

## Chapter II

# The Theology of the Christian Sunday

### II. THE LORD'S DAY

From the earliest times Sunday was connected with Christ's resurrection. It would be quite impossible to begin to give a list of the passages in which the two are linked.<sup>1</sup> What took place on that day had a profound effect on its future observance. We have seen this already in other contexts: the spirit of enthusiastic joy and hope; the witness of those who saw Christ and heard him opening the Scriptures; the gathering of the disciples together and the presence of Christ in their midst; the fact that it was the first day of the week and the Old Testament inferences from that; the breathing of the Spirit on them and the bestowal of peace by the risen Lord (John 20: 21); the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost—all these things had a deep meaning for the Christian church.

But what caused them, no doubt, to call the day the Lord's Day (*kyriakē*)<sup>2</sup> was that in all these conceptions Christ himself was the central figure. It was he who rose; it was he who appeared to them; it was he who spoke; it was he who broke the bread and ate with them; it was he who opened the Scriptures and spoke about the things 'concerning himself' (Luke 24: 27); he who breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Spirit'; he who bestowed his peace when they were gathered together and told them to keep together; he who stood in the midst, the living risen Christ.<sup>3</sup> There may also have been in their minds the thought of the Passover season during which he died and rose again. In Exodus 6: 3 this is closely connected in the LXX with the revelation of God as *kyrios* (Yahweh). The Christian confession was 'Jesus is Lord' (1 Cor. 12: 3). It was he who had delivered from the spiritual Egypt (1 Cor. 10: 1-11).

It does not seem surprising that the same word which was used to describe the Supper which he had commanded them to observe should be attached to the day which came to be observed as the feast of his Resurrection and on which the Supper was regularly celebrated.<sup>4</sup> There is no doubt that the word was used before the close of the first century. It seems clear that the use of it in Rev. 1: 10 does refer to

Sunday.<sup>5</sup> Certainly by AD 115 Ignatius employs it in this sense.<sup>6</sup>

While Christ appeared on the first and second Sundays to individuals for special purposes, it appears certain from the accounts in Luke 24: 33ff. and John 20: 18-19 that it was the realisation of his presence in their midst 'when they were gathered together' that specially impressed the early church. Compare also Acts 1: 4 and Acts 2: 1, in order to see that this is clearly the uppermost thought, the presence of the risen Christ in the midst of the disciples gathered together. The same thought is brought out in Rev. 1: 10, where John, banished to Patmos and probably alone, 'in the spirit on the Lord's Day', sees the glorified Christ 'in the midst of the golden candlesticks', which are the *ekklēsiai*, the churches gathered together.

The central idea would seem then to be that Sunday was the day when the church gathered together as Christ's body, because conscious of the living Lord in their midst, as he had promised, 'where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst'. It would be the day on which the head, Christ, and his body, the church, were visibly united, the union publicly demonstrated.

The idea of the resurrection of Christ was extended to his body the church. They thought of themselves, after having died with Christ, as having risen with Christ (Col. 3: 1), 'If ye then be risen with Christ. . .'. This was the picture in baptism (Rom. 6: 3, 4). And this perhaps was the origin of the custom of not kneeling in prayer on Sundays, for they were risen and stood upright.<sup>7</sup> In spirit they had already 'risen': they were all risen together in the new life with their 'Lord'. In the day of the Lord's return they would be raised also in body.

This union, or communion (*koinōnia*), was shown firstly in the eucharist, the meal which 'Christ' himself had told them to observe in memory of his death and in which he himself was both host and food. As risen Lord he was himself the central figure, blessing and offering the bread and the wine to his church. It was of 'one loaf' they partook, to show that they were 'one body' (1 Cor. 10: 17). Here was the supreme expression of their corporate unity.

But the 'Lord's Supper' seems originally to have included the *agapē*, the social expression of their united life, and Christ was felt to be equally present there.<sup>8</sup> No doubt they linked it with the experience of the disciples at Emmaus (Luke 24: 30), and in the upper room (Luke 24: 43), and perhaps with the thought of the eschatological feast. Like all Jewish meals it would be felt to have a religious character.

So too in the 'opening' of the Scriptures, it would be, as on the first Sunday, Christ who opened the Scriptures, and certainly they felt that he was the subject of the Scriptures (cf. Heb. 1 : 1), and especially of the New Testament. In the use of *testimonia* he was the central figure.

So that perhaps it would be right to say that Sunday was in fact the occasion of the public proclamation of Christ as Lord, 'Jesus is Lord'. While there may not have been a conscious comparison, unconsciously each Sunday the Christian Church was challenging the claim of the emperor to the titles of Lord, *kyrios*, and Saviour, *sōtēr*.<sup>9</sup> At the same time it was claiming that Christ was the 'Lord', *kyrios*, of the Old Testament: 'God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.' While it would be going too far perhaps to say that they definitely identified the risen Jesus with the 'Lord', *kyrios*, of the Old Testament,<sup>10</sup> yet they did not hesitate to apply Old Testament passages of this nature to him.<sup>11</sup>

The prayers in public worship were 'in the name of Christ'. 'If ye shall ask anything in my name' (John 14 : 14) was to be the basis of the public prayers, connecting this part of the worship with the risen Lord. So, too, praise and thanksgiving were 'through Christ' (Heb 13 : 15), and probably the doing of alms and the offerings were felt to be through the risen Lord (cf. Matt. 7 : 22; 18 : 5; 25 : 40). It is interesting to note that in Pliny's letter the hymns sung were to Christ as to a god, *carmenque Christo quasi deo dicere invicem*.

Then again Sunday was connected in the thought of the Christians with the return (*parousia*) of Christ. The Eucharist was to be 'till he come' (1 Cor. 11 : 26). So that there seems to be an anticipation that the return of Christ would take place on a Sunday. It seems probable that the Aramaic *maranatha* (1 Cor. 16 : 22), which became incorporated into the liturgy in *Didache* 10.6, means, 'O our Lord, come!' rather than 'our Lord has come'.

Eusebius suggests in his *Commentary* on Psalm 91 (92) that in fact Christ himself changed the day from sabbath to Sunday. As we have already seen, he says, 'The Word, through the new covenant, changed and transferred the feast of the sabbath to the rising of the light . . . the Lord's Day'.<sup>12</sup> In this connection he twice quotes Psalm 117 (118) : 24, 'This is the day the Lord hath made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.' This verse, as we have seen, has already been quoted in reference to Sunday from Clement of Alexandria onwards. At first sight we are inclined to think that the use is quite arbitrary and has no real connection with Sunday. But on examination we find that in fact under-

neath there is a connection which is not at first realised. The Psalm was one of the *Hallel* psalms, associated with the feast of Tabernacles and other festivals, and from very early days was connected with the triumph of the Messiah; and, as we have seen, in the year of Christ's death, according to the Sadducees and (possibly) St. John's Gospel, both the first and eighth day of the feast fell on a Sunday. Verses 22 and 23, 'the stone which the builders rejected', comprise one of the most frequently used of the *testimonia*, applied by Christ himself and the New Testament writers to the Resurrection and the building up of the church, the new temple. These verses are followed by the verse in question, and so it was referred to the day of the Resurrection. They are linked together in Theodoret's *Commentary on the Psalms* (*In Pss.* 117; PG lxxx. 1817). He says, 'He calls that the day which the Lord had made on which this Stone arose after his passion. For immediately after the resurrection he commanded his apostles to go and make disciples of all nations. . . . For since from the beginning God had made the light in it, having received the resurrection of the Saviour, he sent out the beams of the Sun of Righteousness into all the world, and having made the light he called the light day. For he made nothing else on that day. This day alone as the first of days received the creation of the light.' Here Theodoret has brought together most of the conceptions we have already seen and has connected them with this verse.

We find that the expressions *agalliaō* and *euphraiō* and their nouns, which we have touched on before, are connected with the observance of Sunday, as the day of the Resurrection. *Euphrosynē* and *agalliasis* are used in the LXX quotation from Psalm 15(16):9-11, in Acts 2 : 28, a Resurrection testimony, and the latter word is used in Acts 2 : 46, of the spirit that should characterise Christian meals. Each is later applied to the Christian Sunday (*Barnabas* 15.9; Basil, *Ep.* 243.2, PG xxxii. 905; and many other references).

It seems clear, then, that to the early church the day itself had been chosen by Christ as his own. Augustine considered that Christ had deliberately chosen the day on which he should die, lie in the grave and rise again (*Contr. Faust.* 16.29; PL xlii. 334). This day, the church felt, he had himself 'made' (*epoiēse*) (Ps. 118 : 25 LXX) in the Resurrection, and therefore the day was his (*Serm.* 169. 2, 3; PL xxxviii. 916). The name 'Lord's Day' (*kyriakē*) spoke not only of the central figure in the day, but also of the one who had instituted it and to whom it belonged. It was his 'holy day' (Dionysius of Corinth; Eusebius,

*HE* 4.23.11; *PG* xx. 389), and would concentrate the thoughts of the early church on the person and work of Christ in his death and resurrection, on his presence in and for his church and on the expectation of his advent. It would be in their fellowship with all the members of the body of Christ that they would expect to find the fulfilment of all these conceptions, to realise his presence and experience his grace.<sup>13</sup> No wonder, then, that it was called the Lord's Day, a day in which the whole body expected to be together as they met the Lord, and that Eusebius of Caesarea can say that it is more suitable than the sabbath, as it is *kyriōtera* 'more linked with the Lord'.

13. It is strange that the celebration of the Eucharist more than once on a Sunday and at different times of the day has tended to destroy this understanding. No doubt the taking of the elements in the early days to those not present was to emphasize the unity that 'all' were partaking. The celebrations which later grew up on other days than Sunday would tend to have the same splintering effect.

CHAPTER 11 (pp. 112-16)

1. I have a list of at least fifty passages in the first four centuries.
2. Jungmann (*Early Liturgy*, p. 20), points out that 'the Lord' in this connection must mean Christ. St. Paul almost always when he uses it refers to Christ, except in OT quotations. See also Bousset, *Kurios Christos*, pp. 95-9.
3. If we accept the tradition in Mark 16: 14f., then the commission to preach would also have taken place, it would seem, on the second Sunday.
4. We have seen that some authors have suggested (improbably) that the day got its name from the meal.
5. I have gone into this in an article in *NTS* 12 (1965-6), p. 70, 'A note on the meaning of *kuriake* in Rev. 1.10.' White in the art. 'Lord's Day' in *HDB* points out that one so familiar with the OT as the author would certainly have used the common OT expression for 'the day of the Lord' if he had meant that.
6. This has been challenged by Seventh Day Adventist authors, but without success.
7. Another name for the day was *anastasimos*; see the references in *PGL*, in loc. and also Basil, *De Spirit. Sanct.* 27.66 (PG xxxii. 192).
8. The two are combined in 1 Cor. 11. It is clearly a religious service in Tertullian's *Apology* 39 (PL i. 468).
9. For *kyrios*, see Bousset, *Kurios Christos*. For *sōtēr*, LS give references to the Greek gods and the Roman emperors.
10. Adolph Saphir, the converted Jew, attempted to identify the two (*Divine Unity*, p. 59).
11. For instance, see the references in Heb. 1. It is interesting to note that in Luke's Gospel the author uses *kyrios* no less than seventeen times of Christ.
12. PG xxiii. 1169; Ps.-Athanasius, *De Semente* (PG xxviii. 144), has the same thought.