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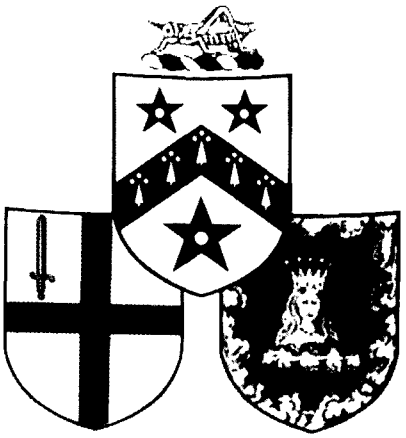

RELIGION ON THE LEVEL

Lecture 3

WHAT IS THE USE OF JESUS?

by

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2 December 1998

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Religion on the Level

What is the Use of Jesus?

There is a fundamental distinction to be made in the meaning of the word *authority*. The more obvious or usual meaning suggests *extrinsic authority*. This refers to an individual, agency or institution that has power over us and can compel our obedience. Many of these extrinsic authorities operate in a relatively benign and helpful way. The traffic policemen have authority or power over us in the highly specific situation of traffic discipline. We may feel that he is performing the task in an incompetent way or that he is giving preference to the stream of traffic coming in the opposite direction to the one we are going in, but we are unlikely to challenge his authority, to get out of the car and try take over the role. Most of us are tolerant of minor versions of extrinsic authority, although we often experience examples of petty tyranny of the sort that makes us expostulate to our friends afterwards. It is altogether different if we live in a real tyranny, in one of those authoritarian societies where people are generally ordered around in ways most of us would find intolerable. Even worse are the totalitarian societies where there is no aspect of life that is beyond the prying interference of rulers and their brutal officials. In these cultures outward conformity to the powers that be is often combined with an inward withdrawal of consent, so that the soul of the apparently compliant individual maintains a sort of spiritual purity. Sometimes women who have been raped offer a similar kind of testimony. They were subjected to extrinsic power, brute strength that was imposed upon them, but they did not offer it the consent of their hearts and minds and tried to preserve a detachment from it that separated them from the horrifying thing that was happening to them.

Very different from extrinsic or imposed authority is *intrinsic authority*. Intrinsic authority wins our inner consent by a mysterious process that persuades and draws affirmation from us. We say Yes to it, acknowledge that it has a legitimate claim upon us, has caused a powerful act of recognition and mutuality to work within our hearts and minds. To use another sexual analogy, we fall in love and open ourselves to the entrance of the other, consent eagerly to the other's embrace, participate fully in the encounter. They said of Jesus that *he spoke with authority, and not as the scribes*. I am assuming that this means he had an intrinsic authority that called forth voluntary assent from people, while the scribes had an extrinsic authority that extracted official compliance, but never real inward assent to what was said or commanded by them. And we have all had experiences of this sort. There have been times, for instance, when we have had to listen to a speech delivered, say, by a junior minister in one of the departments of government. It is quite obvious to us that the speech has been written for him, that it is not his own in any way that compels our interest, and we listen politely, fulfilling one of

the rituals of public life in that unengaged way that usually characterises such occasions. It is very different, however, if we go to hear a lecture by a brilliant and charismatic scholar whose command of her subject draws admiring approval from us. The speaker and the speech have an intrinsic authority that draws attention from us.

The distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic authority is very important in our encounter with religious meaning. We have all sat under clergy who had no intrinsic authority, no ability to compel our assent, no matter how loaded they were with the trappings of extrinsic ecclesiastical authority. And we encounter the same distinction when we deal with religious language and the claims of religious authority. The mere assertion of authority does nothing for us. For instance, the claim that a particular statement must have authority in our lives, because it happens to be in the Bible is likely to leave many of us cold. No form of words will impress us because of their claim to extrinsic authority; a platitude is still a platitude, even if it comes from a prime minister or an archbishop; but their words might impress, challenge or console us, because of their intrinsic power and not because of who uttered them. They might draw recognition and assent from us, because of their self-evidencing authority. *They have something*, we say, *they got to us, touched us, made us shiver.* This distinction in the way we understand the meaning of authority is very important for our project of trying to derive usable wisdom from religious narratives and traditions. The Christian tradition believes that Jesus was a manifestation of God, God made accessible in a human life. No matter what we make of the claim itself - and it is hardly one that can be vindicated by the standard tests of verifiability, so it must always remain a claim of faith - the very fact of the emergence of the claim is itself interesting and significant and suggests, at the very least, that the presence and teaching of Jesus had a considerable impact upon those who met him. It seems safe to claim that the route to the extrinsic authority that was claimed for Jesus - that he came from God - must have first gone through the demonstrable fact of his intrinsic authority. I would like to suggest that it is more important to open ourselves to the words that gave rise to the claim of divinity, rather than profess allegiance to the claim, but show little or no personal response to the words that precipitated it; and that it is more important, for instance, to be forgiving than to claim that Jesus' attitude to forgiveness demonstrates his essential divinity. If we follow the criterion of usability we have been expounding in these lectures, what is the use of Jesus, in what way can his life and teaching be of use to us? The details of his life and death are already well rehearsed and I do not want to repeat them, but I do want to propose that the central elements of his life and teaching have abiding and challenging usefulness both for individuals and for society. And I want to begin by exploring the problem of forgiveness, one of the central elements in the teaching of Jesus. In the prayer he taught his disciples, they were to

say "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us". In his parables he repeatedly taught the particular importance of remembering our own need for and experience of forgiveness when we ourselves are called upon to forgive. It was E.M.Forster who said it, but it could as easily have been Jesus: "Only connect". Connecting in this radically magnanimous way is difficult, of course, but Jesus was right to make it the central element in his teaching. Without radical forgiveness of one another, we condemn ourselves not only to the pain of our offences against one another, but to years of misery that deepen the original wound by the corrosions of bitterness and hatred. And this is true not only of our individual trespasses against one another, but of the sins of whole tribes and nations. Forgiveness is an art the politicians are only just beginning to work at, but their struggle to apply it to some of the most intractable conflicts that disfigure the human situation today gives us an opportunity to meditate on a crucial but complex aspect of human relationships.

In a not-yet-published novel, John Whale describes one of the most difficult of human predicaments. Philip, the main character in the story, has gone into the country near Oxford to prepare for the death that cancer will soon bring to him. His predicament is that he has a sin on his conscience for which he believes there is no obvious forgiveness. His mother had been a monster of tyranny and intolerance all his life, but towards her end he had taken her into his home to care for till her death. Confused, doubly incontinent and enduringly spiteful, she maintained an iron grip upon him and would permit no one else to assist in her care. So he stopped feeding her, giving her, instead, occasional cups of hot water. She hardly noticed and in a few days she was dead. Now Philip, contemplating his own impending death, is unable to find forgiveness. Who can forgive him? He cannot forgive himself. Though he is a priest, he is not quite sure if there is a God to forgive; and, anyway, can God forgive on his mother's behalf? This is where the predicament really bites: she who was sinned against is no longer available to offer the forgiveness that might heal his tortured heart. This is a dramatic example of a not uncommon experience. Many innocent people feel guilt at the death of a loved one: did they do enough or did their neglect somehow contribute to the tragedy? And the comfort of friends does not really help, because the one person who might make a difference is no longer there to make it. The pain is crueller if something wrong *was* done, if there *was* some kind of culpable neglect. That is when guilt burns and gnaws at the gut and changes the beauty of the day into bleakness and sorrow.

Bad as all of that is, it is not the difficulty that particularly obsesses me. I've had more to be forgiven for than to forgive in my life, nothing very terrible has happened to me, so I sometimes wonder if I have any right to talk about forgiveness at all. Has my message been too easy? I preach about

forgiveness a lot, but would I be able to practise it if one of my children had been abducted and murdered or if they had been gassed in Auschwitz along with Ernie Levy, the man we thought about in the last lecture? How can anyone forgive in those circumstances? This brings us right up against the central dilemma. The world is dying for lack of forgiveness, but we don't want a forgiveness that cheapens the evil we do to one another; we don't want a forgiveness that denies the claims of justice or ignores the pain of that endless procession of victims.

This is tough enough on the individual level, but it becomes a thousand times worse when we try to think about situations where whole communities stare in unforgiving hatred at one another, as they still do in Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia, the Middle East and other places too numerous to list. Who is to do the forgiving there? How can it even start? All the sides have inflicted terrible wounds on one another, so how can anyone even begin the process? who is to bring back the dead to speak the words of release and reconciliation? Wouldn't forgiveness cheapen the lives that have been lost and diminish the responsibility of those who took them? That is certainly what we hear whenever the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland releases another group of what their own side call political prisoners and the other side call terrorists. *Cheap grace* it has been called, this forgiving of others, this letting them off, this turning the other cheek. *They should be brought to account, should pay for it, should burn in hell, should stay in gaol till they rot*, the voices cry, *because they have taken joy away for ever from our lives.*

The inability or refusal to forgive is understandable, but it also seems to be a terrible mirror image of the punishment we hand out to the offenders. It keeps us in prison as well, locked up in our own hatred, endlessly working the treadmill of our own bitter memories. That is certainly the impression we get when we look in on those intractable disputes in Israel and Northern Ireland. We get a wearying sense of communities who are imprisoned in their own history, dying in their chains and unwilling to stand up and shake them off. The sight frustrates us from the comparative calm of our own situation, but we can enter imaginatively into their minds if we try to feel the outrage caused by the death and maiming of loved ones during the long years of conflict. So we would probably all agree that at some stage in the process the offence, the sin, has to be admitted if the forgiving is to do its work on the one who needs it: surely we cant receive forgiveness till we acknowledge that we need it? Behind that claim lies the ancient human conviction that we are responsible for our own actions, have freedom, could have chosen otherwise. That's what gnaws at us in those times of guilt and remorse when we look back at our lives: a little more self-control here, a slight change of direction there, and things could have been different and we would not now be eaten up with regret.

All of that is true, and there could be no moral life if it wasn't true, but it does not seem to be the whole truth. The men who hammered the nails into the hands and feet of Jesus must have known what they were doing, must have had some responsibility, yet he prayed, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do". Maybe he just meant the executioners, the ones who did the dirty work, not the real agents of the crime, Pilate and Caiaphas, but I doubt it. I think everyone was included in the forgiveness he prayed for, because he recognised that none of us is completely in charge of our lives. To a very great extent we were made what we are by factors that were not in our control. The crushing weight of the past is there behind us, forming and moulding us, so that it is sometimes tempting to believe that our choices are hardly ours at all. Much of what we are comes straight from our animal past. It is true that consciousness gives us some control over our instincts, but it is far from complete. We all know the experience of moral powerlessness: "I couldn't help it", we say, "something got into me". If this is true of many of our private choices, think how much truer it is when people get caught up in historical tragedies over which they have no control. If you had a bitter childhood in a Palestinian refugee camp it might make you what the world calls a terrorist. If you spent your boyhood in the divided streets of Belfast it might make you into the kind of man who could be persuaded to pick up the gun. We know how formative early childhood experience is in making us into what we later become, for better or for worse. When we think about it, therefore, the human situation is actually quite complicated. Yes, we know we are responsible for our own actions, have free will; but we also know that other people's choices have influenced and helped to form us, so our freedom is a qualified thing at best, and some people have been dealt a hand that hardly offers them any choices at all. I think that this is why Jesus was a strange combination of anger and compassion, as though he carried this contradiction in his own heart. He hated and challenged sin and its effects, but he had an enormous compassion for sinners and the helpless predicaments they found themselves in. He forgave the men who hammered in the nails, just as he had previously offered Pilate sympathy for having to condemn him to death! The paradox of the anger of Jesus was that it was poured out against those who refused to acknowledge their sin, while to those who admitted the confusions of their lives he was filled with love and compassion. Perhaps forgiveness was so central to his message that he was made angry by those who denied themselves the opportunity to receive it by their blindness to their own condition. Of course, we do not have a systematic treatment of the practise of forgiveness in Jesus, but all the elements we would require for such a treatment are present. What there can be no doubt about, however, is his conviction about the importance of forgiveness to everyone.

To begin with, let us leave the offender on one side and notice how important forgiveness is for the healing and growth of the forgiver. If there is no forgiving the original offence can keep growing till it takes over a whole life. This is what happened to a woman in the United States. Her daughter had been murdered, the killer convicted and was waiting execution on death row. The mother hated him with a consuming hatred and planned to be present at his execution, but she also wanted to confront him before his death with what he had done, so the prison authorities arranged for her to visit him. As she spoke to him on death row she started crying, found herself forgiving him and a great weight fell from her. She herself was no longer imprisoned in bitterness and hatred, no longer wanted the killer killed. She continued to visit him and one day, in tears, he confessed his guilt and asked for the forgiveness he had already been given. He has since been executed and she now campaigns against capital punishment; and her life has been given back to her.

We should notice one or two things about this case. It was because he had already been forgiven that the killer was able to repent. The forgiveness melted his defences and helped him to see and own his crime for the first time. This is how the radical forgiveness that Jesus taught seems to work: the father of the prodigal forgives his son before he gets a word out, and it is that act of grace that melts his selfish heart into real repentance. I know this from my own experience. Judge and attack me and I'll defend myself with anger and violence; offer me love and understanding and you'll break my heart into sorrow for the way I've hurt you. Forgiveness can release honesty in the offender; more importantly, it liberates the person who has been offended, so that she is no longer trapped, caught up in the continuing horror of the event, and can move away from it into a new future. I can see now *how* forgiveness works, but I still cant say where people find the generosity for great forgiving, for letting go of monstrous wrongs. This is why I have to recognise that people like me have no right to call other people to forgive, though I may be able to remind them that at some time or other everyone is in need of forgiveness, and those who refuse forgiveness may be destroying the very bridge that one day they may have to cross. Nevertheless, it is true that the most effective exponents of forgiveness are the ones who themselves have been wounded. Only the wronged can really preach forgiveness, only the crucified.

This is why Christians say that the crucifixion of Jesus is a saving event, something that can bring healing to us in our broken humanity. At the centre of the maelstrom of violence and cursing we hear this voice offering forgiveness to us for all the things we have ignorantly or knowingly done. It is a voice that pleads with us to pause and reflect on the way our lives can be consumed by hatred and bitterness, so that the past, like an implacable tyrant, controls the present and destroys the future.

"Release yourselves from that bondage", the voice on the cross says, "lay down the burden of hatred, forgive; lay down the burden of guilt, accept forgiveness; and the future will be a new country".

Though I am still a bit baffled about where people find the grace to forgive in the kind of horrifying circumstances we have been thinking about, it is increasingly clear how important forgiveness is to a healthy private life; even more importantly, it is essential in political life, especially in situations of chronic conflict. Who could ever pick their way through the ancient antagonisms of Northern Ireland and produce an accurate check sheet of the rights and wrongs of that tragedy? It can never be done. The accounting mentality simply destines the tragedy to continue, unless there is forgiveness, something that the peace process is slowly working away at. Fortunately, there is a good example to hand of trying to make political forgiveness work. South Africa is a country whose history is drenched in blood and hatred, but a remarkable experiment took place there called the Truth Commission. Here we see the politics of forgiveness at work. It seemed to them that the only way to bury that terrible past was not to forget it, but to forgive it, so the Commission guaranteed amnesty for those who owned up to their offences, and created the very circumstances in which the full horror of the past could be owned by both the agents and the victims, so that all could move on into the future. Great emphasis is being placed upon the healing of memories, but that healing cannot happen if the truth of the past is not acknowledged and confronted. The report of the Truth Commission is full of examples of this process at work, as South Africa tries painfully to heal its past by the radical political application of the dynamic of forgiveness. Denis Healey wrote that you never reach conclusions in politics, but you do have to make decisions, you have to get on with things. The instinct for political forgiveness is close to that insight. It knows how complex our sins and mistakes are, and knows how impossible it is to draw up a true balance sheet. Forgiveness gives us the courage to draw a line under the past, so that we can walk away from it at last, and move into the future. The centrality of forgiveness in the teaching of Jesus is entirely appropriate in someone who came to set people free and make their lives more abundant. It was that passion for enlarging the lives of those who had been diminished and beaten by life that is the other element in the teaching and example of Jesus I want to look at tonight, by reflecting on some aspects of the birth narratives. Let me begin by reflecting on the nativity of the current President of the United States of America.

Not many people had heard of a small town in Arkansas called Hope, till Bill Clinton, who was born there, became President of the USA. However, the town of Hope in Arkansas will, for citizens of the USA, have a particular historic significance from now on, no matter what they think of the current resident of the White House. Becoming President of the USA confers fame upon the place from

which the journey to Washington started. And the legends start building. "That's the desk he studied at and these are the boots he wore when he walked every day to the old school house, six miles there, and six miles back. He had his first fight over there, behind Kelly's bar; and he kissed Darlene Chisholm, the night of the High School prom, on the back seat of this here Pontiac station wagon, belonged to her dad; you can still see the scorch mark right there on the upholstery". The technical term for this process of reading legends back into the early years of historic figures is called *retrojection*. It is a natural instinct to read back a person's greatness into the early years; to look for, or invent, signs of what was to come. The precise detail of the stories doesn't matter, as long as they are consistent with what we know of the later life. They have to fit the theme of the life, express something of the nature or history of the famous person.

This is how we ought to approach the stories of the birth of Jesus. The question we should ask as we hear the stories of the nativity in a few weeks time is not, "Is this really how it was?" but, "What do these stories tell us about the meaning of this life?" In other words, we should go for the spiritual or theological meaning, not the historical, because that is no longer available to us. Luke is in no doubt about where the significance of Jesus lies, and he loads his birth story with that meaning. He was born in Bethlehem, the least of the cities of Judah. Shepherds, the travelling people of the day, mistrusted and feared by the settled, were the first to hear of the birth. And he was placed in a manger in the part of the house where the animals slept, because they were probably staying with relatives who, though poor themselves, welcomed them under their own roof. Luke, at the very beginning of his book, places Jesus at the bottom of the social pyramid. And pyramid it was.

The economic setup of the time was a domination system, a social pyramid, and the whole structure was designed to serve the needs of the people at the top. Until fairly recently, most societies were domination systems, and there is a certain logic in that. In the struggle for life it is the strong who come out on top. That wouldn't be so bad if they were honest about it and told us that they liked being on top and would fight to stay there, but they do more than that. They develop theories and theologies to justify their privileges. They say, "God put us here, because this is the best way to run the world; we are really up here, not for our own sake, but for everyone else's; it is for their sake that we have accepted the burden of privilege and leadership". The powerful always do this; they justify their privileges with theories, but they hold on to them with their muscles.

One of the most powerful arguments against Christianity is that it has often leant its support to whatever system was on top and anointed it. It preached resignation, not revolt. The strange result is

that, by preaching self-denial to the people at the bottom in order to justify the privileges of those at the top, it has given the impression that Christianity is a religion of world-denial and repression. We are against pleasure and fun; we are against the instincts and the sheer joy that says Yes to life and grasps it with both hands. That's why the papers love all those ministers that come forward every December to denounce the exuberance of Christmas. Our history is filled with that kind denial of life and its energies and joys, like the American fundamentalist sect that wanted to ban sex, because it might lead to dancing. But all that crawling, creeping, breast-beating, "we-know-our-place" kind of Christianity is profoundly contrary to the spirit and example of Jesus.

The thing that offended them about Jesus was that he refused to conform to the system himself and he denied that it had any divine legitimacy. It was a human, not a divine creation, and should be challenged and overthrown in the name of the God who longed for justice. He preached what he called "the kingdom of God"; he wanted things done on earth as they were in heaven, that is, with love and mutual kindness; and he told the poor the revolution had to start with them. Interestingly, he was the original example of a political phenomenon that has often been remarked upon. Aneurin Bevan, the great Welsh socialist, was dismissed as a Bollinger Bolshevik, because he enjoyed the good things of life. He replied that there was no contradiction in his enjoyment of the privileges of the rich, because he wanted everyone to be able to share in the world's good things. And Jesus was no pining ascetic, either. They called him a wine-bibber and a glutton, and he did not deny the charge. Life was a wedding feast and guests don't fast at a wedding; but this feast was for all, and he had come to compel the outcasts, those that we now call the excluded, to gatecrash the party.

That is why following Jesus is both joyful and serious. It is about the enjoyment of life and all its colour; it's a banquet, a bash, a cosmic street party. But it's one to which everyone is invited and that means work, sometimes dangerous work, because there are many people at the party who don't want to let anyone else in and would, if they got their way, get rid of some who are already there. Jesus came to raise people up, not exclude them. That is why those who use the example of Jesus not only try to practise forgiveness, but try to learn to look at people differently, to practise imaginative compassion, to see the world as it ought to be and not simply accept it as it is. Seeing it that way round is to see it the way he saw it; and if enough of us start seeing it that way, why it might even come to pass. Let me end with a modern beatitude translated from the Polish of Anna Kamienska that says it all.

Those who carry

Those who carry grand pianos
to the tenth floor wardrobes and coffins
the old man with a bundle of wood hobbling beyond the horizon
the woman with a hump of nettles
the lunatic pushing her baby carriage
full of empty vodka bottles
they all will be raised up
like a seagull feather like a dry leaf
like eggshell scraps of street newspapers

Blessed are those who carry
for they will be raised.