

Foreword

I CAN STILL REMEMBER AS A YOUNG THEOLOGY STUDENT COMING ACROSS the book *The Aims of Jesus* by biblical scholar, Ben Meyer. It was a heady time for theology students with the appearance of works by Hans Küng (*On Being a Christian*) and Edward Schillebeeckx (*Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*) both reflecting the impact of critical biblical scholarship on our understanding of Jesus. Within the excitement of these works, Meyer's book stood out as something different, serious, scholarly, patient and measured in its conclusions. But one thing that really struck me was the implication of the title—Jesus had intentions, aims, a purpose to his actions. Central to Meyer's work was the uncovering of those aims. It was no longer good enough to say Jesus went around doing good like some super boy scout; one had to ask what good Jesus was doing and why he did that type of good rather than another type. Only then would we understand the nature of his mission and its relationship to the coming Kingdom of God.

Sadly Meyer died too young, too young to see his work taken up with enthusiasm by a generation of Biblical scholars—Tom Wright, James Dunn, Scott McKnight and others—looking for alternatives to approaches based on methodological skepticism. What Meyer had found in the critical realism of the polymathic Bernard Lonergan, this generation of scholars found in Meyer, an approach based on data, hypothesis formation, and an accumulation of evidence for their position.

This present work by Peter Laughlin extends the conversation with both the biblical text read through the lens of critical realism, and with the broader insights of Lonergan. Patiently and methodically Laughlin seeks an answer to two basic questions: how can we understand Jesus' death as redemptive? And what relationship, if any, exists between our understanding of Jesus death as redemptive and the meaning Jesus himself gives to his death? As Laughlin points out, the history of Christian theology is littered with answers to the first question, but what is surprising is how little attention has been given to the second. While all Christians agree that Jesus' death and resurrection have saving significance, we are hardly so clear as

to how or why this is the case. That it might have something to do with the meaning Jesus himself gave to his death is rarely if ever pursued.

Reasons for this vary, from agnosticism that we can uncover such a meaning or purpose, to horror at the notion that his death could be given any meaning, let alone a divine redemptive meaning. There are many hurdles to overcome and Laughlin carefully addresses each in turn. The first is to unpick the knotted skein of questions in relation to necessity and contingency, of God's relationship to the created order and God's permissive will in relation to the problem of evil. These are profound and difficult questions, but using Lonergan's work, *Grace and Freedom* as his guide Laughlin turns to the theological resources of Thomas Aquinas to find a path through the maze, to both remove God from responsibility for evil, while maintaining the divine prerogative to create meaning, *ex nihilo*, from the nothingness of evil. Such a creative act does not condone or justify evil, but is God's creative response to the brute fact of evil in human history.

This is an important step because it frees Laughlin from the commonly expressed concern that Christian theologies of the death of Jesus somehow turn God into a divine child-abuser, needing the death of Jesus to appease his anger at human sinfulness. As Laughlin clearly argues, God is not responsible for human sin, and the death of Jesus was the consequence of human sin. Therefore God is not responsible for, or wills in any way the death of Jesus. But given the death of Jesus at the hands of sinful men, the question is, how does God (and Jesus) respond? Quoting Ben Meyer, Laughlin notes, "Jesus did not aim to be repudiated and killed, he aimed to charge with meaning his being repudiated and killed."

The next issue is the question of the relationship between history and theological meaning. Should there be any connection at all between the faith proclaimed by the Church (theological meaning) and the historical events constituted by meaning and value of Jesus' life and death? As Laughlin puts it more bluntly, "why should the theologian care about what Jesus of Nazareth thought of his impending death?" Indeed it is not difficult to demonstrate how little theological thought has sought to incorporate Jesus' own self-understanding into its account of the atonement. For example, would Jesus have recognized himself within the feudal framework of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*? Again Lonergan's discussion of meaning and history are decisive in working through the issues here. Lonergan's notions of carriers and functions of meaning and of authenticity suggest the theological importance of Jesus' own meanings. Through a

consideration of incarnate, linguistic and symbolic carriers of meaning Laughlin pieces together the evidence needed to answer the question of the meaning Jesus gave to his impending death. Here it is not Aquinas, but contemporary biblical scholarship that he must examine, interrogate and critique, with those scholars who have most taken up Ben Meyer's call for a critical realist approach to exegesis coming to the fore.

With a particular focus on symbolic carriers of meaning Laughlin focusses his attention of the cleansing of the Temple and the institution narrative of the Last Supper. In this reading he allows Jesus to be genuinely creative, not just repeating symbols from the past or locating all creativity within the early Church, but has Jesus bringing familiar Jewish symbols together to create a new meaning, constituting a new reality which the disciples (and ourselves) are invited to enter. As he says, "Jesus created the symbolism of the Last Supper to reveal that God's eschatological work (occurring in and through him), would redeem his followers for life within a new covenant community and to guarantee them a place at the eschatological banquet to come."

As Laughlin notes of this, "to some this conclusion will be too orthodox to possibly be true, to others it does not go far enough." Rereading this some years after Peter originally wrote his doctorate under my supervision, it reminded me of his intellectual courage and determination to go where the evidence led him, regardless of prevailing orthodoxies but with a faithful commitment both to the truth and to his Christian faith. As he argued in his chapter on faith and history, faith should never be an impediment to the quest for truth; in fact if our faith is authentic we can and must welcome the demands of historical investigation, while also recognizing the limits of what can be affirmed historically. This book is a testament to this dual commitment, tackling the most difficult questions with a serene confidence that intelligent investigation and attention to the evidence can lead to a cautious conclusion which is congruent with the best of our Christian faith tradition.

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