his day of destiny, true,
it warmed my heart a bit to spare some Trojans:
droves I took alive and auctioned off as slaves.
But now not a single Trojan flees his death,
not one the gods hand over to me before your gates,
none of all the Trojans, sons of Priam least of all!
Come, friend, you too must die. Why moan about it so?
Even Patroclus died, a far, far better man than you.
And look, you see how handsome and powerful I am?
The son of a great man, the mother who gave me life
a deathless goddess. But even for me, I tell you,
death and the strong force of fate are waiting.
There will come a dawn or sunset or high noon
when a man will take my life in battle too -
flinging a spear perhaps
or whipping a deadly arrow of his bow'."

Whereupon, Achilles slaughters the kneeling Lycaon'. Steiner continues, 'I recall graphically the rush of wonder, of a child's consciousness troubled and uncertainly ripened, by that single word 'friend' in the midst of the death-sentence: 'Come, *friend*, you too must die'. And by the enormity, so far as I could gauge it, of the question: 'Why moan about it so?'"[2]

In that passage we hear, in Achilles, the authentic voice of heroic morality, the ethic of the strong men who create good and bad by their own choices, and are not weakened by self-doubt and the bite of conscience. There is another passage in Nietzsche that makes this same point, about the strong man's ability to forget and just get on with confronting the challenges of life:

> 'To be incapable of taking one's enemies, one's accidents, even one's misdeeds seriously for very long - that is the sign of strong, full natures in whom there is an excess of power to form, to mould, to recuperate and to forget (a good example of this is Mirabeau, who had no memory for insults and vile actions done him and was unable

[2] George Steiner, *Errata*, Phoenix, London, 1997, pp13-14.

> to forgive simply because he - forgot). Such a man shakes off with a *single* shrug many vermin that eat deep into others; here alone genuine "love of one's enemies" is possible - supposing it to be possible at all on earth. How much reverence has a noble man for his enemies! - and such reverence is a bridge to love'. [3]

For Nietzsche, the origin, what he called the genealogy, of morals and the guilty conscience comes in the transition to more organised social systems from this state of instinctive ascendance by the strong over all that opposed them in the struggle of life. The most fundamental change in human history occurred when the ascendant warrior, who defined reality and value by his own will, found himself enclosed within the walls of society and of peace. The cruel energies of the strong were then turned in upon themselves. Instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly turn inward. Society created instruments of control, mainly the exercise of punishment, to protect itself against the old instincts, and thereby turned these instincts back against their possessors. 'Hostility, cruelty, joy in persecuting, in attacking, in change, in destruction - all this turned against the possessors of such instincts: *that* is the origin of the "bad conscience"'.[4] Of course, the lordly and warlike instincts of original man were not entirely expunged by the emergence of political society; they evolved into the right to rule of the aristocracy or nobility, seen at its most complete in the Roman ideal, with its strong sense of its own right to dominate and order the world. There was a glorious cruelty about such absolute self-confidence. At its best it brought order to chaotic societies, but at a great cost to those at the bottom of the system. This is where the slave morality, which Nietzsche despised, emerged from, abetted by the spirit of Christianity, which substituted *pity* for the cruelty that characterised the ethos of the warrior system. Once this new ethos became dominant, it added a further twist to the bite of conscience, because it imposed a sense of divine disapproval upon the instinctive life itself. This is the origin of the ancient accusation against Christianity that it is against life and in love with death, the death of the passions, the death of ambition, the death of the drive of nature in all its exultant intensity. The further accusation is made that, since these drives never can be killed, they are merely covered in the gorgeous robes of priestly Christianity. The priest replaces the warrior, or becomes the warrior's adversary, and replaces the culture of ascendant cruelty with a culture of guilt and consolation.

If we accept Nietzsche's analysis, however broadly, is it fair to associate Jesus with slave morality, with this depressive and resentful reaction of the weak against the strong? It is easy to romanticise the morality of the strong, the morality of the lion. Towards the end of his life Karl Marx was asked by an American journalist to answer the question: 'What is?...to which...he replied: "Struggle!" At first it seemed as though I had heard the echo of despair', John Swinton, writes, 'but peradventure it was the law of life'.[5] It is true that in this universe of struggle it is the strong who overcome, the swift who win the race. There is even a glory about watching the lion bring down its prey in one of those nature films that so enthral and appal us. The difference between us and the magnificent instinctiveness of the lion is that we have become conscious of ourselves and the consequences of our actions, so our conscience begins to make cowards of us. When we contemplate the misery of the mass of humanity down the ages, we can be overwhelmed by pity, the emotion Nietzsche thought weakened the strong; but it can be an angry pity, a pity that girds us for a different kind of struggle, the struggle to transform the human community so that the triumph of the strong is no longer based upon the immisiration of the weak. This is also a kind of war that calls for warriors with fortitude, and Jesus was undoubtedly a man of courage and resistance. The question is, how was that resistance expressed? Dominic Crossan points out that in oppressive systems there is *always* resistance, overt and covert. He places Jesus on the borderline between the covert and overt arts of resistance to the system that oppressed the peasant class from which he came. He writes:

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[3] Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals, First essay, section 10*, op.cit.p.475
[4] ibid., *Second Essay, section 16, op.cit. pp.520-521.*
[5] Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx*, Fourth Estate, London 1999, p.383.

'What Jesus was doing is located exactly on the borderline between the covert and the overt arts of resistance. It was not, of course, as open as the acts of protesters, prophets, bandits, or messiahs. But it was more open than playing dumb, imagining revenge, or simply recalling Mosaic or Davidic ideals. His eating and healing were, in theory and practice, the precise borderline between private and public, covert and overt, secret and open resistance. But it was not less resistance for all of that'.[6] He did not preach armed rebellion; he did not call the people into the wilderness to wait for the supernatural intervention of the messiah who would cast down the mighty from their seats; what he set out to do was to build up the fragmented morale of a broken people, and to persuade them to live a life of resistance to the system that oppressed them, *by acting as if it had no real authority over them.* He followed the path of *organic* resistance, the building of a community that would strengthen the weak in their struggle against their dominators. This was the principle that, nineteen hundred years later, Marx would acknowledge, when he wrote: 'Social reforms are never carried out by the weakness of the strong; but always by the strength of the weak'.[7] Jesus was a strengthener of the weak. I shall come back to Marx, the last of the prophets; meanwhile, let me offer a summary at this point.

If we accept the Darwinian understanding of nature, we can see how inevitable and important the emergence of the warrior class was in the evolution of our own species. As human structures became more complex and settled, the instinctive cruelty of the warrior was internalised, and there emerged the reflective adult who is caught in the struggle between instinct and responsibility, between the will to power of the individual and the needs of the community. Here we begin to see the emergence of the challenge to naked power, and it is always made by those at the bottom of the social pyramid. One of the interesting contrasts with the Darwinian ethic of power is the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount, which turns the values of the warrior class on their head. Please note that I did not say that the ethic of Jesus destroyed the ethic of the warrior class; rather, it applied its courage and strength for the sake of the weak. From the beginning, therefore, Christianity has been profoundly counter-cultural, if by culture we mean the unchallenged ascendance of the instinctual life, leading to the domination by the strong of the weak. The thing to note about this revolt of the slaves is that it calls for immense courage, so Nietzsche was probably being intentionally perverse when he dismissed it; though we probably ought to concede that the church, as it became a power among other powers, merely replaced the honest domination of the strong with the covert domination of priestly Christendom. That, for our purposes tonight, is still far in the future; and anyway, everything human is ambiguous. From our point of view, the work of Jesus, as a figure of contradiction and resistance to oppressive power, has been crucial in human development; and I want to end today with a brief analysis of where we are in that process of development, and it gives me an excuse to bring Karl Marx into the discussion.

Marx was one of the most searching diagnosticians of the human condition. Dr Marx was a lousy therapist, and no society today really tries to follow his prescriptions; but his diagnosis of human social pathology is still powerful and searching. His main insights, like most brilliant perceptions, once you get hold of them, are startlingly simple. One of his central claims is that power always justifies itself, not necessarily by brute force, though it is rarely reluctant to do that, but by theories or ideas. That is why the ruling ideas in any era always justify the position of the ruling class, they are always used to legitimate the way things are done by the people in charge. And what they are in charge of does not, for the moment, matter: it can be anything, from a whole nation down to a university or a hospital or a school or a family. It is important to understand that this is not necessarily an accusatory insight, though it is a critical one. A moment's thought will show how obvious and necessary it is for any institution to be able to justify itself to itself, if it is to continue to operate effectively and not paralyse itself into critical gridlock. The importance of

[6] John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus*, HarperCollins, San Francisco, 1995, p.105.
[7] Wheen, op cit., p.14.

the Marxist insight is that, by helping us to understand how institutions work, it puts us in a better position to strive for their improvement, or, where necessary, their complete transformation.

Since it is easier to see this kind of thing operating elsewhere than in our own institutions; since it is easier, in the language of Jesus, to see the speck in our brother's eye rather than the beam that is in our own, let us look at some examples. Those of us who admire the sanity and moderation of the philosopher Aristotle, also have to acknowledge the fact that he developed a theoretical justification for slavery, because it was in the economic self-interest of the ruling class in ancient Greece, the class to which he belonged. Those of us who admire the sanity and moderation of the theologian Thomas Aquinas, himself a great lover of Aristotle, have to acknowledge that he gave divine sanction to absolute monarchy and serfdom, because it was in the economic self-interest of the leaders of 13th century Europe to do so. This attitude hung around for a long time in Christian theology, and was popularly expressed in Mrs Alexander's well-known hymn,

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them high or lowly,
And ordered their estate.

The tell-tale phrase is 'God made them high or lowly', and it is important to note that there is no relativising comma after, 'God made them'. We are told that 'God made them high or lowly', established them in an order that was fixed and unalterable. In other words, the division of society into classes, into the rich and into the poor, is not an accident of history or the result of straightforward exploitation of the weak by the strong: it is the way *God* has designed things. Tough if you drew the short straw, but who are you to criticise your maker? This kind of philosophical justification of the right to dominate others is the homage that the guilty conscience pays to the protest of the weak against the oppressive privileges of the strong. The powerful no longer have the honest courage to assert themselves by virtue of their own strength; instead, they now have to justify themselves by theory. This is the real hypocrisy of powerful elites, and the thing that makes them morally inferior to the old warriors who ruled by power alone, and rejoiced in it.

If ruling elites always consolidate their position by creating doctrinal justifications for it, how does social evolution ever occur? Where does the impetus to move on and challenge accepted values come from? Hegel would have answered that the spirit of history itself, the mystical reality that animates the whole of time, evolves gradually towards human liberty, away from the rule of naked force. Marx borrowed the evolutionary idea, but said that it worked itself out through changes in the means of production, creating greater social complexity and an accompanying misery and despair that provoked challenge and change. Now, you don't have to buy the mysticism to recognise that history has, in fact, worked out like that. The point I want to derive from this is that, at some moment during the evolution of any human institution, a challenge is made against its ruling ideas by those who are its victims. I was shown a poignant reminder of this struggle for reform some time ago in a flat in the New Town of Edinburgh. When the owner was installing a new kitchen, he found a child's boot stuck up inside the chimney, a reminder that Victorian Edinburgh sent children up its chimneys to clean them. It was the legislation against child labour and the factory acts that put paid to that kind of exploitation, but the reforms were opposed every step of the way by those who profited from a system that virtually enslaved children. It is worth remembering here how opposed the Royal Colleges and the BMA were to the emergence of the National Health Service, so that, to quote his own words, Nye Bevan had to stuff the mouths of the doctors with gold in order to get the main elements of his reforms through.

When they are no longer able to maintain themselves simply by the application of the cruel will to power, ruling groups always disguise their own self-interest in the language of theory and

necessity. An interesting example is provided by Kenneth Galbraith in his book, *The Good Society*. He writes of modern global capitalism: 'There is the inescapable fact that the modern market economy accords wealth and distributes income in a highly unequal, socially adverse and also functionally damaging fashion'. Galbraith is well aware of the efficacy of the market economy at generating wealth, but he is concerned at the way those who benefit from the system refuse to address the damaging effects it has on the most vulnerable members of society. This was also one of Marx's insights. He wrote:

> 'Pauperism forms a condition of capitalist production, and of the capitalist development of wealth. It forms part of the incidental expenses of capitalist production: but capital usually knows how to transfer these from its own shoulders to those of the working class and the petty bourgeoisie'. In his recent biography of Marx, Francis Wheen comments on this claim: 'In the context Marx is referring not to the pauperisation of the entire proletariat but to the 'lowest sediment' of society - the unemployed, the ragged, the sick, the old, the widows and orphans. These as the incidental expenses which must be paid by the working population and the petty bourgeoisie. Can anyone deny that such an underclass still exists?'[8]

Most unprejudiced thinkers would acknowledge the failures as well as the successes of the global market economy. Few people today argue for its complete abolition. Increasingly, however, people are calling for a candid acknowledgement of its failures. 'We created the thing', they say, 'so why cant we learn to modify or correct it?' And we have started doing this in certain areas. We have learnt comparatively recently about the cost to the planet of unregulated industrial activity, so we no longer tolerate businesses that pollute our rivers and destroy the quality of the air we breathe. So far, however, we are uncertain about how to respond to the adverse effects of the global market economy on the human environment. All I am suggesting here is that, since self-interest always justifies itself to itself, we should work hard at trying to understand how the system that benefits us, consequentially damages or destroys many other lives in the process. The word Jesus used to describe this process is, in Greek, *metanoia*. It is usually, and misleadingly, translated as *repentance*, but it actually means a deep switch in thinking of the sort that racists have to go through, if they are to change their attitude towards people of other races; or misogynists, if they are to change their attitude towards women; or homophobes, if they are to shift their attitudes towards gay and lesbian people. All transformation starts here, in this painful process of radical re-appraisal. And the main fact we have to acknowledge is that the system that has made most of us more prosperous has plunged a significant proportion of our fellow citizens into poverty and despair.

One of the most tragically enduring facts of the history of human industry is that change in the methods of production always has a disproportionate impact upon the most vulnerable in society. History, like nature, seems to be indifferent to the pain it causes the weak. Think of the way the industrial revolution chewed up and spat out generations of the poor, before we learned how to protect them from its worst depredations. The paradox of our time is that it is the death of heavy industry that is now devastating the poor. Much of this is the consequence of global economic changes, coupled with the closure of pits and heavy industries. Heavy industry has been replaced by the knowledge economy, and we are only now trying to catch up with its consequential impact upon the poor and ill-educated. And, as if that were not enough, social change has combined with the economic revolution to destroy the cultural cohesion of the most vulnerable sections of our society. When the culture revolutions of the Sixties met and married the economic revolution of the Eighties, there was created a potent instrument of social change that has transformed the social landscape of Britain, and its most devastating impact has been upon young, ill-educated workless males. The institutions that once gave them a motive for responsible living, such as holding down a tough, demanding job with its own culture and

[8] Wheen, op.cit. p.300

honour, and presiding, however clumsily, within a marriage and family that was the primary context for the nurture and socialising of children, have largely disappeared, and with them the main ways the human community traditionally disciplined and integrated what the Prayer Book calls, 'the unruly wills and affections of sinful men'. This shattering of the structures that once gave the poor significance and purpose has created a breeding ground for despair that prompts the kind of destructive behaviour that continually reinforces their alienation. Whenever I refer to these facts in certain circles someone inevitably points out that no one in Britain is starving today, because absolute poverty has been eradicated. That may be technically true, but minority poverty has an exclusionary cruelty that is all its own. When most people were poor there was a camaraderie and cultural cohesion in belonging to the working class that gave them a strength and pride that transcended the structures that excluded them. In a society where most people are prosperous, and the poor are a minority whose culture has disintegrated, the pain and anger they feel is heightened. To use the Nietzschean vocabulary, these are the slaves of today's system, but they are so demoralised that their anger is turned mainly upon themselves. They represent the greatest moral challenge of our time.

We have come a long way from the heroic cruelty of Achilles, but the same dynamic of power is still at work in the human community. It presents to Christians the same challenge as of old, though in subtler forms. Those who follow the way of Jesus are still called to the same task of resistance and transformation. The instruments they use may be different, their weapons may be intellectual challenge and protest rather than the direct action that characterised revolutionary change in the past, but the end is the same - to uncover God's justice on earth.

Richard Holloway

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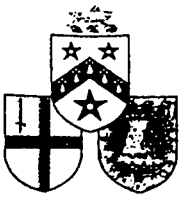

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Gresham College, Barnard's Inn Hall, Holborn, London EC1N 2HH
Tel: 020 7831 0575 Fax: 020 7831 5208
e-mail: enquiries@gresham.ac.uk
Web site : www.gresham.ac.uk