

The Lectures of Rudolf Steiner

The Need for Understanding The Christ

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The constitution, the entire life, of the human soul we conceive much too simply as we human beings of the present time, of the nineteenth, twentieth century experience this. What we learn from external history is in great measure only outside occurrence, far less the history of the human soul itself. The changes which occur with the soul life of the human being are considered very little. Now, it must be borne in mind that earlier periods did not have the same occasion for giving attention to this history of the human soul life as does the present time. For the present time, which, when we consider it as a long historical epoch, began in the first third of the fifteenth century, — this present epoch presents man with very special responsibilities, such as he can discharge only by means of his consciousness, whereas earlier responsibilities could be discharged by means of certain instinct, even though an instinct humanly formed. We have heard in various ways and perhaps read in cycles, how in ancient times man possessed a kind of instinctive clairvoyance, but how the evolution of humanity has consisted in the loss of this instinctive clairvoyance, and that in its place has appeared the contemporary constitution of soul, which is intellectual in character and has developed primarily the human understanding. I do not say that for this reason the capacities of feeling and volition have not been active in the human being, but what constitutes the greatest thing in our contemporary civilization, what we experience at the present time more than anything else, this calls upon the understanding, upon the capacity for conception. But the present day human being has good reason for asking the question what significance an intellectual civilization possesses for the human soul. This question can be completely answered only if one gives a little attention to that reference to the pre-earthly human life to which attention was directed yesterday in a different connection.

As human beings of the present time, we experience concepts as something very abstract, as something that we do not experience in the same degree as that in which concepts were experienced in the time of the ancient instinctive clairvoyance by human beings. And if, from these abstract, intellectualistic concepts, we look at pre-earthly human existence, we find that something entirely different existed in place of what is today abstract thinking. Moreover, since we possessed no body, no organism, in the pre-earthly life, as we still possessed only the soul-spiritual nature, thoughts were something entirely different. Thoughts then still possessed a soul life. We then experienced a thought in such a way that we knew that thoughts are spread everywhere in the entire world, and we draw these out of the world into our own life of soul.

Today the view of the human being is that thoughts are something which he creates with his brain. This is just as clever as if a person taking a glass of water to himself should believe that the water comes out of his tongue, is not taken in from without. In reality, thoughts are something active, living, the working forces in the whole world, and we simply draw them out of the world. Our organic system is only the vessel into which we draw the thoughts by means of our ego. But the erroneous idea that we of ourselves create the thoughts, to this error one can surrender oneself only during the earthly life between birth and death. As long as we live in the pre-earthly existence, it is clear that the realm of thought completely fills everything in our surroundings just as air does during our existence between birth and death. We know that, so to speak, we breathe in thoughts and again

breathe them out, that they are something active, productive. It is of the utmost importance that we become aware that the forces of thought are something quite different in the pre-earthly life and in the earthly existence. When we come upon a corpse somewhere in the world, we do not say to ourselves that this corpse could have been brought into its present form by any kind of forces which we call forces of nature. We know it is the residue of a living human being. The living human being must necessarily have been in existence there; a force of nature can never give to a corpse the form in which it exists. The corpse can be nothing else than the residue of a living human being.

What we are able to observe in regard to the life of thinking in the human being as we possess this in the earthly existence gives us a basis upon which to understand that the forces of thought we develop during the earthly life do not come into existence of themselves in our physical organism, but that they are the residue of living forces we possessed in the pre-earthly existence. With the same certainty with which one says that the corpse is the dead residue of a living person he can say also that abstract thinking such as we have at the present time is the dead residue of what we possessed during the pre-earthly existence in living thought.

The living thought dies as we are born — or as we are conceived — and what becomes effective in us as forces of thinking is the corpse of that living thinking which we possessed during the pre-earthly existence. We do not quite rightly understand the earthly thinking until we look upon it as the residue of the pre-earthly thinking, just as we look upon the corpse as the residue of a living person. This awareness of human thinking, which is the residue of a living thinking, must gradually more and more permeate humanity; only then will one look upon oneself in the right way as a human being; then will one look back in the right way to the pre-earthly existence as one looks back from the corpse, in which only the forces of nature are existent, to the living human being, in whom loftier forces are alive. But one considers this entire thing in the right light only when one knows that this thinking, as we possess it at the present time, tending only toward abstraction, we developed first since the fifteenth century. Naturally, it evolved in various ways in the various individual races and groups of human beings, but in general the situation has been such for civilized humanity that humanity has evolved to this dead thinking in the first third of the fifteenth century; that this thinking became ever more and more completely dead until a certain culmination of this condition of deadness came about exactly in the last third of the nineteenth century.

Indeed, if we look further back in the course of evolution, we find that in these ancient times the human souls, as they passed through conception and birth, brought over into the earthly existence something out of the pre-earthly life. The living nature of ancient myths, ancient popular legends, the ancient formative forces of the soul which are by no means the same as our present activity in phantasy, could not have developed if something had not streamed in from the living pre-earthly existence, if earthly thinking had already become entirely abstract. Indeed, it can be said in a certain sense that even at present there remains a final residue of pre-earthly thinking in the period of childhood, although this is lost in the course of life. But those human beings of a more ancient time were entirely different from contemporary human beings in their entire life of soul. Just imagine quite truly that we could experience at the present time this living thinking, could experience still such clairvoyance as the human soul possessed in ancient times, that you experienced imaginations, that these imaginations could affect you so powerfully that they would appear to you as revelations of divine-spiritual forces. You would never arrive at a consciousness of freedom. The true feeling of freedom developed for the first time in civilized humanity. The fact that man has been able to become free he owes to the circumstance that living thinking is not active at least in his waking state, but a dead thinking into which he injects whatever he wishes out of his free will. Man does not think as he thought at an earlier time; he himself begins to think. But beginning oneself to think means to

inject human will into this thinking, and when man finds a dead thinking he can pour his free will into this thinking. Thus man had to advance to dead thinking in order to become a free being in the course of earthly evolution.

You see that, if we consider in the same way the evolution of the human soul life, it becomes clear to us that there is meaning in the formation of the whole human evolution on earth.

But we will now once more return to somewhat earlier times. That which occurred as a deadening, an abstracting, an intellectualizing of thinking in the first third of the fifteenth century had been in the course of preparation for a long time very gradually beforehand. Such things do not occur all at once but pass through a preparation, pass through a certain beginning finally to reach the highest point. Now it is clearly to be seen that the first beginning toward this abstract thinking occurred in the fourth Christian century. I mean that in the fourth Post-Christian century there began the first trace becoming dominant in human consciousness that man believed he creates his thoughts. This could not have been thought by a Greek. The Greek was altogether conscious still of a certain living quality of this thinking and was conscious that thoughts exist everywhere within things; that he simply draws them himself out of things. The opinion that man creates his thoughts came about through the fact that thoughts became ever more and more lifeless. And these lifeless thoughts, with which one can, so to speak, do whatever one will, made their appearance for the first time in the fourth Christian century. This proceeded gradually still further until, in the fifteenth century, the consciousness (which we still possess today) clearly took on its form.

But what resulted from this in the evolution of humanity? In the fourth Post-Christian century occurred the beginning of an intellectual, abstract thinking. This means, however, nothing else than that the Mystery of Golgotha, the appearance of Christ upon the earth, occurred during a time when the human soul was still filled with living thoughts. In this respect much has been lost to humanity in the matter of its consciousness. It is true that humanity has in this way achieved freedom, but very much, nevertheless, has been lost. When Christ appeared upon the earth he was received by a certain number of human beings who still possessed an inwardly living, active thinking, who still possessed in their thinking a residue of the pre-earthly existence. And these persons related themselves to the Mystery of Golgotha in a manner entirely different from that of the human beings of a later time. Just think for a moment, that till this period, human beings said to themselves — they did not clearly express this; everything was then enveloped in pictures, but the consciousness was there — I am now upon the earth; I have as an earthly human being my thinking; but this directs me backward through birth and conception into the pre-earthly existence, into a different world; it is out of this that I have descended. Man felt himself here as a projection of what he was in the pre-earthly existence. Human beings of that time knew quite clearly that with the earthly existence they were continuing an earlier, pre-earthly existence, even though in that time human beings saw into the pre-earthly existence as if through a glass, darkly. This consciousness, that man is a being descended from the heavens to the earth, disappeared in its essence during the fourth Post-Christian century.

From this point of view also was conceived the event of Golgotha. If mention was made to these persons by initiates — who were at that time still in existence, not possessed of such wisdom as were the initiates of the ancient mysteries, but still having at least a residue of the ancient mystery wisdom, — if mention was made by them of the Christ, their answer was that Jesus Christ had been at home previously in the same world in which we also were present before we descended to the earth; there He was also. That was His world; only He had never previously left that world. It is indeed a characteristic of earthly human beings that they had to descend to the earth since very early times; there they went away from the Christ in order to come down to the earth. If, then, mention was made in the ancient mysteries of the Christ — indeed, mention was constantly made of the Christ in the ancient mysteries, although He was not called by the name "Christ" — then thought

had to be directed to the pre-earthly existence; it had to be said to human beings: If you wish to know something of the Christ, you must not hold fast to your earthly consciousness, but must look upward to the pre-earthly existence.

Indeed, we must introduce something from this pre-earthly existence in order to understand what I wish to bring out today. Standing here upon the earth as earthly human beings, we look up to the sun, we form conceptions of the sun, we even develop hypotheses regarding it: that this sun is a ball of gas or something similar. Indeed, from the earthly point of view it is inevitable that one forms such conceptions; but people believe that this could be the same from all possible points of view. Before we descended to the earth, then also we saw the sun, but out of cosmic spaces, from the other side, as it were. The sun was not then a physical object but a gathering of spiritual Beings, and the most significant among these Beings for humanity before the Mystery of Golgotha was the Christ. Thus one may also make the following statement: when in the pre-Christian time people were initiated into what later was transformed into the Mystery of Golgotha, it became clear to them that human beings beheld the sun in the pre-earthly existence and became aware of the Christ; that, when man then descended to the earth, he saw the sun from the other side, but the Christ was concealed from him: only through mystery wisdom could he be guided to the Christ. This was experienced in the first period of Christian evolution as the nature of Christianity: that the great Sun Spirit now no longer remained the Sun Spirit, but had left through the Mystery of Golgotha those regions through which the human being can pass only outside the physical body, and had come into the earthly existence; that He was the only divine-spiritual Being who had ever entered upon earthly existence. We meet — although only by means of spiritual research — with persons even in the first period of Christian evolution who felt very deeply in their inner being that Christ, came out of the sphere of spirits who did not need to pass through birth and death, for whom birth and death are only a metamorphosis, had descended and passed through birth and death. This descent of Christ to the earth was the entire essential feeling experienced during the first period in Christian evolution. This descent was far more important for human beings of that time than what followed after the descent. The fact that Christ wished to be in a community with human beings, that He desired to share in the two most significant experiences — birth and death — this was felt in circles of the initiates as the genuine religious impulse. This was possible only because man still possessed some degree of inner, living thinking; because until the fourth Christian century thinking had not yet been entirely paralysed, had not become entirely abstract, because it still filled the human being as does breathing at the present time in a physical relation. For this reason it was felt that Christ had carried out the human destiny of the descent, which the other spiritual-divine beings had not done for the reason that being born and dying are not characteristic of the gods, but only of human beings. This is the magnificent element in the belief of initiates in the first Christian centuries: that they felt Christ had really become a human being, had really taken upon himself human destiny; that He is the only one of the divine-spiritual beings who had shared this destiny with man.

Now, however, it is necessary that the truth become clear to the human soul that this soul of man, in the degree that it belongs to the world of pre-earthly existence, cannot really die. For this reason has come about what we associate with the resurrection of Christ: the victory of Christ over death, symbolizing the victory of every human soul over death. And the ancient idea, I should like to say, of the state of being unborn has blended with the new idea of resurrection which had previously existed but not with the same intensity. Since the Event of Golgotha has come about, this became in a way the expression for what is most important of all in the earthly evolution of man.

While thinking was still living, man felt not the least fear of death; this was not for him an extraordinary occurrence. This is something of the utmost importance in the history of human evolution, that death was viewed by man as something entirely different, something obvious, whereas, as man suffered the loss more and more of the consciousness of a pre-earthly existence,

abstract thinking, with the physical body as its instrumentality, brought about more and more fear of death and the belief that death is something final. Ancient humanity had little need for the idea of resurrection, but rather that of the descent to the earth in common with the Christ. As, however, human beings have advanced further and further into abstract thinking, they needed more and more a view out of the earthly existence, a view in the direction of immortality. This outlook is bestowed upon humanity through viewing in the right way the fact of Christ's resurrection. This fact I have set forth in books, lectures, and cycles of lectures many times over. Both facts — the descent of Christ to birth and death and the fact of His resurrection, the fact of victory over death — until the fourth Christian century, this could be clear to humanity in its feeling nature, since living thinking was then still in existence. After the fourth Post-Christian century, as abstract thinking developed further and further, humanity became less and less capable of connecting thoughts with the content of the Mystery of Golgotha. It has actually been the destiny of humanity in its evolution that, during the period in which man achieved through abstract thinking his own freedom, the understanding of Christ Jesus, which had existed during the earliest Christian centuries, had to disappear. That is, because of the fact that those writings designated as the *Gnostic*, a term which has become almost contemptuous, have been almost utterly eliminated except for a few residues with which very little can be accomplished. What had been thought by those persons in the first centuries who still possessed some knowledge of living thinking was destroyed. This we know only through writings of their opponents. Just imagine what the situation would be if, through some kind of accident, all anthroposophical books and other writings should disappear, and that the nature of anthroposophy would have to be adjudged only on the basis of writings by its opponents. Just so much is known today by people who depend upon external documents regarding Gnosis. That most extraordinary understanding of Christ by Gnosis, enclosed within itself, was lost to humanity. Most of all did that awareness completely disappear that the Christ had something to do with the sun, and that He had descended to the earth and passed on Golgotha through a destiny common with that of humanity. All of these relationships, especially the feelings associated with such things, were lost to humanity. More and more there came about the abstract interpretations, the abstract thoughts.

One of those who struggled out of the character of that period toward an understanding of Christianity is to be seen in Augustine. In this Augustine we see a spirit who could no longer understand the ancient form of the conception of nature. You know that Augustine is said to have been a Manichean. Augustine narrates this himself. But all that lies back of these things can no longer be rightly seen through by means of external thinking. What Augustine called Manicheism, what is called at present the teaching of Mani, is only the degenerate outcome of an ancient teaching which conceived the Spirit only as creative and knew no difference between matter and spirit. No spirit was existent that did not create and what it created was seen by the human being as matter. Just as little conception did these ancient times have of mere matter; on the contrary, spirit existed in everything. This was something that Augustine could not understand. What Gnosis understood, and what was no longer understood later; what our own period does not at all understand, — this is true: no matter exists of itself; this was known by the Manicheans and they beheld the descent of Christ in the light of this view. Augustine could no longer make anything out of this; the time had passed, the possibility of making anything out of it, because the documents had been destroyed and the ancient clairvoyance had been blotted out. Thus Augustine, after long intense superhuman struggle arrived at the decision that he could not of himself attain to truth, but must adjust himself to what the Catholic church prescribed as truth: to submit himself to the authority of the Catholic church. And this mood — consider it at first as a mood — remained, contained alive especially for the reason that thinking became ever more abstract. In reality it was only slowly and gradually that thinking was disabled.

And the Scholastics in their greatness — they really are great — still lived within a trace of knowledge that thinking on the earth was derived from a super-earthly thinking, that man lived within a heavenly thinking. Within this evolution however the possibility was gradually more and more

completely lost to conceive the Event of Golgotha as something alive. It is actually true that the advanced theology of the nineteenth century, because it desired to be scientific in the modern sense, lost the Christ; that theology was happy to have at last instead "the simple man of Nazareth". Christ was now "the loftiest human being on earth." Of the Christ indwelling within Jesus no conception could any longer be formed.

Thus the evolution since the fourth Post-Christian century has consisted of a gradual loss of the connection of man with the Christ in that living form as it was conceived by many persons during the first centuries of Christianity. Thus it came about, moreover, that the content of the gospels was less and less understood. You see, the human beings who lived during the first centuries of Christianity would have considered it utterly astonishing to speak of contradictions in the gospels. It is as if some one was familiar with the picture of a human being taken from the front and that a photograph was brought to him taken in profile, and if he should say: "This cannot be a picture of the same person" — thus would it have appeared to persons of the first Christian centuries if one had spoken to them of contradictions in the Gospels. They knew very well that the four Gospels simply present a picture taken from four different points of view. The human being of the present time would say that these are exceptional presentations, that they are from all different sides. In the spiritual world everything is far richer; in the spiritual world photographs would have to be taken from various sides as one has four Gospels. More and more arrived the time in which nothing was known any longer in the ancient sense of the Event of Golgotha. But this Event of Golgotha is of such a nature as can be conceived only from a spiritual point of view. It is indeed interesting that the historians generally slip around the Event of Golgotha. We have now the historian Ranke, considered a distinguished writer of history, who declares actually that one does not mention this, just omits it. If one omits from history the most important thing of all, no history can come into existence. Even if a person has no connection with the spiritual world and thus cannot understand the Mystery of Golgotha, he would still have to admit its tremendous influence. But history is written at the present time without mention of the enormous influence of the Mystery of Golgotha. The capacity has ever more and more disappeared to view the Mystery of Golgotha in the right manner.

We can view the matter, however, from entirely different points of view; we can say to ourselves: in the course of evolution humanity arrived at the necessity of having Christ in its midst. Gradually more and more human beings lost the consciousness of their belonging to the pre-earthly existence. This was no longer in their view; finally human beings knew only that they existed after their birth on the earth. Then the Christ came to them, in order to make manifest to them through His descent that there is a pre-earthly existence; in order to bestow upon them an understanding of what no longer lived within their own consciousness. Since human beings no longer possessed this relation in their own consciousness they were to achieve a new connection through their relation to Christ, who had passed through the Event of Golgotha. The Christ had, in a sense, bestowed Himself upon humanity in that period during which the epoch was gradually to arise for humanity to ascend to freedom. As thinking now became more and more abstract there was no longer any possibility to view in thinking the Mystery of Golgotha. But the content of the New Testament history was so enrapturing, so appealing to the human heart, that even by reason of the purely external traditions that which could no longer be grasped by thought still continued to exist for a certain time.

If we survey the first period during which Christianity was spreading out, we see that traditions existed which, in the final analysis, were derived from the Gospels, that the child-like heart took possession more and more of the picture of the Palestine events; but we see at the same time how a cognitional experience of the Mystery of Golgotha was being lost. In the same degree in which dead thinking came about, there was overshadowed also the child-like memory of the Palestine time; human beings lost their connection with Christ Jesus and people were happy when the connection with the human being Jesus could still be maintained. And now we are within our own present time;

here, in reality — although it is not yet observed — the consciousness of the connection with Christ Jesus has already disappeared. In tradition human beings still hold fast to the doctrines and have no living inner connection with Christ Jesus. One need only observe how external the festivals of the year have become. How external the Easter festival has become for human beings of the present time, whereas this Easter festival was such for human beings of an earlier time that men experienced in deepest inwardness what can be called memory of the Mystery of Golgotha. Christ had given Himself to human beings in a time when humanity had to develop its consciousness of freedom. This had in a certain sense been developed. But this would become merely external if the relation with the Christ could not be found again. This cannot be found unless we begin to seek for a spiritual knowledge. Spiritual knowledge, as this is sought by anthroposophy, will find again the relation with the Christ. This relation can be found only spiritually. What occurred on Golgotha is not merely an event that has laid hold upon the physical, earthly history of humanity, but also a spiritual event. No one can understand the Event of Golgotha who does not understand it in the spirit. Anthroposophical spiritual science, therefore, is at the same time preparation for a new understanding of the Christ and of the Mystery of Golgotha. Indeed, when we consider this fact, we are reminded of the deeply significant Gospel statement: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world". And there certainly shines out from this expression that He was not there only when the Event of Golgotha occurred; that he remains with human beings as a spiritual being, who can be found in the spirit. We need not consider as spiritual, therefore, only what radiates out of the Gospels, but we know that Christ is with us, that when at present, provided with spiritual knowledge, we listen to what is manifest concerning Him out of the spiritual world, this is a manifestation of Christ. This is the manifestation of Christ just as much as what we gain when we look into the Gospels.

"I have many things still to say unto you but you could not bear them now", — this is a reference to the time when Christ is again to be seen. And now this time approaches; it is already here. Humanity would lose the Christ if it were not possible again in a new way, in spiritual knowledge, to gain the Christ. In this way must much more become understandable to us which in an earlier time was connected with the Mystery of Golgotha, but has been lost because the spiritual understanding of it has been lost. How people struggle with the present intellectualism with the statement said to have been spoken by Christ that the Kingdom of God had come down to the earth, that an entirely new life was to begin. It is so immensely clever to say at the present time that everything on the earth has remained, after all, such as it was before. This is obviously clever, but the other question must be put in the spirit of this statement of Christ: is one really speaking in a truly Christian, spiritual understanding in supposing that any kind of external spiritual kingdom was to be set up? An external spiritual kingdom would be, of course, physical. This contradiction, you see, is not observed. But it is extremely conspicuous that people have become extraordinarily clever at the present time and still this cleverness cannot be justified even in its own realm.

I should like to call your attention to something very interesting, even though this really separates us from our actual theme. The Vienna geologist, Eduard Suess, a distinguished research scientist, says in his book *The Countenance of the Earth* that this countenance of the earth must have been entirely different, stones much more living than at present, that man is walking at the present time really upon a dead earth. The clods over which we walk belong to a dying world. Geology assumes that the earth was once far more living and has gradually passed over into the dead state. Suess says in regard to an entirely different area what Christ said concerning the spiritual life of the earth. If only this were true, that the earth will fall to pieces in a far distant future time when it will be reduced to dust in the cosmos, if what occurs to the human being did not occur to the earth — that the body becomes dust, but the spirit lives further — then all of us would be included in this turning into dust. With this earth we are beholding what leads over into the Jupiter existence; we look already toward a new earth.

With regard to the physical, this view of the turning of the earth into dust is true; with regard to the spirit-soul something different is valid. For the ancient initiates of the time of the Mystery of Golgotha it was quite clear that with the ancient civilization, the ancient mysteries, things had come to an end. The manner in which the ancient human beings had lived with their gods had come to an end; the manner in which they had lived with manifestations of nature had come to an end. But the gods bestow upon human beings the possibility of approaching a future in the spirit. What was acquired in ancient times as knowledge out of the earth belongs to the path; a new time must arrive in which the human being must bring about a kingdom by means of his own will, in which man shall give life again to a dead thinking by means of his own forces. This was a prophecy at the time of the Mystery of Golgotha. This kingdom came about also in an external way, it is to be understood, to be accepted, only by human beings of the present time. At the present time we must feel that the Kingdom of Heaven of which Christ speaks must be seen by us upon the earth as the Christ works upon the earth. This must be the fulfillment upon the earth, and the fulfillment of this Kingdom of Heaven must be earnestly conceived precisely in our present time. We experience in all areas that the human being is beginning to confront the peril of being cut off from the spiritual world and from his own being if he does not find access to the spiritual world.

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