

Jesus Discloses Himself as the Christ (2)

It is at the very mid-point of Matthew's Gospel that Jesus's identity as the one in whom *God's Presence is manifest in the world* is made clear when Peter affirms Jesus as the *Christ of God*, the *Messiah*, the *anointed one*, even while many observers still think of him as one of the *prophets*. (It is the same in Mark and Luke.) We might have expected the whole narrative of the Gospel to begin to *lighten* at this point – for the path to become *easier*; but instead this is the moment when Jesus turns back towards *Jerusalem* – the city, with its Temple which represents everything he himself embodies as the Living Word of God – and prepares to *suffer* and to *die*. No wonder some of his followers found this teaching too much to countenance. Once again it is Peter who speaks, as if for us all, in *protest*:

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

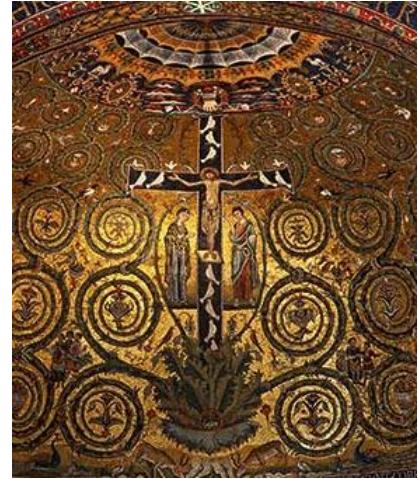
Matthew 16.21-24

For the Messiah to lead the way towards *self-offering* even unto death is the *opposite* of what people expected to hear. Perhaps the deeper truth is that it is not what we *want* to hear. St Paul, in a famous text in his Letter to the Philippians, makes sense of this *self-emptying* by placing it in the context of Jesus' *incarnation* – his coming from God – in the first place:

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death –
even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess,
that Jesus Christ is Lord
to the glory of God the Father.*

Philippians 2.5-12



This is a hugely more poetic summary of the meaning of Jesus' coming among us – to that extent we can see that it is the fruit of a huge amount more *reflection* upon it: but it shares with Peter's immediate response to Jesus' question, 'Who do people say that I am?' – '*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*' (Matthew 16.16) – something of the character of the beginning of a *creed*, or summary of the *meaning* of our faith in Jesus Christ. In particular, it helps make sense of Jesus' self-emptying, his self-offering even to death for us, by placing it mid-way between his *coming* from God and his *return* to God. The suffering comes at a *pivotal* moment – but it makes sense as the means of drawing us all back into *God's Glory*. This, indeed, is why it requires the anointed one of God, the Christ, to enact it – someone *more* than a prophet – because it is a work not of *prophecy* or of *description*, but an *act of God* most directly. In turn, this is the basis on which Jesus invites us – including you and me – to share in the path which looks like the *path of the cross*, but which is really the pathway back into the *embrace of God*:

Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?'

Matthew 16.24-26

All of this we affirm when we recite the words of our own Creed; and we affirm them because they reflect the Word of Life, Jesus Christ himself. May our confidence in him as our light and our guide become ever stronger as we reaffirm the creed week by week.

The image shows part of the 12th century mosaic above the altar in the Church of San Clemente in Rome