

Session 4

The Apologists I (150CE to c.208CE)

The Christian authors who lived and died in the first years following the apostolic era have come to be known as the Apologists, meaning not that they were apologising for their faith (in the way that we think of an apology today), but rather as speaking on behalf of their Faith¹.

The Apologists usually addressed their writings to non-Christians: their aim was to explain Christian beliefs and teachings and to correct misconceptions about Christianity. What they wrote, therefore, gives us a deeper understanding of the faith of the early Church, set out in a clear and understandable way.

Among the earliest Apologists was **Justin**² a man with insatiable curiosity. Brought up as a pagan, he encountered Christianity in his youth and quickly recognised it as more than simply a philosophy: it was something not just to be believed, but to be *lived*.

Justin wrote two Apologies addressed to the Emperor and the Senate - clearly he was aiming high because this was the Christians' greatest source of persecution. He wrote about the Christian way of life, and about faith in Jesus, contrasting them with the ways of the pagans. He sought to explain that Christians were not a threat but were, in fact, upstanding citizens, but his words fell on deaf ears.

Christian Morality

To see something clearly, it often helps to contrast it with something similar but different - and so Justin set out to show how Christian moral life was simply a way of life just like that of pagans, but with a different, deeper sense of morality.

Some of the pagan misunderstandings of Christianity simply came down to words: when Christians were known to speak about their *love feast* with *brothers and sisters*, many pagans thought something very immoral was going on! So Justin set out to explain what Christians meant by the words they used.

But some misunderstandings weren't just about words: they were about values. Justin wanted to show that Christians valued life, and loving relationships, in a deeper way than was common in the pagan world:

Those who once rejoiced in fornication now delight in continence alone; those who made use of magic arts have dedicated themselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who once took most pleasure in the increasing of our wealth and property now bring what we have into a common fund and share with everyone in need;

¹ The term comes from the Greek word for a 'defence argument', for example, in a legal case

² He was born at what is now Nablus, about 20 miles north of Jerusalem, c.100CE

we who hated and killed one another and would not associate with men of different tribes because of their customs now, after the manifestation of Christ, live together and pray for our enemies.³

Of course, Christianity was not just a way of life: it was a belief in Jesus, and who Jesus was and what his life, death and resurrection *meant*.

Justin had grown up in the pagan world and had studied Greek philosophy, so he was well positioned to try to explain Christian faith in words his pagan audience would understand. His writings echo strongly the Johannine Christianity which he had discovered in his youth⁴ and they show how firmly the earliest Christians sought to hold true to the apostolic teaching they had received.

Jesus: the Word of God

We are familiar with this way of speaking about Jesus, but it was something new and incomprehensible to most people of the pagan Roman world: how could a man be God? Justin could not explain *how* Jesus could be God, but he could profess the deep Christian belief that Jesus was indeed human and divine:

Next to God we worship and love the Word born of the eternal God, who is beyond our understanding because he became man for us to heal us of our ills by sharing them himself.⁵

It is also important to notice that the reality of Jesus as *saviour* was one with his nature as God and human.

So we see how Christian belief was being handed on through life and teaching from person to person. As was most often the case in the early Church, the writings are just an expression of what is being handed on in the Tradition through word of mouth and way of life.

The Eucharist

Christian life was centred in the *meeting together* to worship and to remember, obeying the command of Jesus expressed in the Luke's gospel 'Do this in memory of me'⁶. We have small clues to these celebrations in the memory of the Last Supper⁷ and in

³ 1 Apology 14, strongly echoing Acts 4:32

⁴ Justin had studied in both Ephesus, where John the Apostle is believed to have died and which was a centre of Johannine Christianity, and in Rome

⁵ 2 Apology 13

⁶ Lk 22:19

⁷ recalled in the synoptic gospels

descriptions found in Acts⁸, but fuller accounts - as found in Justin's First Apology - are very precious and, in fact, helped guide the Church in modern times in renew the Mass on the model described by Justin:

And on the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place of those who live in the cities or the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president in a discourse urges and invites [us] to the imitation of these noble things. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers. And, as said before, when we have finished the prayer, bread is brought, and wine and water, and the president similarly sends up prayers and thanksgivings to the best of his ability, and the congregation assents, saying the Amen; the distribution, and reception of the consecrated by each one, takes place and they are sent to the absent by the deacons. Those who prosper, and who so wish, contribute, each one of as much as he chooses to. What is collected is deposited with the president, and he takes care of orphans and widows.⁹

One of the accusations put to Christians was that they were cannibals because they 'consumed the flesh and blood of a man called Christus'. Justin might have been tempted to dismiss or minimise the Christian belief, but instead he said this:

We do not receive these things as common bread or common drink but, as Jesus Christ our Saviour being incarnate by God's word took flesh and blood for our salvation, so also we have been taught that the food consecrated by the word of prayer which comes from him, from which our flesh and blood are nourished by transformation, is the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus.¹⁰

The phrase 'we have been taught' appears again and again in Justin's First Apology: it witnesses that he was holding to the tradition handed down from the apostles. In 165CE, he would make his final witness, by his martyrdom, and so he is commonly known today as Justin *Martyr*.¹¹

As well as the ongoing threat of persecution, disagreements among Christians themselves were deepening - not everything could be clearly answered by referring to the gospel texts, the letters of Paul and the teaching of the apostles handed down by word of mouth: circumstances were changing, people were coming in with new ideas. How was the Church to hold on to what was *true*?

It was one thing to have disagreements; it was another to reject the trusted teaching of the apostles. As was already clear, there were many things to discuss and to understand more deeply and clearly - not least the nature of Jesus as both God and human, and the

⁸ for example, Acts 2:44-47

⁹ 1 Apology 67

¹⁰ 1 Apology 66 (see also 26)

¹¹ Justin had taught and lived openly as a Christian in Rome and it was there that he died

meaning of salvation. But there were more immediate questions too: if Baptism forgave sins, then what happened if someone sinned again (or should one only be baptised at the end of life to be sure not to sin again?); and what to do if someone apostatised¹²: could they repent, be forgiven and be allowed to return to their Christian life?

In the decades which followed, these questions and disagreements would begin to shake and split the Church in a way it had never known before.

Secret Knowledge

Some people love the thought that they know something that other people don't. Among some Christians who had grown up in a Hellenistic¹³ world, the idea that God could become a human being was simply beyond belief: if Jesus was God, then he must have simply *appeared* to be human, and his suffering and death must have been pretend.

These Gnostics¹⁴ saw things as either/or: Jesus was divine and **not** human; he came from *above* where all is spiritual and pure, and we live *below* in the world of flesh which is impure.

Gnosticism wasn't one idea - there were many gnostic sects, both Christian and pagan, in the second century CE - but for Christianity, striving to hold true to the teaching of the apostles, they presented a serious threat.

Against Heresies

Gnosticism was sweeping across the Roman world and one man, **Irenaeus** the bishop of what is now Lyon in southern France, decided to attack it with full force: he wrote a five-volume attack on gnosticism, titled *Against the Knowledge Falsely So-called* (and known today as *Against Heresies*).

Irenaeus was methodical in his attack: first he wrote about true authority in the Church and the apostolic succession. His argument was straightforward: if Jesus had secret knowledge to hand on, surely he would have given it to his closest followers. Since the bishops everywhere in the Church could trace their authority directly back to the apostles, and knew nothing of any secret knowledge, how could the gnostics (who had no line of succession) claim to have that knowledge?

Irenaeus' thinking is clear in what he wrote:

¹² which means publicly renounced their faith, for fear of suffering and death

¹³ in other words, in a culture of Greek understanding and philosophy

¹⁴ or 'bearers of Secret Knowledge' (in Greek: *gnosis*)

We ought to... love with the greatest zeal the things of the Church, and so to lay hold of the tradition of the truth. What if there should be a dispute about some matter of moderate importance? Should we not turn to the oldest churches, where the apostles themselves were known, and find out from them the clear and certain answer to the problem now being raised? Even if the apostles had not left their Writings to us, ought we not to follow the rule of the tradition which they handed down to those to whom they committed the churches?¹⁵

Then Irenaeus explained the true teaching of the Church: that Jesus became a human being to save and to heal us, and that this is made real and present in the **sacraments** which, through visible action, bestow invisible blessing.¹⁶ So, he says:

For as the bread, which is produced from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly; so also our bodies, when they receive the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, having the hope of the resurrection to eternity.¹⁷

Notice that, against the gnostic language of either/or, Irenaeus writes of **both/and** - it is fundamental to the Church's understanding in so many aspects:

- Jesus: both fully God and fully human
- the authority of Scripture and Tradition
- God as One and as Trinity
- Christian life shaped by Word and Sacrament

For Irenaeus, Jesus brought a *new beginning* NOT by bringing secret knowledge but by laying down his life in obedience (contrasting Adam¹⁸ who had disordered the world by his *disobedience*). Irenaeus, developing this point, describes Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the new Eve because, by her obedience to God, salvation came into the world. Subsequent centuries would develop this theme.

The Canon of Scripture

Irenaeus had a whole other battle on his hands - not against the gnostics, who were effectively quashed by his huge exposition of true Christian faith - but by others who challenged what was to be held as truth.

¹⁵ Against Heresies III 4.2

¹⁶ Against Heresies III 11.5

¹⁷ Against Heresies IV 18.5

¹⁸ Genesis 3:1-24

Some Christians - just as in the time of the apostles¹⁹ - could not accept Jesus as God: they wanted to hold onto their Jewish faith and believed that Jesus was a prophet sent by God to bring Judaism to its fulfilment.

The desire to *pick and choose* isn't new and it creates deep disagreements in the Church today; here, Irenaeus was faced with Christians who were picking and choosing²⁰ which Christian texts they would accept and which they would not.

The question was very real: when nothing had been decided, which Christian texts were authentic and true to the guiding of the Holy Spirit and which were not?

And a further question: even if agreement on the authentic Christian texts could be found, what did that mean for the scriptures which had been handed down from the Jewish faith? Were they irrelevant now? Should Christian texts stand with less authority than the old scriptures - or indeed more authority?

Irenaeus had to begin to fight this battle to decide on what we now call the *Canon* of the New Testament, and to decide how this New Witness (or Testament) stood in relation to the now Old Testament. In the process, he became one of the first to speak of a *history of salvation*, demonstrating that throughout human existence God has worked to bring humankind to salvation, and that this is witnessed in the scriptures (what we now call the Old Testament) as well as in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the Christian writings which witness to it:

He took his people in hand, teaching them - unteachable as they were - to follow him. He gave them prophets, accustoming man to bear his Spirit and to have communion with God on earth. He who stands in need of no-one, gave communion with himself to those who need him. Like an architect he outlined the plan of salvation to those who sought to please him. By his own hand he gave food in Egypt to those who did not see him. To those who were restless in the desert he gave a law perfectly suited to them. To those who entered the land of prosperity he gave a worthy inheritance. He killed the fatted calf for those who turned to him as Father, and clothed them with the finest garment. In so many ways he was training the human race to take part in the harmonious song of salvation...²¹

The New Testament, as Irenaeus outlined it, is largely the one we know today, and it is thanks to him that we have the names of the four gospels²² and, indeed, the symbols of the evangelists as they have come down to us in Christian art: the lion (Mark), the ox (Luke), the man (Matthew) and the eagle (John).

¹⁹ See Paul's letter to the Galatians

²⁰ They only accepted Matthew's gospel, for example, and even so rejected Mt 1:18-25 because it told that Mary was a virgin (which would, of course, mean that Jesus was divine)

²¹ Against Heresies IV 14.2

²² Against Heresies III 1.1

The Texts

Is it the soul, as such, that constitutes the human being? No. That is only the soul. Is it the body, then, that is called human? No. That is only the body. Consequently, since these two components, separately, do not constitute a human being, it must be the unity formed by the conjunction of both that alone deserves the name. It is the whole person, certainly, whom God has called to life and to resurrection, not merely a part. It is the human being, whole and entire, who is called, that is to say, the soul but also the body. If that is so, how can it be conceded that one should be saved without the other when together they form an indissoluble union?

Justin, Fragment 8

If indeed the flesh possesses no useful function, why did Christ heal it? And why, in particular, did he go so far as to raise the dead to life? What was his purpose? Was it not to show us how the resurrection was to take place? How, moreover, did he raise the dead? Was it souls or bodies? Clearly, it was both together. If the resurrection was to be only spiritual, he would have to have shown, at his own resurrection, his body lying dead on one side, and his soul on the other in its risen state. But he did nothing of the sort. He rose with his body, convinced that the promise of life concerned it too. Why did he rise in his crucified flesh, if not to demonstrate the reality of the resurrection of the flesh? Wishing to convince his disciples who were refusing to admit that he had really risen with his body... he offered himself to be touched by them and showed them the marks of the nails in his hands. But because they still could not admit that it was he, in his own body, he asked to eat with them... and he ate some honey and fish.

Thus he proved to them that resurrection would come to our actual fleshly bodies. Furthermore, having declared that our dwelling place will be in the heavens, he wanted to show that it is not impossible for the flesh to go to 'heaven'. Indeed, they saw him 'taken up into heaven' just as he was, that is to say, in the flesh.

Justin, Fragment 9

Reflection

When you imagine the risen Jesus, how does he seem to you?

In what ways does belief in the resurrection change your own feelings about death?

Where might you draw the line between 'diversity of belief' and 'heresy'?