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Autor: Ploeger, Mattijs
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Life – Death – Resurrection – Church

On the Coherence of Some Central Christian Notions

Mattijs Ploeger

What is the relationship between Jesus's life, his death and resurrection, and his Church? In this article¹ I will explore the connections between these central aspects of the Christian faith. Rather than regarding them as discrete aspects brought together only by the creed, my aim will be to show that these central Christian themes are not available separately, but are mutually interdependent.

Theology, christology, pneumatology

From the outset I want to stress that this does not imply that the Church is determined only – or even primarily – christologically. The Church is as much determined “theo”logically and pneumatologically. That the Church is as much the work of God the Father as it is the work of God the Son will hopefully become clear in the course of this article. The work of God the Spirit will be less manifest in this article. For a fuller treatment of the pneumatological issue, I refer the reader to the work of John Zizioulas, who has proposed the integration of christology and pneumatology in such a way that they are not simply complementary (and therefore potentially competitive) but fully integrated. There is no christology without pneumatology, because there is no Christ without the Spirit². Everything which will be said in this article has, therefore, to be understood against this pneumatological background. It is by the Spirit that Christ lives his life. It is by the Spirit that people follow him. It is by the Spirit that Christ is resurrected. And it is by the Spirit that the Church continually participates in the death and resurrection of Christ.

¹ The article is a tribute to Professor Dr Henk Jan de Jonge on the occasion of his retirement as Professor of New Testament in the University of Leiden NL.

² JOHN D. ZIZIOULAS, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Contemporary Greek Theologians 4), Crestwood NY (St Vladimir's Seminary Press) 1985/³2000, 123–142.

Jesus's ministry and the community of disciples

This article will consider Jesus's ministry under three headings. Firstly, Jesus proclaimed the imminent coming of the kingdom of God, which we should not understand as an afterworld, but as an earthly "kingdom" under God's "kingship". Secondly, Jesus lived according to the will of God (one could say, he fulfilled the *Torah*) by maintaining a lifestyle which was characterized by the service of his fellow humans and by signs (rather than "miracles") which revealed the character of God's coming kingdom. Thirdly, Jesus was not only a prophet of this kingdom, but its ultimate eschatological inaugurator.

From the earliest days of his ministry, Jesus called disciples. This community of disciples was in fact the beginning of the Church – the "group of Jesus" (commonly called the "Jesus movement"). The disciples believed that God would soon assert his kingship and institute his reign of righteousness. They also believed that in Jesus – his way of life, his message, and his signs – God's reign had already made a first start.

In this context, the death of Jesus could not be the end of the "movement". Rather, his disciples interpreted his death according to a concept present in their religious and cultural environment, namely, the context of Hellenistic Judaism³. This was the concept of the vindication of the martyr.

The vindication of the martyr

There are a number of elements belonging to this concept. First of all, the martyr is executed, or tortured to death, because of his faith in God, his loyalty to the *Torah*, or any other reason related to his refusal to apostatize. That such a martyrdom was not simply hypothetical, is clear from the Old Testament tradition. This is particularly true of the later writings such as the stories of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, and of Daniel in the lions' den (Dan. 3 and 6). The second element of the concept is God's refusal to accept the unjust death of his servants. Those who have been unjustly rejected and killed by men, are rehabilitated and resurrected to

³ For the theory of an overall "Hellenization" of Judaism – rather than the theory which presupposes a distinction between a Palestinian and a Hellenized Judaism – see MARTIN HENGEL, *The "Hellenization" of Judaea in the First Century after Christ*, London (SCM)/Philadelphia (Trinity) 1989 [German original ¹1969/³1988].

life by God and with God. With God, because the concept does not count with a continuation of earthly life, but with a heavenly resurrection as “reward for” or “adjustment of” the earthly injustice. In the third place, the concept includes God’s favour towards the martyr’s community. Thus, the unjust death of the martyr is “countered” by God giving his favour not only to the martyr (by raising him to heavenly life), but also to his community by giving it some kind of special blessing or grace as a token of justification, bringing about reconciliation between God and the community connected with the martyr.

The classical biblical passage in which this concept is explored, is the story of the martyrdom of seven Maccabean brothers and their mother (2 Macc. 7). These Jewish people were tortured and killed because they refused to eat swine’s flesh, which was forbidden by the *Torah*. While being tortured, one of them said, “You dismiss us from this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws”. One of his brothers said, when his tongue and hands were cut off, “I got these from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again”. And another, “One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life” (2 Macc. 7, 9. 11. 14). The following chapter of the book tells how the Jewish people – being the martyrs’ community – won a victory over their enemies, because God was “wholly reconciled” with them (2 Macc. 8,29).

Jesus’s death and resurrection

This, then, is the concept by which Jesus’s disciples interpreted his death. It could not be the end of the movement. He had been tortured and killed because he had lived in fidelity to God’s will and proclaimed a message which was pleasing in God’s sight. Therefore, his death had to be the unjust death of a martyr, “countered” by an act of vindication by which God resurrected him to heavenly life⁴ and by the special favour which God bestowed upon his community. Jesus had to be “the stone that the builders rejected”, which had now “become the chief cornerstone”⁵.

⁴ From his heavenly resurrected life, he sometimes appeared to his disciples. Hence his unnoticed coming and going, etc.

⁵ Ps. 118,23; cf. Mt. 21,42; Mk. 12,10–11; Lk. 20,17; Acts 4,11; 1 Pt. 2,7.

This view on Jesus's death and resurrection has some major implications. In the first place, there can be no devotion to Christ's death and resurrection without devotion to his life and works. The very *reason* why God has resurrected Jesus is because He wanted to vindicate Jesus. The resurrection is, therefore, the divine seal upon Jesus's earthly ministry. The resurrection is therefore also the divine affirmation of Jesus's eschatological message and of the ethical implications which the coming of the kingdom has for those who are called to reform their lifestyle in order to be ready for the coming kingdom.

Secondly, Jesus's death and resurrection are not two separate entities with separate meanings. It is not, for example, right to say that we are redeemed by the death of Christ apart from his resurrection. We are, in a certain sense, redeemed by⁶ his resurrection rather than by his death, but of course there is no resurrection without a death. This is why St Paul says that Jesus "was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification" (Rom. 4,25). The two are sides of the same coin, but they receive their meaning only from Jesus's resurrection, which in turn redirects us to his earthly life.

Thirdly, the grace which is given to believers because of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ is a favour given to the martyr's community – that is the "group of Jesus". Salvation is bestowed on those who live in a corporate unity with Christ. This is the historical-exegetical background of *redemption* through the death (and resurrection) of Christ.

The Church

If this concept – by which many New Testament, particularly Pauline, sayings become considerably more comprehensible – is appropriately applied to Christ's death and resurrection, then at the same time it leads us towards an ecclesiology of communion. For if this is the way in which Christian salvation works, if this is the understanding of death, resurrection, and redemption, then it is impossible to speak of individual salvation any longer – and thus it is impossible to conceive of Christianity as anything else than the Church. Then expressions like "Christian-

⁶ Or, "as a by-product of". Believers are saved through their participation in Jesus's rehabilitation by God.

ity”, the “group of Jesus”, the “Church”, and “those who are redeemed by the death and resurrection of Christ” are synonymous.

Moreover, if this argument is correct, then the Church is the eschatological community, living between the rudimentary beginnings of the kingdom in Christ’s words and signs and its final breakthrough. If the resurrection is indeed God’s “yes” to Christ’s final, eschatological heralding and inauguration of the kingdom and to his call to conversion because of the imminence of this kingdom, then the Church is the eschatological community in which the ethics of the kingdom, exemplified by Christ, are normative.

Again, if this argument is correct, then the Church is – as our liturgical tradition affirms – nothing else than the corporate “being in communion” with Christ and one another, the corporate participation in Christ’s death and resurrection through Baptism and the Eucharist, lived out in the continuous sharing of one another’s experiences of death and resurrection.

Conclusion

The concept presented in this article makes the resurrection of Jesus understandable as one element in a coherent salvation history, rather than as a “miracle” which serves as a test of one’s orthodoxy while having little consistent meaning in itself. Moreover, it unites Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection and makes them mutually explanatory. Finally, it explains why the Church and the sacraments are not an afterthought *ad libitum*, but a constitutive element in the Christian story of salvation⁷.

⁷ The line of argument in this article is based on my exegetical formation in the Theological Faculty of the University of Leiden, the Netherlands, where I was particularly influenced by Dr Henk Jan de Jonge, Professor of New Testament. The interpretation of Jesus’s death and resurrection and its relation to the “group of Jesus”, as presented in this article, is based on Professor De Jonge’s teaching. The ecclesiological conclusions are my own. Cf. H.J. DE JONGE, *Ontstaan en ontwikkeling van het geloof in Jezus’ opstanding*, in: F.O. van Gennep e.a., *Waarlijk opgestaan! Een discussie over de opstanding van Jezus Christus*, Baarn (Ten Have) 1989/21994, 31–50; H.J. DE JONGE, *Visionaire ervaring en de historische oorsprong van het christendom* (inaugural address), Leiden (Rijksuniversiteit) 1992; H.J. DE JONGE, *De plaats van de verzoening in de vroegchristelijke theologie*, in: L.J. van den Brom e.a., *Verzoening of koninkrijk? Over de prioriteit in de verkondiging* (Leidse Lezingen), Kampen (Callenbach) 1998, 3–88.

Mattijs Ploeger (born 1970 in Westervoort NL), M.A., studied theology in Leiden, Utrecht, and Cambridge. He is the Old Catholic parish priest of Krommenie and Zaandam, and works as a research assistant at the Old Catholic Seminary (University of Utrecht), where he prepares a dissertation on liturgical ecclesiology.

Address: Noorderhoofdstraat 131, NL-1561 AT Krommenie, The Netherlands

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Die Auferstehung Jesu muss in historisch-kritischer Exegese in einer strikt *theologischen* Perspektive als die von Gott zur Geltung gebrachte Rehabilitation eines Märtyrers gesehen werden, der sein Leben und Sterben ganz auf eine Sache, in der Gottes Gottheit zum Ausdruck kommt, ausgerichtet hat; im Fall von Jesus ist dies das Reich Gottes unter den Menschen. In die göttliche Rehabilitation ist im Licht der frühjüdischen Märtyrertheologie (z.B. 2 Makk 7) auch die Gemeinschaft einbezogen, in welcher der Märtyrer seinen Lebensort hat und die sich mit ihm identifiziert; seine Rehabilitation erschliesst für sie einen soteriologischen «Gewinn». Von daher erscheint es geradezu zwingend, dass das Christusereignis nicht ohne diese Gemeinschaft gedacht werden kann, nenne man sie nun Christenheit, Jesusbewegung, Kirche oder wie auch immer. In Gemeinschaft mit dem rehabilitierten Märtyrer, d.h. mit dem auferweckten gekreuzigten Jesus, zu sein konstituiert die Kirche. Dieses Sein-in-Gemeinschaft wird in Taufe und Eucharistie realisiert. In dieser Sicht ist die Auferweckung Jesu nicht ein vom Leben und der Botschaft Jesu isoliertes Wunder, sondern ein Element einer kohärenten heilsgeschichtlichen Wahrnehmung des Handelns Gottes, in dem auch die Kirche und die Sakramente ihren konstitutiven Ort haben.

A presentation of this theory in English is given in the dissertations of two of de Jonge's students: JOOST HOLLEMAN, *Resurrection and Parousia: A Tradition-Historical Study of Paul's Eschatology in 1 Corinthians 15* (NT.S 84), Leiden (Brill) 1996; DANIEL G. POWERS, *Salvation through Participation: An Examination of the Notion of the Believers' Corporate Unity with Christ in Early Christian Soteriology* (Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 29), Leuven (Peeters) 2001. The latter study already points at the ecclesiological and sacramental consequences which flow from this soteriology.

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