

## JESUS CHRIST: CARPENTER

### **Why should the Son of God have been brought up as a carpenter when he was here on earth among us?**

This is a question to which I will return later as we consider the background to the importance of the role of technology in God's scheme for the Universe, the world and the human race within it. The Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines 'Technology' as "Practical or industrial arts; or the application of science" -- and surely carpentry must be included among the practical or industrial arts. In the practice of the arts, there must be some form of creativity.

Therefore let us first go back to the very beginning. The Judaeo-Christian tradition believes that *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"* (Gen. 1.1). The importance of this cannot be overstated because it seems to me that this is one of the foundations for monotheism. If you have one God responsible for the whole of creation, then there is no need for other gods. The one supreme God looks after everything and everybody that he has created. A Vulcan or a Thor, gods of smiths, or a Neptune, god of the sea, become quite unnecessary. Often the Christian religion has tried to replace such lesser gods with saints, for example St. Blasius of Sebaste, patron of wool combers, or St. Cecilia of music, but in the end, the Judaeo-Christian beliefs return to the concept of the one omnipotent God, the only creator of the Universe and of the planet Earth on which we live. In Revelations, we find this stated in that paean of praise:

*"Worthy art thou, our Lord God, to receive glory and honour and power, for thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created".*  
(Rev. 4.11)

Now, in the creative activity, it seems to me that we have two stages. First we have the initial creation of the basic structure or the building blocks of material from which everything else can be made. There has to be this creation from nothing to start the whole process; the big bang; the formless void; or whatever. Here we have God's word or command speaking and creating. Of this first stage, we have little understanding at present, and it is unlikely that we can ever have a share in this initial part of creation.

But where it seems to me that the human race can come to have some role in the creative actions of God is in the second stage -- where the lumps of material have been provided and there is the possibility of using them like a Lego set to assemble a wide variety of different forms and structures. I cannot read Hebrew but in Genesis 1.2 there is a wonderfully descriptive Greek word for this process, when "The earth was without form and void" (Gen. 1.2); "akataskeuatos" or unfurnished coming from "kataskeuazo" meaning to furnish, equip or construct a house; when God turned our planet Earth into an inhabitable sphere out of the void.

Here is a form of creation or creativity which can be on-going -- which can bring order out of chaos, and lead to the great variety of the world we see around us, the geological formations, the world of nature, and even our own industrial and technological world. At the beginning of Genesis, we have the picture, the myth of God creating everything that exists in seven days. While he rested on the seventh, the arguments rage whether he withdrew thereafter or whether he has been actively involved in an on-going creativity up to the present time. Did God wind up the clockwork mechanism of the Universe and leave it to tick away, or has He been involved in some way ever since? To me, Darwin's claim of the survival of the fittest accounting for the Origins of Species does not provide all the answers, particularly for the extraordinary multitude and variety of forms of life on our planet Earth. Here again, the Judaeo-Christian tradition claims that our creator God has

played and continues to play a vital role in creating, sustaining and guiding the Universe in which we live and move and have our being.

On the one hand, we have a series of laws which govern the world in which we live -- for example, the atomic elements, their restricted number and the ways in which they can combine. So, in one way we have a Universe which gives the stability necessary for our existence. The force of gravity does not suddenly cease and our feet remain firmly on the ground. But, within those laws, we have the possibilities of an amazing variety of creative possibilities. The ever changing patterns and the numberless combinations of the basic building blocks in the world around us is a cause for continual astonishment -- colour, shape, texture, scent while every flower has a recognisable form, yet all are slightly different.

Linking with this Judaeo-Christian claim of God's involvement with his creation must lie two other thoughts. The first is that, in the created world and in creative work around us, we should be able to see the hand and therefore the nature of the creator. St. Paul wrote to the Romans, *"Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible nature, namely his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in things that have been made."* (Rom. 1.20). A painter usually has his or her distinctive style, so that, knowing the style, we ought to be able to recognise who drew the painting. Therefore we should be able to learn something about our Creator from the world around us, particularly from the creative process.

I feel that this is a very important point, something which we have tended to forget in our modern society where so much is prepackaged for us. Kurt Hahn, the founder of Gordonstoun, advocated that some creative project should form part of the curriculum at that school to help stimulate the pupils and this idea was carried over into the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. It emphasises the importance of the role of creativity in our lives. But, as far as God is concerned, I wonder whether we have been asking the right questions in our search for Him within his creation.

The second claim about God's involvement with his creation is that God is a God of love and therefore presumably God loves what he has created. The Bible, of course, is the story of God's love for the human race in particular, and of His redemptive acts to restore the fallen descendants of Adam through his special love for the Children of Israel. The Book of Genesis claims that God made man, or the human race, in his own image. I know that too often we, the human race, have made God in our own image, but the whole thrust of the Biblical message is that there is some form of special relationship between God and the human race. Therefore some of the characteristics of God, such as God is love and God the Creator, ought to appear in the human race as well.

Yet why there should have been the breakdown in the relationship between the Creator and the created, why there should be the need for redemption, remains a mystery. We have the Biblical claim that God saw all that he had made and behold it was very good and that then Eve came along and spoilt everything by falling to the wiles of the serpent after which she corrupted Adam. But we know now that long before homo sapiens appeared on the Earth, the struggles of the natural world, with one species fighting another for survival nature red in tooth and claw had been carrying on for thousands and thousands of years. Change and decay in all around leading to annihilation seems to be at variance with the concept of a God of love. Yet the other extreme, the paradise of the Jehovah's Witnesses where one can reach out and pick ripe apples off the trees the whole year round seems completely unreal and impossible too.

Anyway, we have the need for the redemption of the human race, which must be God's greatest creative act. Therefore in it we must expect to find God revealing himself through what he has created in the world to his people living in that world.

One vital preliminary step in that redemptive process was the Exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt. There was the abuse of technology lying at the root of this particular problem --the forced labour of the Children of Israel making bricks sadly not the first and a long way from being the last of technological abuses. God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush, a phenomenon which still may puzzle scientists and technologists. This was only the first of a series of extraordinary occurrences in which God revealed His power and led to the escape of the Children of Israel across the Red Sea and their eventual arrival in the Promised Land. These events certainly showed to the Jews that their one creator God was in control of the world around them and was therefore the supreme God, far greater than those gods of the Egyptians. These events also showed God's love for His people and how he provided everything for them.

At this point we come to another significant concept in Judaeo-Christian thought which is that history is linear; there has been a beginning and there will be an end. With the annual flooding of the Nile in Egypt and of the Euphrates in Mesopotamia, those peoples could hold a cyclical view of time, every event repeating itself from year to year. Somehow the Israelites developed the linear concept which was to lead to one point of culmination and vital significance the redemption of the world by a Messiah. We have the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, leading up to God, or the Son of God himself in Jesus Christ coming as Messiah. There is a progression, an advance to Jesus Christ the Carpenter.

The redeemer of the world, the Messiah, had to reflect both the nature of God the creator and man the created. The Christian claim that Jesus, as part of the Trinity, is coequal with God, stretches back to the New Testament. In St. John's Gospel, Jesus said, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father, I am in the father and the Father is in me". (Jn. 14.9) Therefore in Jesus, we must look both for love and creativity. The creativity we find both in Colossians, "We have Christ as Head of Creation" (Col. 1.15-18) and also in the start of St. John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God". God spoke and the world was created through the Word.

But why should the Word have been a carpenter, for after all carpentry is not a frequent image in the Old Testament? Abraham took wood with him to sacrifice Isaac but this hardly counts as carpentry. The Ark of the Covenant, the framing of the Tabernacle, parts of the Temple, all had to be built of wood. Why was Jesus not a potter? Jeremiah was sent to the potter for inspiration (Jer. 18.2) and be shown how a potter could reform his clay into different pots. This craft might have been considered suitable for after all Jesus came to refashion people's lives. I can understand why Jesus might not have been a smith because the smiths were so often fashioning weapons of war: "*Behold I have created the smith who blows the fire of coals and produces a weapon for its purpose*" (Is. 54.16).

Possibly one reason may be that a really good carpenter must have a deep feeling for the wood with which he is working. In my own case, I never had the patience to work with wood and found copper, brass and iron were much easier because they were more homogeneous. Each piece of wood is distinct and individual. The grain runs differently, or a knot comes just in the wrong place. To fashion each piece of wood to its best advantage takes real skill. What a training for the Saviour who would have to deal with all the idiosyncrasies of human personality. The master craftsman can see the full potential of each separate piece.

But skills learnt in the carpenter's shop do not form directly the basis of any of the miracles of Jesus. There is the tale in the Apocryphal Gospel of Thomas of how Joseph was asked to make a special bed for an important customer. He must have measured the wood wrongly because one beam was

found to be too short. So Jesus came to the rescue and he and his father took hold of opposite ends and pulled out the beam to its correct length. (The Apocryphal New Testament, Oxford p63)

In fact, the four Gospels contain few accounts of Jesus performing miracles with objects in the created world. We can understand the significance of turning water into wine or feeding the multitudes with bread for our later Holy Communion. Calming the storm, the devils entering the Gadarene swine, the withering of the fig tree are other examples where the miracles did not involve healing people but were connected with the realm of nature. We do not know all the lessons Jesus learnt during his forty days in the wilderness when he was tempted by the devil and rejected the easy way of compelling people to follow him through physical signs, and this may be why he avoided them.

This is a lesson that all who aspire to be 'fishers of men' must learn. Like Christ, we have to leave the inanimate, whatever skills we have gained as master craftsmen, and have to turn to animate, living persons. Creativity lies not in things but in people and can appear in all sorts of forms. At the centre of our faith lies the Cross, that parody of the skill of the carpenter. The Cross shows how people have that terrible capacity to turn good into evil. The tree, that might have been carved into something beautiful in the hands of a master carpenter, became an instrument of torture in the hands of ruthless sinful men. And yet God was able to turn even that into the greatest creative act the world has ever known, the ultimate sacrifice for its redemption. Perhaps the symbol of the Cross is the answer to why Jesus was brought up as a carpenter. The result of that sacrifice of the carpenter on the tree is our redemption.

Surely this must point to the possibility of the redemption of technology also. The human race may use those building blocks supplied to us by God in His creation of the world either for good or for evil. The redemption of the world through Christ on the Cross should lead to a new life with God and the possibility of creating a better world around us. Then we might be able to share St. Paul's vision:

*"We are God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning he had meant us to live it"* (Eph. 2.10)

O Jesu, Master Carpenter, who at the last through wood and nails purchased our redemption; wield well your tools in this your workshop, that we who come to you rough-hewn may be fashioned to a nobler beauty by your hand; for your name's sake, O Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

**Richard Hills, 9th Annual Gathering of the SOSOC at Launde Abbey, July 1995**