

## UNIT 5: KENOTIC CHRISTOLOGY

According to a number of German theologians of the nineteenth century, like Gottfried Thomasius (1802-1875), and Wolfgang Friedrich Geß (1819-91), in the incarnation God limited himself. The second person of the Trinity laid aside certain 'metaphysical' attributes (such as omnipotence and omniscience), i.e. God alienated himself from his divinity, while retaining the moral attributes of love, goodness and so on. All these theologians build on the dialectical philosophy of the Lutheran philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), who was presumably (besides Schleiermacher) the most influential philosophical theologian of our modern time (as Karl Barth noted towards the end of his life). The concept of Kenosis (*Entäußerung*) was a fundamental principle of Hegel's philosophy of 'the spirit' as the 'life force' of the world. Karl Marx (the founder of the communist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) built on this theological concept when he developed his infamous account of the social 'estrangement' (*Entfremdung*) in capitalist societies (i.e. the alienation of the worker from himself as producer that reduces his work to a meaningless, fetishized commodity).

In English theology at the beginning of the twentieth century, kenoticism (as it has become known) took on a slightly different, and philosophically less sophisticated form. There was widespread concern that Christology had become docetic and that the humanity of Jesus was being eclipsed by a sense that Jesus is God in human clothes. Charles Gore (1853-1932) and P. T. Forsyth (1848-1921) argued that those divine attributes which would eclipse human attributes (such as omniscience) were laid aside at the incarnation of the Logos.

These early debates tended to revolve around the issue of how God can become incarnate and remain in any meaningful sense 'God'. Does this imply change in the Godhead? Of what does the Logos divest itself in the incarnation? Is the notion of divine self-limitation coherent? Is kenosis an ontological concept (referring to Christ's being – say, his omnipotence) or a functional concept (referring to Christ's actions – say, his love of the poor)? These issues are discussed very effectively and succinctly in Oliver Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), ch.5.

For the moment, I wish to make some general remarks concerning the wider implications of kenosis, beginning with its Biblical basis. Although Philippians 2 is widely cited as the 'source text' for this doctrine, a number of commentators have pointed out that a kenotic Christology can be found in other New Testament letters (Hebrews) and particularly the Synoptic Gospels. These texts point to the human aspects of Christ as 'limitations' of the divine, and in particular the humiliation, dereliction and suffering of Christ on the cross. This, we suppose, is

what is meant by the 'self-emptying' of God in Christ. It is not simply that God chose to limit himself in the incarnation, but that God continues to pour out his love for the world in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Such a view would constitute a joining together of functional and ontological kenotic Christologies.

Moreover, there is a strong current in the Christian tradition (which includes, for example, Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) and Hans Urs von Balthasar) which suggests that kenosis is the character of God himself, and therefore as much an aspect of the doctrine of creation as it is of Christology. What does this mean? Put simply, the idea is that, in the self-emptying of the incarnation, God did not just have a bright idea 'out of the blue'. Whenever we speak of divine action, we should bear in mind that God is at one with God's actuality or 'activity'. In other words, every 'act' of God (this is a rather clumsy way of putting it) is fully expressive of who God is. So the kenosis of God in the incarnation must be expressive of the divine eternal nature. How is this expressed?

For von Balthasar, the Trinitarian processions (the Son begotten of the Father, the Spirit proceeding from Father and Son) are 'outpourings' or 'self-givings' or 'self-emptyings'. The Father gives himself eternally and completely in the begetting of the Son, and the Father and Son likewise give themselves wholly in the breathing of the Spirit. This rather speculative language seeks to indicate that in God there is no 'holding back', and God gives himself in full freedom and joy because God is not giving from a limited stock of, say, love or creativeness. God gives of his fullness from the plenitude of his own being. The implication is that kenosis does not involve an emptying as one might empty one jug of water into another. Rather, we might use the image of a fountain. The fountain, from a plenitudinous source we cannot see, just pours and pours and pours. The kenosis of the incarnation is therefore an expression of the Trinitarian kenosis in eternity. It is not something peculiar to the Logos or second person of the Trinity, but is properly a characteristic of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The reason why this may also be linked to the doctrine of creation is because creation itself – following Nicholas of Cusa, who spoke of 'the contraction' of creation – can be understood as a divine outpouring of creative love *into another*.

There is another important interpretation of the doctrine of Christological kenosis to which Coakley points and which should be highlighted. Many of the philosophical discussions of this doctrine (such as that by Oliver Crisp) make some key assumptions concerning the incarnation which are largely absent from patristic discussions of this topic. For example, it is sometimes assumed that the incarnation involves turning God into a human being, or God divesting himself of certain powers rather in the same way that a political ruler might temporarily hand over the reins of power. This leads to some rather confusing discussions concerning whether the incarnation involves the compromise of divine

immutability, a debate which does not seem to concern the patristic theologians at all. As Coakley points out, the modern approach to the question is somewhat mistaken. The incarnation concerns the assumption of a human nature to the divine. So rather than God 'giving up' his divine attributes (this may not even be a coherent notion), we instead have the picture of God 'taking up' a human nature to himself in the person of Christ. The discussions of kenosis in certain corners of the literature tend also to assume that divine and human natures are essentially the same sorts of thing which are somehow in competition in Jesus. They can displace each other in a way that implies their mutual exclusivity. This is perhaps not the best way to think of the divine and human natures in the incarnation. As I suggested in the previous unit, in the incarnation the change does not happen to the divine Logos, but to human nature; it is rendered more human in Jesus Christ. The real question is not 'is Jesus human?', but 'are we human?'

### *Kenosis and Holy Saturday*

One important aspect of kenotic Christology which has deeply pervaded systematic theology in the twentieth century is the dereliction – the 'emptiness' – of Christ on the cross. We can see this in the work of Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Jürgen Moltmann, three otherwise very different theologians. Von Balthasar gives this kenosis a slightly unusual slant. His concern is not so much with the suffering of God (this is Moltmann's concern), but with Christ's solidarity with the dead. To what does this refer?

Von Balthasar has been called 'the theologian of Holy Saturday'. Holy Saturday is the day lying between Good Friday and Easter Day, the day when Christ lay dead in the tomb. There is a long patristic tradition which depicts 'the harrowing of hell' by Christ: Christ descends to hell to preach to the dead and draw them to new life in the resurrection. Von Balthasar modulates this image somewhat. For him, the dereliction of Christ on the cross, and ultimately the death of Christ, represent an infinite *diastasis* – or separation – between the Father and the Son. God has gone out to the very furthest reaches – to the cross and beyond – to subject everything once again to his love. In the cross, for von Balthasar, it is not God who is made subject to suffering, but suffering which is made subject to God. In Christ's entombment on Holy Saturday, the Trinity as it were 'extends' itself and 'envelops' the farthest reaches, to that which is so utterly not-God that it ceases to be, namely the dead. It is crucial for von Balthasar that Christ does not descend to the dead to preach. Christ descends to the dead as one who is dead. It is from these farthest shores, from utter darkness and the absence of God, that God enters to draw even the dead back to himself.

This is a remarkable picture of divine self-emptying, and one which significantly extends and transforms the images of kenosis which were prevalent in the writings of the nineteenth century German theologians.