

Lecture 8. The Christology of Edward Schillebeeckx

This lecture is the continuation of the two-part study of the Christology of two of the twentieth century's prominent theologians, Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx, and their distinctions. In the previous lecture, we examined Rahner's view of Jesus as the completion of God's good creation. Here we move to Schillebeeckx's Christology. Schillebeeckx, while not denying Rahner's view, perceives Jesus as God's opponent of evil. The story of Jesus is the story of God's response to the power of evil and the scourge of suffering within human history.

I. Biographical Remarks: Edward Schillebeeckx is a Dominican priest, born in Belgium, who lived from 1914-2009. Taught most of his career in the Netherlands. At Vatican II, advised the Dutch bishops and lectured to groups of bishops. In his later writings (post-Vatican II), he focused on an audience that included those on the margins of the Church.

II. Overall Perspective: His starting point is the reality of evil and suffering in the world. Suffering is: "the alpha and the omega of the whole history of mankind."
- Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, (Herder & Herder, 1983), 725.

Focus on Jesus as God's remedy for the problem of evil and suffering. Negative contrast experience: the natural human reaction to evil and suffering in the world - there are both negative and positive dimensions present in this experience. The Christian response to evil and suffering - not explanations or theories - the proper reaction to evil and suffering is concrete opposition to its existence. "Thus, suffering and evil can provoke scandal; however, they are not a problem, but an unfathomable, theoretically incomprehensible mystery." - Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, 725.

The centrality of narrative in our grappling with suffering is significant for Schillebeeckx. People respond to suffering by telling a story. The story of Jesus of Nazareth (his entire story) as the liberating story of God.

III. The Public Ministry of Jesus: The ministry of Jesus is about the definitive offer of salvation from God - the death of Jesus is the direct outcome of his ministry. The message of the kingdom of God reflects the God whose concern is the concern of humankind: The kingdom of God is, "the saving presence of God, active and encouraging, as it is affirmed or welcomed among men and women." This saving presence of God, "takes concrete form above all injustice and peaceful relationships among individuals and peoples, in the disappearance of sickness,

injustice and oppression, in the restoration to life of all that was dead and dying." Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, (Crossroad Publishing, 1993), 111-112. "The kingdom of God is essentially connected with the person of Jesus of Nazareth himself." Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 112.

The healing ministry of Jesus and his table fellowship: "To a great extent Jesus' action consisted in establishing social communication and opening up communication above all where excommunication or expulsion was officially in force." -Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 116.

Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom was rooted in his "Abba experience." See Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6. Jesus' Abba experience was a contrast experience. God as "pure positivity" - the loving opponent of evil.

IV. The Death and Resurrection of Jesus: The crucifixion of Jesus "was the intrinsic historical consequence of the radicalism of both his message and his lifestyle, which showed that all 'master-servant' relationships were incompatible with the lifestyle of the kingdom of God." - Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 794. ". . . from a particular moment in his career he must have come to terms with the possibility, in the longer term the probability and in the end the actual certainty of a fatal outcome." - Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 301.

Schillebeeckx expresses deep concern about the Christian tendency to glorify the cross. 1. The cross is "the index of the anti-divine in human history" Edward Schillebeeckx, "The 'God of Jesus' and the 'Jesus of God,'" *Concilium*, vol 93, 126. Mark 14:25 - the passing of the cup - shows that "Jesus felt his death to be (in some way or other) part and parcel of the salvation-offered-by-God, as a historical consequence of his caring and loving service of and solidarity with people." Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 310. "God, who according to Leviticus 'abominates human sacrifices' (Leviticus 18:21-30; 20:1-5) did not put Jesus on the cross. Human beings did that." Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 120.

The cross should be seen as an Abba-experience, though one undergone in darkness and silence. We must view Psalm 22 as a whole as a prayer of trust in God—God does not abandon Jesus - we must say that for Jesus and for all of those who suffer that God is always near at hand. God's silent presence to Jesus is disclosed in the resurrection - the focus here is on the resurrection as correction, a new creative act of God. "Therefore, first of all, we have to say that we are not redeemed thanks to the death of Jesus but despite it." - Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 729.

In the resurrection of Jesus, God has so overcome the negativity of Jesus' death that in faith we can say that even the negative aspects of our history have an indirect role in God's saving work. Another important point for Schillebeeckx is the centrality of solidarity and communion - Jesus' abiding communion with God even at Calvary. "On the cross Jesus shared in the brokenness of our world. This means that God determines in absolute freedom, down the ages, who and how he wills to be in his deepest being, namely a God of men and women, an ally in our suffering and absurdity, and also an ally in the good we do. In his own being he is a God for us." - Edward Schillebeeckx, Church, 126.

"The all-embracing sign of grace. . . is Jesus' love to the point of death: his suffering and dying as a breaking of the life which he entrusts to his God, in grief, but with all his heart" - Edward Schillebeeckx, Christ, 466. Christians are people of memory and action—they keep the memory of human suffering; they keep the memory of the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. This memory leads Christians to reflective action that seeks to alleviate suffering and fight against the causes of suffering. Christology is the foundation for a life of Christian discipleship and mission

Reflection Questions

1. The starting point of Schillebeeckx's Christology is the reality of evil and suffering in the world. How does this starting point influence what he says about the person and saving work of Jesus? Do you think that this is a helpful starting point for Christology?
2. In commenting on Jesus' table fellowship, Schillebeeckx says that to a great extent Jesus' ministry consisted in opening up social communication. What implications does this have for Christian ministry today? Do you think that this is an accurate interpretation of Jesus' ministry?
3. Schillebeeckx is concerned about the tendency within Christian theology and spirituality to glorify the cross. Do you agree with this concern? What do you think of the way in which Schillebeeckx deals with the death of Jesus?
4. Schillebeeckx emphasizes the resurrection of Jesus as a divine creative action that corrects what was done to Jesus. Do you resonate with this emphasis in his Christology?