

## **Mark Tully in conversation with James Alison**

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[approx 12 mins in]

MT - There is a very real danger, I believe, in the many ways Jesus is described now. It's the danger that they lead us to believe that the churches' traditional way of seeing Jesus is totally out of date, rendered unsustainable by modern knowledge. James Alison is a Roman Catholic priest and theologian who warns against this in his answer to the question, "Who do you say Jesus is?"

JA - I want to give what I think is both the right answer, and my answer, so I'm going to say that Jesus is Yahweh - that's what I understand when we say "Jesus is Lord" - we're actually saying that Yahweh has come among us, the God of Israel who is referred to by that name, and yes, this is something that was promised in the Hebrew scriptures.

MT - And how then do we react to this?

JA - Well, and I think that's the key issue when we're discussing what's meant by the Incarnation: to what extent, *for us*, is the life and death of this person, this human being, Jesus of Nazareth, the criterion for God - in other words, to what extent is this 'elsewhere-getting-through-to-us' rather than our projection onto this person? And that seems to me to be the key thing that, if you like, the word 'incarnation' is protecting, is 'hedging round', is the 'criterion-from-elsewhere' quality of this person. I just want to say of course that it's very difficult for us to imagine - we, as human beings, we have human criteria for everything: we have no way of talking that is not our way of talking, all our images are our images, they're derived from being this sort of animal, who lives under these social circumstances, formed and brought up in this sort of way, and so on and so forth. So the very idea that someone who is not one of us might be speaking to us from the position of not being one of us is something which, in principle, is very very difficult to understand. And so that's, as I understand it, both the richness and the difficulty, you know, of Christian life and meditation and theology surrounding the Incarnation: how do we keep alive the sense of Jesus being 'God's criterion' given our tendency to close down criteria and make them ours.

MT – And how do we keep it open in this way then?

JA – Well mostly, I would say, ecclesially. I think that when it works at its best, which is maybe more often than we think but not as often as any of us would like, the function of the church and doctrines is to be a sign of this otherness coming towards us.

MT – So you wouldn't agree with the piece of literature which we're reading here in which it's said that Jesus has been “‘shut up’ in canonised Scriptures and the denominational religions” and needs to be released from that? [Referring to earlier reading from Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Catching up with Jesus.*]

JA – Well, certainly not entirely, because very often the canonical Scriptures serve as ‘hedges’ to remind us that actually, this is not something that is under our control. The moment that it is something that is under our control then it's no longer what was being told us in the first place. And unless we have some reminders of that, then my fear is that if you like, letting Jesus ‘out’ will merely mean making him much more like who we are now – and that merely means, once again, we are our own criterion, and we have a sad record as human beings for demonstrating what our criterion is – usually murder and mayhem...

MT – In some ways you're saying the danger of forgetting the canonical Scriptures and the church and all its traditions and things is that we will create Jesus in our own image.

JA – We cannot help but create Jesus in our own image, because all our knowledge, always, is projective, as humans – I think that this is simply part of who we are. What is very difficult, therefore, is to allow ourselves to be ‘broken out of’ our own reflexive criteria – and that is why, it seems to me, there is an important space for, precisely, those, if you like, ‘monuments’ to ‘something-else-happening-here’ which is what, I think, the text of Scripture and, and the doctrinal crystallisations, at their very best, serve to do – they serve to say, ‘if you step over here and make this too tame, you will end up only with yourself’.

MT – Does it concern you that there are such varied interpretations now of who Jesus was?

JA – No, not really. I mean, I think that there always have been, and always will be, such interpretations. What does worry me is when people

give such short shrift to the ancient ways of understanding. For instance the whole way of understanding God in debates in modern philosophy, at least in English-speaking countries, finds it very difficult to understand the basic premises of ancient discussions about God such as you find in Aquinas and earlier amongst the Arabic commentators, al-Ghazali and people like that, which understand very clearly, as would any ancient Jewish commentator, that when you're talking about God you're talking about someone who is much closer to being like 'nothing at all' than 'something that is'. In other words, is not in rivalry with anything that is. Now, to modern ears, that sounds like atheism – and yet, it's the necessary realisation – it's the necessary complement, to understanding that it is we who are functions of God and not God a function of us, that God is not in the order of existing things.

*Transcribed by Blair Hunwick, England*