

# National eConference



# JESUS THE CHRIST

**Presenter: Gerald O'Collins SJ**

**Thursday 16 September 2010**

10.30am – 3.00pm	Eastern Standard Time
10.00am – 2.30pm	Central Standard Time
8.30am – 1.00pm	Western Standard Time

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# Jesus the Christ

*Fully Human, Truly Divine*

## National eConference 2010

### *The National eConference*

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Fr Gerald O'Collins SJ will engage you as he shares his insights into the life and ministry of Christ. Fr O'Collins is an Australian Jesuit priest who is professor emeritus of theology at the Gregorian University, in Rome, where he has lectured since 1974, and the 2006-2007 Wade Chair Holder at Marquette University. Fr O'Collins is the author or co-author of over fifty five titles including *Living Vatican II*, *Catholicism Easter Faith: Believing in the Risen Jesus*, *The Incarnation* and *Experiencing Jesus*. He has written hundreds of articles in popular and professional journals and is a regular contributor to TV and radio.

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# **“What Are They Saying About Jesus”?**

## **Christ’s Identity and Our Memory**

### **1) Introduction**

In his book “What are they saying about Jesus?” published in 1977 our key presenter of the E-Conference on Jesus Christ organized by the Broken Bay Institute G. O’Collins reminds us of the spiritual and pastoral renewal the Second Vatican Council has brought into the Church. At the same time he also raises the concern that the teaching about Jesus Christ comes on secondarily at the Vatican II. According to him “any efforts to renew the Church will remain spiritually empty, emotionally hollow and doctrinally unsound unless they drawn inspiration and strength from the founder of Christianity himself”. In this context he envisioned the III Vatican Council by suggesting “that its major document would not be “The church in the Modern World”, but some response to the question: Who is Jesus Christ for today”?<sup>1</sup>

Today, forty-five years after the Second Vatican Council, the same question is still valid for us. And to be sure, our answers to the question won’t be easy. We are amazed about Jesus, but are also struggling with him. Our present experience of a World in unrest and destruction in various forms, could lead us to the same question Jesus asked when hanging on the Cross: Why have you forsaken me?

Who is Jesus Christ for us? Each of us has a personal image of Jesus. The following joke about theologians will make our point clearer:

Who Do You Say I Am?”

The following joke was found on the Internet. (Youngsters: the four men named in

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<sup>1</sup> G. O’Collins SJ, *What are they saying about Jesus? – a report on recent theological speculation about Jesus Christ and its implications for Christian faith*, NY: Paulist Press, 1977, vii.

the first paragraph are all theological “heavy hitters” — sort of the theologian-equivalents of Albert Einstein and Marie Curie. James Cone is an African American.)

Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and James Cone find themselves all at the same time at Caesarea Philippi. Who should come along but Jesus, and he asks the four famous theologians the same Christological question, “Who do you say that I am?”

Karl Barth stands up and says: “You are the *totaliter aliter*, the *vestigious trinitatum* who speaks to us in the modality of *Christo-monism*.”

Not prepared for Barth's brevity, Paul Tillich stumbles out: “You are he who heals our ambiguities and overcomes the split of angst and existential estrangement; you are he who speaks of the *theonomous* viewpoint of the *analogia entis*, the analogy of our being and the ground of all possibilities.”

Reinhold Niebuhr gives a cough for effect and says, in one breath: “You are the impossible possibility who brings to us, your children of light and children of darkness, the overwhelming *oughtness* in the midst of our fraught condition of estrangement and brokenness in the contiguity and existential anxieties of our *ontological* relationships.”

Finally James Cone gets up, and raises his voice: “You are my Oppressed One, my soul's shalom, the One who was, who is, and who shall be, who has never left us alone in the struggle, the event of liberation in the lives of the oppressed struggling for freedom, and whose blackness is both literal and symbolic.”

And Jesus writes in the sand, “Huh?”

The dialogues only show the various perceptions of Jesus. He is often portrayed and moulded into our own needs and views. In the end it is rather the Jesus we want him to be for us.

In the following chapters we will explore the identity of Jesus Christ whom we believe is our redeemer and brother. The search for his identity is important because what we *do* as the people of God will rest ultimately on what we *think* about Jesus<sup>2</sup>. Or memory of him will determine the way we act in the world.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., viii.

## 2) The Identity of Jesus

The question of “who Jesus is?” was crucial for the understanding of the identity of the disciples. Their destiny is closely connected to the identity of Jesus. The “Who Jesus is” determines also “who the disciples are”.

Who is Jesus? Let us have a look at the situation of the first disciples of Jesus. According to the NT the disciples were amazed, and at the same they struggled as they were uncertain about Jesus. They saw how Jesus cured many forms of sickness; they saw how he welcomed the marginalized; they also listen that he proclaimed to the freedom the captives and that he blessed those who thirst for justice. And yet the disciples could not stop at questioning Jesus’ identity. They asked: “In whose name does he speak and bless the people”? In other place the NT puts this question in the mouth of the disciples: “Who is he? Is he the Messiah”?

Similar to the disciples, we too have our doubts, although Jesus’ life and actions still inspire us. We like his way of living and sharing our human vision. However, is he really God?

The following articles will help you to answer this question. They will introduce you to the understanding of the concept of the personhood and how Jesus Christ’ humanity can shed light on your understanding of identity and self – something for which you are always searching. In order to do so, it is important that you emerge in the world of Jesus in Palestine. From there you may understand better the challenge message of Jesus for the world today. The last articles will provide you with thoughts and spiritual reflections about Jesus which intend you inspire and transform your life.

At this stage please allow me to say something about myself and how my present life is inspired by Jesus. When I was born my parents did not make plans for me! I remember the only plan my mum has was her prayer at the bedtime. She daily says the same prayer: “God you have sent your son into our world with the uncertainties and risks which are parts of this world. You have given me my son and I am releasing him in this world, although, unlike you, I don’t know what his future will be. However, I trust in your guidance as you have guided your beloved son. You won’t let him dash his foot against a stone and as Father you won’t give him a stone if he begs for his daily bread. I trust in you, even when he meets difficulties and will face one day the breath of the death. I trust you, as your own beloved son have trusted in you”

Her prayer becomes my prayer. Each time I think of her, I pray also the same prayer for her instead of praying for me.

This is the work of Jesus who continues to be with us through the work of the Holy Spirit. Prayer is the most precious moment in my life – at Jesus is often portrayed in the NT as a man of prayer. Jesus prays for us and therefore intercedes for us as his brothers and sisters. At the cross Jesus recommend his mother to the disciples and the disciples to his mother.

I hope that through Christ we continue to pray for each other and that we become for each other mothers and brothers and sisters. This is what Jesus commands us to do as his disciples, brothers and sisters.

**Article 1**

**Title: Story-Shaped Christology  
The Role of Narratives in Identifying Jesus Christ**

**Author: Robert A Kreig CSC**

**Publisher: New York: Paulist Press**

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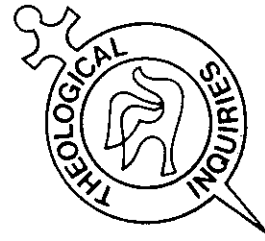
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## *Story-Shaped Christology*

*The Role of Narratives in  
Identifying Jesus Christ*

Robert A. Krieg, C.S.C.



PAULIST PRESS  
New York • Mahwah

## Chapter One

### WHO IS JESUS CHRIST TODAY?

On Sunday, September 29, 1963, Pope Paul VI opened the second session of the Second Vatican Council with an historic address. After praising his predecessor, the new Pontiff took up John XXIII's call for renewal. He charged the Council to give a fresh view of the Church, to promote Christian unity, and to engage in dialogue with the contemporary world. Paul VI linked these tasks with faithfulness to Jesus Christ: "[H]ere and at this very hour we should proclaim Christ to ourselves and to the world around us; Christ our beginning, Christ our life and our guide, Christ our hope and our end."<sup>1</sup> When, after an hour, the Bishop of Rome ended what he termed his "first encyclical," all assembled in St. Peter's Basilica knew that there would be no turning back. Paul VI had secured John XXIII's "*aggiornamento*."

Sixteen years later another newly elected Pontiff issued his first formal statement. On March 4, 1979, in his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II committed himself to renewing the Church. As Paul VI (d. 1978) had done, the former archbishop of Krakow called for the Church's reform, binding it to Jesus Christ. John Paul II accentuated the mystery of the Church's founder: "Our spirit is set in one direction, the only direction for our intellect, will and heart—toward Christ our Redeemer, toward Christ, the Redeemer of man."<sup>2</sup> Further: "The Church's fundamental function in every age and particularly in ours is . . . to help all men to be familiar with the profundity of the redemption taking place in Christ Jesus."<sup>3</sup> What was one theme among others in Paul VI's address became the major thrust of John Paul's: For authentic renewal, the Church must live in union with Christ.

Paul VI's and John Paul II's statements show a shift in emphasis. From Vatican Council I through Vatican Council II Church leaders grappled with ecclesiology. Paul VI and the Council treated the nature of the

Church, the authority of the bishops, and the Church's mission in the modern world. Since Vatican II these issues persist, but they are seen in relation to Christology. In his first encyclical John Paul II has given priority to Christ's redeeming activity in the world within which the Church is "the community of disciples."<sup>4</sup> This view represents what many Christians now see. We have become increasingly aware that our identity depends upon the identity of the one to whom we dedicate our lives. "If Vatican II were to meet [now]," observed Gerald O'Collins in 1977, "its major document would not be 'The Church in the Modern World' but some response to the question: Who is Jesus Christ for us today?"<sup>5</sup>

This emphasis on Jesus Christ is also found in the work of many contemporary theologians.<sup>6</sup> In the past two decades there have appeared significant Christological texts by Frans Jozef van Beeck, Leonardo Boff, Eugene Borowitz, John Cobb, Hans Frei, Rosemary Haughton, Monica Hellwig, Peter C. Hodgson, Walter Kasper, Hans Küng, Gerald O'Collins, Schubert Ogden, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Karl Rahner (d. 1984), Edward Schillebeeckx, Piet Schoonenberg, Juan Luis Segundo, Jon Sobrino, William M. Thompson, and Patricia Wilson-Kastner. What is striking about a list like this is that many more names could be added to it. Numerous theologians are participating in the Church's effort to identify its Founder. I too want to support this endeavor.

In this chapter and the ones to follow I shall clarify the process by which we answer "Who is Jesus Christ today?"<sup>7</sup> My thesis is that the explicit use of narratives can strengthen Christology. Just as we often say who someone is by telling his or her life story, so too our research into the identity of Jesus Christ can employ different forms of narratives, namely, historical reconstructions about Jesus, the Gospels as stories, and the lives of the saints. This is not to say that Christology should be reduced to storytelling. On the contrary. Narratives can provide a systematic inquiry with specific ways to structure its Christology.

This call for narrative theology is not new. Others have already made it. Since 1972, in numerous essays, Johann Baptist Metz has envisioned a "post-idealistic theology," relying on narratives.<sup>8</sup> In *Blessed Rage for Order* (1975) David Tracy has acknowledged the place of story in Christology.<sup>9</sup> Hans Frei has demonstrated how Christology can depend on "the Gospel story" in *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (1975).<sup>10</sup> In *Models of Revelation* (1983) Avery Dulles has included the category nar-

native among the kinds of "symbolic mediation" of God's revelation.<sup>11</sup> Along with these texts there are a number of careful studies on theology and narrative. These include George Stroup's *The Promise of Narrative Theology* (1981), John Navone's and Thomas Cooper's *Tellers of the Word* (1981), Michael Goldberg's *Theology and Narrative* (1982), Terrence Tilley's *Story Theology* (1985) and Ronald Thiemann's *Revelation and Theology* (1986).<sup>12</sup> This short list names but a few titles from a lengthy one of books and articles, some of which I will cite as we proceed.

What is new in this study? Rather than lay out a theory to support theologians' use of narratives, this book highlights the ways three recent Christologies actually depend on narratives in order to identify Jesus Christ. In *Jesus the Christ* Kasper has demonstrated that Christology can draw on three sources: historical research into Jesus' life and times, Christian testimony to the risen Christ, and the experience of the contemporary Church.<sup>13</sup> Crucial to these sources are their narratives. Further, Schillebeeckx in *Jesus* has constructed an historical narrative about Jesus and proposed that it can generate a new Christology.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, in *Christ Proclaimed* van Beeck has recounted the story told by Matthew, Mark and Luke, and from this he has presented Jesus Christ as the perfect relation between God and creation.<sup>15</sup> To be sure, these three Christologies exhibit distinct methods and views of Jesus Christ. Yet, they stand together in their reliance on narratives, and therefore they convey some of the ways that narratives can shape Christology.

One part of the following book is analysis. Chapters Two, Three and Four study *Jesus the Christ*, *Jesus* and *Christ Proclaimed*. The other part of this book is more constructive. Chapter Five builds on the Christologies of Kasper, Schillebeeckx and van Beeck. It presents a story-shaped Christology, in which a retelling of Mark's Gospel, an historical narrative of Jesus' ministry, and a biography of Dorothy Day are the sources for identifying Jesus Christ as the founder of the new people of compassion. The logic of this inquiry is then discussed in Chapter Six with help from works by Alasdair MacIntyre and Paul Ricoeur.

Talk about Jesus Christ can become tangled, for it can be distracted by the fact that he is a special case. Christ does indeed bear a singular relation to God and to the human community, but this does not mean that talk about him is so unusual that it does not resemble ordinary discourse.<sup>16</sup> The language of Christology is similar to our usual attempts to

say who someone is. Theologians depend on analogy, and in their respective works Kasper, Schillebeeckx and van Breeck have done just this. They have been guided by our familiar logic of personal identification. What is this logic, and how does it influence Christology? I shall pursue this question in this first chapter's two major sections. Section one reviews our familiar process of identifying another person, and section two considers how we can give an individuating account of Jesus Christ. This first chapter will equip us to study how different kinds of narratives can function in a systematic response to "Who is Jesus Christ today?"

### I.1 *Identifying Another Person*

When we are asked "Who is that person?" we usually mention a name and then give a title, e.g., "Doctor." Sometimes this is enough. But at other times more is needed. If so, we tell anecdotes. For example: "She is the woman who last year won the Merit Award." To identify someone we recount some of the things the person has done and endured. If more still needs to be known, then we review the person's life, during at least a limited period of time. In other words, we resort to biography. This way of identifying a person exhibits a pattern which requires further comment.<sup>17</sup>

"Who is so-and-so?" directs attention to the person as person. To see this, contrast it with "What is so-and-so?" What-questions classify persons in terms of functions and types. In response to "What is she?" we might say, for instance, "She is a physician." This expresses her professional role. In response to "What kind of person is she?" we might say "She has an extrovert personality" or "She is an honest person." These answers place the individual within categories to which other men and women belong. This is not the case with the who-questions. It views persons in relation to their lives, for anecdotes and biography focus on persons within their respective histories. Therefore, whereas what-questions view persons in relation to functions and types, the who-question regards the character of the persons themselves.

The personal direction of the who-question prompts us to respond to it by giving names and titles.<sup>18</sup> A name is person-directed, for it serves as a tag. It singles out people by pointing to them. Titles refer to people in a more complicated way. On the one hand, titles take their meaning

from the social structure within which they function. For example, to say that someone is president of the United States is to locate the person within an institution. In this perspective, titles are not person-directed. But on the other hand, titles often receive their specific meaning from the conduct of the person to whom they are ascribed. For example, both Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan have served as U.S. president, and the title "president" means something quite different when applied to each man. To some extent, the meaning of a title is governed by the person who bears it, and therefore there is a sense in which titles like names are person-directed. We know what the title means by knowing the individual to whom it points.

This brings us to a limit of names and titles in answering "Who is so-and-so?" Names and, to some extent, titles point to their reference. They function best when we already know about the person to whom they refer, and then we can link the name or title with the individual. What do we do however when this external connection cannot occur? This is when we adopt forms of description.

One form of description is an account of the person's physical features. We describe the person's age, height, weight, hair, complexion, posture and mannerisms. Frequently this allows us to single the person out in a crowd. Such a response to the who-question has the advantage of not merely pointing, as names do, but it is inadequate in that two or more people may resemble each other. Moreover, physical description does not reach deeply enough into personal existence. It presents persons as objects, neglecting their personalities, experiences and life goals. Physical description does not therefore suffice when answering "Who is so-and-so?"

Another form of description by which we identify someone is the category narrative. Our attempts to provide an individuating account usually include anecdotes and biographies. We focus on the person by recalling the person's words, deeds and life. Hannah Arendt makes this point when she writes: "Who somebody is or was we can know only by knowing the story of which he is himself the hero—his biography, in other words; everything else we know of him, including the work he may have produced and left behind, tells us only *what* he is or was."<sup>19</sup>

Why is this? Why do we identify persons by telling their life stories? In part, it has to do with the nature of personal existence, and to this I shall turn shortly. Further, in part our reliance on anecdotes and biog-

raphies stems from the nature of this kind of description. A good anecdote or biography hangs together. It coheres so that it creates a world in which persons interact with one another and their situation.<sup>20</sup> Who someone is is a function of what the person says, does and endures in this world. Thus, an anecdote or biography gives a context in which we can place a person and identify him or her. Moreover, this context is not a set of classifications but a series of events, a drama. Thus, we see the person in action over a course of time, and we see the person's line of continuity, that which remains the same. Anecdotes and biographies can be aesthetic units which create a world inhabited by the person whom we want to know, and they describe this person as he or she acts, suffers and persists over a period of time. In sum, these narratives are person-directed, and therefore they can provide answers to the who-question which is also directed to persons as persons.

Talk about biography raises of course many issues.<sup>21</sup> More than one biography can be written about a life. Much depends upon the life itself, the author of the biography, and the relationship between the author and the subject. But we need not pursue all of this here. My point is simply this. We often find that full answers to "Who is so-and-so?" include anecdotes and biographies. Identifying someone appears therefore to depend upon the use of different kinds of narratives as well as on names, titles and physical description.

Finally, we rely on yet another form of discourse. This is conceptual discourse, language characterized more by the use of ideas than by images, and thus possessing a high degree of generality without the loss of clarity.<sup>22</sup> The question about one person's identity can lead to a comparison between this life and others, and also to a discussion of personal existence in general. Once we know someone's life story we can find ourselves asking "How is this person unique?" That is: "How does this person's life and configuration of personal qualities distinguish him or her from other men and women?" Moreover, we might query "What is the truth of this life?" and "What does this one life reveal about personal existence in general?" Once we pursue questions like these, we adopt a language that permits us to talk about personal existence in general. This language employs concepts of person so that an individual can be seen in relation to the idea of being a person.

Often we say who someone is or was without being aware that we are following a pattern which unfolds with distinct components. The

who-question leads from names and titles to physical description, and physical description moves to anecdotes and biographies. Further, biographies can answer the question of personal identity, but they also lead beyond the study of one human being to a consideration of personal existence in general. To put this another way, our use of narratives can bring us to conceptual or thematic discourse. It does this because ideas of personal identity and personal existence are implicit in the process of saying who someone is. To these I will now turn.

## 1.2 *Personal Identity*

"Personal identity" is a complex notion. It refers to that which remains the same in a person throughout a life. A synonym for "personal identity" is "personal continuity." Both phrases express that particular dynamism which is denoted by the indexical term "I." Frei describes "personal identity" by using the metaphor of a "core." He writes: "Loosely speaking, the word ['personal identity'] indicates the very 'core' of a person toward which everything else is ordered, like spokes to the center of a wheel."<sup>23</sup> While this account is helpful in highlighting the persistent element in personal existence, it risks reducing this to a single point.<sup>24</sup> To fill out this understanding let us consider that a person consists of the three dimensions of length, breadth and depth.

First, persons have histories. Persons take shape as they abide and interact in the world. In his philosophical discussion of personal identity, Sydney Shoemaker observes that personal identity entails "persistence in time."<sup>25</sup> The "I" is formed in the course of time as one intends, acts and suffers within a natural and social environment. In this same vein, Schillebeeckx observes that the "I" includes "the past events that have surrounded him" and also "the effect he has had on subsequent history."<sup>26</sup> Personal identity is arrived at and manifest in one's length of days. Richard Taylor asserts this when he states that:

... a person undergoes constant change and renewal over the course of time, such that he is in some respects the same today as he was yesterday and in some respects different, that over the course of sufficient time, he undergoes a total renewal such that he shares no cell or particle with a former self long since

past, but that he is nevertheless *the same person* in this relative sense, that he *grew out of* that former person.<sup>27</sup>

Persons exist as physical beings. They are flesh and blood. To be sure, they change physically—especially today in light of medical advances. Yet, persons are in part a function of physical, genetic and racial factors. Richard Taylor writes: “The connection between yourself and your body is far more intimate and metaphysical than anything else you can think of. One’s body is at least a part of himself, and is so regarded by everyone.”<sup>28</sup> Bernard Williams corroborates this view when he insists that personal existence, as we know it, entails embodiment.<sup>29</sup>

Second, persons are constituted by their relationships with the world, especially with other people. Persons may be influenced by their interaction with events, physical reality and society. In particular, the “I” is defined by the “we,” by a person’s bonds with other men and women. Schillebeeckx, for instance, notes that no one can be understood “independently of his relations with those about him, contemporaries who have received from him and in turn have influenced him and touched off specific reactions in him.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, when we wish to know someone, we may need to know those with whom the person associates.

Third, persons are more than their histories and their associations. They are also determined by their point of view on their histories and relationships. A person’s self-consciousness shapes in part who the person is, as John Locke (d. 1704) and philosophical discussions since Locke have stressed.<sup>31</sup> Personal existence depends upon memory. The recollection of events and persons binds these together in relation to our lives. One’s history and involvements with other men and women are united in part because one remembers them.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, self-consciousness involves taking a stance in relation to what one remembers and is currently involved in. A person possesses an outlook or perspective from which one recollects the past and faces the world. In sum, memory and viewpoint provide persons with a mode of interpreting their lives, and this interpretation is part of their identity. George Stroup makes this point when he states: “A person’s identity, therefore, is an interpretation of personal history in which the meaning of the whole and hence the identity of the self is constructed on the foundation of a few basic events and the symbols and concepts used to interpret them.”<sup>33</sup>

Personal identity is, as Frei states, that which remains the same in a person. Yet, this “core” is three dimensional. It consists of the length of one’s history, the breadth of one’s involvements, and the depth of one’s self-reflection. To put this succinctly, personal identity is one’s continuity. This continuity consists however not of a single line, but of a convergence of lines. A person’s persistence in human affairs, bonds with others, and memory and outlook on life define that person. This is the mysterious reality to which we point when we name a person. Stephen Crites expresses this well when he writes:

Our sense of personal identity depends upon the continuity of experience through time, a continuity bridging even the cleft between remembered past and projected future. Given when it is largely implicit, not vividly self-conscious, our sense of ourselves is at every moment to some extent integrated into a single story.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, this understanding of personal identity allows us to appreciate the appropriateness of biography for personal identification. Biography, a form of the category narrative, is capable of expressing a person’s length, breadth and depth. Biography encompasses the unfolding of events, the interaction of agents, the relating of men and women, and their self-reflections. Because of this, biography not only points to a person, it may also represent the person by conveying the dimensions of this life. Biography can manifest the continuity of a life, and hence it can reveal a person. That reality to which names and titles refer and which discursive language locates in general classifications can also be expressed in narrative.

### I.3 *Notions of Person*

Three concepts of person correspond to the three aspects of personal identity. These are: person as agent, person as relation, and person as subject.<sup>35</sup> Person as agent conceives of a person in his or her action. It highlights the unfolding or length of a life. Person as relation conceives of a person in community. It accentuates the web of relationships or breadth of a life. Person as subject views a person in terms of self-con-

sciousness. It illuminates the subjectivity or depth of personal existence. Each of these notions requires a brief comment.

*Person as agent* regards action as the primary form of personal expression.<sup>36</sup> A person is what he or she says and does. In this view, René Descartes' (d. 1650) "I think, therefore I am" is made subordinate to "I do, therefore I am." Cornelius van Peursen makes this point when he observes that "the 'I' must not be conceived of primarily as a thinking or perceiving subject, but as acting and doing."<sup>37</sup> To be a person is to be one who initiates change, brings something about, and is responsible for this new state of affairs.

Person as agent rests on the conviction that intentions are realized in saying and doing. What I intend in my action is evident, under ordinary conditions, to other men and women who observe my conduct. Moreover, when these intentions are deep-seated, their realization in my behavior reveals me, my "self." I am not disconnected from my action; rather I am integrated in what I do, and I make myself known to others. In van Peursen's words, "the 'I' of another person is manifested in all that he does. It is not something behind or among these doings of his, but is their total cohesion—is precisely that."<sup>38</sup> Hannah Arendt describes it thus:

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice.<sup>39</sup>

In action a person becomes an individual, for action unites a person's complex of intentions, thoughts, affections and embodiment. John Macmurray writes: "The Self, then, is not the thinker but the doer. In its positive doing it is agent; in its negative doing it is subject."<sup>40</sup> That is, a person becomes integrated as he or she acts, and as a result action is the primary moment of personal expression. But action without reflection loses its orientation and thus ceases to be action. Therefore, in Macmurray's view the notion of personal agency is linked to other ideas of person. Action springs from a person's relationships with others and simultaneously deepens these, and further action requires self-awareness.

*Person as relation* rests on the recognition that personal existence is communal. Who I am depends in part upon the men and women with whom I live and work. Martin Buber (d. 1965) grasped the centrality of the relational aspect of being a person.<sup>41</sup> He insisted that personal existence is not primarily a matter of I-it, of the self relating to objects. Rather, personal existence is constituted by the I-Thou, by the self relating to other selves. To be a person is therefore to be a relation. This concept of person as relation is articulated by Macmurray when he states "that the Self is constituted by its relation to the Other; that it has its being in its relationship; that this relationship is necessarily personal."<sup>42</sup>

Often we do not accomplish what we set out to do. Our intentions, at least as we initially hold them, are modified in our give-and-take with the world. Our actions come about as we interact with other persons, events and physical realities. Moreover, we do not fashion our intentions in isolation from other people. Other men and women influence what we hope for, think and initiate. Others call us into being and sustain us in this development. In a word, personal existence is relational. Yet, our relating to others is also connected to our relating to ourselves.

*Person as subject* recognizes that personal existence requires self-consciousness. To be a person is to be aware of one's intentions, feelings, thoughts and conduct. Thus, speech includes the use of the self-referential word "I." The person or self has a perspective on the world; it stands in the world and yet apart from it. Person as subject, says Ludwig Wittgenstein (d. 1951), is similar to the eye as seer, for it looks on the world but is not seen.<sup>43</sup> The self, like the eye, is a limit of the world.

The capability for self-reflection distinguishes persons from objects. Whereas an inanimate object (e.g., a stone) can be satisfactorily analyzed through empirical methods, for example, by weighing and chemical tests, a person is not fully known by means of scientific studies, for example, through sociological, economic and psychological profiles. A person possesses a subjectivity, a relating to self, that in part defines the person. This view is articulated by Martin Heidegger (d. 1975) when he writes: "The question of the 'who' answers itself in terms of the 'I' itself, the 'subject,' the 'Self.' The 'who' is what maintains itself as something identical throughout changes in its experiences and ways of behaviour, and which relates itself to this changing multiplicity in so doing."<sup>44</sup>

Person as subject is essential to our understanding of personal ex-

istence. So too are person as agent and person as relation. Being a person is such a rich reality that it can best be apprehended by more than one notion. Each of the three concepts we have reviewed captures an aspect of personal existence while also allowing for other complementary views of what it means to be a person.

Moreover, these three views of person are inherent in talk about personal identity. Person as agent is implied by our attentiveness to a person's words and deeds. A biography depends upon descriptions of what a person said and did. Person as relation is operative in biography, for we need to appreciate the circles of friends and acquaintances with whom the person interacted. It is implied as well in our recognition of the social, historical and economic factors in a person's world. Person as subject is manifest in biography when a person's self-disclosive statements are quoted. 'I'-statements allow us to apprehend a person's self-awareness. In conclusion, then, our ordinary response to "Who is so-and-so?" depends on at least three ideas of person: person as agent, person as relation, and person as subject.

## II.1 Identifying Jesus Christ

Analogy goes from the known to the unknown. It extends our ordinary use of words so that we can talk about something which is similar to and yet different from the usual realities about which we speak. In the words of David Tracy, analogy is "a language of ordered relationships articulating similarity in difference."<sup>45</sup> Further, according to David Burrell, analogy "is closely linked to a purposive use of language."<sup>46</sup> We extend our use of words in order to speak about something beyond the usual reach of our discourse. Therefore, as both Tracy and Burrell remind us, analogy is one of theology's primary forms of discourse. We apply to God patterns of speech that do not properly fit God, and we qualify this talk so that it more accurately reflects the mystery of God. One such pattern of speech is the process of identifying a person. We adopt this familiar logic to answer, "Who is Jesus Christ?"

"Who is Jesus Christ?" is similar to and yet different from "Who is so-and-so?" asked of any ordinary person. It is similar in that it directs attention to Jesus' words, deeds and life. That is, the who-question does

not call for locating Jesus Christ within categories, as occurs with "What does it mean to speak, as Chalcedon does, of Jesus Christ as 'truly God' and 'truly man'?" Nor does it set up a comparison between Jesus Christ and other religious leaders, as can happen with "How is Jesus Christ unique?" When applied to Jesus Christ, the who-question asks about this "person" as it asks about any person's life and involvements.

Yet, "Who is Jesus Christ?" is unlike "Who is so-and-so?" because Jesus Christ is now known in light of his resurrection. The present tense in "Who is Jesus Christ?" expresses the mystery of this life and therefore conveys an unusual meaning, whereas in the case of all other men and women we eventually shift to the past tense, "Who was so-and-so?" This need not occur in talk about Jesus Christ. Since he is a living reality, he is contemporaneous with every age. This means that the question about the identity of Jesus Christ demands an answer whose logic is not exactly like the one that we ordinarily follow in response to the who-question. The language of identifying Jesus Christ is therefore not the same as but analogous to the pattern we reviewed in the first section of this chapter. We can see this as we consider Christology's use of names, titles, and historical reconstruction.

A person stands at the center of Christian belief. He is called 'Jesus Christ' which consists of both a name, "Jesus," and a title, "Christ." "Jesus Christ" is therefore more than a tag. Not only does it refer to this individual, it also makes a claim about him. "Jesus Christ" declares something—this person is a special case, for knowing him entails more than knowing Jesus of Nazareth. "Jesus of Nazareth" is the name of a past figure whom we must indeed seek to know if we are to understand Jesus Christ. But knowledge of the historical person does not suffice for apprehending the present and future reality, Jesus Christ.

Along with the title "Christ," this person receives other titles (for example, "Son of God" and "Lord") and here too we are reminded that we speak in analogy. On the one hand, these titles are ascribed to Jesus Christ in a way similar to our ascription of titles to other men and women.<sup>47</sup> Thus part of what they mean is determined by convention. "Son of God" and "Lord" functioned in the life of Israel apart from Jesus, and therefore this history determines in part what they mean when they are applied to Jesus. On the other hand, the meaning of "Son of God" and "Lord" also depends in part on how they are redefined by



their recipient. To an extent, this is common, for a person's conduct influences the meaning of his or her titles. But the case of Jesus exhibits a special feature.

As the Christian community has increased its understanding of the person to whom it is dedicated, the titles have functioned in new ways, thereby changing their meaning. The Church has come to realize that there is a quantum leap between these titles' shades of meaning when applied to other figures and the meaning of these same titles when ascribed to Jesus. For example, it may be said of another religious leader that this person is a son or daughter of God, but Christians speak of Jesus as the "Son of God." For Christians this person exists in a singular relationship with God, and therefore he gives a radically new significance to whatever titles he receives.

As we saw in the first section, our identification of another person relies not only on names and titles but also on physical description. In the case of Jesus Christ such a depiction is in fact impossible, since we simply lack the sources for this. Further, if it were possible, the theological import of a physical description would be two-sided. First, we must recognize Jesus' corporeality, for he was flesh and blood as all of us are. Moreover, his resurrection included his whole person. Second, a physical description of Jesus of Nazareth is not a prerequisite to identifying him. What is crucial, however, is his character as disclosed in his actions and life. Thus, for the purposes of identification, it suffices to know the minimum, for example, that he was a Palestinian Jew from Galilee who lived in the second temple period.

We usually turn to biography when a name, titles and physical description do not say all that we need to say about a person, and, given the mysterious complexity of Jesus Christ, we do require something more than titles and a vague physical sketch if we are to know him. A fuller, more descriptive account is needed in order to clarify the reality to which the name and titles refer. To an extent, this is no different from our attempts to identify any person. We often resort to anecdotes and biographies to say all that must be said. But, when discussing Jesus Christ, we encounter two difficulties. First, biographies of Jesus are in fact not possible, for the historical data is lacking. Second, even if a biography of Jesus could be written, this would be insufficient for our knowledge of him. With these two points, we have reached the terrain

crossed by recent "quests" for the historical Jesus. Let us therefore take each in turn.

First, what can we say about the life of Jesus of Nazareth? Since we do not have the historical data, we cannot write a biography of Jesus.<sup>48</sup> Nor can we give even a chronicle of events in his life. Yet, we can form an historical reconstruction of some aspects of Jesus' life and times. In recent years historians and biblical exegetes have reached a general consensus about key features of Jesus' words, deeds and life, and on the basis of this we can fashion an historical narrative, not unlike a rough biographical sketch, about Jesus' ministry and death. An example of this is given by Schillebeeckx who in *Jesus* describes this account as "a post-critical narrative history."<sup>49</sup> In light of Schillebeeckx's work, we see that while we cannot provide a detailed response to "Who was Jesus of Nazareth?" we can provide a loose historical narrative about Jesus of Nazareth.

Second, what is the theological import of this historical narrative? Those who undertook the late nineteenth century's original quest for the historical Jesus offer one answer. According to such writers as Ernst Renan (d. 1892), Adolf von Harnack (d. 1930) and Shailer Matthews (d. 1941) the object of faith is Jesus of Nazareth, and therefore an historical narrative about Jesus might undermine Christian claims. In their respective works each of these scholars tried to tell a biography that would stand as the basis of Christian belief. Norman Perrin (d. 1976) has succinctly described the "liberal" quest's aim:

This epitomizes the concern of liberal scholarship, namely, to establish by historical-critical methodology the authentic teaching of Jesus and the historical core of the gospel narratives concerning his life, to recapture the person mirrored in that teaching and revealed in that life, to accept that person and that teaching as the concern and object of faith, and to seek to imitate and to learn from him.<sup>50</sup>

This view was overturned, in the first part of the twentieth century, by such scholars as Martin Kähler (d. 1912), Albert Schweitzer (d. 1965), Karl Barth (d. 1968) and Rudolf Bultmann (d. 1976). These theologians took issue with the liberal quest's assumption that faith rests on

the historical Jesus. Christian belief, they argued, does not primarily concern an historical person but the risen Christ. Belief begins in response to Jesus' resurrection. These theologians remind us, as Perrin states, that: "The object of Christian faith is the historic Christ, the Christ of the kerygma, and not the historical Jesus."<sup>31</sup> What then, according to this view, is the theological significance of history? In general, it simply assures us, insists the "dialectical theologians," that Jesus lived, preached and died on a cross.

This second answer to the question of history's significance for belief and theology has been followed by a third. In 1953 Ernst Käsemann, a student of Bultmann, initiated the "new quest" with his lecture "The Problem of the Historical Jesus."<sup>32</sup> Käsemann persuasively argued that the first Christian preaching, as found for example in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, includes historical data, and it does so because what Jesus' followers proclaimed about him after his resurrection is based in part upon features of his life prior to his death. Through the work of such theologians as Käsemann, Günther Bornkamm and Hans Conzelmann the new quest has established a position between the extremes of the liberal quest and dialectical theology. On the one hand, it acknowledges that Christian faith is directed toward the risen Christ. On the other, it recognizes the importance of what Perrin calls a "material continuity" between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith.<sup>33</sup> History contributes to our understanding of the risen Christ because it highlights the historical Jesus' trust in God as Abba and therefore implies his bond with God.

We have a common way of answering "Who is so-and-so?": We give a name, titles, physical description and a biography. When we ask however "Who is Jesus Christ?" we can follow the usual form of response only to a limited degree. "Jesus Christ" consists of a name and a title, and all titles when applied to this person take on a new meaning. Physical description is not only impossible, it is also secondary to knowing the "person" who lives today in God's Spirit. Finally, a biography is not possible, and while a loose biographical sketch may be possible, it cannot express fully the reality of the risen Lord. What a historical narrative can achieve, though, is important. As the new questers have argued, it can focus on Jesus of Nazareth so that light is shed on the character of the risen Lord. For instance, it can provide a glimpse of Jesus' sense of intimacy with God, thereby pointing toward his full iden-

tity. This leads however to a central question: What do we mean when we talk about the identity of Jesus Christ?

## II.2 The Identity of Jesus Christ

Personal identity is a complex idea, and it becomes even more intricate when applied to Jesus Christ. In ordinary usage personal identity depends on the unfolding of one's life, web of relationships and self-understanding, and therefore it consists of a person's continuity. But how does this apply to Jesus Christ? When Christians speak of his "life," they have in mind a reality that extends beyond death. When they consider his relationships, they talk not only about his bonds with Peter, James and John who knew Jesus prior to his death, but also about his encounter with Paul. Also, when Christians reflect on Jesus' sense of self, they think of Christ's union with God in the Spirit. How then can we talk about the identity of Jesus Christ in a way that on the one hand respects this mystery and on the other takes its bearings from our familiar patterns of discourse?

We can speak about the identity of Jesus Christ, I propose, by relying on three different kinds of narratives. Whereas we can ordinarily grasp who someone is by telling a biography, in the case of Jesus Christ we need not only a rough biographical sketch, but also something more. We need narratives that allow us to convey the continuity of this life beyond death. Two such kinds of narratives are the Gospels and biographies of exemplary Christians. Through the use of historical narratives about Jesus, the Gospels as stories, and critical recollections of the saints' lives, we are able to perceive Christ from three perspectives.

First, an historical narrative about Jesus can partially reveal Christ. In this perspective, the continuity of this life runs from birth to death, as it does for any human being. Jesus gains his identity in the course of his life, ministry and last days, as he interacts with his disciples, the people and the authorities. Moreover, this history and interaction influence his self-understanding which in turn shapes his future and his involvements. This outlook is manifest, for example, in his sayings and parables. When we assemble historical data about Jesus' life, involvements and outlook, we have at hand the material for a rough biographical sketch, for an historical narrative of the sort fashioned by Schillebeeckx in *Jesus*.

A second perspective on the identity of Jesus Christ reaches beyond his death to his presence among the first Christians. In this view the length of this life does not stop with the cross but extends into the first Christian communities. The breadth of his identity encompasses the interaction between the risen Lord and the New Testament communities, for example, those of Paul and the evangelists. The depth of his life includes Jesus' special bond with God, as presented by the various scriptural testimonies. To apprehend this Jesus we rely on biblical narratives as literary units, for example, on the Gospels, since their scope is broader than that allowed by the canons of modern historical methods.

The third view of the identity of Jesus Christ searches for the risen Lord today. This is the Christ who encounters Christians at the Lord's Supper as well as in their service for the coming of God's "kingdom." In this view, the length and breadth and depth of Christ is expressed in the Church's tradition, for example, in its worship, service, teachings, and Christian lives. Moreover, this knowledge of Christ entails the study of tradition and contemporary culture. One specific way to pursue this third approach to Christ is through the lives of saints. In every age singular women and men emerge who mirror the face of Christ. By knowing the length and breadth and depth of their lives, we can indirectly identify Christ in a given era. Biographies of Christ's twentieth century disciples can afford us therefore knowledge of Christ today.

In order to have a full account of Jesus Christ's identity, we need to view his life from more than one perspective. If we were to limit ourselves to one approach to Jesus, for example, to historical reconstruction, we would neglect the richness of this person. Thus, I propose that we know this person in three kinds of narratives: historical narratives, the Gospels and biographies of exemplary Christians. By taking this threefold approach, we can respect the mystery of Christ while simultaneously adopting familiar forms of discourse.

A biography is not the last word about a person. It can prompt further discussion regarding the truth of this life and the nature of personal existence in general. To put this another way, narrative discourse provides only part of the answer to "Who is so-and-so?" It can be developed in more conceptual language—in language, for instance, that explicitly employs the ideas of person as agent, person as relation and person as subject. So too, talk about Jesus Christ does not stop with narratives. It assumes more discursive forms in which the use of clear no-

tions of person sheds further light on Jesus Christ and the existence of all men and women.<sup>54</sup>

### II.3 *Notions of Person in Christology*

The word "person" has a rich history in theology.<sup>55</sup> It appeared first in the writings of Tertullian and Hippolytus of Rome, and it increasingly functioned with technical precision in the evolution of theological controversies, doctrines and systematic theologies. In recent years major theologians have written theological anthropologies in which they reflect on the nature of personal existence and the reality of Jesus Christ. The works of Karl Rahner and Wolfhart Pannenberg, for example, have significant implications for Christology.<sup>56</sup> Here we will consider how the three notions of person that we treated in section one bear on our view of Jesus Christ.

Person as subject has played a primary role in some of the most important theological investigations of the twentieth century. To break with the positivism of the nineteenth century, which in effect reduced persons to objects, many theologians have stressed human subjectivity. In this view, the self exists beyond the scope of scientific scrutiny. Personal existence entails self-consciousness, and personal identity concerns the self that is inaccessible to the scientist's and historian's detached observation. For Christology, this means that the identity of Jesus Christ evades historical inquiry. Jesus Christ is known indirectly through an intuitive grasp of personal existence in general. While all people are drawn to trust in the source of life, Jesus Christ has done this with complete self-abandon. He has totally surrendered himself to God, and therefore he has accomplished what the rest of us never fully realize apart from him, perfect union with God. This use of person as subject in Christology occurs in the work of Rahner and also in the new quest for the historical Jesus.

According to Rahner personal existence is characterized by subjectivity. We are persons in that we are knowing subjects. That is, we are capable of reflecting on ourselves and our involvements. In Rahner's words, "spirit is the single person insofar as he becomes conscious of himself in an absolute presence to himself . . ." <sup>57</sup> In light of this subjectivity, God calls each of us to become a full self, one who says yes to self, to God, and

to neighbor. We hesitate however to do this, for we fear the loss of control and the sense of falling into an "abyss." Yet, Jesus Christ has responded to God's call with his whole self. In his life, passion and death, he has totally accepted himself as subject, as a self relating to self, God and others, and in his resurrection he has received the fullness of life. Therefore, Jesus Christ is the "absolute Savior," the one with whom we can be united so as also to become full subjects before God.

Person as subject does not of course stand alone in Rahner's writings. In his ecclesiology Rahner emphasizes person as relation, and in his later Christology he accentuates the historical Jesus' words and deeds, thereby implicitly employing person as agent.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, Rahner makes extensive use of person as subject because it aligns with his understanding of God as mystery. The self relating to itself and freely accepting its subjectivity is united with God, the infinite mystery whose divine life is love, God's joyous self-giving. This theme is a major one in Rahner's writings, and therefore person as subject holds a central place in his thought.

Person as subject also plays a key role in the new quest. As noted earlier, Käsemann and the other new questers seek to uncover the material continuity between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. To do this, they highlight Jesus' abiding disposition—an attitude beneath the surface of his words and deeds—and then they show how this way of relating to life is also declared in the early Church's proclamation about the risen Christ. This approach depends therefore upon the view that the self is not primarily manifest in one's words and deeds, but in one's abiding outlook on life, an attitude that persists beneath the surface of one's activities.

James M. Robinson, for instance, presents the view of person as subject when he states that personal identity is not to be found in one's "*empirical habitus*," that is, in dates, places and specific incidents. This positivism distorts the nature of personal existence. Who someone is is a matter of the self relating to itself, and in this dynamism making a commitment to a definite kind of life. The self is defined therefore by its abiding disposition, its basic decision to approach life in a particular way. Robinson writes:

The self is not simply one's personality, resultant upon (and to be explained by) the various influences and ingredients pres-

ent in one's heritage and development. . . . Selfhood results from implicit or explicit commitment to a kind of existence, and is to be understood only in terms of that commitment, i.e., by laying hold of the understanding of existence in terms of which the self is constituted.<sup>59</sup>

According to the new questers, Jesus' life was marked by his radical trust in God, and therefore this reliance on God gives an indication of Jesus' identity. Historical research has substantiated that Jesus of Nazareth spoke with an exceptional inner authority, addressed God as Abba, and freely went to his death rather than betray his mission. These historical conclusions are clues to Jesus' basic attitude: he was motivated by his unwavering faith in God, and this motivation lies at the core of Jesus' person. Jesus is the person of utter dependence on God, and this total trust is what characterizes Jesus before his death and after his resurrection. The material continuity between the historical Jesus and the risen Christ is the attitude of abiding confidence in God. Thus Käsemann states: "The Gospel is tied to [Jesus] who, both before and after Easter, revealed himself to his own as the Lord, by setting them before the God who is near to them and thus translating them into the freedom and responsibility of faith."<sup>60</sup> Jesus Christ is defined by his complete faith in God, and he brings his followers to make a similar act of trust in the God whom he calls Abba. Jesus' identity springs from his perfect relating to himself and God, and he leads other men and women to become full subjects before God.

Person as subject can indeed serve Christology well, as Rahner and the new questers have demonstrated in their respective ways. It allows us to appraise empirical analyses that might reduce Jesus Christ to an historical figure, and it permits us to reflect on the quality of Jesus' bond with God. Nevertheless, one liability of its use in Christology is its tendency toward dualism. Talk about persons as subjects can foster a hard distinction between the object and the subject, between the phenomenal and the real, so that we would distinguish between "inner" history and "outer" history.

This tension has been noted, for example, in Rahner's writings. According to Metz, Rahner's transcendental method can be used to disregard historical contingencies as well as the theological significance of "*praxis*."<sup>61</sup> This does not occur in Rahner's work, observes Metz, be-

cause Rahner writes with the Church's actual life in mind. Yet, this implicit reference to Church history is not required by the transcendental method, and on its own terms the method discounts the historical character of God's revelation.

The possible devaluing of history in the language of subjectivity has significant implications for answering "Who is Jesus Christ?" When person as subject governs our discourse, we can have difficulty identifying a person. Since person as subject focuses on a person's abiding disposition and regards a person's words and actions as mere indicators of this attitude, it can make too little of biography's role in our knowledge of other persons. Then when this view is extended to Christology, it has difficulty saying who Jesus Christ is, for it places a great deal of weight on his total trust in God—a trust that all men and women should adopt. As a result, person as subject can lead us to misconstrue Jesus Christ as merely a token or symbol of what all people can become.

In recent years the work of Käsemann, Robinson and others has received criticism for this very reason. It is argued that their approach to history, the "new historiography," has resulted in the blurring of Jesus Christ's individuality. Leander Keck has pointed out, for instance, that the new quest casts Jesus as "the embodiment of the existentialist message."<sup>62</sup> What is important is not Jesus Christ himself, but his call for reliance on God. In a similar vein, Hans Frei maintains that the kind of "identity analysis" undertaken by the post-Bultmannians either loses sight of a person or posits a person's identity in an "unswerving inward disposition" that is so "inward" that the self cannot be known by others.<sup>63</sup> Each of us is estranged from our neighbor, even from those who love us and want to know us. This view of personal existence is problematic, and the difficulty stems from the new quest's emphasis upon person as subject.

Person as subject need not govern Christology. Person as agent and person as relation shape the Christologies of Kasper, Schillebeeckx and van Beeck, even though these approaches to Jesus Christ differ in other ways. For example, Schillebeeckx espouses person as agent, when he maintains that "it is only in his actions that a man is finally to be understood."<sup>64</sup> Moreover, he stresses person as relation, when he states that "an individual human being is the personal focal point of a series of interactive relations to the past, the future and his or her own present."<sup>65</sup> Further: "In other words, being a person entails interpersonality."<sup>66</sup> Fi-

nally, Schillebeeckx has stressed person as agent and person as relation without disregarding person as subject. He acknowledges, for example, the link between person as agent and person as subject in this statement: "Now the mystery of each person is only accessible to us in his behaviour, which on the other hand is just the inadequate sign of the person manifesting himself in it and at the same time conceals him."<sup>67</sup> Similarly, in their works Kasper and van Beeck accentuate person as agent and person as relation, while not losing sight of person as subject.

The adoption of person as agent and person as relation in Christology may appear, however, to pose a dilemma. How can these notions be employed when a biography of Jesus is neither in fact possible nor in principle theologically sufficient? To advocate primary reliance on person as agent and person as relation in Christology seems to demand a return to the original quest with its attempt to write a biography of Jesus. But this does not in fact occur in the Christologies of Kasper, Schillebeeckx and van Beeck. These theologians have relied on person as agent and person as relation without reverting to the liberal agenda. How has this been possible?

Analysis will show that Kasper, Schillebeeckx and van Beeck have turned to forms of narrative other than biography. Kasper's *Jesus the Christ* implicitly rests on an historical narrative of Jesus and also on biblical stories. Schillebeeckx's *Jesus* depends on an historical narrative, and van Beeck's *Christ Proclaimed* is undergirded by the "Synoptic story," the drama running through Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Further, these accounts manifest person as agent in that Jesus stands out as the individual who enacts his intention to live faithfully to God, and person as relation functions in these accounts for Jesus Christ is presented as the individual who totally gives and receives from God and neighbor. One of the significant contributions made by Kasper, Schillebeeckx and van Beeck to recent Christology consists of their reliance on narratives and the ideas of person as agent and person as relation.

Biographies of Christians are not however employed in the Christologies of Kasper, Schillebeeckx and van Beeck, and it is here that I shall expand their use of narratives. Study of the person and work of Jesus Christ draws not only on historical data, Scripture and tradition, but also on contemporary experience. This experience is probed by Kasper, Schillebeeckx and van Beeck through their distinct analyses of modern thought. Yet there are other ways of learning from Christians' living

encounter with Christ. One such source, as Kasper has noted, is the Church's liturgy. Another, mentioned by Metz, is the lives of the saints, especially those women and men whose discipleship to Christ has included their critical integration of the Christian heritage and their culture. Among exemplary twentieth century Christians in the United States stands Dorothy Day (d. 1980), and therefore a biographical sketch of Day can serve as a source for Christology. I shall demonstrate this in an inquiry into the identity of Jesus Christ that employs an historical narrative about Jesus, a retelling of Mark's Gospel, and a recollection of Day's life.

Finally, our examination of the works of Kasper, Schillebeeckx and van Beek (Chapters Two, Three and Four), along with an exercise in identifying Jesus Christ (Chapter Five), positions us to consider the rationale for the use of narratives in Christology (Chapter Six). This rationale can be presented in three points. First, just as the lives of all persons are similar to narratives, so too the "life" of Christ is like a narrative that is glimpsed, for instance, when Christians profess: "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again." Second, Christ's life is too complex to gain adequate expression in only one kind of narrative. Therefore, it can be recounted in historical reconstructions, the Gospels and the lives of the saints. Third, narratives about a life need not block other kinds of discourse about a person, and they can in fact clarify our use of conceptual terms. As a result, by employing narratives in Christology, we can recover the meaning of the Church's teachings about Jesus Christ.

### III. *Myth, Story and History*

Talk about narratives can easily become tangled. The word "narrative" and its related terms can mean such different things that, unless these words are defined, what they mean can be ambiguous. Therefore, before going any further, I shall clarify the meaning of "myth," "history" and "story." Each of these terms specifies a distinct form of narrative. A narrative is "a recital of events."<sup>68</sup> It is an account with "a beginning, a middle and an end."<sup>69</sup> Having recognized this much, we need to distinguish among some of the different kinds of narrative.

"Myth" refers to that kind of narrative which recounts "events"

outside of time—"events" in which we can participate through rituals. The Bible's two creation accounts (Genesis 1 and Genesis 2) are myths, as is the Greek tale of Prometheus. These narratives are such that they can provide people of every age with a sense of the meaning of their basic involvements. Norman Perrin makes this point when he states: "Myths are narratives that express in symbolically rich language human experiences that resist expression in any objective, descriptive language."<sup>70</sup> Because myths express recurring experiences, they are characterized by their circularity. Or, in the words of William Poteat, a myth is distinguished by the fact that:

though, like a story it unfolds in time, so that in one perfectly good sense we may say there are "events" recounted . . . and we may say that these "events" are laid out in time, so that, in one sense, we want to claim that Y was *after* X and *before* Z . . . it is not a report of unique events, and, in *our* senses of these notions, has neither a beginning nor an end—as a circle has neither a beginning nor an end.<sup>71</sup>

"Story" denotes that kind of narrative whose events as reported occur once and for all. It is a drama whose beginning, a middle and an end are indeed just that, and not moments within a cycle. Moreover, a story consists of characters who are singular, not archetypes as in a myth. Poteat states:

A story is a temporal deployment of events which differs from myth, in the Classical sense, in that it requires the concept "happen" in a logical environment other than that afforded by ritual re-enactment, the passage of the cosmos through its finite course and eternal return; it requires the concept "person"; and it requires that of "action."<sup>72</sup>

Moreover, the category story can be divided into two sub-categories. There are fictional stories.<sup>73</sup> These stories are "made up"; that is, their events and characters are invented by the storyteller. Examples of fiction are Fyodor Dostoyevski's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879), Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (1918). Yet, there are also non-fictional stories.<sup>74</sup>

These stories possess a real subject matter. They speak of actual events and persons, in such a way that, while they manifest historical accuracy, they primarily aim at providing insight into the essential human ingredients in this drama. Hence, in non-fictional stories the storyteller fills in historical gaps with imagined elements. An example of a non-fiction story in contemporary literature is Truman Capote's novel *In Cold Blood* (1965). In ancient literature, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John can be classified as non-fiction stories, even though they are a genre unto themselves.

Finally, "history" refers to that type of narrative which is intended to possess empirical or historical accuracy in speaking of actual events and persons. Thus, according to Poteat: "History is a similar temporal deployment of events [—similar to story—], bound to what we question-beggingly, but unproblematically, and . . . benignly call 'facts.'"<sup>75</sup> Or, as Warner Berthoff states, history "is meant to reveal a preexistent order of actuality."<sup>76</sup>

These descriptions should help us to keep our wits about us as we consider the use of narratives in Christology. It can be immediately clarified, for instance, that we are not interested in myths. It may be that some biblical stories function in the Church's life as myths would, for example, by shaping ritual activity. Yet, such narratives as the Gospels are not myths, but non-fiction stories. In subsequent pages, I shall argue that Christology can benefit from the explicit use of the Gospels as stories, historical narratives about Jesus (that is, from loose recitals of actual persons and events in Jesus' ministry), and biographies of exemplary Christians.

Christians have always inquired into the identity of Jesus Christ, and in recent years we have done this with exceptional vigor. Paul VI in 1963 exhorted the delegates at the Second Vatican Council to set their deliberations in relation to Jesus Christ, and in 1979 John Paul II directed the entire Church to describe itself within the mystery of Christ. Toward this, he envisioned the Church as "the community of disciples."<sup>77</sup> Along with Church leaders, theologians have taken a serious interest in Christology. Influenced by modern historical methods and philosophy as well as by cultural issues, they have studied anew the incarnation, Jesus' life and ministry, the resurrection, the kerygma's emergence, and the present and future reality of Christ. In the past thirty years, the Chris-

tian assembly has embarked upon what Aloys Grillmeier has predicted will prove to be a new "Christological age."<sup>78</sup>

Walter Kasper has consistently contributed to our era of Christology. In *Jesus the Christ, The God of Jesus Christ* and numerous articles he has enriched our understanding of the person whom Christians confess as Lord. Moreover, his work is significant not only for its content, its view of Jesus Christ, but also for its form, its theological method. This method strikes a balance in its reliance on various theological sources, for it unites historical-critical research, the analysis of Christian kerygma and doctrines, and critical reliance on contemporary thought. It is displayed most clearly in *Jesus the Christ*, and therefore this is the work upon which we shall focus in the next chapter. Throughout our study, Kasper's "method of reciprocity" will serve as the primary paradigm for critical reflection upon the person and work of Jesus Christ.

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# Reflection Questions

Article 1:     **Story-Shaped Christology**  
                  **The Role of Narratives in Identifying**  
                  **Jesus Christ**  
                  *Robert A Kreig CSC*

Our Identities are often shaped by the way we remember and retell our stories.

- a)   *Who is Jesus for You?*
  
- b)   *How can the Story of Jesus inspire your life and help you to find your identity?*

**Article 2**

**Title: Jesus  
A Gospel Portrait**

**Author: Donald Senior CP**

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# JESUS

## *A Gospel Portrait*

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

Donald Senior, C.P.



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Paulist Press ♦ New York ♦ Mahwah, N.J.

And we catch something of the land's face: the mountains where Jesus seeks solitude from the din of his mission, the desert, the Jordan River, the rich farmland, the ever-present Lake of Galilee. Seldom do the gospels step back from their narration to reflect explicitly on all of this. Some of the evangelists may have been as unfamiliar with this scene as we are. The names and places and factions are part of the story, the gospel tradition about Jesus, and they flow on without explanation.

But the very inclusion of these bits and pieces of background reveals an important feature of the gospel portrait of Jesus. Jesus was not a mythical God whose fabled life was played out in a timeless kingdom. He was a man whose birth and life and death were bound by the observable limits of time and place. Much of what Jesus thought and said and did was shaped by and in reaction to the culture and situation of his times. If we hope to read his portrait with intelligence and understanding, then we must know something about the thoroughly human dimensions of Jesus' world. This, after all, is part of taking seriously our belief in the incarnation.

### *The Origin of Jesus*

Each of the gospels, in their own distinct way, reflects on the origin of Jesus. Mark begins his story on the edge of the Judean desert where the river Jordan flows into the waste of the Dead Sea (Mk 1:1–11). Here the adult Jesus comes to listen to the fiery desert prophet, John the Baptist, who preaches an ominous message about the approaching end of the world and the need for repentance. Jesus accepts that ritual of new life and so begins his own powerful ministry. John's gospel, by contrast, reaches back into the vastness of the universe before creation and time began, into the very life of God, and there finds the ultimate origin of Jesus (Jn 1:1–18). The "word" spoken by God, a word that perfectly expresses God's love, arches into time and creation and takes flesh. Jesus' life and ministry begin in the timeless love of God for the world.

Matthew and Luke—each in a distinctive way—begin with Jesus' roots in the people and history of Israel. Matthew's opening verses give the genealogy of Jesus, tracking his origins from Abraham the patriarch through David the king and on into the turbulent history of Joseph and Mary (Mt 1:1–17). Joseph, a just man, and Mary, threatened vessel of

## 2

# The World of Jesus

Anyone who begins to search out the gospel portrait of Jesus will soon discover the baffling traces of another world. Jesus was not a twentieth century man but a Jew of the first century. The gospel story is full of strange people and parties, unfamiliar lands and places, conflict and debate whose point and emotion have been tempered with centuries of receding time. The more we want to know about Jesus, the more we should know about his world.

Jesus, as the gospels tell it, seems to conduct his ministry in a mobile arena constantly ringing with debate: Pharisees, scribes, Sadducees, Herodians, high priests, elders. There is talk of ritual washing of hands and of numerous subtleties of sabbath law. Around the circle of the arena swirl the crowds—some curious, some grateful, some pleading: publicans, sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, fishermen, lawyers, the sick and disabled. Ominous rumblings break through the din in the arena to suggest a backdrop of imminent political crisis: a Roman prefect sits in judgment in the Jewish capital city; a Jewish vassal king rules the northern region of Galilee. We hear of rebels and riots, of executions and punishment. We sense the tension of a land occupied by a foreign power. Well-worn prejudices flash frequently into speech and gesture: Galileans are mocked for their accent; Nazareth is called a city with no expectations; Samaritans are feared, hated, and avoided.

And then there is the geography on which all of this is played, a string of names and places vaguely familiar yet mostly without identity or character for us. But for Jesus and his compatriots, they were real: Capernaum, Nazareth, Jericho, Bethany, Jerusalem, Emmaus, Tiberias, Caesarea, the Decapolis or the "Ten Cities," Tyre, and Sidon.

God's grace, have to endure the murderous threats of Herod and exile in Egypt before, as fugitives, they retreat to Nazareth of Galilee. The homage of Gentile magi from the east coupled with hostility and rejection by the leaders in Jerusalem already signal to the reader the adult Jesus' own destiny.

The mood of Luke's story is quite different. He, too, locates Jesus' origins firmly in the life and history of Israel. Jesus' family ties are with the good and pious Jews such as the humble temple priest Zachary and his wife Elizabeth, destined to be the parents of John the Baptist; with Mary and Joseph poor and devout Galileans who must come to register for the census in Bethlehem, the city of David. The child who is born in most humble circumstances is visited by shepherds and acclaimed by the prophets Simeon and Anna. Luke, too, signals the later destiny of Jesus by having the young messiah visit the Jerusalem temple and astound the leaders with his wisdom.

It is likely that neither Matthew nor Luke had a wealth of sure historical information about the early years of Jesus' life. They affirm in common his birth in Bethlehem, the wondrous circumstances concerning his virginal conception, the identity of his parents as Mary and Joseph, and his ultimate location in Nazareth (although each get him there in very different ways!). They affirm, too, that Jesus was firmly rooted in Jewish history, a history glorious in its faith and devotion but also a history wracked with pain, failure and oppression. The threats of a Herod and the long arm of Roman authority in demanding a census were important historical realities for Jesus' generation.

But beyond this basic data there is little convergence among the gospel stories about the origin of Jesus, and it is clear that some of the details derive from early Christian reflection on the Old Testament and Jewish tradition, as well as loving but historically unprovable stories about the marvelous circumstances of Jesus' early days.

More important from the gospel perspective, Matthew and Luke share with Mark and John a concern to emphasize the ultimate origin of Jesus in God's purpose. While very different in form, the goal of the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke is little different from that of John's majestic prologue or Mark's reflection on the prophetic mission of the Baptist. Each of the evangelists wants to affirm that Jesus' birth was no accident of history. God had destined Jesus from all eternity to liberate Israel. And Jesus was no disembodied spirit; he was firmly rooted in the history of a real people—their pain, their joy, their

fidelities, their sin. Mark makes this point in linking Jesus with the prophet John at the Jordan; Matthew and Luke do it by their vivid stories of Jesus' infancy; John does it by his eloquent statement: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14).

It is fully in accord with the spirit of the gospels, then, to deepen our knowledge about the land and the people where Jesus began.

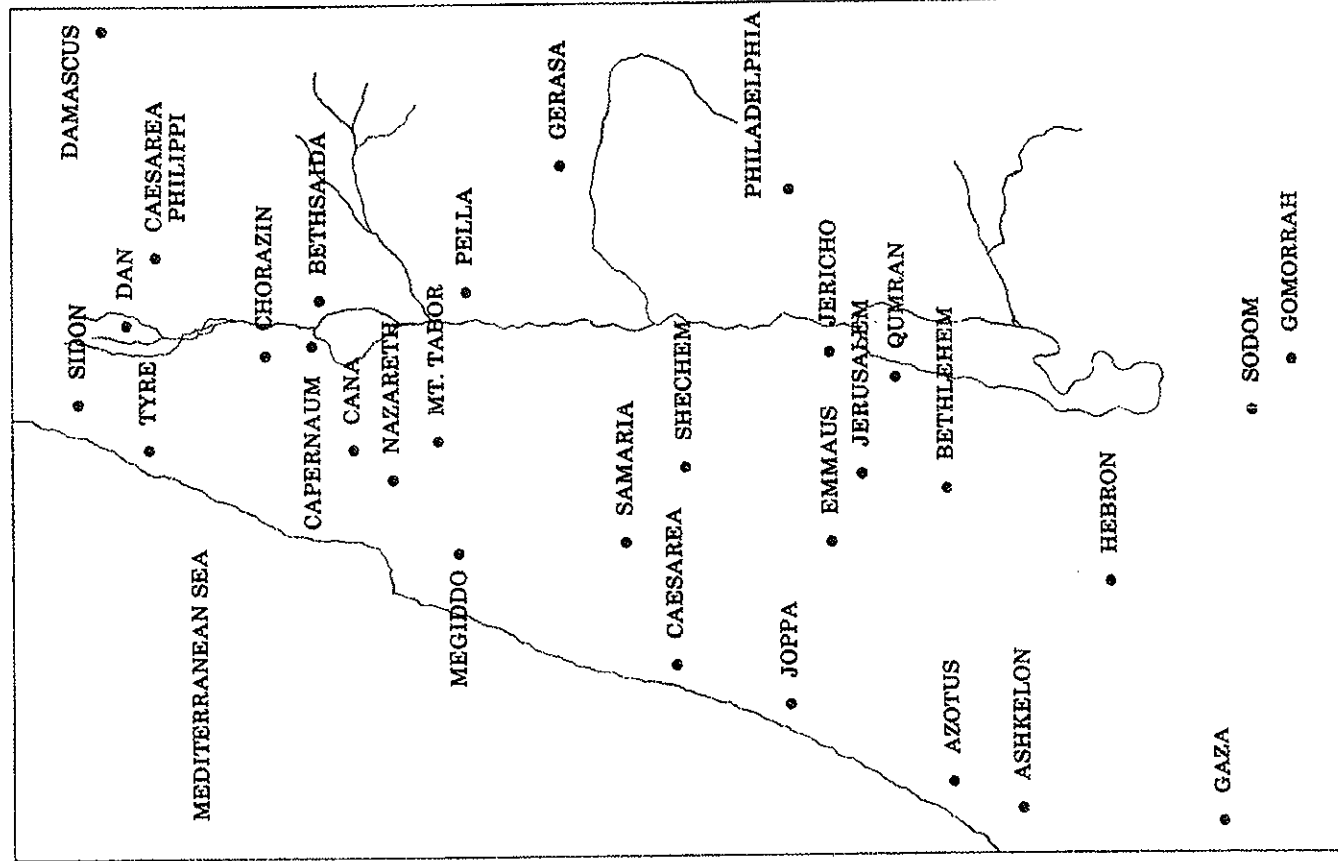
### The Land

The land shapes people and their history. The small tract of land that held the life of Jesus had much to do with the fate of his world and his own place in it.

Israel, or Palestine (the name imposed on the region by the Romans in reference to the Philistines who had once inhabited the coastal area), was a small tract on the world map at the time of Jesus, a narrow rectangular strip, scarcely one hundred and fifty miles long and only fifty to sixty miles wide at its broadest point (see map page 30). The land's strategic importance belied its size. It formed the keystone of the so-called "fertile crescent," the land bordering the southeastern rim of the Mediterranean Sea that served as the corridor alternately for Syria's and Persia's moves west and Egypt's moves east. Later it became the threshold for the eastward expansion of Greece and then of Rome. Israel was a land tattooed with the invader's boot.

The Bible speaks of Israel as the "land of milk and honey." Those products existed there certainly, but the phrase's connotation must have been taken with wry humor by the herders and farmers of that rough and craggy land. The land's backbone is humped with mountains, rising to nine thousand feet in the north and still precipitous in the south. On each side of this central ridge, the surface gradually tapers into flat land, an arable coastal strip on the west and rugged barren desert to the east. Running through the great rift valley that splits Israel from north to south is a single precious river, the Jordan, which parallels the central ridge on the east, separating the mountains from the desert. The Jordan begins in the high mountains of the north, widens suddenly into the Sea of Galilee, narrows again, and lays a hesitant strip of green along the border of the desert until it spills into the brackish salt waste of the Dead Sea, the lowest point on the earth.

# NEW TESTAMENT PALESTINE



Where the river dies, the desert stretches without interruption to the Arabian gulf, over a hundred miles to the south.

The cool green of the Sea of Galilee and the salt wastes of the Dead Sea reveal the differing personalities of the extremities of Israel. Galilee, the northern region surrounding the lake, is a lush land of rolling hills. A narrow plain on the western side of the lake, Gennesareth, has been famous from ancient times until now for its fertility. The well-stocked lake nourished a thriving fishing industry even in Jesus' day when pickled and dried fish were exported throughout the Roman empire. Further to the west is the broad expanse of the Jezreel valley, also called the plains of Megiddo, which stretches from the Carmel range near the Mediterranean to the hills that surround the Sea of Galilee. Nazareth, Jesus' home town, was a small village perched in the hillsides overlooking this vast fertile plain through which commerce from east and west took its course.

Judea, the southern region that spreads westward through the mountains from the Dead Sea, is craggy and dry, its terraced slopes tilled with care over the centuries to coax crops from the rocky soil. But at its heart stands Jerusalem, perched on a cluster of high hills, the capital city of Israel since the time of David when he captured it from the Jebusites and made it the center of his now united kingdom. Jerusalem was the seat of religious and political power, the trading center of Israel. Between Galilee of the north and Judea of the south was Samaria, a region of rough and often barren land that divided Israel less geographically than ideologically.

The evangelists plot Jesus' movements on the map of Israel differently. Matthew and Luke depend heavily on Mark's account of Jesus' itinerary, but at times they too differ in particulars. John's account is strikingly different in this aspect of the gospel story as in others. For example, in the synoptic gospels (i.e. Mark, Matthew, and Luke), Jesus is described as going to Jerusalem only once during his public ministry. The one hundred mile march from Caesarea Philippi in the extreme north to Jerusalem in the south becomes much more than a journey spanning the length of Israel. In all three of these gospels, the journey has symbolic overtones. Jesus and his disciples leave their home region of Galilee, where Jesus' ministry of healing and teaching had made such an impact, to start toward Jerusalem, the fateful city where Jesus, like the prophets before him, would suffer and die. Thus the journey becomes a theological odyssey during which Jesus instructs his disci-

ples on the meaning of suffering and its consequences. John, on the other hand, has Jesus go to Jerusalem at least three times during his public ministry; the drama of a single, fateful journey is blunted.

This divergence in the four gospel accounts is understandable when we recall the process of composition outlined in the previous chapter. The gospel tradition did not develop as a coherent, overall story of the details of Jesus' life. The general framework was known, and individual incidents were fitted in to suit the purpose of the evangelist.

However, there is some agreement about the geographical arena of Jesus' life that cuts across all four accounts to suggest that the historical roots of that consensus are strong. All the gospel accounts agree that Galilee was the main arena for Jesus' public ministry. As we shall note in the next chapter the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, each in its own way, relate that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a Judean city not far from Jerusalem. But they are quick to assert that Nazareth of Galilee was his home. Most of the incidents that take place during Jesus' ministry are also located in the north. It has been pointed out often that the lush beauty of Galilee supplied the imagery of Jesus' teaching: the sower, the birds of the air, the lilies of the field, the barns crammed with the harvest, the net filled to the breaking point. As we shall see, it was not only the rich farmland and the dominant presence of the lake that helped mold Jesus' ministry. Galilee shared in the political and religious tensions that seared Israel at the time of Jesus.

### *The Politics of Jesus' World*

Nature had branded jagged lines across the rugged hide of Israel, but the divisions and tensions it experienced at the time of Jesus were due to realities other than geography. The period in which Jesus lived and in which the gospels were formed was probably one of the most torturous in Israel's long and painful history. This historical backdrop, too, affected Jesus' ministry, and we must be aware of it.

As is so often the case, one must get a running start to appreciate any particular period in history. To appreciate first century Palestine, one must begin with the first waves of invasion from the west, initiated by Alexander the Great.

Alexander died in 323 B.C. after having conquered most of the Mediterranean world and as far east as India. After his death, some

attempt was made to consolidate these vast holdings by dividing them among his leading generals. The Middle East, including Palestine, was carved up between two generals, Seleucid and Ptolemy. These two men and their successors would dominate the political life of the Middle East for over one hundred and fifty years. The Seleucid dynasty had its base in Antioch of Syria while the Ptolemies were located in Alexandria, Egypt. Israel, located in between, predictably was caught in the rivalry that soon broke out between the two competing dynasties.

For the first century of Greek occupation, Israel was ruled by the Ptolemies. Egypt was relatively far away from Palestine, so the Jews enjoyed little interference in their internal affairs. The subtle impact of Greek culture, however, was beginning to seep into Jewish thought and life. Theaters would appear and public baths and gymnasia—typical signs of Greek influence. Trade and political associations with the Ptolemies in Judea necessitated contact with Greek culture and use of the Greek language. Galilee was under the rule of the Seleucids in nearby Antioch, and the incursion of Greek influence was profound. There had been some systematic colonization of the area by Greek soldiers and their families. Thus the region deserved its biblical nickname, "Galilee of the Gentiles."

This more tolerable level of Greek occupation came to an end in 198 B.C. when all of Israel came under Seleucid rule. At first the Seleucids allowed the province of Judea to enjoy autonomous local rule, but a thirst for increased revenues brought this experiment to an end. Then, too, the specter of Rome loomed on the western horizon of the Seleucid empire. In 190 B.C. Roman naval forces dealt a crippling blow to the Greeks and exacted an enormous financial penalty as the price of defeat. To support its war effort and to make up the tribute to Rome, the Seleucids began a cruel and systematic taxation of Israel. Relations between Israel and its Greek overlords deteriorated rapidly.

Within Israel—we are speaking primarily of Judea at this point—two different sets of reactions to foreign incursion began to stir. The landed wealthy, those in positions of power, and the priestly aristocracy sought ways to accommodate their Greek overlords. But there was also a growing sentiment of resistance to oppression. The *hasidim*, or "pious ones" as many members of this group came to be called, resented the interference of the Seleucids; they considered compromise with Greek culture a threat to religious fidelity. From these two general



streams of reaction would be born many of the factions that dominated the religious and political life of Jesus' own day.

The increasingly intolerable rule of the Seleucids led to one of the most extraordinary phases of post-exilic Judaism. In 167 B.C. the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus IV, tried to annex the Ptolemaic holdings in Egypt, but Roman intervention thwarted his move. Hearing of Antiochus' defeat, rebels in Judea attempted to overthrow the Greeks' puppet ruler in Jerusalem. However Antiochus, frustrated by his defeat at the hands of the Romans and embittered by the rear-guard rebellion of the Jews, sacked Jerusalem on his way back from Egypt. Worse, he desecrated the Jerusalem temple itself: he enshrined a statue of Zeus in the holy of holies in the sacred inner room of the temple where not even a devout Jew was permitted entry.

Judea erupted in revolt, led by the Hasmonean family of Mattathias and his sons. One of the sons, Judas, was nicknamed Maccabeus, "the hammer," because of his ferocious energy in opposing the Gentile enemy. (The exploits of Judas and the Hasmonean family are treasured in the two biblical books of Maccabees.) By all rights the Hasmonean revolt, however heroic, should have been no more than a suicidal gesture of resistance. Instead the Jews won a decisive victory. The Seleucids were unable to give their full attention to suppressing the revolt because of Roman pressure to the west and Persian threats from the east. By 164 B.C. the hated statue of Zeus had been cleared from the inner sanctuary, and the temple was rededicated, an event commemorated ever since by the Jewish feast of Hanukkah. In 142 B.C. the Seleucids granted full independence to Israel, and there began almost a century of Jewish national independence, a situation never to be repeated until the modern state of Israel emerged in the middle of the twentieth century.

Although freedom would once again slip away with the coming of the Romans, the incredible victory of the Hasmoneans was never forgotten in Israel. Nationalists at the time of Jesus were convinced that just as Yahweh had granted success to the Hasmoneans against the Greeks, the same victory could be achieved against the Romans. The prescription would be a tragic mistake.

The Hasmonean family assumed the leadership of the new Jewish state. As courageous revolutionaries, their achievement was unparalleled; as national rulers, they proved disappointing failures, aping the worst features of the Seleucids. Even before formal independence,

Jonathan Hasmonean had accepted the "gift" of the high priesthood from the Seleucid ruler, Alexander Balas. The Hasmoneans were not a priestly family, so acceptance of the gift violated hereditary accession to the high office. This pattern of expediency and compromise would typify the Hasmoneans' treatment of the priesthood throughout their reign.

Just as the *hasidim* had reacted to the incursions of the Greeks into their national and religious life, so now they found that they had much to fear from their own rulers. But the reaction was not uniform, and for the first time in Israel the various religious and social groups operative at the time of Jesus began to take on clear definition. The *Sadducees* comfortably found their orbit around the power base in Jerusalem. This priestly aristocracy was able to work out an accommodation with the Hasmoneans as they had with the Seleucids. Others, however, withdrew in complete revulsion from active political and religious life. Groups such as the *Essenes* formed monastic communes where they attempted to live with complete fidelity to the law. Ruins of such a monastery were discovered in 1947 on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, near the desert valley of Qumran. Included in the famous discovery was the monastery's "library" of scrolls that had been stored or hidden in caves near the main buildings. These Dead Sea Scrolls, as they have come to be known, give us a fascinating insight into the mentality of this breakaway group and an inside view of some of the religious ferment of the Hasmonean period. Groups such as at Qumran were attempting to live in utmost religious purity while awaiting the restoration of a genuine priesthood and liturgy at the defiled Jerusalem temple.

The *Pharisees* were another important party that began to emerge in definite terms at this time. They steered a middle course between the compromise of the Sadducees and the radical withdrawal of the Essenes. The Pharisees refused to sell out to expediency, thus abdicating much direct involvement in the religious and political ruling circles. But their reputation among the people as strict and faithful upholders of the religious laws of Judaism made them an influential movement that had to be reckoned with.

Hasmonean abuse of power was not limited to tampering with the priesthood and the religious life of Israel. Their foreign policy became as expansionist as that of the Greeks. In the beginning the center of the Jewish national state was the southern province of Judea. But the

Hasmoneans soon began to reach out for neighboring territory. Much of the prejudice and aggravation among the various sections of the country at the time of Jesus finds its origin in this period.

Idumea, the desert territory immediately south of Judea, was quickly absorbed, and its inhabitants were forced to accept the Jewish faith. An irony of history would be that Herod and his family were Idumeans. They would form the dynasty that, with the help of Roman occupation, would replace the Hasmonean state. Herod's Idumean background meant that the authenticity of his Jewish faith would always be suspect in the eyes of most mainline Jews.

Samaria, immediately north of Judea, also was suspect. Its inhabitants had been disliked by the Judeans for many decades. The Samaritans, remnants of the northern Jewish tribes, had not been subject to the great Babylonian exile (587–537 B.C.) as the Judeans had. As a result, much of their religious practice, and even their version of the scriptures, differed from those of the Judeans. When the exiled Jews returned from Babylon, they refused to allow the Samaritans to participate in the rebuilding of their national life. Thus the gulf between the two branches of Judaism widened. Suspicion and hatred of the Samaritans flamed the zeal of the Hasmonean invaders. They destroyed the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim and attempted—unsuccessfully—to force the Samaritans back into orthodoxy. Hatred between the two regions, already well-developed, became even more vicious. Jesus' many stories in which Samaritans appeared in a favorable light were calculated thrusts at an explosive prejudice.

Galilee too was annexed by the new state. The region's heavily Gentile population was forced to accept proselytization or face deportation. Systematic programs of colonization by Jewish southerners were initiated to secure orthodoxy's foothold in the region. The campaign of Judaizing Galilee seems to have had a great deal of success. By the time of Jesus the population was mainly Jewish, although there remained a number of "Hellenized" or Greek cities. But suspicion at the region's late entry into the Judean orbit, and the continuing presence of Gentile inhabitants and culture, gave Galilee a demeaning reputation in the eyes of mainline Judaism. The ridiculing of Jesus' Nazorean (and thus Galilean) background at several points in the gospels reflects this attitude.

Thus the century of independence brought about by the Hasmonean revolt rapidly became a century of deterioration and factious

strife. By 63 B.C. Hasmonean excesses and the rivalry of the various groups who sought their overthrow had brought the country to the edge of civil war. Like a bemused tiger, Rome bided its time, waiting for Israel to fall. When both Sadducees and Pharisees appealed to Rome for arbitration of the power struggle, Rome not only arbitrated; it took over the entire country.

As was their policy throughout most of the empire, the Romans preferred to administer their territories through carefully selected local rulers. By 40 B.C. the Romans had chosen a shrewd Idumean, Herod, entrusting Israel to his capable hands. Herod himself would continue in power until 4 B.C., and his sons would maintain the Herodian dynasty until almost the end of the first century A.D.

Herod the Great, as the founder of the dynasty has come to be known, gradually solidified his newly acquired kingdom with a combination of political savvy and brute terror. Herod made great efforts to ingratiate himself with his Jewish subjects, but he also had a keen taste for Greek culture. The king was a master builder. Even today, magnificent ruins of his many fortified summer palaces and the shrines he built for some of his Gentile subjects are sprinkled throughout Palestine. Still impressive are the vestiges of the cities he constructed such as Samaria (or Sebaste as it came to be known) or the great harbor city of Caesarea Maritima. But the most ambitious of Herod's projects was the reconstruction of the Jerusalem temple. The new temple was part of Herod's calculated effort to mollify Jewish suspicions of him; it also gave an outlet to his own love of triumphant architecture. Once again, irony played its role in Jewish history. The temple, begun in 19 B.C., was not fully completed until A.D. 63. Only seven years after its completion, it was destroyed by the Romans in the great revolt of A.D. 70. The time span of the temple's construction meant that Jesus himself never saw its full completion. Then, too, the fact that it was Herod, an Idumean and an avowed promoter of Greek pagan culture, who had built the temple encouraged the continued reaction of groups such as the Essenes who had withdrawn in disgust from the Jerusalem scene. These groups worshiped in protest without the benefit of the temple liturgy, awaiting the time when Yahweh—or his messiah—would purify the temple and restore a legitimate priesthood.

Herod died in 4 B.C., his reputation for cunning and cruelty unabated. One story related that as he lay dying in his summer palace near Jericho, he ordered that the prominent men of the town be

executed at the moment of his death to ensure that sufficient mourning would coincide with his funeral. This popular estimate of Herod's cruelty is corroborated by the story in Matthew's infancy gospel that tells of the same King's effort to liquidate a possible claimant to the throne by executing all male infants in Judea (Mt 2:16).

Herod's cruelty, however, did not negate his political ability. Despite his excesses, he was able to maintain the unity of the Hasmonean territory. At Herod's death, Rome gave the administration of Israel over to his sons. The sons of Herod, unfortunately, inherited much of their father's cruelty but little of his intelligence. The unity of the land was finished. The division of Israel and the ineptness of the Herodian dynasty encouraged the nationalist sentiment of Jesus' own day. By A.D. 67 it would break out into open and tragic revolt against Roman occupation.

The territory of Israel was now divided into three regions. This political division and the names of their rulers become the background for the gospel story. Philip, perhaps the most sensible of the Herodians, took over the extreme northern section. He was the builder of Caesarea Philippi, the town where Peter is recorded as confessing that Jesus was the messiah, an important turning point in the gospel drama. Herod Antipas ruled Jesus' home region of Galilee and Perea, the area east of the Jordan River. Herod Antipas fares badly in the gospels. Because of his illicit marriage to Herodias, wife of his half-brother Philip, he drew the fire of John the Baptist. Later, Antipas had the prophet imprisoned and executed (see, for example, Mk 6:17-29). The ruler also showed great interest in Jesus, even fearing that he might have been John the Baptist returned from the dead. Jesus dismissed Herod's curiosity with the epithet, that "fox" (Lk 13:32). By far the most inept son of Herod was Archelaus, who was placed over the key districts of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. He gets dishonorable mention in the gospel of Matthew for being a threat to the holy family when they returned from exile in Egypt (Mt 2:22). Archelaus proved to be so unpopular and repressive that the Romans exiled him to France in A.D. 6. From that point on, the Romans assumed direct rule of Judea. A series of Roman prefects, under the command of the Roman legate stationed in Syria, carefully monitored Jewish life in Jerusalem. Pontius Pilate, the Roman official who would execute Jesus, was one of these prefects. This political division of the country also explains the rather complex series of events that Luke related in his account of the passion. Pilate, as

governor of Judea, had jurisdiction over the administration of Jesus' Jerusalem trial. But when he discovered that Jesus was a Galilean, he sent him to Herod Antipas, the ruler of that region, who happened to be visiting the capital city during the Jewish feast of Passover.

The division of the country under the Herodian dynasty, and the resulting tensions and frustrations it encouraged, remained the state of affairs throughout Jesus' lifetime. Under pressure of increasing taxation and political mismanagement and fired by the vision of the incredible Maccabean revolt, nationalist feelings began to build. They exploded in A.D. 67, some thirty years after the death of Jesus, when the radical Zealot party led an open rebellion against Rome. But the Romans were not the Seleucids. The revolt was crushed completely, and Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed by A.D. 70. A suicidal attempt at a second revolt occurred in A.D. 132 with even more disastrous results. Judea was decimated by the angry Romans. Jerusalem itself was declared off limits to Jews, and the city's name was changed to Aelia Capitolina. Jewish hopes for national freedom were utterly destroyed. Only the strength of the Pharisaic party enabled Judaism to find the hope to survive.

### *Social and Religious Ferment*

The torturous period between the lyric hopes of Maccabean independence and the oppression of Roman occupation gives us some idea of the tense and critical times in which Jesus of Nazareth was born and carried out his mission. To gain a more complete picture of the world in which Jesus lived, let us return to the various groups and movements in the religious and social sphere of first century Israel.

Judaism at the time of Jesus was not a monolithic bloc of orthodoxy. It was laced with a variety of movements and parties, and it showed considerable tolerance for diverse practice and doctrine. What united Judaism was a common religious heritage and a more-or-less common scripture. Our knowledge of the religious patterns of Jesus' day has been increased measurably in recent years through new archaeological discoveries such as the Qumran documents. Our sources, however, are still so fragmentary that the picture must be drawn with some caution.

The gospels themselves highlight several of the important groups

of this period. We have mentioned the Sadducees, the Jerusalem-based party that drew its membership from the priestly aristocracy. This influential group was able to adapt to the political realities of Palestine, but it was much more rigid and conservative in religious matters. The Sadducees insisted that only the written Pentateuch—the first five books of the Bible, also called the *Torah* or the law—should form the basis of Jewish religious life. They rejected any theological developments that sprang up in later writings or in reflection on the law. This rigid attitude accounts for some of the gospel disputes between the Sadducees and Jesus. In chapter 12 of Mark's gospel, for example, we are told of a discussion about the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees rejected the idea of resurrection because it was a relatively new theological development in Judaism. Hence their tale about the widow who had survived seven husbands was an attempt to make the resurrection appear absurd. Jesus challenged them by ignoring their question and appealing to the power of God who is able to exceed our expectations (Mk 12:27).

The Sadducee party did not survive the catastrophes of A.D. 70 and 132. Once the temple had been destroyed and their base of power in Jerusalem dispersed, the Sadducees do not seem to have had the resilience necessary to continue their role in Judaism's critical new situation.

No Jewish group dominates the pages of the gospels as much as the members of the lay reform movement called the Pharisees. The image they acquire in the gospels is uniformly negative; however, we should accept this stereotype with a great deal of caution. The name "Pharisee" probably derives from the Hebrew word meaning "to separate," referring to the strict adherence to law that characterized their way of life and distinguished them from less faithful elements in Judaism. The Pharisaic movement found its origin in the *hasidim* reaction to the excesses of the Hasmoneans and the puppets of Greek rule before them. Their faithful adherence to the Mosaic law and their rejection of compromise with foreign influence earned them great respect and influence among the Jews.

Pharisaic devotion to the law should not be seen as a blind embrace of legalism. Their extensive system of oral commentary on the law and its detailed prescriptions was an attempt to make the law livable, not impossible. For example, the law might command rest on the sabbath, but how could one know if he or she were faithful to this

command? The Pharisaic commentaries and prescriptions were designed to give precise guidance for every possible contingency: how far one might walk, how much to eat, what sort of movement was permitted, and so on. Thus the Pharisees, unlike the Sadducees, were open to new development in Jewish thought. For them, the great network of oral commentary that had grown up around the law in the rabbinic schools of Israel was not a subversion of the law but an insurance that it was living and active.

The inner strength of the Pharisaic lay reform movement and its basis of power in the family and the synagogue rather than the temple helped assure its leadership role in the chaotic period following the Jewish revolts and the destruction of the temple. It was the Pharisees who effectively reorganized Jewish religious life and lifted it from the ashes. Although the temple was gone, the law remained. If the sacred rituals of the sacrifices at Jerusalem had ceased, one could still worship God in the sanctuary of one's home and in the assembly of the synagogue with a clean heart by strict fidelity to God's commands. Jewish national independence might lay shattered in the ruins of the Zealot revolt, but the messianic hopes of Israel could survive even this purification. Thus the Pharisees left their stamp on the character of post-70 A.D. Judaism, a character that would remain indelible for centuries: modern Judaism is derived ultimately from Pharisaism and its ability to respond with flexibility to difficult circumstances, and not from the revolutionary fervor of the Zealots.

The prominence of the Pharisaic party in Judaism during the period when the gospels were being written helps explain some of the uniformly negative image that appears in the gospels. Jesus himself undoubtedly had fundamental differences with the Pharisees over interpretation of the law and even more basic differences about the nature of religious fidelity. It is likely too that the Pharisees' zeal for the law could lead to an excess of legalism and to a concern for externals bordering on hypocrisy. Thus the gospels' indictment of the Pharisees cannot be completely overturned. But it is a Christian responsibility to be aware of the complexity of the picture lest the gospel critique of the Pharisees become an excuse for antisemitism and anti-Judaism, as it often has been in the past. In other words, the historical situation through which the gospel tradition passed, prior to and during its inclusion in the written gospels, accounts for much of the negative tone regarding these Jewish leaders. In the book of Acts, we read that

many of the Pharisees actually joined the early Christian community. The apostle Paul boasted of being a Pharisee. But by the time the gospels were written, Pharisees had become a symbol of opposition to Jesus and prime instigators of his death. The change is due in part to the fact that the early Christian church and orthodox Judaism had drifted further and further apart, especially after the crisis of A.D. 70. One result of Jewish effort to rebuild was a lessening of tolerance for fringe groups within Judaism. The leadership of the Pharisees gradually imposed a tighter orthodoxy on Jewish life, based on strict fidelity to the law. Christian critique of the law and the church's openness to Gentile converts put the early community on a collision course with Judaism. The fact that the Jews generally did not accept the gospel and the efforts of some Jews to thwart the Christian mission led to a fratricidal bitterness that should not be overlooked when we assess the gospel portrait of the Pharisees. Certainly some of this tension and polemic helped reduce their image in the gospel story to that of mere opponents and persecutors of Jesus.

To acknowledge the role that later history played in the gospel portrait of the Pharisees does not subvert the gospels' reliability, but once again it urges that we read the accounts with full understanding of the process that produced them.

Our review of Jewish history uncovers other groups in the Judaism of Jesus' day, even though some of them play only minor roles in the gospel story. The Essenes, as noted, were a group that reacted in radical fashion to the compromises of official religious life under the Hasmonaens. They withdrew from ordinary life to set up communes where fidelity to the law could be carried out in monastic isolation. The Essenes are not mentioned in the gospel. John the Baptist's insistence on ritual washing as a sign of repentance and his preaching of an imminent judgment echo Essene practice and doctrine. Some commentators suggest that his desert sojourn prior to his public ministry may have been spent in contact with a group such as that at Qumran. But there is no direct evidence in the gospels. During the revolt of A.D. 67-70, the Romans destroyed the monastery of Qumran. The Essene movement seems to have died out, unable to find a place in the adjustment of Jewish life called for by the crisis of A.D. 70.

Another group without credits in the gospel—but of vital importance for the fate of Judaism—was the Zealots. They emerge clearly as a movement or party at the time of the first revolt against Rome in A.D. 70.

But it is likely that their brand of radical nationalism already had begun to crystallize during Jesus' own lifetime. The Zealots maintained that Jewish independence could be achieved only by military action against the Romans. The brawn of the occupying power did not discourage the Zealots; they firmly believed that God would intervene to establish the kingdom of Israel if the Lord's faithful servants would only begin the struggle. The Zealots took heart from the incredible victory of the Hasmonaens: what God had done to the Seleucids could also be done to the Romans.

The only possible reference to the Zealots in the gospels is the mention that Simon "Zelotes" was one of the apostles. Many scholars believe that Simon may have been a member of the Zealot movement before joining the ranks of Jesus' disciples. Jesus' preaching of the imminent coming of the kingdom and the force of his leadership easily could have attracted the Zealots. Here perhaps was someone who could galvanize the masses and begin the struggle against Rome. The Roman authorities themselves might have feared this possibility, thus justifying their summary execution of Jesus for his claim to be "king of the Jews." But an examination of Jesus' teaching shows that he carefully distanced himself from the Zealot movement on such questions as Roman taxation and the use of violence. Jesus' teaching and ministry would indeed effect profound and even revolutionary transformation on every level of human life, but our modern image of the political revolutionary mounting the barricades and taking up arms against the oppressor does not fit the gospel portrayal of Jesus.

The Zealots eventually brought off their revolution. A series of abortive attempts to overthrow the Romans had marked the early decades of the first century, but a general uprising, under Zealot leadership, was not triggered until A.D. 66. It was snuffed out by the Romans by A.D. 70. The Zealot survivors fled to the rock fortress of Herod at Masada, a sheer, flat-top mountain on the southwestern shore of the Dead Sea. The Zealots held out for nearly three years while the Romans besieged the fortress. When they realized their cause was hopeless, the revolutionaries committed mass suicide rather than submit to Roman slavery. Sixty years later another rebellion was attempted, but Roman might could not be overcome, and the Zealots' cause was doomed.

Not all or even most of the Jewish people living at the time of Jesus can be fitted into the few categories we have catalogued. The historian Josephus, a contemporary of this period, suggests that the Pharisees

never numbered more than 35,000. His figures may be questioned, but it is likely that these parties and movements never formed a majority of the people. Most of the Jews' time were the ordinary, uninfluential people who make up the life of any country in any period. Israel was basically agrarian, and the bulk of the population were peasants, living in small villages and coaxing a living from the reluctant soil that covered most of Palestine. Shepherds were still numerous among a people whose ancestors were nomads but were often branded as thieves and untrustworthy by the general population. The fishermen of Galilee, from whom Jesus selected many of his disciples, were relatively prosperous, owning boats and having access to the rich fisheries of the lake. There were a few sizable cities in Palestine: Jerusalem, of course, and the heavily Gentile Tiberias on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (or the Sea of Tiberias, as John's gospel calls it) and Sepphoris, one of the largest cities located near Nazareth but not mentioned in the gospels, and there were the coastal cities such as Caesarea Maritima, Tyre and Sidon where the urban masses—tradesmen, merchants, the professional classes—made their homes. As is usually the case, some tension existed between the larger cities and the rural villages; adherence to Jewish practice tended to be more strict and traditional in the smaller villages and isolated areas of the country.

The political tensions that rankled Israel at this time were compounded by other problems, particularly economic ones. The burden of taxation, especially on the peasant, was almost unbearable. The upkeep of the temple and its worship traditionally demanded a tithe of the male Jew. Added to this were the inexorable demands of Roman taxation, which itself invited abuse. Hired Jewish agents were given a quota to fulfill, and they were practically free to levy taxes as they saw fit. The tax collector was understandably despised both as a Roman quivering and as a thief. Some historians estimate that the taxation of the Galilean peasant may have reached as much as forty percent, although it is impossible to be sure of such figures. In addition, much of the land was in the hands of absentee owners, especially in the north. There was little opportunity for redress and no satisfaction in one's accomplishments.

The pressure of injustice was matched for many of the people by a burden of religious guilt. The Pharisees had spelled out the conditions for righteousness under the law, and they were respected for their scrupulous fidelity. But, for most of the people, such fidelity was impos-

sible. Those whose occupations brought them into contact with Gentiles were proscribed as officially unclean or incapable of keeping the law: shopkeepers, toll collectors, traders, and so on. Others, like the shepherds, bore the stigma of popular suspicion for dishonesty, much like the gypsies of modern Europe. Too, these groups found that such suspicions banned them from temple worship and from being able to give testimony at a court of law. And, of course, public sinners, such as prostitutes and other outcasts, had absolutely no hope of achieving fidelity under the law. Thus for many of the common citizens of Israel—the *amharetz* or "people of the land"—the way to religious fidelity was clear; but often, too, that way was permanently sealed.

Such was the world of Jesus. There is much that we do not know. The historical records that give us a glimpse into this past are fragmentary. But what we do know is helpful. The world of Jesus was a cosmopolitan world, in touch with both Greek and Roman cultures. An educated religious Jew might well be trilingual, fluent not only in his native Aramaic and Hebrew, the traditional religious language, but able to carry on business in Greek, the language of the empire. Knowledge of Latin was probably more rare, restricted to the Roman troops and government officials located in Palestine. It was also a world of deep religious conviction, where dissent and individual persuasion were generally tolerated. But it was also a world of ominous and mounting political tension, a world that seemed to be moving toward an inevitable holocaust, a world in which the birthright of God's people had been diminished by oppression and despair.

This was the world that Jesus of Nazareth ministered to. The later world in which the gospels were written experienced profound changes separating it from the time and conditions that Jesus faced. Judaism was profoundly transformed, and the Christian mission was moving across the face of the empire. But the gospel tradition and the words and works of Jesus it portrays still find roots in this past world. To know of it is to know something more about Jesus.

## QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND REFLECTION

1. Why is some knowledge of the land and circumstances of first century Palestine helpful in reading the gospels? Consider how the context of your own "world" has shaped your life.

2. What do you consider some of the most important facts about the political and economic situation in which Jesus grew up?
3. The gospels portray the Pharisees in almost totally negative terms. What historical circumstances do we need to keep in mind in assessing this image today?

# Reflection Questions

Article 2:     **Jesus**  
                  **A Gospel Portrait**  
                  Revised and expanded edition  
                  *Donald Senior CP*

Jesus worked and proclaimed his Good News to people in a particular context.

- a) *How can you transmit the message of Jesus Christ in your family, workplace and community?*



**Article 3**

**Title: Jesus of Nazareth  
From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration**

**Author: Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI**

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JESUS  
OF NAZARETH

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*From the Baptism in the Jordan  
to the Transfiguration*

by  
Joseph Ratzinger  
Pope Benedict XVI

Translated from the German by Adrian J. Walker

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## *Jesus Declares His Identity*

Already during Jesus' lifetime, people tried to interpret his mysterious figure by applying to him categories that were familiar to them and that were therefore considered apt for deciphering his mystery: He is seen as John the Baptist, as Elijah or Jeremiah returning, or as the Prophet (cf. Mt 16:14; Mk 8:28; Lk 9:19). In his confession, Peter uses—as we have seen—other, loftier titles: Messiah, Son of the living God. The effort to express the mystery of Jesus in titles that explained his mission, indeed, his essence, continued after Easter. Increasingly, three fundamental titles began to emerge: "Christ" (Messiah), "Kyrios" (Lord), and "Son of God."

The first title, taken by itself, made little sense outside of Semitic culture. It quickly ceased to function as a title and was joined with the name of Jesus: Jesus Christ. What began as an interpretation ended up as a name, and therein lies a deeper message: He is completely one with his office; his task and his person are totally inseparable from each other. It was thus right for his task to become a part of his name.

This leaves the two titles "Kyrios" and "Son," which both point in the same direction. In the development of the Old Testament and of early Judaism, "Lord" had become a paraphrase for the divine name. Its application to Jesus therefore claimed for him a communion of being with God himself; it identified him as the living God present among us. Similarly, the title "Son of God" connected him with the being of God himself. Of course, the question as to exactly what sort of ontological connection this might be inevitably became the object of strenuous debate from that moment on, as faith strove to prove, and to understand clearly, its own rational content. Is he "Son" in a derivative sense, referring to some special closeness to God, or does the term "Son" imply that within God himself there is Father and Son, that the Son is truly "equal to God," true God from true God? The First Council of Nicea (325) summed up the result of this fierce debate over Jesus' Sonship in the word *homoousios*, "of the same substance"—the only philosophical term that was incorporated into the Creed. This philosophical term serves, however, to safeguard the reliability of the *biblical* term. It tells us that when Jesus' witnesses call him "the Son," this statement is not meant in a mythological or political sense—those being the two most obvious interpretations given the context of the time. Rather, it is meant to be understood quite literally: Yes, in God himself there is an eternal dialogue between Father and Son, who are both truly one and the same God in the Holy Spirit.

The exalted Christological titles contained in the New Testament are the subject of an extensive literature. The debate surrounding them falls outside the scope of this book,

which seeks to understand Jesus' earthly path and his preaching, not their theological elaboration in the faith and reflection of the early Church. What we need to do instead is to attend somewhat more closely to the titles that Jesus applies to himself, according to the evidence of the Gospels. There are two. Firstly, his preferred self-designation is "Son of Man"; secondly, there are texts—especially in the Gospel of John—where he speaks of himself simply as the "Son." The title "Messiah" Jesus did not actually apply to himself; in a few passages in John's Gospel we find the title "Son of God" on his lips. Whenever messianic or other related titles are applied to him, as for example by the demons he casts out, or by Peter in his confession, he enjoins silence. It is true, of course, that the title Messiah, "King of the Jews," is placed over the Cross—publicly displayed before the whole world. And it is permissible to place it there—in the three languages of the world of that time (cf. Jn 19:19f.)—because now there is no longer any chance of its being misunderstood. The Cross is his throne, and as such it gives the correct interpretation of this title. *Regnavit a ligno Deus*—God reigns from the wood of the Cross, as the ancient Church sang in celebration of this new kingship.

Let us now turn to the two "titles" that Jesus used for himself, according to the Gospels.

#### THE SON OF MAN

Son of Man—this mysterious term is the title that Jesus most frequently uses to speak of himself. In the Gospel of Mark alone the term occurs fourteen times on Jesus' lips. In

fact, in the whole of the New Testament, the term "Son of Man" is found only on Jesus' lips, with the single exception of the vision of the open heavens that is granted to the dying Stephen: "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56). At the moment of his death, Stephen sees what Jesus had foretold during his trial before the Sanhedrin: "You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mk 14:62). Stephen is therefore actually "citing" a saying of Jesus, the truth of which he is privileged to behold at the very moment of his martyrdom.

This is an important finding. The Christology of the New Testament writers, including the Evangelists, builds not on the title "Son of Man," but on the titles that were already beginning to circulate during Jesus' lifetime: "Messiah" (Christ), "Kyrios" (Lord), "Son of God." The designation "Son of Man" is typical for Jesus' own sayings; in the preaching of the Apostles, its content is transferred to the other titles, but this particular title is not used. This is actually a clear finding. And yet a huge debate has developed around it in modern exegesis; anyone who tries to get to the bottom of it finds himself in a graveyard of mutually contradictory hypotheses. A discussion of this debate lies outside the scope of this book. Nevertheless, we do need to consider the main lines of the argument.

Three sets of "Son of Man" statements are commonly distinguished. The first group consists of sayings concerning the Son of Man who is to come, sayings in which Jesus does not point to himself as the Son of Man, but distinguishes between the one who is to come and himself. The second group comprises sayings about the earthly activity of the Son

of Man, while the third speaks of his suffering and Resurrection. The predominant trend among exegeses is to regard only the first group—if any—as authentic sayings of Jesus; this reflects the conventional interpretation of Jesus' preaching in terms of imminent eschatology. The second group, which includes sayings about the authority of the Son of Man to forgive sins, about his lordship over the Sabbath, and about his having neither possessions nor home, is said to have developed—according to one main line of argument—in early Palestinian tradition. This would point to quite an early origin, but not as far back as Jesus himself. Finally, the most recent sayings would be those concerning the death and Resurrection of the Son of Man. In Mark's Gospel, they occur at intervals during Jesus' journey up to Jerusalem, and naturally, according to this theory, could only have been created after the events in question—perhaps even by the Evangelist Mark himself.

Splitting up the Son of Man sayings in this way is the result of a certain kind of logic that meticulously classifies the different aspects of a title. While that might be appropriate for rigorous professorial thinking, it does not suit the complexity of living reality, in which a multilayered whole clamors for expression. The fundamental criterion for this type of interpretation rests, however, on the question as to what we can safely attribute to Jesus, given the circumstances of his life and his cultural world. Very little, apparently! Real claims to authority or predictions of the Passion do not seem to fit. The sort of toned-down apocalyptic expectation that was in circulation at the time can be "safely" ascribed to him—but nothing more, it would seem. The problem is that

this approach does not do justice to the powerful impact of the Jesus-event. Our reflections on Jülicher's exegesis of the parables have already led us to the conclusion that no one would have been condemned to the Cross on account of such harmless moralizing.

For such a radical collision to occur, provoking the extreme step of handing Jesus over to the Romans, something dramatic must have been said and done. The great and stirring events come right at the beginning; the nascent Church could only slowly come to appreciate their full significance, which she came to grasp as, in "remembering" them, she gradually thought through and reflected on these events. The anonymous community is credited with an astonishing level of theological genius—who were the great figures responsible for inventing all this? No, the greatness, the dramatic newness, comes directly from Jesus; within the faith and life of the community it is further developed, but not created. In fact, the "community" would not even have emerged and survived at all unless some extraordinary reality had preceded it.

The term "Son of Man," with which Jesus both concealed his mystery and, at the same time, gradually made it accessible, was new and surprising. It was not in circulation as a title of messianic hope. It fits exactly with the method of Jesus' preaching, inasmuch as he spoke in riddles and parables so as to lead gradually to the hidden reality that can truly be discovered only through discipleship. In both Hebrew and Aramaic usage, the first meaning of the term "Son of Man" is simply "man." That simple word blends together with a mysterious allusion to a new consciousness of mission in the term "Son of Man." This becomes apparent in a saying about the Sabbath that we find

in the Synoptics. It reads as follows in Mark: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27f.). In Matthew and Luke, the first sentence is missing. They record Jesus as saying simply: "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (Mt 12:8; Lk 6:5). Perhaps the explanation is that Matthew and Luke omit the first sentence for fear that it will be abused. Be that as it may, it is clear that according to Mark the two sentences belong together and interpret one another.

To say that the Sabbath is for man, and not man for the Sabbath, is not simply an expression of the sort of modern liberal position that we spontaneously read into these words. We saw in our examination of the Sermon on the Mount that this is exactly how *not* to understand Jesus' teaching. In the Son of Man, man is revealed as he truly ought to be. In terms of the Son of Man, in terms of the criterion that Jesus himself is, man is free and he knows how to use the Sabbath properly as the day of freedom deriving from God and destined for God. "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." The magnitude of Jesus' claim—which is an authoritative interpretation of the Law because he himself is God's primordial Word—becomes fully apparent here. And it also becomes apparent what sort of new freedom devolves upon man as a result—a freedom that has nothing to do with mere aprice. The important thing about this Sabbath saying is the overlapping of "man" and "Son of Man"; we see how this teaching, in itself quite ordinary, becomes an expression of the special dignity of Jesus.

"Son of Man" was not used as a title at the time of Jesus. But we find an early hint of it in the Book of Daniel's vision

of four beasts and the "Son of Man" representing the history of the world. The visionary sees the succession of dominant secular powers in the image of four great beasts that come up out of the sea—that come "from below," and thus represent a power based mainly on violence, a power that is "bestial." He thus paints a dark, deeply disturbing picture of world history. Admittedly, the vision does not remain entirely negative. The first beast, a lion with the wings of an eagle, has its wings plucked out: "It was lifted up from the ground and made to stand on two feet like a man, and the heart of a man was given to it" (Dan 7:4). Power can be humanized, even in this age of the world; power can receive a human face. This is only a relative salvation, however, for history continues and becomes darker as it progresses.

But then—after the power of evil has reached its apogee—something totally different happens. The seer perceives as if from afar the real Lord of the world in the image of the Ancient of Days, who puts an end to the horror. And now "with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man . . . And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion . . . and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed" (Dan 7:13f.). The beasts from the depths are confronted by the man from above. Just as the beasts from the depths represent hitherto existing secular kingdoms, the image of the "Son of Man," who comes "with the clouds of heaven," prophesies a totally new kingdom, a kingdom of "humanity," characterized by the real power that comes from God himself. This kingdom also signals the advent of true universality, the definitive pos-

itive shape of history that has all along been the object of silent longing. The "Son of Man" who comes from above is thus the antithesis of the beasts from the depths of the sea; as such, he stands not for an individual figure, but for the "kingdom" in which the world attains its goal.

It is widely held among exegetes that this text rests upon an earlier version in which "Son of Man" indicated an individual figure. We do not possess this version, though; it remains a conjecture. The frequently cited texts from 4 Ezra 13 and the Ethiopian Book of Enoch that do portray the Son of Man as an individual figure are more recent than the New Testament and therefore cannot be regarded as one of its sources. Of course, it would have seemed obvious to connect the vision of the Son of Man with messianic hope and with the figure of the Messiah himself, but we have no textual evidence that this was done dating from before Jesus' public ministry. The conclusion therefore remains that the book of Daniel uses the image of the Son of Man to represent the coming kingdom of salvation—a vision that was available for Jesus to build on, but which he reshapes by connecting this expectation with his own person and his work.

Let us turn now to the scriptural passages themselves. We saw that the first group of sayings about the Son of Man refers to his future coming. Most of these occur in Jesus' discourse about the end of the world (cf. Mk 13:24–27) and in his trial before the Sanhedrin (cf. Mk 14:62). Discussion of them therefore belongs in the second volume of this book. There is just one important point that I would like to make here: They are sayings about Jesus' future glory, about his coming to judge and to gather the righteous, the "elect." We

must not overlook, however, that they are spoken by a man who stands before his judges, accused and mocked: In these very words glory and the Passion are inextricably intertwined.

Admittedly, they do not expressly mention the Passion, but that is the reality in which Jesus finds himself and in which he is speaking. We encounter this connection in a uniquely concentrated form in the parable about the Last Judgment recounted in Saint Matthew's Gospel (25:31–46), in which the Son of Man, in the role of judge, identifies himself with those who hunger and thirst, with the strangers, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned—with all those who suffer in this world—and he describes behavior toward them as behavior toward himself. This is no mere fiction about the judge of the world, invented after the Resurrection. In becoming incarnate, he accomplished this identification with the utmost literalism. He is the man without property or home who has no place to lay his head (cf. Mt 8:19; Lk 9:58). He is the prisoner, the accused, and he dies naked on the Cross. This identification of the Son of Man who judges the world with those who suffer in every way presupposes the judge's identity with the earthly Jesus and reveals the inner unity of Cross and glory, of earthly existence in lowliness and future authority to judge the world. The Son of Man is one person alone, and that person is Jesus. This identity shows us the way, shows us the criterion according to which our lives will one day be judged.

It goes without saying that critical scholarship does not regard any of these sayings about the coming Son of Man as the genuine words of Jesus. Only two texts from this group, in the version reported in Luke's Gospel, are classified—at least by some critics—as authentic sayings of Jesus that may

“safely” be attributed to him. The first one is Luke 12:8f: “I tell you, every one who acknowledges me before men, the Son of man also will acknowledge before the angels of God; but he who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God.” The second text is Luke 17:24ff: “For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of man be in his day. But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.” The reason why these texts are looked upon with approval is that they seem to distinguish between the Son of Man and Jesus; especially the first saying, it is argued, makes it quite clear that the Son of Man is not identical with the Jesus who is speaking.

Now, the first thing to note in this regard is that the most ancient tradition, at any rate, did not understand it in that way. The parallel text in Mark 8:38 (“For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels”) does not state the identification explicitly, but the structure of the sentence makes it crystal clear. In Matthew's version of the same text, the term Son of Man is missing. This makes even clearer the identity of the earthly Jesus with the judge who is to come: “So every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 10:32f.). But even in the Lukan text, the identity is perfectly clear from the overall content. It is true that Jesus speaks in the riddle form that is characteristic of him, leaving the listener to take the final step toward understanding. But there is a functional identification



in the parallelism of confession and denial—now and at the judgment, before Jesus and before the Son of Man—and this only makes sense on the basis of ontological identity.

The judges of the Sanhedrin actually understood Jesus properly: he did not correct them by saying something like: "But you misunderstand me; the coming Son of Man is someone else." The inner unity between Jesus' lived *kénosis* (cf. Phil 2:5–11) and his coming in glory is the constant motif of his words and actions; this is what is authentically new about Jesus, it is no invention—on the contrary, it is the epitome of his figure and his words. The individual texts have to be seen in context—they are not better understood in isolation. Even if Luke 12:8f. might appear to lend itself to a different interpretation, the second text is much clearer: Luke 17:24ff. unambiguously identifies the two figures. The Son of Man will not come here or there, but will appear like a flash of lightning from one end of heaven to the other, so that everyone will behold him, the Pierced One (cf. Rev 1:7); before that, however, he—this same Son of Man—will have to suffer much and be rejected. The prophecy of the Passion and the announcement of future glory are inextricably interwoven. It is clearly one and the same person who is the subject of both: the very person, in fact, who, as he speaks these words, is already on the way to his suffering.

Similarly, the sayings in which Jesus speaks of his present activity illustrate both aspects. We have already briefly examined his claim that, as Son of Man, he is Lord of the Sabbath (cf. Mk 2:28). This passage exactly illustrates something that Mark describes elsewhere: "They were dismayed at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as

the scribes" (Mk 1:22). Jesus places himself on the side of the Lawgiver, God; he is not an interpreter, but the Lord.

This becomes clearer still in the account of the paralytic, whose friends lower him from the roof to the Lord's feet on a stretcher. Instead of speaking a word of healing, as the paralytic and his friends were expecting, Jesus says first of all to the suffering man: "My son, your sins are forgiven" (Mk 2:5). Forgiving sins is the prerogative of God alone, as the scribes rightly object. If Jesus ascribes this authority to the Son of Man, then he is claiming to possess the dignity of God himself and to act on that basis. Only after the promise of forgiveness does he say what the sick man was hoping to hear: "But that you may know that the Son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins—he said to the paralytic—I say to you, rise, take up your pallet and go home" (Mk 2:10–11). This divine claim is what leads to the Passion. In that sense, what Jesus says about his authority points toward his suffering.

Let us move on now to the third group of Jesus' sayings about the Son of Man: the predictions of his Passion. We have already seen that the three Passion predictions in Mark's Gospel, which recur at intervals in the course of Jesus' journey, announce with increasing clarity his approaching destiny and its inner necessity. They reach their inner center and their culmination in the statement that follows the third prediction of the Passion and the closely connected discourse on ruling and serving: "For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45).

This saying incorporates a citation from the Suffering Servant Songs (cf. Is 53) and thus weaves another strand of

Old Testament tradition into the picture of the Son of Man. Jesus, while on one hand identifying himself with the coming judge of the world, also identifies himself here with the suffering and dying Servant of God whom the Prophet foretells in his Songs. The unity of suffering and "exaltation," of abasement and majesty, becomes visible. Service is the true form of rule and it gives us an insight into God's way of being Lord, of "God's lordship." In suffering and in death, the life of the Son of Man becomes sheer "pro-existence." He becomes the Redeemer and bringer of salvation for the "many": not only for the scattered children of Israel, but for all the scattered children of God (cf. Jn 11:52), for humanity. In his death "for many," he transcends the boundaries of place and time, and the universality of his mission comes to fulfillment.

Earlier exegesis considered the blending together of Daniel's vision of the coming Son of Man with the images of the Suffering Servant of God transmitted by Isaiah to be the characteristically new and specific feature of Jesus' idea of the Son of Man—indeed, as the center of his self-understanding overall. It was quite right to do so. We must add, though, that the synthesis of Old Testament traditions that make up Jesus' image of the Son of Man is more inclusive still, and it brings together even more strands and currents of Old Testament tradition.

First of all, Jesus' answer to the question as to whether he is the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed, combines Daniel 7 with Psalm 110: Jesus presents himself as the one who sits "at the right hand of Power," corresponding to what the Psalm prophesies of the future priest-king. Furthermore, the third

prediction of the Passion, which speaks of the rejection of the Son of Man by the scribes, elders, and high priests (cf. Mk 8:31), blends in the passage from Psalm 118:22 concerning the stone rejected by the builders that has become the chief cornerstone. This also establishes a connection with the parable of the unjust vintners, in which the Lord cites these words in order to prophesy his rejection, his Resurrection, and the new communion that will follow. This connection with the parable also brings to light the identity between the "Son of Man" and the "beloved Son" (Mk 12:1-12). Finally, the Wisdom Literature provides another of the currents present here. The second chapter of the Book of Wisdom depicts the enmity of the "ungodly" against the righteous man: "He boasts that God is his father. . . . If the righteous man is God's son, he will help him. . . . Let us condemn him to a shameful death" (Wis 2:16-20). V. Hampel holds that Jesus' words about the "ransom for many" are derived not from Isaiah 53:10-12, but from Proverbs 21:18 and Isaiah 43:3 (cited in Schnackenburg, *Jesus in the Gospels*, p. 59). This strikes me as very unlikely. The actual reference point is and remains Isaiah 53; other texts demonstrate only that this basic vision may be linked to a wide range of references.

Jesus lived by the whole of the Law and the Prophets, as he constantly told his disciples. He regarded his own being and activity as the unification and interpretation of this "whole." John later expressed this in his prologue, where he wrote that Jesus himself is "the Word." "Jesus Christ is the 'Yes' to all that God promised," is how Paul puts it (cf. 2 Cor 1:20). The enigmatic term "Son of Man" presents us in concentrated form with all that is most original and distinctive

about the figure of Jesus, his mission, and his being. He comes from God and he is God. But that is precisely what makes him—having assumed human nature—the bringer of true humanity.

According to the Letter to the Hebrews, he says to his Father, "A body hast thou prepared for me" (Heb 10:5). In saying this, he transforms a citation from the Psalms that reads: "My ears hast thou opened" (Ps 40:6). In the context of the Psalm, this means that what brings life is obedience, saying Yes to God's Word, not holocausts and sin offerings. Now the one who is himself the Word takes on a body; he comes from God as a man, and draws the whole of man's being to himself, bearing it into the Word of God, making it "ears" for God and thus "obedience," reconciliation between God and man (2 Cor 5:18–20). Because he is wholly given over to obedience and love, loving to the end (cf. Jn 13:10), he himself becomes the true "offering." He comes from God and hence establishes the true form of man's being. As Paul says, whereas the first man was and is earth, he is the second, definitive (ultimate) man, the "heavenly" man, "life-giving spirit" (1 Cor 15:45–49). He comes, and he is at the same time the new "Kingdom." He is not just one individual, but rather he makes all of us "one single person" (Gal 3:28) with himself, a new humanity.

What Daniel glimpsed from afar as a collective ("like a Son of Man") now becomes a person, but this person, existing as he does "for the many," transcends the bounds of the individual and embraces "many," becomes with the many "one body and one spirit" (cf. 1 Cor 6:17). This is the "discipleship" to which he calls us: that we should let ourselves be

drawn into his new humanity and from there into communion with God. Let us listen once more to what Paul has to say about this: "[j]ust as the one [the first man, Adam] from the earth was earthly, so too is his posterity. And just as the one who comes from heaven is heavenly, so too is his posterity" (cf. 1 Cor 15:48).

The title "Son of Man" continued to be applied exclusively to Jesus, but the new vision of the oneness of God and man that it expresses is found throughout the entire New Testament and shapes it. The new humanity that comes from God is what being a disciple of Jesus Christ is all about.

### THE SON

At the beginning of this chapter, we saw briefly that the two titles "Son of God" and "Son" (without further qualification) need to be distinguished; their origin and significance are quite different, even though the two meanings overlapped and blended together as the Christian faith took shape. Since I have already dealt quite extensively with the whole question in my *Introduction to Christianity*, I offer only a brief summary here as an analysis of the term "Son of God."

The term "Son of God" derives from the political theology of the ancient Near East. In both Egypt and Babylon the king was given the title "son of God"; his ritual accession to the throne was considered to be his "begetting" as the son of God, which the Egyptians may really have understood in the sense of a mysterious origination from God, while the Babylonians apparently viewed it more soberly as a juridical act, a divine adoption. Israel took over these ideas in two

ways, even as Israel's faith reshaped them. Moses received from God himself the commission to say to Pharaoh: "Thus says YHWH, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, 'Let my son go that he may serve me'" (Ex 4:22f.). The nations are God's great family, but Israel is the "firstborn son," and as such, belongs to God in a special way, with all that firstborn status means in the ancient Middle East. With the consolidation of the Davidic kingship, the royal ideology of the ancient Near East was transferred to the king on Mount Zion.

The discourse in which Nathan prophesies to David the promise that his house will endure forever includes the following: "I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. . . . I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him . . . but I will not take my steadfast love from him" (2 Sam 7:12ff.; see Ps 89:27f., 37f.). These words then become the basis for the ritual installation of the kings of Israel, a ritual that we encounter in Psalm 2:7f.: "I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my son, today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.'"

Three things are evident here. Israel's privileged status as God's firstborn son is personified in the king; he embodies the dignity of Israel in person. Secondly, this means that the ancient royal ideology, the myth of divine begetting, is discarded and replaced by the theology of election. "Begetting" consists in election; in *today's* enthronement of the king, we see a summary expression of God's act of election, in which Israel and the king who embodies it become God's "son."

Thirdly, however, it becomes apparent that the promise of dominion over the nations—a promise taken over from the great kings of the East—is out of all proportion to the actual reality of the king on Mount Zion. He is only an insignificant ruler with a fragile power who ends up in exile, and afterward can be restored only for a brief time in dependence on the superpowers of the day. In other words, the royal oracle of Zion from the very beginning had to become a word of hope in a future king, a word that pointed far beyond the present moment, far beyond what the king seated upon his throne could regard as "today" and "now."

The early Christians very quickly adopted this word of hope and came to see the Resurrection of Jesus as its actual fulfillment. According to Acts 13:32f., Paul, in his stirring account of salvation history culminating in Christ, says to the Jews assembled in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia: "What God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm, 'Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee.' We may safely assume that the discourse recounted here in the Acts of the Apostles is a typical example of early missionary preaching to the Jews, in which we encounter the nascent Church's Christological reading of the Old Testament. Here, then, we see a third stage in the refashioning of the political theology of the ancient Near East. In Israel, at the time of the Davidic kingship, it had merged with the Old Covenant's theology of election; as the Davidic kingship developed, moreover, it had increasingly become an expression of hope in the king who was to come. Now, however, Jesus' Resurrection is recognized by faith as the long-awaited

"today" to which the Psalm refers. God has now appointed his king, and has truly given him possession of the peoples of the earth as a heritage.

But this "dominion" over the peoples of the earth has lost its political character. This king does not break the peoples with an iron rod (cf. Ps 2:9)—he rules from the Cross, and does so in an entirely new way. Universality is achieved through the humility of communion in faith; this king rules by faith and love, and in no other way. This makes possible an entirely new and definitive way of understanding God's words: "You are my son, today I have begotten you." The term "son of God" is now detached from the sphere of political power and becomes an expression of a special oneness with God that is displayed in the Cross and Resurrection. How far this oneness, this divine Sonship, actually extends cannot, of course, be explained on the basis of this Old Testament context. Other currents of biblical faith and of Jesus' own testimony have to converge in order to give this term its full meaning.

Before we move on to consider Jesus' simple designation of himself as "the Son," which finally gives the originally political title "Son of God" its definitive, Christian significance, we must complete the history of the title itself. For it is part of that history that the Emperor Augustus, under whose dominion Jesus was born, transferred the ancient Near Eastern theology of kingship to Rome and proclaimed himself the "Son of the Divine Caesar," the son of God (cf. P. W. Martitz, *IDNT*, VIII, pp. 334-40, esp. p. 336). While Augustus himself took this step with great caution, the cult of the Roman emperors that soon followed involved the full claim

to divine sonship, and the worship of the emperor in Rome as a god was made binding throughout the empire.

At this particular historical moment, then, the Roman emperor's claim to divine kingship encounters the Christian belief that the risen Christ is the true Son of God, the Lord of all the peoples of the earth, to whom alone belongs worship in the unity of Father, Son, and Spirit. Because of the title "Son of God," then, the fundamentally apolitical Christian faith, which does not demand political power but acknowledges the legitimate authorities (cf. Rom 13:1-7), inevitably collides with the total claim made by the imperial political power. Indeed, it will always come into conflict with totalitarian political regimes and will be driven into the situation of martyrdom—into communion with the Crucified, who reigns solely from the wood of the Cross.

A clear distinction needs to be made between the term "Son of God," with its complex prehistory, and the simple term "the Son," which essentially we find only on the lips of Jesus. Outside the Gospels, it occurs five times in the Letter to the Hebrews (cf. 1:2, 1:8, 3:6, 5:8, 7:28), a letter that is related to the Gospel of John, and it occurs once in Paul (cf. 1 Cor 15:28). It also occurs five times in the First Letter of John and once in the Second Letter of John, harking back to Jesus' self-testimony in the Gospel of John. The decisive testimony is that of the Gospel of John (where we find the word eighteen times) and the Messianic *Jubelruf* (joyful shout) recorded by Matthew and Luke (see below), which is typically—and correctly—described as a Johannine text within the framework of the Synoptic tradition. To begin with, let us examine this messianic *Jubelruf*: "At that time Jesus

declared, "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes [to little ones]; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son wills to reveal him" (Mt 11:25-27; Lk 10:21-22).

Let us begin with this last sentence, which is the key to the whole passage. Only the Son truly "knows" the Father. Knowing always involves some sort of equality. "If the eye were not unlike, it could never see the sun," as Goethe once said, alluding to an idea of Plotinus. Every process of coming to know something includes in one form or another a process of assimilation, a sort of inner unification of the knower with the known. This process differs according to the respective level of being on which the knowing subject and the known object exist. Truly to know God presupposes communion with him, it presupposes oneness of being with him. In this sense, what the Lord himself now proclaims in prayer is identical with what we hear in the concluding words of the prologue of John's Gospel, which we have quoted frequently: "No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (Jn 1:18). This fundamental saying—it now becomes plain—is an explanation of what comes to light in Jesus' prayer, in his filial dialogue. At the same time, it also becomes clear what "the Son" is and what this term means: perfect communion in knowledge, which is at the same time communion in being. Unity in knowing is possible only because it is unity in being.

Only the "Son" knows the Father, and all real knowledge of the Father is a participation in the Son's filial knowledge of him, a revelation that he grants ("he has made him known," John tells us). Only those to whom the Son "wills to reveal him" know the Father. But to whom does the Son will to reveal him? The Son's will is not arbitrary. What we read in Matthew 11:27 about the Son's will to reveal the Father brings us back to the initial verse 25, where the Lord thanks the Father for having revealed it to the little ones. We have already noted the unity of *knowledge* between Father and Son. The connection between verses 25 and 27 now enables us to see their unity of *will*.

The will of the Son is one with the will of the Father. This is, in fact, a motif that constantly recurs throughout the Gospels. The Gospel of John places particular emphasis on the fact that Jesus unites his own will totally with the Father's will. The act of uniting and merging the two wills is presented dramatically on the Mount of Olives, when Jesus draws his human will up into his filial will and thus into unity with the will of the Father. The second petition of the Our Father has its proper setting here. When we pray it, we are asking that the drama of the Mount of Olives, the struggle of Jesus' entire life and work, be brought to completion in us; that together with him, the Son, we may unite our wills with the Father's will, thus becoming sons in our turn, in union of will that becomes union of knowledge.

This enables us to understand the opening of Jesus' *Jubelruf*, which on first sight may seem strange. The Son wills to draw into his filial knowledge all those whom the Father wills should be there. This is what Jesus means when he says in the

bread of life discourse at Capernaum: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me so wills" (Jn 6:44). But whom does the Father will? Not "the wise and understanding," the Lord tells us, but the simple.

Taken in the most straightforward sense, these words reflect Jesus' actual experience: It is not the Scripture experts, those who are professionally concerned with God, who recognize him; they are too caught up in the intricacies of their detailed knowledge. Their great learning distracts them from simply gazing upon the whole, upon the reality of God as he reveals himself—for people who know so much about the complexity of the issues, it seems that it just cannot be so simple. Paul describes this same experience and then goes on to reflect upon it: "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart' [Is 29:14]. . . . For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong . . . so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor 1:18f., 26–29). "Let no one deceive himself. If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise" (1 Cor 3:18). What, though, is meant by "becoming a fool," by being "a little one," through which we are opened up for the will, and so for the knowledge, of God?

The Sermon on the Mount provides the key that discloses the inner basis of this remarkable experience and also

the path of conversion that opens us up to being drawn into the Son's filial knowledge: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt 5:8). Purity of heart is what enables us to see. Therein consists the ultimate simplicity that opens up our life to Jesus' will to reveal. We might also say that our will has to become a filial will. When it does, then we can see. But to be a son is to be in relation: it is a relational concept. It involves giving up the autonomy that is closed in upon itself; it includes what Jesus means by saying that we have to become like children. This also helps us understand the paradox that is more fully developed in John's Gospel: While Jesus subordinates himself as Son entirely to the Father, it is this that makes him fully equal with the Father, truly equal to and truly one with the Father.

Let us return to the *Jubelruf*. The equality in being that we saw expressed in verses 25 and 27 (of Mt 11) as oneness in will and in knowledge is now linked in the first half of verse 27 with Jesus' universal mission and so with the history of the world: "All things have been delivered to me by my Father." When we consider the Synoptic *Jubelruf* in its full depth, what we find is that it actually already contains the entire Johannine theology of the Son. There too, Sonship is presented as mutual knowing and as oneness in willing. There too, the Father is presented as the Giver who has delivered "everything" to the Son, and in so doing has made him the Son, equal to himself: "All that is mine is thine, and all that is thine is mine" (Jn 17:10). And there too, this fatherly giving then extends into the creation, into the "world": "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16). On one hand, the word *only* here points back to the prologue to John's

Gospel, where the Logos is called "the only Son, who is God" (Jn 1:18). On the other hand, however, it also recalls Abraham, who did not withhold his son, his "only" son from God (Gen 22:2, 12). The Father's act of "giving" is fully accomplished in the love of the Son "to the end" (Jn 13:1), that is, to the Cross. The mystery of Trinitarian love that comes to light in the term "the Son" is perfectly one with the Paschal Mystery of love that Jesus brings to fulfillment in history.

Finally, Jesus' prayer is seen also by John to be the interior locus of the term "the Son." Of course, Jesus' prayer is different from the prayer of a creature: It is the dialogue of love within God himself—the dialogue that God is. The term "the Son" thus goes hand in hand with the simple appellation "Father" that the Evangelist Mark has preserved for us in its original Aramaic form in his account of the scene on the Mount of Olives: "Abba."

Joachim Jeremias has devoted a number of in-depth studies to demonstrating the uniqueness of this form of address that Jesus used for God, since it implied an intimacy that was impossible in the world of his time. It expresses the "unicity" of the "Son." Paul tells us that Jesus' gift of participation in his Spirit of Sonship empowers Christians to say: "Abba, Father" (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). Paul makes it clear that this new form of Christian prayer is possible only through Jesus, through the only-begotten Son.

The term "Son," along with its correlate "Father (Abba)," gives us a true glimpse into the inner being of Jesus—indeed, into the inner being of God himself. Jesus' prayer is the true origin of the term "the Son." It has no prehistory, just as the Son himself is "new," even though Moses and the Prophets

prefigure him. The attempt has been made to use postbiblical literature—for example, the Odes of Solomon (dating from the second century A.D.)—as a source for constructing a pre-Christian, "Gnostic" prehistory of this term, and to argue that John draws upon that tradition. If we respect the possibilities and limits of the historical method at all, this attempt makes no sense. We have to reckon with the originality of Jesus. Only he is "the Son."

### "I AM"

The sayings of Jesus that the Gospels transmit to us include—predominantly in John, but also (albeit less conspicuously and to a lesser degree) in the Synoptics—a group of "I am" sayings. They fall into two different categories. In the first type, Jesus simply says "I am" or "I am he" without any further additions. In the second type, figurative expressions specify the content of the "I am" in more detail: I am the light of the world, the true vine, the Good Shepherd, and so on. If at first sight the second group appears to be immediately intelligible, this only makes the first group even more puzzling.

I would like to consider just three passages from John's Gospel that present the formula in its strictest and simplest form. I would then like to examine a passage from the Synoptics that has a clear parallel in John.

The two most important expressions of this sort occur in Jesus' dispute with the Jews that immediately follows the words in which he presents himself as the source of living water at the Feast of Tabernacles (cf. Jn 7:37f.). This led to division among the people; some started asking themselves



whether he might really be the awaited Prophet after all, whereas others pointed out that no prophet is supposed to come from Galilee (cf. Jn 7:40, 52). At this point, Jesus says to them: "You do not know whence I come or whither I am going. . . . You know neither me nor my Father" (Jn 8:14, 19). He makes his point even clearer by adding: "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world" (Jn 8:23). It is here that the crucial statement comes: "You will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he" (Jn 8:24).

What does this mean? We want to ask: What are you, then? Who are you? And that, in fact, is just how the Jews respond: "Who are you?" (Jn 8:25). So what does it mean when Jesus says "I am he"? Exegesis understandably set out in search of the origins of this saying in order to make sense of it, and we will have to do the same in our own efforts to understand. Various possibilities have been suggested: typical Revelation discourses from the East (E. Norden), the Mandaeen scriptures (E. Schweitzer), although these are much later than the books of the New Testament.

By now most exegetes have come to realize that we should look not just anywhere and everywhere for the spiritual roots of this saying, but rather in the world where Jesus was at home, in the Old Testament and in the Judaism of his lifetime. Scholars have since brought to light an extensive background of Old Testament texts, which we need not examine here. I would like to mention just the two essential texts on which the matter hinges.

The first one is Exodus 3:14—the scene with the burning bush. God calls from the bush to Moses, who in his turn asks

the God who thus calls him: "What is your name?" In answer, he is given the enigmatic name YHWH, whose meaning the divine speaker himself interprets with the equally enigmatic statement: "I am who I am." The manifold interpretations of this statement need not occupy us here. The key point remains: This God designates himself simply as the "I am." He just is, without any qualification. And that also means, of course, that he is *always* there—for human beings, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

At the great time of hope for a new Exodus at the end of the Babylonian exile, Deutero-Isaiah took up once again the message of the burning bush and developed it in a new direction: "You are my witnesses," says the Lord, "and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am YHWH, and besides me there is no savior" (Is 43:10f.). "That you may know and believe me and understand that I am he"—the old formula *'ani YHWH* is now abbreviated to *'ani hu'*—"I he," "I am he." The "I am" has become more emphatic, and while it remains a mystery, it has also become clearer.

During the time when Israel was deprived of land and Temple, God—according to the traditional criteria—could not compete with other gods, for a god who had no land and could not be worshiped was not a god at all. It was during this period that the people learned to understand fully what was different and new about Israel's God: that in fact he was not just Israel's god, the god of one people and one land, but quite simply God, the God of the universe, to whom all lands, all heaven and earth belong; the God who is master of

all; the God who has no need of worship based on sacrifices of goats and bulls, but who is truly worshiped only through right conduct.

Once again: Israel came to recognize that its God was simply "God" without any qualification. And so the "I am" of the burning bush found its true meaning once more: This God simply is. When he says "I am," he is presenting himself precisely as the one who is, in his utter oneness. At one level, this is of course a way of setting him apart from the many divinities of the time. On the other hand, its primary meaning was entirely positive: the manifestation of his indescribable oneness and singularity.

When Jesus says "I am he," he is taking up this story and referring it to himself. He is indicating his oneness. In him, the mystery of the one God is personally present: "I and the Father are one." H. Zimmerman has rightly emphasized that when Jesus says "I am," he is not placing himself *alongside* the "I" of the Father ("Das absolute 'Ich bin,'" p. 6), but is pointing to the Father. And yet precisely by so doing, he is also speaking of himself. At issue here is the inseparability of Father and Son. Because he is the Son, he has every right to utter with his own lips the Father's self-designation. "He who sees me, sees the Father" (Jn 14:9). And conversely: Because this is truly so, Jesus is entitled to speak the words of the Father's self-revelation in his own name as Son.

The issue at stake in the whole of the dispute in which this verse occurs is precisely the oneness of Father and Son. In order to understand this correctly, we need above all to recall our reflections on the term "the Son" and its rootedness in the Father-Son dialogue. There we saw that Jesus is

wholly "relational," that his whole being is nothing other than relation to the Father. This relationality is the key to understanding the use Jesus makes of the formulae of the burning bush and Isaiah. The "I am" is situated completely in the relatedness between Father and Son.

After the Jews ask the question "Who are you?"—which is also our question—Jesus' first response is to point toward the one who sent him and from whom he now speaks to the world. He repeats once again the formula of revelation, the "I am he," but now he expands it with a reference to future history: "When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am he" (Jn 8:28). On the Cross, his Sonship, his oneness with the Father, becomes visible. The Cross is the true "height." It is the height of "love to the end" (Jn 13:1). On the Cross, Jesus is exalted to the very "height" of the God who is love. It is there that he can be "known," that the "I am he" can be recognized.

The burning bush is the Cross. The highest claim of revelation, the "I am he," and the Cross of Jesus are inseparably one. What we find here is not metaphysical speculation, but the self-revelation of God's reality in the midst of history for us. "Then you will know that I am he"—when is this "then" actually realized? It is realized repeatedly throughout history, starting on the day of Pentecost, when the Jews are "cut to the heart" by Peter's preaching (cf. Acts 2:37) and, as the Acts of the Apostles reports, three thousand people are baptized and join the communion of the Apostles (cf. Acts 2:41). It is realized in the fullest sense at the end of history, when, as the seer of the Book of Revelation says, "Every eye will see him, every one who pierced him" (Rev 1:7).

At the end of the disputes reported in chapter 8 of John's Gospel, Jesus utters once again the words "I am," now expanded and interpreted in another direction. The question "Who are you?" remains in the air, and it includes the question "Where do you come from?" This leads the discussion on to the Jews' descent from Abraham and, finally, to the Fatherhood of God himself: "Abraham is our father. . . We were not born of fornication; we have *one* Father, even God" (Jn 8:39, 41).

By tracing their origin back beyond Abraham to God as their Father, Jesus' interlocutors give the Lord the opportunity to restate his own origin with unmistakable clarity. In Jesus' origin we see the perfect fulfillment of the mystery of Israel, to which the Jews have alluded by moving beyond descent from Abraham to claim descent from God himself.

Abraham, Jesus tells us, not only points back beyond himself to God as Father, but above all he points ahead to Jesus, the Son: "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad" (Jn 8:56). At this point, when the Jews object that Jesus could hardly have seen Abraham, he answers: "Before Abraham came into existence, I am" (Jn 8:58). "I am"—once again, the simple "I am" stands before us in all its mystery, though now defined in contrast to Abraham's "coming into existence." Jesus' "I am" stands in contrast to the world of birth and death, the world of coming into being and passing away. Schnackenburg correctly points out that what is involved here is not just a temporal category, but "a fundamental distinction of nature." We have here a clear statement of "Jesus' claim to a totally unique mode of being which transcends human categories" (Barrett, *Gospel*, II, pp. 80f.).

Let us turn now to the story recounted by Mark about Jesus walking on the water immediately after the first multiplication of the loaves (cf. Mk 6:45-52), a story that closely resembles the parallel account in the Gospel of John (cf. Jn 6:16-21). H. Zimmermann has produced a painstaking analysis of the text ("Das absolute 'Ich bin,'" pp. 12f.). We will follow the main lines of his account.

After the multiplication of the loaves, Jesus makes the disciples get into the boat and sail to Bethsaida. He himself, however, withdraws to pray "on the mountain." The disciples, in their boat in the middle of the lake, can make no headway because the wind is against them. While he is praying, the Lord sees them, and comes toward them over the waters. Understandably, the disciples are terrified when they see Jesus walking on the water; they cry out in "total confusion." But Jesus kindly speaks words of consolation to them: "Take heart, it is I [I am he]; have no fear!" (Mk 6:50).

At first sight, this instance of the words "I am he" seems to be a simple identifying formula by means of which Jesus enables his followers to recognize him, so as to calm their fear. This interpretation does not go far enough, however. For at this point Jesus gets into the boat and the wind ceases; John adds that they then quickly reached the shore. The remarkable thing is that only now do the disciples really begin to fear; they were utterly astounded, as Mark vividly puts it (cf. Mk 6:51). But why? After their initial fright at seeing a ghost, the disciples' fear does not leave them, but reaches its greatest intensity at the moment when Jesus gets into the boat and the wind suddenly subsides.

Obviously, their fear is of the kind that is typical of

"theophanies"—the sort of fear that overwhelms man when he finds himself immediately exposed to the presence of God himself. We have already met an instance of this fear after the abundant catch of fish, where Peter, instead of joyfully thanking Jesus, is terrified to the depths of his soul, falls at Jesus' feet, and says: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man" (Lk 5:8). It is this "divine terror" that comes over the disciples here. For walking on the waters is a divine prerogative: God "alone stretched out the heavens, and trampled the waves of the sea," we read in the book of Job (Job 9:8; cf. Ps 76:20 in the Septuagint version; Is 43:16). The Jesus who walks upon the waters is not simply the familiar Jesus; in this new Jesus they suddenly recognize the presence of God himself.

The calming of the storm is likewise an act that exceeds the limits of man's abilities and indicates the power of God at work. Similarly, in the earlier account of Jesus calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples ask one another: "Who is this that even wind and water obey him?" (Mk 4:41). In this context too, the "I am" has something different about it. It is more than just a way for Jesus to identify himself. The mysterious "I am he" of the Johannine writings seems to find an echo here too. At any rate, there is no doubt that the whole event is a theophany, an encounter with the mystery of Jesus' divinity. Hence Matthew quite logically concludes his version of the story with an act of adoration (*proskynesis*) and the exclamation of the disciples: "Truly, you are the Son of God" (Mt 14:33).

Let us move on now to the sayings in which the "I am" is given a specific content by the use of some image. In John there are seven such sayings; the fact that there are seven is

hardly accidental. "I am the Bread of Life," "the Light of the World," "the Door," "the Good Shepherd," "the Resurrection and the Life," "the Way, the Truth, and the Life," "the True Vine." Schnackenburg rightly points out that we could add to these principal images the image of the spring of water—even though it does not literally form part of an "I am" saying, there are nevertheless other sayings in which Jesus presents himself as this spring of water (cf. Jn 4:14, 6:35, 7:38; cf. also 19:34). We have already considered some of these images in detail in the chapter on John. Let it suffice here, then, to summarize briefly the meaning that all these Johannine sayings of Jesus have in common.

Schnackenburg draws our attention to the fact that all these images are "variations on the single theme, that Jesus has come so that human beings may have life, and have it in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10). His only gift is life, and he is able to give it because the divine life is present in him in original and inexhaustible fullness" (Barrett, *Gospel*, II, p. 88). In the end, man both needs and longs for just one thing: life, the fullness of life—"happiness." In one passage in John's Gospel, Jesus calls this one simple thing for which we long "perfect joy" (Jn 16:24).

This one thing that is the object of man's many wishes and hopes also finds expression in the second petition of the Our Father: thy Kingdom come. The "Kingdom of God" is life in abundance—precisely because it is not just private "happiness," not individual joy, but the world having attained its rightful form, the unity of God and the world.

In the end, man needs just one thing, in which everything else is included; but he must first delve beyond his superficial

wishes and longings in order to learn to recognize what it is that he truly needs and truly wants. He needs God. And so we now realize what ultimately lies behind all the Johannine images: Jesus gives us "life" because he gives us God. He can give God because he himself is one with God, because he is the Son. He himself is the gift—he is "life." For precisely this reason, his whole being consists in communicating, in "pro-existence." This is exactly what we see in the Cross, which is his true exaltation.

Let us look back. We have found three terms in which Jesus at once conceals and reveals the mystery of his person: "Son of Man," "Son," "I am he." All three of these terms demonstrate how deeply rooted he is in the Word of God, Israel's Bible, the Old Testament. And yet all these terms receive their full meaning only in him; it is as if they had been waiting for him.

All three of them bring to light Jesus' originality—his newness, that specific quality unique to him that does not derive from any further source. All three are therefore possible only on his lips—and central to all is the prayer-term "Son," corresponding to the "Abba, Father" that he addresses to God. None of these three terms as such could therefore be straightforwardly adopted as a confessional statement by the "community," by the Church in its early stages of formation.

Instead, the nascent Church took the substance of these three terms, centered on "Son," and applied it to the other term "Son of God," thereby freeing it once and for all from its former mythological and political associations. Placed on the foundation of Israel's theology of election, "Son of God"

now acquires a totally new meaning, which Jesus had anticipated by speaking of himself as the Son and as the "I am."

This new meaning then had to go through many difficult stages of discernment and fierce debate in order to be fully clarified and secured against attempts to interpret it in light of polytheistic mythology and politics. For this purpose the First Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) adopted the word *consubstantial* (in Greek, *homoousios*). This term did not Hellenize the faith or burden it with an alien philosophy. On the contrary, it captured in a stable formula exactly what had emerged as incomparably new and different in Jesus' way of speaking with the Father. In the Nicene Creed, the Church joins Peter in confessing to Jesus ever anew: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16).

# Reflection Questions

Article 3:     **Jesus of Nazareth**  
                  **From the Baptism in the Jordan**  
                  **to the Transfiguration**  
                  *Joseph Ratzinger*  
                  *Pope Benedict XVI*

In an egalitarian society titles don't count much. Titles often set people apart and therefore they create distance. In case of Jesus, people invest him with titles because they believed that He truly served the humanity with his life and deeds. Jesus' titles thus did not create distance because He earned his titles by practising humility. Jesus is a servant – leader!

- a)   *According to you – how can the “humble”  
      Church serve best the World?*

**Article 4**

**Title: Jesus  
A Gospel Portrait**

**Author: Donald Senior CP**

**Publisher: New York: Paulist Press**

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# JESUS

## *A Gospel Portrait*

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

Donald Senior, C.P.



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Paulist Press ♦ New York ♦ Mahwah, N.J.



people of every disease and illness. As a consequence of this, his reputation traveled the length of Syria. They carried to him all those afflicted with various diseases and racked with pain: the possessed, the mentally ill, the paralyzed. He cured them all" (4:23–24). In chapters 8 and 9 of his gospel, Matthew lays out a string of ten miracles, absorbing the same incidents mentioned by Mark. And, as did his predecessor, the evangelist injects several summaries into his narrative to indicate that the miracles recorded are only samples of Jesus' widespread healing activity.

The story is much the same in Luke and in John. Luke prefaces Jesus' public ministry with a quotation from Isaiah 61: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore, he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord" (Lk 4:18–19). That keynote text, dramatically read in Jesus' home synagogue of Nazareth, is a preview of Jesus' healing ministry among the poor and oppressed. Throughout Luke's gospel Jesus reaches out to heal the sick, to expel demons, to raise the dead.

John is more sparing of miracles in his gospel, but they have a special place of prominence in Jesus' ministry. Seven great "signs" mark the first half of the gospel, covering the entirety of Jesus' public mission. Several of these "signs" or miracles become the occasion for Jesus' long discourses, so characteristic of the fourth gospel.

Thus all of our sources are in agreement: Jesus was a healer. The same testimony is born out by the Acts of the Apostles, which refers to Jesus as a "man whom God sent to you with miracles, wonders, and signs as his credentials" (Acts 2:22). Even rabbinic texts remember Jesus as a "sorcerer" and a wonder worker.

To round out our gospel portrait of Jesus, we need to examine this substantial portion of gospel material devoted to Jesus' miracles to discover what it might tell us about the healer.

### *The Meaning of Miracle*

Almost every modern treatment of the miracles of Jesus is prefaced with some discussion of the problem that the very notion of "miracle" poses for the contemporary mind. No matter how religious we might

## 5

# Jesus Heals

The gospel portrait of Jesus would not be accurate or complete if our image of him were that of a mere teacher or dispenser of religious truth. A major part of the gospel material concentrates not on what Jesus says but on what he does—his miracles of healing, of exorcism, of power over the forces of nature.

The four evangelists are unanimous on this point. Mark has Jesus begin his ministry with a burst of healing activity in the lake town of Capernaum: a man tormented by a demon is set free in the synagogue itself; Simon's mother-in-law is cured of a fever in her home; a leper is touched and cleansed; the paralytic is able to walk again; a man with a withered hand has it restored. And by means of several rapid summaries, Mark indicates that these are only a few examples of Jesus' healing activity: "Because he had cured many, all who had afflictions kept pushing toward him to touch him. Unclean spirits would catch sight of him, fling themselves down at his feet, and shout, 'You are the Son of God!'" (Mk 3:10–11). The crush of the crowds becomes so great that Jesus takes the precaution of having a boat ready for escape, and when Jesus' family hears of his frenzied pace—he is not even stopping to eat—their good sense tells them that he is "out of his mind," and they set out to rescue him from this nonsense (Mk 3:21).

Matthew brings a more orderly arrangement to his narrative of the ministry of Jesus but the impression of Jesus as a man consumed with his mission of healing is scarcely different from that of Mark's gospel. In a masterful summary placed at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry, Matthew notes: "Jesus toured all of Galilee. He taught in their synagogues, proclaimed the good news of the kingdom, and cured the

be, we are products of our own world. And a basic tenet of the worldview that most of us share is an assumption that all of physical reality is ultimately explainable on its own terms. If there are footprints, then someone has walked by. If there is drought, then atmospheric conditions, no matter how complex, have caused it. If there is sickness, then we must find the virus. We harbor our share of myths and superstitions, just as every age has done, but in theory we hold that every observable phenomenon has an explaining cause, even if for the moment that explanation eludes us.

For most citizens of the twentieth century, at least those influenced by a rational scientific viewpoint, a "miracle" is by definition some phenomenon that ruptures the explanatory link between cause and effect. It is an exception, a violation of the "laws of nature" whereby something occurs whose cause is outside the world of physical reality. Very few of us have ever witnessed something that we would confidently call a miracle in the strictest sense, even though we may have prayed earnestly for one and believe that God is capable of working one. Certainly few of us have come across the steady performance of miracles such as the gospels almost routinely attribute to Jesus. Thus when many modern believers turn to the pages of the New Testament to read of wonders attributed to Jesus, stirrings of skepticism are understandable. At least some effort is needed to fit Jesus' activity into our own miracle-less experience.

Not all of the distance between the gospels' worldview and our own can be neatly bridged. The gospels' insistence that Jesus performed miraculous deeds, even to the point of "breaking the laws of nature," ultimately can be answered either by choosing to dismiss the testimony of the gospel tradition or by believing that Jesus was no ordinary human being. But some refinements can and should be made before that choice is too blatantly forced on the modern mind. A responsible understanding of Jesus' world and of what "miracle" meant to it helps bring the gospel tradition closer to our own experience.

First, we should be aware that the biblical mind was unlikely to define a miracle the way that we do. For us, it is an exception, a rupture of the observable order of the world that we experience and that science works to explain. But a believer of the first century did not think of it in these terms. A "miracle," understood as a manifestation of God's control over the world, really was not an "exception"; rather, it was a vivid insight into the way things actually were. God directly

controlled creation. God shaped human destiny and ruled the awesome forces of nature. If God chose to manifest this control over life in a clearly visible way, that was no violation of any law but a wonderful sign of the power that normally affected humans in more subtle and ordinary ways. Thus the exceptional thing about miracles was not their possibility but the vividness of their manifestation. A miracle provoked awe and reverence, even fear, but not fundamental surprise.

Given the biblical view of the universe, it is not unexpected that the biblical people would be likely to discover "miracles" much more frequently in their world than we might in ours. The modern believer shaped by the western scientific worldview considers creation as autonomous, existing, and developing according to its own inner elements and patterns. The human person as a part of creation is destined to discover its secrets and harness its energies. If some phenomenon eclipses our experience, then we must strive to uncover its explanation hidden in the richness of created reality. But the biblical mind might not be tempted to pursue the search into the mysteries of created reality with our convictions. A cogent explanation was near at hand. A baffling illness, a sudden cure, the fearsome power of a storm, the inevitable pattern of the seasons—all of these experiences were signposts that supernatural powers touched the everyday human life. Thus miracles and miracle workers were much more commonplace in the first century than they are in the twentieth century. Many rabbis, contemporaries of Jesus, were considered wonder workers, able to cure illness and to check the forces of evil through invoking God's power. But miracle working was not confined to Palestine or Judaism. Many of the Greek religions boasted their own miracle makers, and other regions of the Middle Eastern world experienced similar occurrences.

If first century believers were convinced of the reality of miracles, they were convinced too of the need for miracles. Human vulnerability was much more apparent to an observer of the ancient world than it is to us. Medicine was, of course, still primitive. Hospitals for the mentally ill were unknown. The blind, the disabled, the lepers (a term covering a host of skin diseases), and the psychotic were pushed into the backwash of normal society. Feared and avoided, they were often viewed as repulsive proof of how humankind was a victim of forces that defied natural explanation. Here is an accurate picture of the background of the gospel narrative: the blind and disabled scattered along the roadside begging for coins from passers-by; lepers, banned from

town and temple, moving in condemned bands across the countryside; epileptics and psychotics roaming wild among the tombs or cruelly manacled, rolling on the ground and shrieking in uncontrolled frenzy. Jesus and his contemporaries faced the stark reality of sickness and death in a way that we seldom do.

Biblical reflection tended to tie together the vast array of ills that tortured human beings; all of them were labeled ultimately the work of evil. To the biblical mind, sin, sickness, chaos, death were practically the same thing. Some strands of biblical tradition had taken the rather simplistic view that each manifestation of sickness and death could be traced to the responsibility of personal sin, either on the part of the one who suffered the affliction or on the part of that person's family or friends. So if someone were cut down by a tragic death or suffered from sickness, it was the result of some hidden sin committed by himself or herself or at least by an ancestor. This was the case made to Job by his friends. But such a naive solution to the problem of suffering was rejected by wiser elements of biblical thought, as the author of Job himself so eloquently did. Death and suffering could not be written off as just payment for individual sin. The mystery of evil was far more complex and far more baffling. The truly innocent had to suffer as well as the guilty.

Jesus, too, acknowledged the mystery of suffering when he refused the implication that the Galileans executed by Pilate were somehow responsible for their misfortune (Lk 13:2) or that the man born blind was so because of either his sin or that of his parents (Jn 9:2-3). This ancient impulse to attribute personal guilt to one who is ill or disabled still continues even in modern times and on the part of devout Christians, despite its destructive consequences and its disavowal by Jesus' own words. Such attitudes often inflict far more suffering on persons with disabilities or those who bear an illness than their physical conditions have ever done, and they fail to recognize that human dignity and integrity transcend any physical condition.

But if mature biblical reflection rejected the notion that all suffering could be explained by guilt for sin, it still clung to the notion that all the various forms of death humans had to contend with were ultimately bound up with the mystery of evil. Seen from this perspective, it made little difference ultimately whether someone was possessed by an evil spirit or was blind or was smitten by leprosy or had seen the life of a son or daughter snuffed out. All were manifestations

of "evil" that could bring pain and suffering to God's children. All of them were limitations imposed on God's creation. And God's victory over the power of evil in the world would not be complete until all pain and suffering and death itself were overcome and every human longing and potency fulfilled.

A miracle, understood as a visible manifestation of God's power over evil, was seen, therefore, as a sign of that ultimate victory, assured but as yet incomplete, when God would rule creation in triumph.

No doubt many of the phenomena considered miracles by Jesus' contemporaries would not be viewed as such by our own age. Perhaps many of the exorcisms performed by Jesus might be explained as the therapeutic effect of an extraordinarily compassionate and forceful personality on someone gripped by neurosis or hysteria. Such "charismatic" healings take place in our modern world as they did in ancient times. Many of Jesus' extraordinary cures might be explained in the same way, as the impact of a human being gifted by God with singular power and vitality, able in his contact with suffering human beings to dissolve hysteria or disabling fear in those so afflicted and to unleash in them the innate but hitherto dormant healing power of their own bodies and spirit.

It is also possible that many details and even some entire incidents recorded by the gospels may have been inflated or even added as the gospel tradition developed. But an honest appraisal of the gospel material does not allow us to "solve" Jesus' miracles so easily. There still remains a solid residue of the tradition that insists that Jesus performed extraordinary signs of power over evil in its various forms. At this point the question of faith moves forward to take a central place. But also at this point a solid understanding of how miracles fit into Jesus' overall ministry and message becomes crucial. To become transfixed only by the questions of if and how Jesus worked miracles would be to miss the uniqueness of the gospel portrait and the reason why miracles have such an important place within it.

### *Miracles and Ministry of the Kingdom*

The key to understanding the purpose of the gospel miracle tradition is Jesus' proclamation of the coming of God's kingdom. We have noted how this basic theme guided the gospel's selection of material

when it describes Jesus' associations and his teaching. The same theme helps explain the importance given to the healing ministry of Jesus.

Jesus' searching of the scriptures and his own experience in prayer had convinced him that the critical hour of the kingdom was about to break onto the world. The God of the kingdom, the God of mercy and compassion, was drawing near to humankind in a way unprecedented in history. This fundamental conviction, based on Jesus' own intimate relationship with God, with his Abba, animated his teaching on love and forgiveness, and it provided the motivation for his sharp critique of his opponents. It also drove Jesus to search out the poor and the marginalized, to bring to the alienated members of his own society the message of grace and reconciliation uniquely characteristic of this Galilean rabbi.

But Jesus' integrity is demonstrated by the fact that he was never content merely to proclaim and teach a message of love and mercy. His words and what he does are one. The herald of God's love and mercy becomes the healer of sickness and disease. The compassion that led him to seek out the poor and the afflicted drove him to cure them and to relieve their burdens. Zeal for God's justice led him to challenge attitudes that isolated the sick and the disabled and denied them full access into the community of Israel.

The gospels leave little doubt that such compassion and such a deep sense of justice were the motivation behind Jesus' healing ministry. Compassion urges Jesus to touch the leper and to cure him (Mk 1:41). Compassion for the crowd's hunger moves him to feed them. Compassion for their aimlessness and their affliction causes him to enlist the disciples in the same healing ministry (Mt 9:36). Compassion for the widow of Naim leads Jesus to restore her son to life (Lk 7:14). A drive for justice leads Jesus to defend the dignity of the woman bent double—this "daughter of Abraham" as Jesus calls her—when the manager of the synagogue assails her (Lk 13:10–17). His commitment for justice enables Jesus to recognize the active faith of the paralytic's friends who, unable to gain access for their disabled friend by means of the front door, go up on the roof and lower him down to Jesus (Mk 2:1–5). His sense of compassion for those cast aside by others and his determination to seek justice for them lead Jesus to respond to the pleading voice of the blind Bartimaeus when the disciples attempt to silence him (Mk 10:46–52).

Quite simply, Jesus cures because people are sick. He touches the

diseased skin of the leper (and thereby incurs ritual taboo) because he is in solidarity with those pushed to margins (Mk 1:40–41). In Matthew's gospel a challenge to Jesus' ministry among the poor and afflicted is turned back with a curt citation from the prophet Hosea: "People who are in good health do not need a doctor; sick people do. Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'It is mercy I desire and not sacrifice'" (Mt 9:12–13).

But if a commitment to justice and compassion for those in need appear as an obvious motivation for Jesus' healing ministry, the gospels make clear that this is not the total picture. Jesus is not painted simply as a humanitarian going about eradicating the ills of his society. The main emphasis of the gospels, in fact, does not fall on this aspect of Jesus' healing ministry. Only when we look deeper into the gospel picture does the full purpose of the miracle tradition become apparent.

The most characteristic designation applied to the miracles of Jesus in the gospels is not "acts of kindness," nor even the technical Greek term for "miracle," but the word "power"—in Greek *dynamis*. Jesus' miracles are acts of power; they reveal the power of God himself working through Jesus. Several features of Jesus' miracles illustrate this gospel emphasis.

The gospels give special attention to Jesus' exorcisms, those acts of healing whereby Jesus liberates the victim from an evil spirit. Americans in recent years have been curious about the world of the occult. Fascination with witchcraft and exorcisms has spawned a number of pop religious sects and record-breaking movies. But we should be careful not to equate too easily Jesus' exorcisms and our modern blend of superstition and fantasy. Popular portrayals of evil spirits in the movies or on television can subtly install evil on the shelf of the fascinating and the improbable. It portrays a form of evil that may tingle our spines but, in fact, is completely remote from our ordinary experience.

The biblical mind, however, acknowledged that the power of evil had nudged its way into daily life. The biblical mind linked sin and sickness and death as differing manifestations of the fundamental evil that afflicted the human world and set it in opposition to God. Personal responsibility for sin was not excused by allocating all evil to the arbitrary power of Satan, as much contemporary literature of the occult implies. The human contribution to sin and evil was accepted as a fact of life. At the same time, though, experience had convinced the Jew

that the mystery of evil transcended individual choice; it could stifle the innocent as well as the guilty in its deathlike grip. The evil they feared was pervasive, chronic, hereditary, systematic; it seeped into every aspect of life and stifled human dignity and freedom, leaving people seemingly defenseless before its aggressive power. To get some sense of what the Bible means by such evil, one has only to think of the impact of such chronic expressions of evil in our world today as the problem of drugs or violence or the inequities that have left millions of people starving throughout the world, or homeless and despairing people on the streets of the world's richest cities.

Jesus' confrontations with the symptoms of such a pervasive evil as expressed in his struggle to liberate someone from a tormenting spirit or to cure an illness or to challenge those denying access and dignity to God's children were merely skirmishes in an epic war. God's victory would be complete only when all evil—personal, communal, cosmic—was eradicated from creation. This is the immense significance of Jesus' exorcisms. Jesus' power over Satan is a sign of God's saving power—a sign of the imminence of the Kingdom.

The gospel temptation scenes dramatize their profound statement about Jesus. Mark (1:12–13) has Jesus driven into the desert immediately after his baptism. There he struggles with Satan, alone with the personification of evil in the traditional place where Israel was tested. This cryptic scene seems to symbolize the deeper meaning of Jesus' approaching ministry. His healings, his teaching, his conflicts, even his own death, are ultimately a confrontation between the power of God and the power of evil. Matthew and Luke have fortified the temptation scene with additional material. The struggle with Satan now becomes a dramatic dialogue: the prince of evil attempts to seduce God's Son from his ministry of the kingdom. But Satan is defeated by the Son's obedience—again, a preview of the ultimate significance of Jesus' life.

What the temptation scenes symbolize, the exorcism stories dramatize in the prosaic setting of Jesus' ministry. During his public life, Jesus never directly confronts a disembodied Satan. The power of evil is manifested in human suffering: illness, exclusion, prejudice, lives consumed by despair. This is the tragic arena where Jesus confronts Satan. And, in each case, the power of God present in Jesus heals and restores. The man who roamed the cemetery of Gerasa is restored to his family (Mk 5:1–20). The epileptic boy is given back to his father

(Mk 9:14–19). The mute speaks (Lk 11:14). The woman doubled over by a crippling spirit stands up straight and praises God (Lk 13:10–13). Mary Magdalene, liberated from tormenting demons, is free to follow Jesus and to minister to him (Lk 8:2).

Thus "exorcisms" in the gospels are not a marketable superstition; they are a way of acknowledging the helplessness of humanity in the face of evil, an evil in which our own responsibility may be not absent but over which we are often powerless. The exorcism miracles become a strong statement about Jesus. His opponents themselves recognize the issue at stake. In a gospel scene that undoubtedly is authentic, certain Pharisees interpret Jesus' power to cure as a sign of an alliance with Satan: "He is possessed by Beelzebul . . . He expels demons with the help of the prince of demons" (Mk 3:22). Jesus retorts that if this were so, then Satan's household must be divided; the work Jesus does is to overcome evil, not to advance it. He then adds a short parable (reported in all three synoptic gospels) that reveals Jesus' own insight into his ministry. "No one can enter a strong man's house and despoil his property unless he has first put him under restraint. Only then can he plunder his house" (Mk 3:27). Jesus is a plunderer in Satan's own household, a man armed with the might of God who binds up the power of evil and rescues Satan's captives.

The exorcisms, therefore, are central to Jesus' ministry of the kingdom. They are further signs of the unique authority and power of God's Son; he reveals in what he says and does the compassionate love of God for us. As Jesus tersely states: ". . . if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the reign of God is upon you" (Lk 11:20).

Jesus as the revelation of God's power to heal and to save is presented in even more dramatic fashion by the so-called "nature" miracles. These acts of power demonstrate Jesus' mastery over the very forces of creation—as, for example, in his stilling of the storm on the Lake of Galilee, or his walking on the water, or his feeding of the multitudes with only a few loaves and fishes. Included here might be the awesome power to bring back the dead, such as the daughter of Jairus or the son of the widow of Naim or Lazarus. Not all of the nature miracles are in a crisis situation. To satisfy the temple tax, Jesus directs Peter to retrieve a shekel coin from the mouth of a fish (Mt 17:24–27). On another occasion, the fig tree that does not bear fruit is cursed and it withers (Mk 11:12–14, 20–21).

These miracles cause more difficult problems for the modern

interpreter than any other aspect of the gospel. The very term "nature miracle" does not come from the gospels' own vocabulary; it is a category set up by exegetes who find that these incidents strain credibility more than the other accounts of Jesus' healing ministry.

For the gospel tradition, however, all of these miracles have the same basic significance. Jesus' ability to cure blindness or to cast out an evil spirit really was no different from his ability to still an angry storm. All of these crises were in some fashion manifestations of the threat of evil. And each of Jesus' responses was a sign of God's healing power that could rescue someone lost in the despair of a terminal illness as easily as he could pluck a foundering ship from the sea.

These distinctions made by biblical scholars should not be dismissed as irreverent assaults on the gospels. The distinctions, in fact, represent a responsible attempt to understand the nature of the gospel material. It is one thing to say that all of the gospel miracles have the same basic significance (i. e. signs of God's redeeming power in Jesus); it is quite another thing to say that all of them are to be considered narrations of historical fact with no further refinement. Our purpose is not to develop a full-blown apologetic regarding the miracle stories, but some discussion of the nature miracles helps clarify our more central task of discovering what this gospel material tells us about Jesus.

We discussed in the opening chapter how the basic traditions about Jesus were transmitted and shaped in the life of the church. There is no question that the church's faith in Jesus as the risen Lord, as the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel, has left its imprint on the gospel account of his life. This does not falsify the gospel story but gives it an aura of interpretation that was possible only after the community had experienced resurrection faith. Only then were his followers able to comprehend the full significance of Jesus' life and teaching. The fruits of this fuller understanding are presented to us in the church's gospels.

We should keep this in mind when we consider the question of the nature miracles. We should be aware, for instance, that the ability to control nature by calming the winds or by walking across the waves is an attribute of God in the Old Testament scriptures. Psalm 65, for example, hymns the power of God who "stills the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves and the tumult of the peoples." In Psalm 89 the mighty Lord is the one who "rules over the surging of the sea," who

"stills the swelling of its waves." The book of Job speaks of God "treading (ing) upon the crests of the sea" (Job 9:8).

We should be aware too that such miracles as the multiplication of the loaves and even the raising of the dead have Old Testament prefigurations. The prophet Elisha fed a hundred men with twenty barley loaves, and there was such bounty that some was left over (2 Kgs 4:42-44). The heavenly manna of the exodus story illustrates God's care for Israel through the miraculous multiplication of seemingly insufficient rations. The great prophet Elijah brings back the son of the widow of Zarephath from the dead. Elisha does the same for the Shunammite's son.

And, finally, we must acknowledge that the Christians' own experience of the power of the spirit of the risen Lord present in the church touches their reflection on the life of Jesus. Jesus' gestures in the multiplication story echo the ritual of the eucharist (Mk 6:41). The disciples' plea for help in Matthew's version of the stilling of the storm uses the words of a Christian ejaculation, "Lord, save us!" (Mt 8:25). The raising of Lazarus prefigures the resurrection of Jesus himself (Jn 11:38-44). Peter's ability to walk on the waves like his master and his failure to sustain the power of his faith symbolize the plight of the ordinary Christian in moments of crisis (Mt 14:22-33).

To acknowledge the rich complexity of these gospel accounts does not mean that we explain away the nature miracles. But it does suggest caution in asserting that all of the gospel miracle stories should be read as literal descriptions of events as they happened. At the root of these traditions may well have been some extraordinary display of Jesus' healing and calming power in a moment of crisis. Christian prayer and Christian faith have then infused the accounts with rich imagery drawn from the Hebrew scriptures and their own church experience. In some particular instances, the passage of gospel tradition through the experience of the church may have had more than incidental effect on the final form of the story. Jesus' cursing of the fig tree is a miracle story that is notoriously unique. It seems arbitrary on Jesus' part—it was not even the season for figs—and incongruous with the purposeful use of his power in the rest of the gospel story. It originally may have been a *parable* of Jesus about a fig tree rather than a miracle story. In Luke's Gospel, that is what we have (cf. Lk 13:6-9; compare Mk 11:12-14, 20-21). The discovery of the shekel coin in the mouth of the fish also

seems a bit fanciful (Mt 17:24–27). It suggests that this wondrous detail was not an original part of the story and grew up as this story was used to explain the church's stand on paying the temple tax. Examples like these smack of the art of storytelling, the kind of affectionate embellishment that easily could have crept into the tradition as Christian preachers and catechists recounted the deeds of the master.

But our discussion of the influence of the church's faith on the form of the nature miracles should not distract us from the fundamental statement they assert about Jesus. At this point the message of the nature miracles is little different from that of the other types of miracles, even though the nature miracles may bear more evident traces of faith illumination. All of these acts signify that the healing and redeeming power of God was experienced by those to whom Jesus ministered. Later Christians would be able to understand more fully the implications of that power in Jesus. But the gospel tradition leaves little doubt that Jesus' own contemporaries considered him a man of extraordinary force and power, a power that could liberate and heal, a power that could come only from God.

### *Miracles and Faith*

Our description of Jesus as a powerful miracle worker could easily lead us astray. If we are tempted to think of him as a first century Captain Marvel, then we have wandered far from the gospel. One of the distinctive traits of the gospel portrait is that Jesus, instead of being a ready dispenser of divine cures, may in fact have been a *reluctant* miracle worker. Precisely here, in the soberness of the gospel portrayal, do we begin to discover those unique and fresh characteristics that stamp the authenticity of the gospel tradition.

The gospels seldom, if ever, portray Jesus as taking the initiative in using his healing powers. He does not roam around curing everyone in sight. The sick and the poor come to *him*. An occasional, critical need that he happens upon, such as the funeral procession of the widow's son, will draw from Jesus an immediate response. But in almost all cases, Jesus must be asked by those who seek to be cured. This reflects, in part, the gospels' appreciation for the active role of the sick and the disabled in seeking to be healed or in demanding their rightful access

into the community. Yet it also suggests that Jesus did not impose or flaunt his healing powers.

The gospels seem to indicate that Jesus' healing power sometimes overwhelmed him, perhaps even made him wish he did not have such extraordinary drawing power. After his first day of ministry in Capernaum, he slips away to a lonely spot in the desert. His disciples are forced to "track him down" (Mk 1:35). As the pace of his ministry quickens and his fame spreads, he avoids the larger towns and tries to stay in the countryside. But still, the gospel notes (Mk 1:45), "people kept coming to him from all sides." Even when he works a cure, Jesus seems to fear the commotion it inevitably causes. Over and over again, the gospels note that Jesus tells those cured, such as the Galilean leper or Jairus and his wife, "not a word to anyone" (Mk 1:44).

What is the meaning of all this? Undoubtedly some of the gospel writers' own theological purpose may be at work here. The reverential approach of the petitioners to Jesus may reflect the conviction of the evangelists and the tradition before them that such was the way the believer should approach his saving Lord. The frequent injunctions to silence following Jesus' cures also might be part of Mark's subtle way of indicating that Jesus' messianic identity could easily be misunderstood; it should be reflected on carefully before the believer applies traditional titles to the risen Lord. But even when we responsibly honor the presence of such theological interpretation in the gospels, we are still left with a surprising residue of material that suggests that Jesus was hardly carried away by the power he seemed to possess. He did not want it to become the identifying mark of his mission.

Perhaps nothing in the gospel tradition emphasizes this reluctance more than the way Jesus deals with those who come to him looking only for these spectacular "signs." In the synoptic gospels, when Pharisees demand some great marvel capable of convincing them of Jesus' authenticity, he vigorously refuses: "With a sigh from the depths of his spirit he said, 'Why does this age seek a sign? I assure you, no such sign will be given it!'" (Mk 8:12). John's gospel in particular picks up this note about Jesus. Jesus seems deeply disappointed that the royal official in Capernaum appears interested only in Jesus' healing power: "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you do not believe" (Jn 4:48). A suspicion about those who seek only for "signs" characterizes the Johannine Jesus. The easily bought allegiance of the crowds that had witnessed his powers did not delude Jesus. "Jesus would not trust him-



self to them because he knew them all. He was well aware of what was in the human heart" (Jn 2:24–25).

At the climax of John's gospel, Jesus exclaims: "Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe" (20:29). This statement provides the key to Jesus' reluctance. If anything characterizes the gospel miracle tradition and sets it off from other analogies in Greek or Jewish literature, it is the consistent link between miracles and faith. What Jesus demands of those who come to him, either to learn or to be cured, is that they should totally trust him and his message and act on it. They were expected to believe in him, in the sense that they would acknowledge that what Jesus said and did was the work of God. If people were not willing to accept Jesus on his own terms, if they came to him merely to exploit his power without appreciating his mission, then in Jesus' eyes they would be indulging in a magic game that had nothing to do with the purpose of his life.

Examples of this link between miracle and faith crowd the gospels. The leper is cleansed because he approaches Jesus with a firm expression of faith: "If you will to do so, you can cure me" (Mk 1:40). The faith of the paralytic's friends assures his forgiveness and cure (Mk 2:5). Jesus tells the woman with the hemorrhage, "It is your faith that has cured you" (Mk 5:34). It is faith too that restores Bartimaeus' sight on the outskirts of Jericho (Mk 10:52). Jesus' amazement at the faith of the Gentile centurion and the Canaanite woman triggers his response to their needs. These exemplars of authentic faith not only believe in Jesus but take the initiative to respond to him: they reach out to him over boundaries of culture and taboo; they take roofs off of houses to gain access for a friend; they dare to touch the hem of his cloak; they refuse to be silenced. Theirs is an active, not a passive faith.

Conversely, lack of faith or mere curiosity about Jesus' healing power stands in the way of Jesus' miracles. A surprisingly blunt text of Mark notes that Jesus "could not" work miracles in his home town of Nazareth "so much did their lack of faith distress him" (6:5). In the parallel text of Matthew, this notice is changed to read: "he did not" work miracles there. But Mark's rendition retains the straightforward character of the original. The inability of Jesus to work miracles when faith in him was not present is no different from his refusal to grant the Pharisees' request for some spectacular sign or his overall diffidence about being labeled a miracle worker. What Jesus wanted was that people should believe in *him*, should recognize in his mission the

power and compassion of the God who sent him, and should commit whatever energy and determination they had in the light of this conviction. Jesus never used miracles to bludgeon people into belief. They would have to take him on his own terms. Could they recognize in him—in his parables, his words of wisdom, his interpretation of the law, his compassion for the poor and the marginalized—the authenticity of Jesus' message, its claim to be the work of the compassionate and just God of Israel? If they could not or would not, then Jesus would never work a miracle to force faith. It had to be a genuine response to his mission, or it was nothing.

But if there was faith, then the miracle had already begun: the miracle of a transformed life, of healed alienation, of liberated legalism, of compassion refound. The physical cures were simply dramatic illustrations of the fundamental restoration Jesus worked in everyone whom he touched and who believed in him. That is why "miracle," in the spectacular sense of the word, was decidedly second place in Jesus' ministry. And that is why those who sought only to test or to exploit Jesus' power, such as certain Pharisees or Herod Antipas, would never be acknowledged by Jesus. But those who came with faith, totally willing to accept Jesus and his mission and to act on that faith, are healed, whether by the power of a physical cure, or, in the case of the prostitute, by the power of his love. To all, Jesus' message is basically the same: "Your faith has been your salvation" (Lk 7:50).

Like other portions of the gospel material, the miracle stories add another stroke to the portrait of Jesus. We can acknowledge readily that the community's post-Easter faith in Jesus as the risen Lord has helped shape the miracle tradition and has embellished details here and there—perhaps even some entire stories. We can recognize, too, that the individual evangelist adds further dimension to the miracles when it fits into the overall framework of his gospel. But some aspects of the gospel miracle stories range across all of the gospels and throughout the various layers of the general gospel tradition. It is precisely these characteristics that smack of the vigor and freshness of Jesus. Jesus and the testimony of his contemporaries stand at the root of the miracle tradition.

The miracles tell us a few more things about Jesus. They tell us that his contemporaries experienced him as a human being of uncommon power, a charismatic man who had the awesome power to heal, to bring calm to crisis, to call forth the very best in the people who trusted



him. The miracle stories tell us too that Jesus was a man of absolute integrity. His healing power never stepped outside the bounds of his own life mission, never betrayed the purpose of his ministry. He preached a God of love and compassion and justice, and his care for the poor and his response to their pain translated his words into action. He preached a call to service and human freedom; therefore he never exploited his power or used it for his own grandeur. He claimed that his “meat” was to do the will of his God. Thus anyone who came to Jesus wishing to toy with his supposed magic but unwilling to be caught up in God’s work would never receive a sign from Jesus.

We find in the miracle stories, as in other parts of the gospel heritage, that steady testimony to the absolute wholeness and utter genuineness of Jesus of Nazareth. He was a human being so close to his God that God’s own creative power flowed out from him in healing waves. He was a man so dedicated to God’s work that his own fascinating power seemed to embarrass him; at times it seemed even to get in the way of his message. But, most of all, Jesus was a man so charged with God’s own compassion and love that any cry of pain or confusion drew from him an instant response of healing and restoration.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What does “miracle” mean to you? How would you relate your understanding of miracle to the biblical understanding of miracle?
2. Why do the gospels give such importance to Jesus’ ministry of healing? How does this aspect of his mission proclaim the coming of God’s rule?
3. What significance do exorcisms play in the gospel portrayal of Jesus? Can you relate contemporary experience to this important aspect of the gospel portrayal?
4. In what ways, from the biblical perspective, can we say that “evil” and illness are related?
5. What role does faith play in the healing ministry of Jesus?

# Reflection Questions

Article 4:     **Jesus**  
                  **Jesus Heals**  
                  Revised and expanded edition  
                  *Donald Senior CP*

In the Gospel Jesus is often rebuked for his ministries which showed a preference for the oppressed and marginalized people. In fact, it is easier to hate our neighbours than to love them. That is the reason why Jesus performs miracle because he brought healing in situations where people less expected him to do.

- a) *In which situations of your life would you like to have made a call on Jesus to be your healer?*
  
- b) *How can you be healer for others? How can the faith in Jesus Christ be your strength?*

**Article 5**

**Title: Teaching Jesus Today**

**Author: Carl J Pfeifer**

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# Teaching Jesus Today

Carl J. Pfeifer



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## Jesus Christ Empowering Presence

*“My ship is so small and the sea so large!”* I have seen these words so often engraved or painted on polished pieces of marble, on wooden wall plaques, or on prayer cards suitable for mailing or framing.

The words paint a picture of a profound human feeling, an enervating sense of helplessness and fear in the face of threatening powers that seem beyond our control. We are surrounded by destructive forces in nature—hurricane winds, parching sun, flooding, engulfing waters, quaking of the earth. Natural disasters snuff out lives in a few brief moments. Then, too, there are the powers of our own creation that seem to control us. In a world of impersonal computers, deadly nuclear warheads and gigantic multinational corporations, it is not surprising that people feel helpless.

But the threat is not just from powers outside us. Deadly disease can eat away our very lives from within. An even more frightening sense of helplessness comes from the buffeting force of our innermost impulses. A look into our hearts, or a glance at the morning paper reveals our fragility against the relentless tides of selfishness, greed, lust, anger, hate.

Even with the gigantic strides of the modern physical and social sciences and their related technologies, most of us, at some time or other, experience a profound sense of the world being out of our control. We may even wonder if there is any control, any direction, to this chaotic world. “My ship is so small and the sea so large.”

To open the pages of the Gospels is to find them peopled by people like us, sharing a sense of helplessness

and hopelessness against seemingly senseless powers of destruction. We read about the sinner caught up in an unbreakable web of temptation, the poor crushed beneath harsh, irreversible economic forces, the sick beset by unknown powers of death, the mentally ill whose emotions seem bent on self-destruction, the possessed in whom the very powers of evil seem to make their home.

It is to these that Jesus raised his voice and reached out his hands. These are the people who turned to Jesus with increased expectation as his reputation spread throughout Galilee and Judea. They brought to him the many tortured shapes and cries of human helplessness and fear. "If you will do so, you can cure me" (Mark 1:40). "My little daughter is critically ill" (Mark 5:23). "My son is possessed by a mute spirit" (Mark 9:17). "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!" (Mark 10:47). "Lord, save us! We are lost!" (Matthew 8:25).

Touched by their anguished pleas, Jesus responded with quiet strength and deep compassion. He spoke strong words, words of faith and hope. "This is the time of fulfillment," he said over and over. "The reign of God is at hand!" (Mark 1:15). "Get hold of yourselves! Do not be afraid!" (Mark 6:50).

In language familiar to his listeners, Jesus was saying that God's powerful love was breaking into the world with the force of a new creation, giving life ultimate direction and purpose. The power of evil was being radically broken under the creative power of a caring God. Somehow, he implied, the coming of God's reign of justice, peace, wholeness and love was being initiated through his words and actions. Believe it, he urged. It's good news. Don't be afraid. Everything is not out of control. Love is directing, guiding, controlling all. The Father's care and might extend even to the fragile sparrows. How much more then to his sons and daughters! (Matthew 6:26-34).

That was the message he never tired of preaching. People found encouragement, hope, strength in Jesus'

words. They also noticed remarkable signs that bore out the truth of his words. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus' first words about God's reign are immediately followed by a "miracle story."

At Capernaum, in the synagogue, a man possessed by an evil spirit confronted Jesus. With a single sharp rebuke, Jesus broke the power of the demonic spirit. After a violent convulsion, the man was whole and at peace. Everyone was amazed. "What does this mean? A completely new teaching in a spirit of authority! He gives orders to unclean spirits and they obey!" (Mark 1:23-28).

And so it happened in the scattered towns and villages of Galilee and Judea, even in the bustling city of Jerusalem. Wherever people came to him with trust, the Gospels record a variety of remarkable happenings, always related to Jesus' preaching of God's reign. They are sometimes called "works," or "acts of power," at other times, they are called "signs." Curiously, these significant actions are never called "miracles" in the Gospels, although that was a common term in the Greek world of the time.

Blind people found their sight restored. Sinners were not only forgiven, but empowered to change their lives. Storm winds and waves were calmed. Demons were driven out. Water became wine. A few loaves and fishes increased to feed a multitude. Jesus walked on the fear-some waves.

People could see and feel the reality Jesus preached. The creative power of God was in their midst in a dramatic way. They were amazed and praised God for giving such power to a man.

After decades of intense research and sharp skepticism, today's Scripture scholars agree that there is a definite historical base for the miracle stories. There is no justification for dismissing them from the Gospel story, for they belong to the earliest strata of the Gospel traditions. Jesus' miraculous deeds actually fill about half of Mark's entire Gospel.

There is little doubt today that Jesus of Nazareth cured people in a manner that caused amazement to those present. He gave evidence of powers over evil forces in people's lives, forces then identified with demons. Only the "nature miracles" seem to lack solid historical basis, as we shall see later. That Jesus did remarkable deeds which caused even his greatest critics to pause in wonder and amazement seems historically certain. Jesus was a "miracle worker" as surely as he was a teacher or preacher.

Unlike other wonder workers of his time—Rabbinic and Hellenistic miracle stories of cures, exorcisms, and other wonders abound—Jesus' signs were motivated by genuine compassion and directed to faith in God. To those who believed, Jesus' miracles were dramatic signs of God's caring power breaking through to overcome the fearful forces of evil: the deadly powers of nature, the diminishing powers of sickness and sin, the awesome powers of the superhuman, the demonic.

Where there was no faith, he could work no signs. In a climate of faith, his amazing deeds turned people's eyes and hearts to God. Powerless persons experienced through Jesus' words and hands a healing, creative, renewing power. God's loving might was touching and transforming their lives through what Jesus said and did. Through his signs, God's powerful creative love was becoming visible. God's reign—for those who trusted—was the "healing of creation" (Kung).

Not all opened their hearts and minds in trust. Jesus' signs remained ambiguous. Hostile hearts saw in them the power of Beelzebub, the prince of evil. Skeptical minds might cite stories of the many other wonder workers who allegedly healed the blind and lame, raised the dead, changed water into wine. Those with political and religious power might view this wonder worker and his amazing acts as a threat to their own position as well as to God's kingdom.

In fact, not everyone praised God at the sight of Jesus' miracles. What to many were joyful signs of God's

creative, caring presence, for others were foreboding signs of opposition to God's rule. In the struggle that ensued, it must have appeared that the hostile skeptics were right. Jesus was successfully silenced. There was an end to his signs. His promise of God's creative presence turning back the forces of evil and death seemed contradicted as he hung dying on the cross, executed out of hatred and fear.

The darkness of Thursday night and Friday afternoon symbolizes the apparent triumph of evil. Even Jesus felt abandoned to the full onslaught of evil forces beyond his control. For him, too, the ship was small and the sea so large as to engulf him. With his body, the hopes and dreams of many were buried in the dank tomb.

But then, on the third day, early Sunday morning, the tomb was found empty. A handful of his closest friends claimed to experience him alive. They believed God had raised him up, overcoming even the power of death. Life had triumphed over death; love had overcome hate. The reign of God was indeed in their midst. The world was not out of control or beyond control. Love and life were the deepest dimension of life and its insistent direction and purpose.

In the weeks and months that followed, more and more people shared the experience of the risen Jesus. The disciples realized to their surprise that in his name, through his creative power, they performed signs similar to his—healing, exorcising, overcoming the powers of evil. They reflected on their experiences in the light of what they remembered Jesus doing and saying. They prayed and pondered the Hebrew Scriptures, trying to make sense of it all. They celebrated Jesus' creative, healing presence with them as they "broke bread" together in their homes.

By this process of experience and reflection on it in the light of their scriptures and personal memories of Jesus, the small communities of Christians gradually came to believe that Jesus was more than a compassionate, powerful worker of signs of God's mighty care. They

found themselves speaking of Jesus in words faithful Jews had used only when speaking of the one God. The remarkable actions of Jesus of Nazareth, which had caused amazement and praise of God, now seemed to draw similar praise to him, risen and alive.

It was not long before the Christians came to call Jesus "Savior," in the sense that they called God their savior. It was no accident that his very name, Jesus, meant "God's salvation." The Christians came to believe that Jesus was more than a prophet or herald of God's healing love.

They remembered his compassion, his concern for those who came to him in pain and fear. They sensed that in Jesus they experienced God's healing, creative presence. They called him, like God himself, their savior, the savior of the world. John writes this post-resurrection faith into the early days of Jesus' ministry as he has the Samaritans say, "We know that this really is the Savior of the world (John 4:44).

They even came to call him "Lord," the name reserved in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures to the one God. "Jesus Christ is Lord" became one of the earliest Christian creeds (Philippians 2:11). To the believing Jew "Lord" meant—and means—that God is master of the universe, lord of history, holding all reality in existence, giving it direction and purpose with power placed always in the service of love. Fully aware of what they were doing, the young Christian communities called Jesus "Lord," and confessed that "in him everything in heaven and on earth was created. . . . In him everything continues in being" (Colossians 1:15-20). Henceforth nothing could forcibly separate them from God's love in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:35-39).

Out of this post-resurrection faith the Gospels were written. The historical signs worked by Jesus of Nazareth were embellished and multiplied. Cures and exorcisms were "blown up" in detail to bring out what Christians now believed about Jesus. The "nature miracles"—walking on water, stilling the storm, changing

water into wine, multiplying food to feed thousands—were created out of Old Testament themes to identify Jesus with God, the loving Lord of creation and history. Occasioned perhaps by historical events, they became dramatic signs of his creative, healing power over the forces of evil.

In the risen Lord and Savior people found hope and courage, then and over the centuries. Today we continue to experience his healing, creating presence. In him, millions continue to find the power and strength to grapple with the most frightening forces of evil. In him, they find hope and strength when things seem most out of control.

"My ship is so small and the sea so large!" Still true. But the Christian can see Jesus walking on the waters guiding the ship to shore. The Christian may sense Jesus present, seemingly asleep in the boat itself as the crises mount. With such faith rooted in experience, enriched by remembering the Gospel stories of Jesus' signs, we can say with Paul: "I am content with weakness, with mistreatment, with distress, with persecutions and difficulties for the sake of Christ; for when I am powerless, it is then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10). "In him who is the source of my strength I have strength for everything" (Philippians 4:13).



## Jesus Christ Freeing Presence

I once asked a group of sixth graders what slavery was. They told me about slavery in the United States before Lincoln's emancipation proclamation. So I gave them a stack of newspapers and challenged them to see if there were any signs of slavery in the world today. They went to work and to my surprise selected reports of people whose freedom was diminished by poverty, hunger, natural catastrophes, war, political oppression, sickness, drugs, unemployment, ignorance, suspicion, prejudice.

As they talked about what they culled from the newspapers, I asked them what they now thought slavery was and how they felt about it. Their perceptive answer was, "Slavery is selfishness." The conditions the paper reported were symptoms of this inner bondage, a radical slavery that enslaves us all.

Against the reality of this universal bondage and its countless forms of oppression, the reality of Jesus takes on a new meaning. He fully shared the human condition in a time and place that had its own particular kinds of enslavement. Yet to read the Gospels is to discover Jesus as a supremely free person who sets for himself the task of liberating people from all their chains.

Jesus lays out his manifesto of liberation at the very start of his preaching, as described by Luke. In his hometown synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus claims the Spirit of God is upon him, sending him "to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners" (Luke 4:14-30).

This was but another way of stating his *central message* about the coming of God's reign or kingdom. God, as the Jewish people learned centuries earlier as

they fled Egyptian slavery, was a God of freedom. Totally free himself, Yahweh set people free. His reign was liberating.

Jesus was convinced that God's freeing power was breaking into human experience in a definitive way through his own words and actions. Wherever Jesus went, there were signs of God's freeing presence. The eyes of the blind were opened. The paralyzed and lame moved freely about. The tongues of the dumb were loosed, the ears of the deaf unblocked. Those possessed by evil spirits were freed to lead normal lives. Jesus' miracles were all signs of the liberating reign of God, freeing people from physical, emotional or cosmic-demonic forces, liberating them for wholeness and fellowship.

The bonds that shackle people are not just those of disease and demons, not just physical and cosmic. There are enslaving chains forged in the human heart as well. Jesus knew the slavery arising from oppressive economic forces. As a poor man himself, he experienced exploitation by the rich and powerful. He felt the burden of unjust taxation, inflated by the graft and greed of the tax collectors. So it was natural that Jesus preached glad tidings of liberation to the poor.

Standing among the poor, as one of them, Jesus spoke against the corrupting power of money. He courageously condemned the rich who exploited the poor. Yet he was no economic reformer in our modern sense. He advocated no plan for more equitable land distribution, higher wages or lesser taxes. He spoke to the poor about their dignity and worth as daughters and sons of the Father. He told them of God's constant care. He assured them that God's justice was soon coming.

Jesus put his finger on what keeps both rich and poor in bondage, what creates unjust economic institutions and exploitative systems. He spoke of the enslavement of the heart to riches, to self-serving security, to selfishness. Such attachment closes one's heart and hands to the needs of brothers and sisters.

Giving, he said, is better than taking, sharing more

freeing than hoarding. Jesus' key to economic liberation was not in the realm of economics but of the heart. Effective, imaginative wars on poverty would arise where there was respect for human dignity, sensitivity to other's pain, a sense of compassion and generosity, true poverty of spirit.

In the political realm, too, Jesus fomented no resolution against the Roman occupation government, although he clearly must have shared the deep Jewish longing for political independence. He may have been familiar with the many radical underground movements dedicated to the overthrow of the Romans. He even chose one such radical, Simon the Zealot, as one of his 12 closest disciples. But he resisted every temptation to fight the oppressors with military might.

Jesus' most anguishing personal decisions seem to have centered right on this point. People hailed him as the long-awaited Messiah, meaning by that term, the God-sent revolutionary leader who would liberate the people from Roman domination. Jesus knew he had immense popular support. The Gospels condense into one dramatic struggle what must have been a recurring temptation, namely to accept the role of political-military Messiah or freedom fighter (Matthew 4:1-11).

His choice was to work for a deeper liberation of the heart. Whether in the hands of Romans or Jews, rulers or revolutionaries, he believed power tended to enslave. The oppressed all too readily rise up only to become the oppressors themselves. In the kingdom of his Father, there was only one legitimate power, that of love and service. Any other form of power was more enslaving than liberating (Luke 22:24-30).

Jesus went out of his way to preach liberation from any power not rooted in love and mutual service. If you are forcibly struck, turn the other cheek. If someone forces you to walk a mile with him, freely walk a second mile. If he steals your cloak, freely hand over your coat. Do not hate your enemies, love them. Control not only your fists, but the anger in your heart. If you live by the

sword, you will die by the sword.

Jesus' plan for political liberation centered in the heart. When people's hearts are freed for mutual service, genuine political reform can be created. Love is the only truly freeing power.

Jesus lived in a country where cultural and religious prejudices added to the slavery of economic exploitation and military occupation. Women were deprived of equal rights in most areas of social, political and religious life. Their freedom in public situations was severely restricted.

Jesus' attitude to women was so free that it surprised even his disciples. He talked in public with women, like the woman at Jacob's well, something no devout rabbi or pious layman would think of doing. Jesus had close women friends, like Martha and Mary. He welcomed mothers and their children. He shared with women the deepest mysteries of God's reign.

Jesus' approach to foreigners showed the same freedom, the same compassionate respect. The Jews of his time kept foreigners at a discreet distance lest they be contaminated by them. The Samaritans in particular found themselves the objects of intense prejudice and discrimination. Yet Jesus responded with compassion to a Roman soldier and an unfortunate Greek woman—in each case responding to their deep faith and profound need. He makes Samaritans the heroes of his most telling parables, and does not hesitate to approach them.

But Jesus led no movement for equal opportunity for women and foreigners in the sense of modern social reformers. His reform movement cut to the heart of the matter, respect for each person as a daughter or son of the same Father. All artificial social restraints and prejudices would be overthrown as people freed their hearts to love and respect others as they loved and respected themselves.

Jesus was most strikingly free in his attitude to those considered as public sinners and outcasts from God's people—tax-collectors, prostitutes, and the like. Jesus

freely associated with them, to the scandal of the priests, the theologians, and the pious laity. Most shocking of all was the fact that Jesus ate and drank with them and proclaimed God's forgiveness even to them.

For the Jews of Jesus' time, a meal was more than a matter of physical nourishment. To eat at the same table implied fellowship. When Jesus ate and drank with public sinners, he was expressing his fellowship and solidarity with them. As a rabbi, one sent by God to speak for God, his meals with sinners affirmed their fellowship with God. The loving, healing, forgiving reign of God was indeed within their midst, a rule not restricted by the religious rules of his people. God was a God of mercy and forgiveness, demanding mercy more than legal observance or cultic sacrifice.

Jesus went out of his way to make this point. He freely violated the many legal and ritual prescriptions that would have prevented his association with acknowledged sinners. He deliberately violated even the sacred Sabbath laws to bring healing and forgiveness to those who were in need. He allowed his disciples to break the Sabbath to satisfy their hunger. The Sabbath, he told his critics, was for people. God's reign was for people, for their wholeness and happiness. Even so sacred a law as that of Sabbath must bend to respond with compassion to human need.

Jesus violated religious laws to bring forgiveness to sinners and to dramatize the proper priorities in the Father's kingdom. Such freedom was seen as a threat to true religion. What was even more unheard of was Jesus' personal attitude toward the Mosaic law itself. The Law of Moses, the Torah, was—and still is—respected as God's own law. Theologians then might vary in their interpretations of the Torah, but none would dare change a word of it.

Jesus scandalized many by doing just that. He freely contradicted the Torah on a number of important points: divorce, oaths, retaliation, the attitude toward enemies (Matthew 5:21-48). He further interpreted it in a radical-

ly interiorized form—where the law forbade murder, Jesus saw God forbidding anger; where the law forbade adultery, Jesus said God forbade lust. And Jesus made his corrections to the Torah on his own authority. Not “thus says the Lord,” (as the prophets and theologians spoke) but “this I say to you.”

In effect, Jesus was preaching a radical freedom from every law but the will of God, the law of love. It is not surprising that Jesus was seen as subversive to the religious establishment. His attitude to the law, his fellowship with and forgiveness of public sinners were at the heart of people’s growing opposition to him. His open confrontation with the religious teachers and authorities intensified their antagonism. Jesus went out of his way to challenge, criticize, and condemn any approach to religion that placed legal observance or cultic worship above mutual love, compassion, and forgiveness.

Eventually, the inevitable happened. His opponents moved to silence him. Captured and condemned as subversive to true religion—a blasphemer who claimed to forgive sins, a flagrant violator of the law—he was handed over to the Romans who executed him as a political revolutionary.

His death seemed the end of this attractive, threatening man of freedom. But his disciples experienced the ultimate power of Jesus’ freedom as he broke even the bonds of death, that last enslavement of sin.

During those early days, they themselves experienced in his risen presence a remarkable freedom—from fear, disillusionment, and despair. Gradually, they and their growing bands of converts found themselves more and more free of prejudices, from bondage to money and power. His freeing presence led them to a new freedom regarding the material world and its riches. Their communities, despite tensions, reflected the mutual respect, sharing and forgiveness that Jesus said exemplified God’s reign of love.

Among them there was no longer Jew or Greek, male or female, master or slave—all these artificial barriers

were leveled (Galatians 3:28). They found in mutual love a power that eventually overcame Rome itself, a more liberating power than the sword. They found themselves freed from the Mosaic law and all law but the law of the Spirit of Christ, the law of love, which spontaneously fulfills all other laws that do not stifle the Spirit. They were freed from sin’s power.

In every age, Christians have experienced the same freeing presence of the risen Lord and his Spirit. As Paul wrote, “where the Spirit is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17). Ultimately, that freedom is a freedom from selfishness which, as my sixth graders perceived, is the most basic form of slavery. “Remember that you have been called to live in freedom . . . Out of love, place yourselves at one another’s service” (Galatians 5:13).

## Jesus Christ Pleading Presence

One chilly fall afternoon in New York City, I noticed a blind beggar sitting in the sun outside a restaurant. As persons approached him, he raised his voice in a monotonous plea for help. He held out a tin cup. He did not ask for much, just a dime or a quarter.

Fortunately he could not see those who passed. Most hurried by with little more than a passing glance. Some seemed to look the other way. One or two looked back a bit guiltily, but went on anyway. One young tough made an obscene gesture and cursed the beggar. A few stopped, usually without a word, reached into their pockets or purses, and let a couple coins clink into the cup.

It was a sad sight. The blind beggar's pleading voice and outstretched arm haunted me long afterwards. Blind and poor, he was a fellow human being in need. The dull clink of the few coins captured the hollowness of people's response to him.

That pleading man was probably not much different from Bartimaeus of Jericho. Sitting by the roadside one day, begging from the passersby, Bartimaeus learned Jesus was coming down the road. The blind man began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!" People nearby angrily told him to be quiet. But he shouted still louder, "Jesus, have pity on me!"

Jesus stopped. He looked for the man who was calling out to him. Spotting the blind beggar, Jesus was moved with compassion. He went over to Bartimaeus and asked him what he wanted. The blind man pleaded for sight, to be able to see. Jesus responded warmly to Bartimaeus'

faith-filled plea. At Jesus' word, the blind man's eyes were cleared. He was able to see (Mark 10:46-52).

This touching story is a kind of dramatic parable of Jesus' entire life. In Mark's Gospel, the cure of Bartimaeus is the final incident in Jesus' public ministry prior to his entry into Jerusalem one week before his death. This story reveals the deepest motivation of Jesus' life and ministry. It suggests, too, why Jesus, so obviously a good man, was condemned by the religious leaders of Israel. Jesus' compassion led to the cross.

Jesus' sensitive response to Bartimaeus is typical of his entire public life. He was deeply responsive to people in need, the poor and oppressed, the sick and suffering, the anxious and tormented, the hungry, the sinner. He went out to those in need and they searched him out knowing his kindness. There was an evident bond between himself and suffering human beings.

Although he was a devout Rabbi, Jesus was frequently seen in the company of those considered sinful or religiously unworthy. He entered the homes of public sinners, ate and drank with despised tax-collectors and prostitutes. He associated freely with society's rejects and religion's outcasts—the poor, lepers, aliens, cripples, diseased. His sensitive compassion for hurting human beings led him to a kind of solidarity with the needy.

Jesus' identification with the poor was motivated, too, by something more than his sense of human compassion. Jesus responded to the needy because he was touched by their suffering, but also out of religious conviction. Jesus believed the mystery of God was accessible only to those who draw near to the poor. In his profound search for ever closer union with God, Jesus searched for him where he believed God was most likely to be found—among the suffering and needy.

He believed God's voice could most surely be recognized in the pleas of the poor. His conviction was rooted in the most traditional teaching of the great Hebrew prophets before him—Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah. The God of the prophets was a God of compassion. He

was on the side of the "orphans and widows," and all the helpless, hopeless, pleading people of the world.

Curiously, in the religious orthodoxy of Jesus' time, it was precisely these people who were believed estranged from God and a source of uncleanness to devout Jews. Aliens like Samaritans or Gentiles, lepers and cripples, prostitutes and tax-gatherers, law-breakers and sinners were to be avoided by anyone seriously seeking God's presence. For the religious establishment of the time, God was to be found rather in the temple and synagogue, in observance of the law, in the careful performance of prescribed ritual and sacrifice.

Jesus' compassionate solidarity with the "unclean" was therefore a scandal in the eyes of the religious hierarchy. Jesus' words and deeds challenged the basic teachings of Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Priests. Contrary to their theology, Jesus taught that the privileged place to find God was precisely among those who were thought estranged from God. Without deprecating the holiness of temple and torah (Jesus remained to the end a devout, orthodox Jew), he insisted that the all-holy God was to be found first and foremost among people, particularly among those in genuine need.

Out of the deepest religious conviction, as well as from human compassion, Jesus freely identified himself with those considered outside the realm of God's grace. His compassionate lifestyle became a conscious challenge to the most fundamental religious assumptions of the then contemporary theology and orthodoxy.

Jesus' association with the sick and sinful forced people to question and rethink their assumptions about God, about religion, about sin, about holiness. He was saying, in effect, that God was with the poor and pleading. They were even more his temple than the great temple in Jerusalem. Compassion was the core of the law.

The parable of the Good Samaritan boldly expressed where Jesus stood. A traveller is robbed, beaten, and left half dead along the Jericho road. A priest sees the bleed-

ing body, but passes quickly by. Then comes a levite, an assistant in the temple. He, too, glances at the beaten man, and then goes about his business. There follows a Samaritan—an alien, a hated heretic. He sees the poor victim, is moved with compassion, and responds generously to his desperate need. Jesus' point is clear. Response to someone in need, the definition of "neighbor," is the very heart of the law. Who is observing the law? Not the priest and levite, scrupulous devotees of legal and ritual purity, but an unclean, despised Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

It is no wonder that Jesus' teachings and lifestyle led to steadily increasing conflict with the religious authorities. He publicly challenged the prevailing orthodoxy. He angrily unmasked the hypocrisy of those who were using religion, with its legalistic casuistry, to cover up their lack of compassion for people in need. Those with vested interests, as well as sincere convictions, who felt compelled to defend their religious orthodoxy and authority, sought to silence Jesus. His compassion, grounded in human sensitivity and religious conviction, led directly to the cross.

The case against Jesus was essentially religious. Before the High Priest and the Sanhedrin, he is accused of undermining temple worship and observance of the law. He is seen as a false prophet, a fake messiah. The verdict is guilty; the crime is blasphemy; the penalty is death. Jesus is condemned for being against the God of his fathers. Only before the Roman Governor is the charge changed to a political one—insurrection against the emperor.

Now Jesus finds himself in the very situation as the people he had gone out of his way to help. Like them, he is now considered a sinner, outside the realm of God's gracious presence. Devout followers of the law would now have nothing to do with him. He is an outcast like the lepers, the blind, the demented, the aliens with whom he so freely associated. Jesus now experiences a new solidarity with the poor and the suffering. He knows

firsthand their helplessness, their need, their pain. He is one of them.

Jesus' painful identification with suffering humanity deepens as Thursday melts into Friday. He is imprisoned, stripped, beaten. Weak with pain, he becomes the object of cheap jokes and mocking laughter. He is led through the streets like a common criminal as people look on with curiosity and horror.

Considered unclean, Jesus cannot even die within the Holy City. Nailed to a cross, he hangs for three hours in excruciating pain. Helpless. Alone. Naked. Thirsting. Utterly poor. One with the needy in his lifetime, he is still more intimately identified with them in death.

Most agonizing of all, Jesus feels abandoned even by his Father. He pleads, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). He who preached God's nearness in grace and love, now begs for some sign of his presence. Jesus experiences God's absence in his extreme suffering, poverty and need. He shares to the full the feelings of millions who live and die in misery, alienated from their more fortunate fellow human beings, seemingly abandoned even by God.

Jesus, who was so compassionate all his life, now stirs compassion himself. A Roman soldier offers him a drugged drink to ease his pain. Mary his mother, John, and a few women stand beside him, suffering with him. When he dies, his weeping friends bury him, and go off to mourn him. His enemies set a guard at his tomb.

Before the weekend is over, the sorrowing disciples are surprised out of their sadness by his presence, alive with new life, victorious over suffering and death. He comforts Mary in her sorrow at the tomb (John 20:11-18). He walks with the distressed, disillusioned disciples on the Emmaus road (Luke 24:13-35). He strengthens the frightened group locked inside the Upper Room (Luke 24:36-49). The descriptions of the appearances of the risen Lord convey the same kind of sensitivity and compassion Jesus showed in his life and ministry.

As the days went on, the disciples and the communities that formed around them experienced in new circumstances the presence of the risen Christ and his Spirit. They rejoiced in his victory over suffering and death, but they never forgot the sufferings of the Crucified. The Spirit of Jesus, whom they recognized as coming to them from the cross of Jesus (John 19-30) led them back to the cross. While they celebrated the victory of the Lamb, they remembered that the victorious Lamb remained always "a Lamb that had been slain" (Revelation 5:6).

They came to realize that the marks of his sufferings were visible all around them. The cross of Jesus was seen in the pain of others. In a mysterious sense Jesus, who had identified himself with the needy in his compassionate life and even more so in his agonizing death, was still to be found in solidarity with people in need. They remembered Jesus' words: "Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate!" (Luke 6:36). The risen Lord was to be met not just in their eucharistic celebrations but in the anguished faces of hurting human beings.

Matthew's account of the final judgment provides a profound insight into the pleading presence of Christ in the monotonous, insistent pleas of suffering men and women. No doubt the account has roots in the words of Jesus himself, but has unquestionably been edited in the light of post-resurrection experience. It provides the surest measure of whether a Christian truly knows Jesus Christ and is following his way. It points to the Lord's hidden, frequently overlooked presence in anyone who suffers, a presence that continually comes as a shock and surprise.

"I was hungry . . . thirsty . . . a stranger . . . naked . . . ill . . . in prison," says the Lord to those on both right and left. Each group asks in amazement when they responded to, or failed to respond to, him in his need. "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or away from home or naked or ill and in prison . . . ?" The answer is straightforward and definite: "As often as you did it

for one of my least brothers, you did it for me . . . As often as you neglected to do it to one of these least ones, you neglected to do it to me" (Matthew 25:31-46).

Identified with the needy in life, still more in death, Christ Jesus remains identified with them in his risen life. Access to the compassionate Father and equally compassionate Son is through compassion to people in need, as well as through prayer and virtue.

The voice of a blind beggar pleading for dimes and quarters on a busy city street may well be the pleading voice of Christ Jesus, our Lord and King, who was always found among the blind and poor and alienated.

"Men go to God when they are sore bestead,  
Pray to him for succour, for his peace, for bread,

For mercy for them sick, sinning or dead:

All men do so, Christian and believing.

Men go to God when he is sore bestead,

Find him poor and scorned, without shelter or bread,

Whelmed under weight of the wicked, the weak, the dead:

Christians stand by God in his hour of grieving."

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*



10  
*Jesus Christ  
Challenging Presence*

Mary sat quietly, self-assuredly. She was telling me about her summer as a volunteer recreation worker. "I never thought I could do something like that," she admitted. "I grew up with everything I wanted. My parents saw that I received a good education. They gave me just about everything most people my age would like to have. But I felt bored. I needed a challenge. Something important seemed to be missing."

I listened without comment. Mary continued. "Then one day I read a story about a statue of Jesus. It was found in a bombed-out church. The hands of the statue had been blown off. An American soldier found the statue in the rubble of the church but he could not find the hands. So he set up the statue and placed a handwritten sign beside it. His sign read, 'Now you must be his hands.'"

I remembered the story. Apparently it happened near the end of World War II, probably in France.

"That really touched me," Mary went on. "I felt a strong desire to do something, to reach out to help others. I sensed a kind of challenge from Christ to do something for him. That same week I saw a notice on the bulletin board at school. Missionaries on a Sioux reservation needed a volunteer recreation director for the summer."

Mary paused for a moment. She smiled and said, "I already had plans for three weeks of the summer. I was going to the beach. But that story of the statue without

hands kept haunting me. The notice seemed to show me a way that I could become his hands; it looked like a real challenge. So a few days later, I volunteered. It was a tremendous experience. I hope I helped those young people as much as they helped me."

As Mary described what she did during the summer on the reservation, I was captivated by her joy and enthusiasm. I could not help thinking of another young person faced with a similar challenge. He, too, had just about everything he wanted or needed, but like Mary, felt a desire for something more. My memory of him was such a contrast with Mary. His face was sad, his spirits downcast.

The young man had just met Jesus of Nazareth and had eagerly asked him what more he could do with his life. Jesus liked him and sensed his longing. Jesus invited him to give up his riches, share them with the poor, and become his disciple. The young man felt the challenge. But, even more, he felt the pull of possessions and a comfortable life. He lowered his eyes and looked away from Jesus. Sadly he walked away (Matthew 19:16-23).

Mary's experience and that of the rich young man of the Gospel dramatize a vital dimension of the reality of Jesus. His presence is inevitably a challenging presence. His presence normally leads to a crisis within one, a moment of decision. So it has been from the very start of his public ministry.

Jesus' first recorded words as a wandering rabbi in Galilee were words of exciting challenge. He told everyone who would listen that "this is the time of fulfillment. The reign of God is at hand!" (Mark 1:15). What he meant was that the long-awaited outpouring of God's powerful love was taking place. His words were of unbelievable divine kindness and promise. He assured his listeners that it was really happening before their very eyes. They could be a part of God's gentle but mighty rule of love.

The opportunity was present. The challenge was clear. There would be no force, but an insistent call: "Reform

your lives and believe in the gospel!" (Mark 1:15). The challenge flowed from the attractiveness of God's unimagined benevolence: "Believe this incredibly good news and live accordingly."

The life-changing implications of accepting the challenge quickly became clear. Fishermen left nets, boats, family and everything else to share with Jesus God's promised reign. Blind and lame who genuinely believed found new vision and mobility. Prostitutes who accepted the challenge found themselves truly loved. Greedy tax collectors like Zacchaeus found unexpected riches in giving back what they had stolen. Wise religious leaders like Nicodemus discovered still deeper wisdom. Sinners of all kinds found mercy and forgiveness.

But others found the challenge hard to accept. It seems that Jesus' relatives and the religious leaders found greater difficulties than most. His relatives tended to consider him insane, while those "learned in the law" found him an agent of Beelzebub, the evil one.

Jesus' teaching was forthright in spelling out the dimensions of the challenge occasioned by the coming to be of God's gracious reign. His early preaching is summed up in the "great discourse" reconstructed in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke. Both versions reveal a challenge that cuts to the heart of every listener.

The love required of those who accept God's reign of love is to embrace, as does God's love, even enemies, those who hate you, those who attack you and treat you badly. The perfection of those who accept God's call to perfection is to be as compassionate to all as the Father of all is compassionate.

Accepting God's good news of grace is not just a matter of repeating, "Lord, Lord!" It involves practicing what Jesus teaches. It involves doing the will of God. It is a matter of the heart, of total, single-minded commitment and trust.

Jesus lays down the challenge in graphic terms: If your eye leads you to sin, gouge it out. Cut off your hand if it leads you away from God's will. Better to be maimed

than damned.

There are just two roads, one smooth and wide leading to destruction, the other narrow and rough leading to life. There are only two kinds of trees—known from their fruits—sound ones and decaying ones. Those that bear bad fruit are cut down and burned. There are two possible masters of one's heart. You cannot serve them both and find God's blessing. There are beatitudes—blessings—for those who choose God's will. For the rest, there are contrasting woes.

The challenge that Jesus spells out is all-encompassing, demanding. The only acceptable response is total commitment matched with total trust. Jesus reassures those who fearfully face so weighty a choice: Their Father in heaven knows all their needs, and cares for them more than he cares for the rest of the world. So trust him completely.

Jesus' parables during the rest of his ministry place before his hearers the attractiveness of God's reign and the totality of its claim. The price is high, but the reward far outstrips any cost. It makes obvious sense to sell all you own in order to buy a field in which a treasure lies hidden, a treasure worth considerably more than all one now possesses. A merchant who finds one pearl more precious than all the rest he already has, does the right thing to sell them all in order to buy the one really precious pearl.

Jesus never attempts to gloss over the high cost of discipleship in God's kingdom. Commitment to God will take precedence over every other affection, even the love of parents. It means taking up one's cross daily. It means being willing to lose one's life in the hope of gaining fuller life. There is no valid excuse accepted for not coming to the banquet of the king. You need to become like a child once again, full of total trust in the Father, placing yourself completely in his hands.

Such is the challenge Jesus preached as he announced the coming of God's mighty love. Jesus calls his hearers to a total reorientation of life, the complete surrender of

self to God's will. Acceptance of God's will involves a decisive change of heart, an undivided heart, a single-minded spirit. The supreme norm of life now becomes the will of the Father. And the broad lines of that will are clear: love and trust God by acting as he does, with unconditional compassion and care for every human being.

What Jesus asked of others, he lived himself. The Gospels record his single-minded pursuit of the Father's will. Leaving home, he placed the Father's will above even the closest of family ties. One day, when his disciples told him that his mother and other close relatives were at the door, he told those who were listening to him, "Whoever does the will of God is brother and sister and mother to me" (Mark 3:35).

Jesus' commitment to the Father's will for him was one of unswerving fidelity, but one that cost continual struggle. Throughout Jesus' ministry, he was faced by a recurring and attractive temptation. It was the fundamental temptation we all face: between self-seeking and seeking God's will. For him, the temptation took on a unique form, centering on his leadership role in the coming reign of God. In its simplest form, the temptation was between accepting the popular view of the Messiah—a revolutionary who would lead the people against the Roman legions, driving them out of Israel, and then become the king of a liberated nation—and God's view of the Messiah. As the days went on, it became clearer to Jesus that God's view was one of compassionate service, culminating in rejection and suffering, perhaps even in death.

The temptation is summed up in the Gospels as a dramatic confrontation between Jesus and Satan in the desert. The struggle hinges on the nature of power to which Jesus is drawn: the power of popularity and force, or the power of obedient service. Jesus, turning to the Scriptures to refute Satan, chooses a leadership of trust and love rather than of self-glorification and power. Such is God's will as he perceives it.

Later in Jesus' ministry, the temptation recurs in a

particularly poignant manner. After months of immense popularity, Jesus finds that fewer and fewer people take his challenge seriously. The influential religious leaders were the first to turn away from him and his message. Gradually the crowds became smaller and smaller. Soon only a relatively small group of people, generally considered the most insignificant, came out to hear him. In what must have been a moment of deep discouragement, Jesus reveals the totality of his response to God, his Father. He prays, "Father, it is true. You have graciously willed it so" (Matthew 11:26).

That same single-minded acceptance of the Father's will led Jesus to preach with even greater urgency the message of compassion despite the growing hostility against him. As the outcome becomes more evident to Jesus and more imminent, he becomes beset with fear. Confiding his anguish and sadness to his closest friends, he withdraws to pray alone. Weakened by utter terror before the horror he knew awaited him, Jesus pleaded with the Father to allow him another way. Yet over and over he prayed: "Father, let it be as you would have it, not as I... your will be done" (Matthew 26:39-42).

The same total surrender to the Father's will finds expression in the midst of the mental and physical agony of crucifixion. Jesus died as he had lived, seeking only his Father's will. With his final breath, even though feeling abandoned even by God, he surrenders his life into the hands of the Father: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). Even in the moment of greatest agony, his compassion and mercy find expression in a plea for forgiveness of the very persons who have brought him to such an awful end: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

That moment of Jesus' death on the cross presented his friends and disciples with the greatest challenge of their lives. Jesus lived according to his perception of God's will just as he taught them to do, but where had it led him? Was this the outcome of accepting God's rule?

Was this the gracious reign of a Father? In final disillusionment, many followers turned away for other more promising challenges. Many were now convinced that Jesus was indeed a false prophet. A faithful few continued to accept Jesus' vision and challenge, but the evidence of his violent death profoundly troubled them. To those closest to him, his death posed a greater challenge to faith and love than did his life.

Then, to their amazement, his faithful friends experienced him again alive. His presence was reassuring and a source of unbounded joy. But the presence of the risen Christ brought a renewed sense of challenge. Some, like Thomas, had serious doubts and hesitation. Peter had his own anxieties, after betraying Jesus. No doubt each of the others had their secret fears. But all was overcome by the presence of their risen Lord. They accepted his command to go out and proclaim the good news to the whole of creation. He promised to be with them until the end of time.

As they carried out his mission in the changing circumstances of their lives, Jesus' disciples were driven by their heartfelt affection for and admiration of the risen Christ. "The love of Christ impels us," wrote Paul (2 Corinthians 5:14). That was the way they now perceived the challenge of the kingdom. Love was focused on Jesus Christ, who came to be recognized as embodying in his own person the ultimate norm of action. The basic choice or challenge centered on him: do you love him and accept him as your Lord, or not? Jesus himself was now seen as the law, the model. The concrete way of discovering God's will in one's life was to be the way of imitating Jesus Christ. The fundamental challenge facing Christians was to live in their own circumstances and unique situations the way Jesus lived, and to do so in union with him whose presence remained an insistent challenge.

"Your attitude must be that of Christ," urged Paul in writing to the Christian community at Philippi (Philippians 2:5). "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ," he writes the Roman Christians (Romans 13:14). Putting on Christ

involved reproducing in one's own life the motivation and manner of acting that governed the life of Jesus himself. The early Christians recalled stories of Jesus' life and examples of his teaching. His words and acts became normative. They remembered how he lived and tried to live in that same spirit within their quite different circumstances.

The imitation was grounded in inner configuration of spirit between Jesus and his followers. Imitating Christ was less a detailed imitation of his mannerisms than an identification with his spirit. "Continue therefore to live in Christ Jesus the Lord, in the spirit in which you received him. Be rooted in him and built up in him, growing ever stronger in faith, as you were taught, and overflowing with gratitude" (Colossians 2:6-7).

Ultimately the challenge facing the Christian is, with the help of Christ's Spirit, to live as Jesus lived. "It is a life of faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me" (Galatians 2:19-20). In its most succinct form the challenge is to "love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

Surprising as it may seem, that awesome challenge brings peace, joy, fulfillment. Mary experienced some of that in accepting the challenge to reach out as Jesus' hands to the needy on the Sioux reservation. She responded to the challenging presence of Jesus Christ, with us always and everywhere.

**Article 6**

**Title: Jesus Today  
A Spirituality of Radical Freedom**

**Author: Albert Nolan**

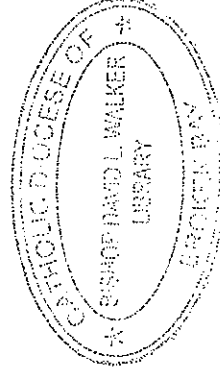
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# JESUS TODAY

A Spirituality of Radical Freedom

ALBERT NOLAN



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## PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION TODAY

In Part Three we shift our focus from the signs of our times and the spirituality of Jesus in his time to a practical spirituality for today. What are the practical steps we need to take (if we have not already done so) in order to live in our day as Jesus lived in his?

Healing takes time. There are no shortcuts or quick fixes. A cure or a conversion may happen suddenly and dramatically, but the transformation of the whole person or a whole society takes years, many years—no matter how dedicated we are or how hard we work at it. Jesus called for repentance or conversion, but the legacy he left his disciples was a way, a road, a journey. We must turn the corner, but after that we must move along the road.

Before they came to be called Christians in Antioch (Acts 11:26) and even for a while after that, Jesus' followers spoke of themselves, and were referred to by others, as *people of the Way* (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). I have called it Jesus' spirituality, but we must recognize that this spirituality, like



most others, is a process of personal and social transformation, a journey.

All spiritualities and especially mystical spiritualities are structured as journeys with steps or stages. These vary from person to person depending on time, place, and social context. Jesus does not seem to have ever spoken about particular steps or stages, but he was very much aware of the growth and development that would be needed. Hence his parables of the mustard seed and the leaven. He himself “grew in stature and wisdom” (Lk 2:52 NIV). And, as we have seen, his return from the desert to Galilee constituted a new stage in his life and spirituality.

Like all other forms of life, our spiritual life *evolves*, interacting creatively with other people, our environment, and historical events and responding to the opportunities that arise or missing them. The inner work of personal transformation is like a creative work of art rather than like the planned step-by-step journey along a mapped-out road. There is no path that is forever fixed, as some spiritual writers seem to imply. It is, rather, what Meister Eckhart calls a “Wayless Way.”

In Part Three, following the inspiration of Jesus himself, we propose some of the changes or mutations that we would have to consider along the road to greater maturity, deeper consciousness, and radical freedom. We will not be alone in walking this and other similar paths of personal transformation. The only way ahead is together, hand in hand, helping and healing one another. And yet, the place to start is with ourselves.

## CHAPTER 8

# In Silence and Solitude

The first hurdle to cross is that of *busyness*. So many people today—executives, politicians, priests, housewives, students, and activists—complain about being overextended. We like to think that there is nothing we can do about it, because there is just so much to be done. With the exception of wage laborers who have very little, if any, control over the number of hours they are forced to work, it is simply not true to say that we can do nothing about our busyness.

Busyness, whether it is a matter of making money or trying to change the world or just doing what others do, has become an obsession. We are driven. We feel obliged to work hard. “Time is money,” it is said. “Don’t waste time.” So many re-tired people will tell you that they are busier now than ever. We want people to think that we are busy even when we are not. If we don’t actually work hard and keep busy, we begin to feel guilty.

Why this obsession with work and busyness? Is it because our lives are empty and we need to fill them with busyness? Are we afraid of having nothing to do? Are we just following the crowd and doing what everyone else does? Or do we actually believe that hard work and tireless activism is all that is needed to save the world?

In truth, busyness is the supreme distraction. It distracts us from self-awareness and from awareness of the *real* world. It distracts us from awareness of God. Busyness leaves us stranded

in the upside-down world that Jesus tried to turn right side up. Constant busyness is a bit like sleepwalking. No matter how good our intentions or how altruistic our work, relentless busyness can make us like Don Quixote: fighting windmills instead of real dangers and threats.

Waking up, becoming more fully conscious and facing the realities of life, requires a certain measure of silence and solitude, as it did for Jesus.

### Jesus in the Desert

During the years that we call his "public" life, Jesus was a very busy man. Great crowds followed him, pushing and shoving to get closer to him (Mk 5:24, 31), hoping for healing or a word of wisdom. He and his disciples did not even have time to eat, Mark tells us. They would try to get away to a quiet place to rest a while, but the crowds would follow them and, in his usual caring manner, Jesus would give them his attention once again (Mk 6:31-34 par.). And yet, Jesus seems to have experienced a *profound need for silence and solitude*.

As we saw earlier, he returned as often as he could to the desert. "Desert" here does not mean a hot and sandy place with little or no vegetation. The Greek word *herēmon* means a deserted or lonely place, a quiet place. It was to some such place that he withdrew for forty days and forty nights (and maybe much longer) and to which he went very early in the morning to pray (Mk 1:35). To be alone, he and his disciples sometimes went up a mountain (Mk 9:2 par.; Mk 3:13 par.; Jn 6:2). According to Luke, when he needed time to think about his choice of twelve apostles, he spent the night on a mountain (Lk 6:12). The mountain was a deserted place.

If we wish to follow Jesus, we need to follow him first and foremost into the desert. There is no way that you and I today

can enter into the spirit of Jesus' Way without creating some space in our lives for silence and solitude. Opportunities for doing this will vary from person to person. In a family with babies or young children, one might need to find time late at night or when the children have gone to school or by visiting a church on the way home from work. A quiet room like a study or a bench in the park may be one's desert or lonely place. Those who live alone or in a religious community will have other opportunities. Those who live in a crowded shack in a slum might have to be more inventive.

It would be best if we could organize a time of peace and quiet every day. But if that is not possible we might try a longer time once or twice a week, perhaps over the weekend. A retreat once a year, valuable as that is in itself, is simply not enough. Regular periods of solitude and silence are indispensable.

Jesus' spirituality is largely about how we relate to people—loving our neighbor. Even our relation to God is most often experienced in our attitude to people. We will look at that in greater detail later. But, like Jesus and all the saints and mystics, we must also find a place in our lives for *solitude*.

The modern psychologist Anthony Storr has written a book entitled *Solitude*.<sup>1</sup> His argument is that searching for happiness and fulfillment in relationships only, as most people try to do today, is mistaken. All the world's geniuses and truly wise men and women benefited from lengthy periods of solitude. To reflect, to discover ourselves and to search for God, we need to spend some time alone.

Similarly, in today's world of incessant noise we need *silence*. We need to find a way of sometimes disconnecting from the relentless flow of words, sounds, and images that bombard us day and night. More important still, we need an inner silence that switches off the inner stream of thoughts, images, and feelings. Without this, authentic spirituality and spiritual transformation would not be possible.

### Silent Meditation

Meditation is not a mental activity like thinking about God or Jesus. Meditation, at least in the way the word is understood today, is an exercise in calming the mind and the heart—as well as the body. It is a way of arriving at inner silence.

Our minds and our hearts are restless. Our heads are cluttered with thoughts and feelings: memories, plans, fears, worries, desires, anger, and frustration. We replay in our heads what happened recently: what we said, what was said to us, what we should have said, and what we will say next time. It is all very busy. In fact, even when we manage to have some quiet time, the noisiness and frenetic busyness of our lives rushes into our minds and hearts. There is outer silence but no inner silence.

What is worse is that we seem to have no control over this jumble of thoughts and feelings. In fact, it is our thoughts and feelings that control and drive us. We are like a cork bobbing up and down on a stormy sea. The more we try to remain calm or to get something out of our heads, the more it returns and occupies our attention. Our chaotic thoughts and feelings drive us to do things we don't really want to do and to say things we know very well we should not be saying.

Meditation is a way of bringing some order and peace into this chaos by emptying our minds of all thoughts and feelings. That is not as impossible as it may sound. There is a way of doing it that has been used with much success over the centuries in Christianity and in the religions of the East.

The first Christian hermits in Egypt and Syria went off into the desert, as Jesus had done, in search of God. For them the first step was *hesychia*, or silence of the heart. This they did mostly through the repetition of what was called the Jesus Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me*. Linked some-

times to the rhythm of one's breathing, the aim of this practice was the calming of the heart and the mind. As a spiritual exercise, *hesychia* has been practiced in Orthodox Christianity to this day. Some Western mystics adopted and adapted it, especially the fourth-century writer John Cassian, who had a powerful influence on Western spirituality.

The Benedictine monk John Main, who died in 1984, popularized a similar form of meditation using a repetitive word or two that he called a *mantra* (a Sanskrit word used in the religions of the East). Many of us have found this powerfully effective in stilling the mind and silencing the heart.

Numerous other Christians have found peace of mind by following the practice that is known as "centering prayer."<sup>22</sup> In this case the repeated phrase is called one's *sacred word*, but the practice is much the same.

In the religions of the East we have the same experience of calming and emptying the mind through the practice of silent meditation focusing on the rhythm of a mantra and/or one's breathing. Yoga involves concentrating on slow rhythmic movements and controlled breathing while the mind is focused on a word, an object, or a sound like *Om*. The principal religious exercise in Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, is meditation or *zazen* (sitting still) and the focus is on one's breathing. The mystics of Islam, the Sufis, have the practice of repeating words or phrases, sometimes with special breathing exercises.

What they all have in common is the focusing of attention on one thing: a word, a sound, or one's breathing, and it is this focusing or "centering" that helps to empty the mind of all else. "In the meditation of the great religions," writes William Johnston, "one makes progress by going beyond thought, beyond concepts, beyond images, beyond reasoning, thus entering a deeper state of consciousness or enhanced awareness that is characterized by profound silence."<sup>23</sup>

Thomas Merton once said: "Contemplation is essentially a listening in silence."<sup>14</sup> As the prophet Elijah discovered in his cave on the mountain, God is not in the wind or the earthquake or in the fire but in the silence of a gentle breeze (1 Kgs 19:11-13). Or, as Meister Eckhart would have it, "Nothing is more like God than silence."<sup>15</sup>

We do not know how Jesus prayed and meditated when he went off to a desert or place of silence and solitude. What we do know is that his behavior points to an inner life of perfect calm and tranquility. He showed no sign of emotional restlessness or uncontrollable feelings and thoughts. He was at peace with himself—and with God and the world. Anything that would help us, even partially, to find such calm and tranquility would be a valuable contribution toward living as he did.

### Relaxation

The usual recommendation is that we meditate for twenty minutes twice a day. That would be helpful, but it is not necessary. It is not wise to make meditation into yet another obligation that leads to feelings of guilt whenever we cannot manage it. We do what we can. A certain measure of regularity and discipline is needed, but rigidity prevents the exercise from becoming what it should be, enjoyable and relaxing.

The mantra or sacred word we choose does not need to be particularly meaningful. It is simply a focus point that enables us to forget or ignore our chaotic jumble of thoughts and feelings. When we notice that we have drifted off again to our preoccupations and distractions, we quietly move our attention back to the repetition of the mantra.

Silent meditation is supposed to relax the mind and the heart. But this is possible only if we also do something to relax the body. The spiritual exercise of meditating would be largely

ineffective if it did not include some way of releasing the tension in our muscles.

Life today is extremely stressful. The rush and the rivalry, the threats and the dangers, the fears and worries are simply endless. They put our bodies on high alert day and night. Stress in itself is not bad for us. When we are faced with danger, our muscles become tense so as to be ready for flight or fight. When the danger passes, our muscles relax again. But if the "stressors" or things that cause high alert are constant and continuous, our muscles remain tensed up and stiff all the time. That is not healthy. Not only does the body begin to deteriorate, but the tension also affects our behavior and our peace of mind.

There are any number of ways of relaxing the body, from massage and workouts to sporting activities. But, for our purposes, all that is needed is to sit in an upright position during meditation and to relax the muscles of one's face and shoulders where most of the tension lies. If you tighten the muscles of your face, especially the jaw, and then release them, letting your mouth drop, you will notice the difference. Similarly, we hunch up our shoulders because of muscle tension. Releasing those muscles allows our shoulders to drop and relax.

There are other ways of relaxing one's body, mind, and heart. Some use music. In Africa there is the continuous repetition of a few words in song. Some Catholics make use of the repetitive prayers of the rosary. But there can no longer be any doubt about the power and effectiveness of silent meditation.

We live in a world that looks for results. The scientific and mechanistic worldview we inherit is interested only in the efficiency and practical results of any exercise. What's more, people want quick results, instant solutions. This is all part of what one might call instrumental thinking or utilitarianism. If it is not useful, throw it away.

Meditation does produce results, but not immediately and not of the kind that can be easily measured. Many people today

use meditation in the same way as they use other forms of relaxation—in order to go back to work refreshed and energized. But we do not solve the problem of busyness by simply taking time out in order to come back and work as frenetically as ever. Something more is needed. Time spent in silent meditation can teach us the value of slowing down, of wasting time by doing absolutely nothing, not even thinking. Busy people need to learn the art of doing nothing, the art of just being.

### In the Present Moment

One of the results of spending time in silence and solitude, and especially the practice of silent meditation, is that it helps us to live in the present moment, the here and now. When we empty our minds of thoughts and feelings about the past and the future, all that is left is the silence of the present moment.

According to Matthew (6:25-34) and Luke (12:22-31), Jesus taught his disciples not to worry about tomorrow, what they might eat and what they might wear. Instead, they were to set their hearts on the kingdom or family of God, which, as we saw earlier, is a here-and-now reality, even if it is still as small as a mustard seed. Jesus moved the focus of attention from the kingdom as a future event to a reality of the here and now.

What emerges clearly is that Jesus himself lived in the here and now. He must have experienced God as his *abba* in his present moment. Moreover, this must have been why he would rise early in the morning to find a lonely place to pray in solitude and silence.

Most of us live in the past or in the future. We are distracted by what happened yesterday. Our feelings and thoughts dwell upon what happened recently or sometimes upon what happened a long time ago. We can also romanticize the past.

We might want to go back to the good old days when everything was safe, secure, and certain. But the past does not exist anymore. It is not real.

Others live in the future, in the kind of world they hope to have one day, the kind of church or business they hope to create, the kind of person they would like to be. Or we worry, as Jesus says, about what we will wear and what we will eat in the future. These are imaginary worlds. They don't exist yet. What exists is the here and now, the present moment.

It is valuable to know about the past because the past helps us to understand where we are at present. It is valuable to plan for the future because that can help us to decide what to do now. But the only thing that actually exists is the here and now. And that means that the only place we can meet the living God and experience God's presence is in the here and now. This is why all spiritual writers emphasize the importance of living in the present moment.<sup>6</sup>

Personal transformation begins when we follow Jesus into the desert by setting aside time for silence and solitude. This will be our time for silent meditation, but not only that. We also need time to read, to reflect, to pray, and to allow the spirit of Jesus to seep into our bones. We go into the desert to hear what Jesus has to say and to begin to see the world as it really is. It is our time for getting to know ourselves better, for reading the scriptures and the signs of our times, and for listening to the voice of nature. It all takes time.

Living in the present moment does not mean withdrawing into one's *private* present moment. God is present here and now not only in my private life but also in the lives of everyone and in the whole universe. The present moment that we need to become aware of in silence and solitude is the present moment of today's world. We read the signs of our times in order to live in the here and now of our unfolding universe—which is the only place where God can be found.

I do not wish to imply that we can do these things *only* in silence and solitude. Much can and will be learned through interaction with others. But even the insights we gain from our interaction with people and with the earth need to be integrated into our lives during contemplative periods of silence and solitude. This is what Jesus did, and it is what we also must do.

## CHAPTER 9

# Getting to Know Oneself

According to the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus said: "One who knows everything else but does not know him/herself, knows nothing" (67). A powerful statement. The point could hardly have been made more radically and definitively.

All mystics, spiritual writers, therapists, philosophers, and counselors recognize the fundamental importance of self-knowledge. The psychologist Neville Symington, for example, speaks of self-knowledge as "the foundation-stone of mental health."<sup>1</sup> Teresa of Avila claims that "one day of humble self-knowledge is better than a thousand days of prayer," and Meister Eckhart says quite plainly: "No one can know God who does not first know him/herself."<sup>2</sup> Jesus says if you don't know yourself, *you know nothing*.

Jesus was a poet and an artist who communicated with people by painting mental pictures. In this case he exposed the ludicrousness of not knowing oneself by painting a picture of someone offering to take the speck out of a neighbor's eye while ignoring the huge log of wood in his own eye. It is a cartoon, a caricature. It is meant to be thoroughly laughable, like the equally ludicrous picture of a camel trying to get through the eye of a needle. With a log like that in your eye *you can see nothing*.

We quote the text in full:

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye,  
but do not notice the log in your own eye?

Or how can you say to your neighbor,  
 “Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,”  
 when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye?  
 You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye,  
 and then you will see clearly  
 to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.  
 (Lk 6:41-42)

Jesus goes to the heart of the matter. It is easy to see that other people have blind spots, but we are often not honest enough to recognize the blind spot or huge log of wood in our own eyes. Jesus calls this hypocrisy.

### Hypocrisy

There was nothing Jesus disliked more than hypocrisy. He loved people, but he was enraged by any display of hypocrisy, especially in the religious leaders of his time. “You hypocrites!” he exclaims again and again. The challenge was directed not only at the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus’ spirituality challenges all of us to look at ourselves and to recognize our own hypocrisy, the log in our own eye.

To be a hypocrite is to pretend to be what we are not, to present a false image of ourselves to the world. It is about the falsehood of our lives, the lies and contradictions we live. It is about our dishonesty and insincerity, our blindness. If I think I am not blind and that there is no log in my eye, then I am doubly blind, blind to my own blindness (see Jn 9:39-41).

Jesus cautions us against parading our virtues before the world like those who pray, fast, and give alms publicly in order to be noticed and admired by others (Mt 6:1-18). They are hypocrites. How easily we become whitened sepulchres (Mt 23:27). How easily the words on our lips contradict what is in our hearts (Mk 7:5-6). How much of our behavior is for show,

for the sake of our reputation or image? Jesus would be quite blunt and call it hypocrisy.

Those who say they cannot read the signs of the times but know perfectly well how to read the signs of tomorrow’s weather in the sky are hypocrites, Jesus says (Lk 12:56). When we spend time analyzing the performance of our shares on the market while we ignore the stark realities of our times, we have become hypocrites. When we try to catch someone out with a clever question while pretending to be really interested in the answer, then, like those who presented Jesus with a trick question about paying taxes, we are hypocrites (Mk 12:15). We are hypocrites too when we criticize others for doing the very things we ourselves do, like those who criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath while they themselves would “break” the Sabbath by untying their ox or donkey to take the animals to the water (Lk 13:15).

The issue here is honesty and truth. Hypocrisy is a blatant lie, a contradiction. Jesus was truthful, honest, sincere, and completely transparent. That is why his eye was clear and he could see the lies and falsehood in the world around him. That is why he could turn the world right side up and show us the *true* world. The yeast or leaven that the Pharisees were kneading into the dough was hypocrisy and lies (Lk 12:1). The leaven of the kingdom that Jesus was spreading was truthfulness and honesty (Lk 13:20-21 par).

Today, when one of the signs of our times is the crisis of individualism and the explosion of egoism, getting to know who we really are is a matter of extreme urgency. The hunger for spirituality can never find fulfillment if it remains individualistic and self-centered. We know so much more today about everything from stars to atoms. We even know a great deal more about the brain and the human psyche. But in most cases we don’t know ourselves. We continue to get ourselves out of perspective by imagining that we are separate from the rest of the universe and superior to all other beings. Too often as individuals we remain

blind to our own motives, our rationalizations, our hypocrisy, and the reality of our true selves. As a result there is a very important sense in which we can be said to know nothing.

How then can we learn to face the truth about ourselves in all honesty?

### The Ego

The log in your eye is your ego, your selfish self. What blinds you to the truth about yourself and about others is your ego. What blinds you to the truth about your ego is your ego itself. Our egos make hypocrites of us all.

Although each of us has a slightly differently structured ego, there are ways of categorizing general personality types. One way is through the enneagram. The nine enneagram types point to different compulsions and obsessions, different forms of self-centeredness. The enneagram also details the strengths of the different personality types. In recent times many thousands of people have had their eyes opened to their behavior patterns by books and courses on the enneagram.<sup>3</sup>

The beginning of self-knowledge, then, is our growing awareness of our ego and all its works. Without judging or blaming or making excuses for ourselves, we need to begin the practice of observing our behavior in different circumstances, of recognizing our compulsions and obsessions. We must begin to face as truthfully as we can our motives, including our ulterior motives and mixed motives. Sometimes our behavior may reveal itself as irrational. An honest look at ourselves might reveal that almost all of us are at least mildly neurotic. For some of us, our obsessions may turn out to be seriously neurotic. This is where we will need the help of others: a counselor or a therapist.

As we continue this lifelong process of getting to know ourselves we will notice that we have a variety of *images* of ourselves. Some will be the images we project in company or

the images others have of us. Some of these images will be true and others false. At times we may know that this or that image is not true. At other times we may believe our own lies and identify ourselves with a totally false image of who we are.

It can be helpful to observe our ego at work here—tempting us to indulge in feelings of pride and superiority or of abasement and inferiority, of self-righteousness or self-pity. These are all false images, all self-centered and hypocritical. They are not our true self.

The ego is a cunning trickster. It tries to hide from us what it is doing. At times the ego is so convinced of its own superiority that it does not feel the need to boast about it publicly. It assumes a stance of false modesty.<sup>4</sup> "Thank God I am not like other people." We then have the ultimate contradiction and hypocrisy: being proud of our humility.

It would be useful to have a sounding board or mirror, someone who can help us to see the log in our eye. Apart from making use of the expertise of a therapist or counselor when necessary and when possible, patient and honest observation by itself over a long period of time and especially during periods of silence and solitude can lead to quite extraordinary revelations about oneself.

### The Guilt Complex

As we discover more of our selfishness and hypocrisy, we might be tempted to feel thoroughly ashamed of ourselves and even to develop a guilt complex. As we uncover the ulterior motives or mixed motives behind some of our most valued relationships, our greatest achievements, and our highest ideals, we might begin to despair of ever becoming truly unselfish and loving.

Many people suffer from a debilitating guilt complex. It is one of the most irrational and contradictory attitudes of the



ego. There are those who hate themselves and blame themselves for whatever goes wrong in their lives. A surprising number of women blame themselves for being raped or assaulted. Children who were sexually abused often think it was their fault.

One source of these guilt feelings is the superego. The superego is all the "oughts" in our head. It is the inner voice that says we ought to do this and avoid that. Some people mistake their superego for the voice of conscience or the voice of God. In fact, it is our cultural, social, or religious conditioning acting as an ego above our own ego—a super-ego. Getting to know ourselves will include a growing awareness of our guilt feelings, our social conditioning, and our superego.

There are of course genuine feelings of guilt and an authentic voice of conscience, but these are manifestations of our true self, as we shall see. It is important to remember, at all times, that the ego is not our true self. Our self-centered self is a false image of who we are. It is based upon the illusion that we are separate, independent, and autonomous.

### The Flesh

The apostle Paul was painfully aware of what we today call the ego, except that he called it the flesh (*sarx*). This has led to a great deal of misunderstanding, because the word conjures up images of sexual desire, over-indulgence, and gluttony.<sup>5</sup> But when Paul lists the works of the flesh he includes hostility, conflict, jealousy, anger, rivalries, divisions, factions, envy, conceit, and competitiveness (Gal 5:19-21, 26). These we would describe as the works of the ego. The desires Paul speaks about, such as fornication, impurity, and drunkenness, are also works of the ego, not because they are desires but because they are selfish or self-indulgent desires.

There is nothing wrong with our desires as such—any of our desires. It is the ego's use of desire for selfish purposes that creates a problem. Our desires have been given to us as gifts to enable us to live life to the full. Our desires for sex, for love, for food and drink, for comfort, for peace, and for unity become twisted and distorted by our egotistical self-centeredness. That is what Paul meant by the flesh.

Paul, like most of us, really struggled with this, as we see in Romans 7:14-24. He experienced his ego as another law in him that made him do what he did not want to do. So, he concludes: "If I do what I do not want, it is no longer I [his true self] that do it, but sin [his ego] that dwells within me" (v. 20). What he calls his flesh, or the law of sin in him, we would call ego. This clearly identifies the problem as selfishness rather than desire. For centuries, well-intentioned ascetics crucified their desires because they thought that desire was the flesh that was leading them astray.

Getting to know ourselves today includes learning to recognize our desires for what they are, getting in touch with our feelings, with our emotions, like love, compassion, sadness, depression, fear, anger, resentment, and frustration. We need to become conscious of our changing moods and our possible woundedness from past hurts. As we now know, trying to suppress our feelings, desires, and emotions is not helpful at all. They are not our enemies. What matters is that we do not allow our egos to misuse them for selfish purposes.

Nor is it enough to simply observe our feelings. Sometimes we need to *feel* them. Henri Nouwen, the modern spiritual writer, provides us with a very valuable insight into how to deal with feelings of hurt and woundedness when he says:

The great challenge is living your wounds through, instead of thinking them through. It is better to cry than to worry, better to feel your wounds deeply than

to understand them, better to let them into your silence than to talk about them.

The choice you face constantly is whether you are taking your wounds to your head or to your heart. In your head you can analyze them. . . . But no final healing is likely to come from that source. You need to let your wounds go down to your heart. Then you can live through them and discover that they will not destroy you. Your heart is greater than your wounds.<sup>6</sup>

There is no need to be overwhelmed by all of this. What matters is that you begin to discover your *true self*, or what Nouwen would call your heart.

### The True Self

There is no way you can simply conquer your ego or annihilate it, as many ascetics have tried to do. Such efforts only strengthen the ego, because it is your ego that does the fighting or conquering. You cannot destroy it, but you can sideline it and transcend it. You can remove the log from your eye.

Jesus' image for your true self is your clear eye, your eye without a log or any other obstruction. "Take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly" (Lk 6:42). "Your eye is the lamp of your body. If your eye is healthy, your whole body is full of light; but if it is not healthy, your body is full of darkness" (Lk 11:34). Your true self is buried below your ego or false self, below the log of wood.

But how do you remove the log? How do you sideline your ego? How do you become unselfish and egoless?

The first step is to become fully conscious of your ego with all its machinations and duplicity. Your ego's show of confidence masks the reality of its fears, anxieties, worries, and insecurity. The next step is to recognize it as a false image of

who you are, an illusion. The final step is to disassociate yourself from it. You stand back from your egocentricity and laugh at it. You objectify it. Once you have made this false image of yourself into an object out there, you can stop identifying with it. In the words used by some spiritual traditions, you become "the witness" who looks at the false image and rejects it. That's not me. I am the witness. The witness is my true self.

We have seen Jesus doing this in the desert. He refused to identify with the false images of himself presented to him by Satan, the cunning trickster representing his ego. The false images take the form of a temptation (Mt 4:1-11 par).

For most of us it takes years of quiet reflection to do this. We drift back again and again to identify with our egos. We are tempted to act or think selfishly, and we fall for it. When we recognize what we have done, we can stop, laugh at ourselves, and return to the position of witness. The process is much the same as the practice of meditation with a mantra. We will be distracted again and again, but each time we gently return to our mantra. Whatever else, we should not feel guilty and blame ourselves for our lapses. They are par for the course.

At the same time, we will begin to notice the signs of our true self. When we start experiencing a strong desire to know the truth about ourselves, no matter how humiliating that truth might turn out to be, this is our true self emerging. When we can laugh at the antics of our ego, it is our true self that is laughing. When we are genuinely moved with feelings of compassion for people in need, that is the real self. When we begin to feel truly grateful for the many gifts that life offers us, we can be quite sure that this does not come from the ego. The ego is totally incapable of gratitude.

Genuine feelings of sorrow and regret as we recognize our own responsibility and guilt for harm done is yet another manifestation of the true self. There will be other signs too, as we shall see in subsequent chapters.

It is important to remember that we cannot get to know ourselves by merely reading about human behavior. We need periods of solitude and silence to deepen our reflections, and while we may need the help of others, in the end it will be during our quiet time that we will take the log out of our eye and recover from our long night of blindness to begin to see the world as it is and as Jesus saw it—right side up.

## CHAPTER 10

# With a Grateful Heart

Jesus saw everything in terms of God's love. His appreciation of God as his loving *abba* was not merely an occasional peak experience. Jesus was constantly aware of God moving and acting with love and care in the events of daily life. He experienced God as the one who feeds the birds, clothes the fields, and looks after each human being (Mt 6:26-30 par). In the signs of his times, especially the surprising outbursts of healing and joy, what Jesus saw and experienced was "the finger of God" (Lk 11:20). It was all God's work, the work of a warm, loving, and intimate God.

In practice this meant that Jesus was conscious of everything in life as a gift from God, a blessing. There is no evidence that he just took things for granted. He was deeply grateful for everything. His life must have been filled with prayers of thanksgiving. Only one such prayer has come down to us: "I thank you, Father, for revealing these things not to the learned and the wise but to mere infants" (Lk 10:21 par; my translation).<sup>1</sup> We can extrapolate from this that there were other prayers of thanksgiving for God's many gifts and blessings. Jesus had a grateful heart. His response to God's love was gratitude.

## The Grateful and the Ungrateful

One of the things Jesus really appreciated in the people he met was their gratefulness. This is powerfully depicted in

Luke's story of the woman who "washed" Jesus' feet with her tears (Lk 7:36-50).<sup>2</sup> She had come to anoint his feet with fragrant ointment as a sign of her gratitude for the good news that all her sins had been forgiven. She had presumably been suffering from a terrible sense of guilt. And now she just couldn't stop crying. Her flood of tears began to fall onto Jesus' feet. She tried to wipe her tears up with her hair, and then she could not resist kissing his feet.

Her copious tears, however, were not the tears of sadness or sorrow or even repentance. She wept uncontrollably because she was overcome with joyful gratitude for having been forgiven so much. She knew how deeply she was indebted to God and to Jesus. Simon, on the other hand, the Pharisee in whose house this happened, did not experience the same grateful love because he did not think that he was much in need of forgiveness or that he was particularly indebted to Jesus or to God.

Jesus felt for the woman and fully appreciated her wild gestures of grateful love. Here was someone with a truly grateful heart.

On the other hand, few things made Jesus as angry as a total lack of gratitude and appreciation. This we see in his parable about the unforgiving servant (Mt 18:23-34). The man has been forgiven a colossal debt. In today's currency it would amount to something like ten million dollars. The sum is purposely exaggerated. No servant or slave could possibly have owed his master that amount of money. It's laughable. It's a caricature.

This very fortunate servant then meets a fellow servant who owes him a mere hundred dollars. He flatly refuses to cancel it or roll it over. The man's extraordinary lack of gratitude and appreciation for what he has been given is unbelievable. That is how Jesus saw any human being who did not wish to forgive his or her neighbor. Such a refusal to forgive demonstrates a quite unbelievable ungratefulness to God who has been so good to all of us.

Ungratefulness is the work of the ego. The self-centeredness of the ego prevents it from ever being truly grateful to someone else—even to God. The individualist regards himself or herself as self-made, independent, and not beholden or indebted to anyone. To admit that something might be an undeserved gift is to admit that one might be dependent upon someone else.<sup>3</sup> There are no free gifts. There is no free lunch.

At its worst, the ego sees others as objects to be possessed, used, and exploited. They are all potential threats or competitors. At best, the ego just takes everything for granted.

The person with a grateful heart appreciates the gratuitousness of everything in life. Nothing is taken for granted. My very existence is a gift. I did not create myself. There is no way that I could have earned or deserved or merited my human existence. Everything I *have* is a gift. Other people are sent to me as blessings, even if at times they appear in disguise—a blessing in disguise, we say.

Gratefulness is an alternative attitude to all of life. It enables us to see the world right side up. The grateful heart is a manifestation of one's true self. Nothing sidelines the ego more effectively than a grateful heart.

"To be a saint," says the spiritual writer Ronald Rolheiser, "is to be fuelled by gratitude, nothing more and nothing less."<sup>4</sup> And, according to Gustavo Gutiérrez, the liberation theologian, only one kind of person transforms the world spiritually, someone with a grateful heart.<sup>5</sup>

### Prayers of Thanksgiving

Personal transformation in the spirit of Jesus would have to include the development of a grateful heart. The practice that molds and shapes one's heart toward gratefulness most effectively is the daily practice of praying prayers of thanksgiving. What we need is not the occasional prayer of thanks when

something exceptionally good has happened to us. What we need is continuous daily prayers of thanksgiving. As Paul says, "Pray without ceasing; give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thes 5:17-18). To develop a grateful heart we need to be thanking God day and night, whenever we have a chance and all through our lives.

Moreover, generalized prayers of thanks for everything are not enough. What we need are specific prayers of thanks for specific things: my health, my eyesight, my mind, my experience of life. We can also say prayers of thanksgiving for our friends and relatives, and for all the people and events that have formed us over the years. The list is endless.

We tend to make lists, at least in our minds, of all our complaints, all the things we think we need or want, all the things we don't have. That is why prayers of intercession, asking God for this and that, are so much more popular than prayers of thanksgiving. There is a place for intercession, but on the whole we need to spend more time expressing our gratitude for the countless gifts that have been showered upon us. The writer David Steindl-Rast in his book *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer* defines prayer as "grateful living."<sup>6</sup> And Meister Eckhart once said, "If the only prayer I ever say is Thank You . . . that is enough."

But the ego is a cunning trickster. It can use even our prayers of thanksgiving for its own selfish purposes.

### Unselfish Prayers

Prayers of thanksgiving can become selfish. If I thank God for all that I have and all that has been given to me, without any sense of gratitude for what others have been given, I will end up thoroughly selfish. Thank God I have enough food when others don't. Thank God I am healthy even if others around me are not. Thank God I am safe; I don't know about the others.

Thank God I am honest and compassionate, unlike most other people. That was the prayer of the Pharisee in the parable: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector" (Lk 18:10-11). That is not the prayer of a truly grateful heart; it is the selfishness and pride of a swollen ego.

A grateful heart will thank God for *everything* that is good—in my life or in the lives of others. It may be difficult to thank God for the good fortune of others who have gifts, achievements, and friends that I do not have, but that is the test of genuine gratefulness. All else is envy and jealousy.

How easily we thank God for what we have, while we envy others who have more or who have some of the things we want. And when someone else is preferred over me, how easy it is to feel jealous instead of thanking God that the other person is now loved and affirmed. A truly grateful heart rejoices over the good fortune of everyone and anyone.

A grateful heart will also read the signs of the times with an eye for what is best for everyone, not just for me. My true self will be grateful for the movement of the spirit that leads postmodern people to search for a new spirituality. My true self will rejoice with all those who benefit from the globalization of the struggle for justice. We can learn to be deeply grateful for the development of compassion and peace anywhere in the world. The truly grateful person will be pleased to discover that others outside of his or her own religious circles can teach him or her something about transcending one's ego. We thank God for that.

And above all we thank God for the discoveries of the new science, our expanding universe and the mystery of it all, that will give future generations such a great advantage over our generation. We can even thank God for the growing awareness of the destructiveness of individualism and the recognition that we are heading for extinction. That awareness, that recognition, could be a blessing in disguise.

### Personal Transformation

Prayers of thanksgiving are deeply transformative. When we practice this kind of prayer daily, for some time and inclusive of others, it changes our attitude to life. It makes us more appreciative of life, of people, and of God. In some cases this can show itself as a change of personality.

When we learn to see everything in life as a free gift, we no longer move around with the long face of those who experience life as drudgery, a boring struggle with one problem after another. Instead of being full of complaints, pessimistic, and impossible to please, we become happy, contented, and grateful for what we have. Instead of being cynical and seeing only the negative in people and events, we learn to appreciate the goodness in other people.

A deeply grateful heart can change one's attitude to God too. I no longer just *think* that God is good and *believe* it because I have been told so. I begin to *feel* that God is good and that God loves me—and everyone else.

### In the Midst of Evil

The challenge, though, is to develop and maintain a grateful heart in the midst of intolerable suffering and evil. We don't thank God for what is wrong in the world. When we are surrounded by so much pain and suffering, so many tragedies and so much cruelty, how can we continue with prayers of joyful thanksgiving?

The danger is that in order to maintain our joyful gratitude we play down the suffering and evil in the world or just ignore it. We find it difficult to hold the two together: the glorious giftedness of life and the horrendous suffering that most people experience as daily living. Nor does it help to say that suffering is good

for us, or that good can come out of it, or that it is outweighed by the goodness of God's gifts. Worst of all is telling the victims who are oppressed, downtrodden, or abused that they should just accept their fate and thank God for what they do have.

On the other hand, it doesn't help to become bitter and cynical about our suffering world, to despair and to hate all who are cruel and merciless. We cannot allow the evil in the world to destroy in us the spirit of humble gratitude.

If we are going to be honest and sincere, as Jesus was, we must face the full horror of human suffering and allow ourselves to be outraged by the unimaginable cruelty of so many of our fellow human beings. Jesus had no illusions about that and there is no evidence that he ever played it down. He was overcome with compassion for all who were suffering in any way and he abhorred every kind of cruelty and wickedness. But he also had a joyously grateful heart.

Compassion and gratitude are not incompatible. When we allow ourselves to be moved by feelings of sympathy and compassion for others, we are imitating Jesus. In fact we are experiencing something that is divine. Jesus was compassionate because his Father was compassionate, and he taught his followers to be compassionate too—because God is compassionate (Lk 6:36).

Compassion is a gift from God, one of the most powerful of all God's gifts to us. We can therefore thank God for our feelings of compassion without in any way diminishing the reality of the suffering that evoked our feelings of compassion in the first place. We don't thank God for the suffering, but we are pleased to see people waking up gradually to the pain and suffering of others, and to the reality of human cruelty. Human cruelty, of course, is what happens when we humans have no compassion at all, when we lose all feeling for the other, when the ego reigns supreme.

Compassion finds expression in prayers of intercession and in action. The value of prayers of intercession is that they enable

us to express our care and concern for others and our recognition of our dependence upon God. But if the compassion is genuine, then prayer will never become a substitute for action. We are compelled to act and to act boldly wherever we can.

Another important factor in the development and maintenance of a grateful heart in the midst of evil is *trust*. Jesus put all his trust in God. He was hopeful and remained hopeful, despite all the pain and suffering, despite all the cruelty and evil, despite all the failures and disappointments. We will be able to develop and maintain a grateful heart not only when we recognize all of life as a gift but also when we learn to put our trust in God. God is at work in our world today and in the future.

Finally there is the problem of my own pain and suffering. I cannot feel joyfully thankful to God when I am angry about my own sufferings and when I am overcome with self-pity. Why does God allow this to happen to me? That is my ego speaking. But then, how does one deal with painful illnesses, tragic accidents, bereavement, and failure? How does one suffer graciously—as Jesus did?

The answer, as we shall see, is to be found in the mystical experience of oneness with God, with ourselves, with others, and with the universe.<sup>7</sup>

## CHAPTER 11

# Like a Little Child

Of all the things Jesus turned upside down, none was more surprising and unexpected than his depiction of a little child instead of an adult as the model we should imitate and learn from. The image he put forward as the ideal to strive for was not the image of some great heroic figure, a person of great strength and power, a superstar, or even a wise old man or woman or a Buddha-like contemplative. The image of true greatness that he put before his disciples and lived up to himself was the image of a little child. For Jesus, personal transformation means becoming like a child. Why?

## Humility

When his disciples were arguing about who was the greatest, Jesus put his arm around a little child (Mk 9:36-37 par). According to Jesus, the least or most insignificant persons in the society are the greatest (Lk 9:48). In the society and culture of the time, the child had no standing or status whatsoever. The child was a "nobody." The implication is that Jesus and those who want to follow him are "nobodies," right at the bottom of the social ladder.<sup>8</sup> For Jesus, the child was a model of radical humility (Mt 18:3-4). Those who wish to follow him will have to become as humble as little children.

However, it is important to notice that you cannot become humble by merely deciding to do so. No amount of determination and will power can make you humble. The harder you try, the less you are likely to succeed, because this kind of effort will be the work of your ego. What you can do is become more *aware* of your pride or lack of humility—of your ego.

Humility is a matter of truth, of recognizing the truth about yourself. To imagine that you are superior to other people when you are not, or inferior to others when you are not, would be to have a false image of yourself. Recognizing the truth about yourself entails recognizing the futility of all comparisons in terms of superior and inferior. Competition and rivalry are the work of the ego.

Since the ego is a false image of oneself, the best way to undermine or sideline it is to grow in awareness or consciousness of the truth about oneself without comparing and without competing. In other words, you become as humble as a child by becoming more aware of your true self. The child was Jesus' image of a person's true self.

Fundamental to his choice of the child as a model was Jesus' well-attested love for children. When his disciples wanted to keep the children away from him because the adults were busy with matters of great seriousness and importance, he was indignant and rebuked the disciples (Mk 10:13-14 par): "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them." Parents were pushing their children forward to have them blessed or just touched by this amazing man of God. But Jesus saw something more in these children, something truly admirable and lovable. In them he saw something of what his kingdom-family was about. "To them belongs the kingdom" (see Mk 10:14-16 par).

Jesus loved children not merely because they are "nobodies"—overlooked and neglected. Jesus loved children because they are not hypocrites. At their stage of life they are still open and sincere—and in a truly remarkable way they are still spontaneously *trusting*.

## Childlike Trust

In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus is struck by the trust and contentment of infants in their mothers' arms: "Jesus saw infants being suckled. He said to his disciples: These infants taking milk are like those who enter the kingdom" (22a). The reference is to infants, but the attitude of trusting the parent usually continues into childhood before being gradually eroded as the child grows up.

Babies in the womb and after birth have what is called 'basic trust.'<sup>72</sup> It is pre-conceptual and involuntary—a natural instinct. They experience themselves as one with their environment and have no reason to mistrust anyone or anything. Gradually, as they become more and more independent and as they begin to experience rejection of one kind or another, real or apparent, growing children learn to mistrust, becoming suspicious of others and of their environment. The isolated ego takes over, aggressive, fearful, mistrusting, and wanting to control its environment.

Jesus recognized in children, and even more in infants, the kind of total and unquestioning trust that he had in God, his *abba* Father. In that sense Jesus was exceptionally childlike. That of course is not the usual image people have of him. He has been accorded glorious titles that exalt him far above anything we associate with children. He is depicted as the all powerful, all knowing king of kings and mighty Savior. Describing him as childlike, however, does not mean that he was weak, immature, inexperienced, or naive. It means that he drew his strength and self-confidence from his childlike trust in God.

We can see this in his amazing fearlessness. He was not afraid of the scribes and Pharisees. He was not afraid of what they would think of him or say about him. He was not afraid of what they or the chief priests or the Sanhedrin or Herod or Pilate might do to him. And at every opportunity he encouraged his disciples and friends by saying: Do not fear; do not worry; trust



God (Mt 6:25-34; 10:19, 26-31 par). Where other teachers might have had long lists of "do-nots" or prohibitions, Jesus' principal concern seems to have been that people not be paralyzed by fear.

It would be wrong to think that in times of danger Jesus did not experience feelings of fear. We are told that he "sweated" blood in Gethsemane at the prospect of being arrested, tortured, and crucified (Lk 22:44). But he was not paralyzed by his fear; he did not allow it to determine his behavior. He trusted his Father and prayed his famous prayer: "Your will be done" (Mk 14:36 par). Feelings of fear are natural and indispensable in situations of danger, but what we eventually decide to do in such situations is another matter. Jesus could cope with fear because of his wholehearted trust and confidence in God.

There are still other reasons, I believe, for Jesus' choice of the child as a model. It is not only the humility and trustfulness of our childhood that we need to return to, but also our childhood sense of wonder and playfulness.

### A Sense of Wonder

One of the most remarkable qualities of a healthy child is a sense of wonder. Everything is new and surprising. We have all seen a child spellbound before some natural phenomenon that we take for granted. Most of us have seen the wonder and awe on the face of a child seeing the ocean for the first time. Watching the waves rushing in, bursting onto the beach before returning quietly, the child can hardly believe her eyes. She runs away from the approaching wave and then runs back when the wave recedes. Is the sea just teasing the little one? For a child, who has not been deprived of its childhood in one way or another, life is magical and everything is a miracle.

As we grow up and go to school and learn to cope with the practical demands of the world we live in, we generally lose our sense of wonder. We begin to take everything in life for

granted. Instrumental thinking takes over and we become practical and pragmatic. Our sense of wonder is no longer useful. It doesn't enable us to achieve anything. So we suppress it and get on with life. But, according to Einstein, when we do that, we die. He once said: "The most beautiful experience we can have is of the mysterious. The person to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead." There are people who never lose their sense of wonder (or regain it in later life): artists, poets, mystics, nature lovers, and scientific geniuses like Einstein.

Reading between the lines of the gospels it seems abundantly clear to me that Jesus had a deep sense of wonder. He was enthralled by the beauty of lilies of the field, whose splendor, he felt, far surpassed that of King Solomon in all his regalia (Mt 6:28-29 par). He marveled at the birds of the air that find food without having to sow and reap and store in barns (Mt 6:26 par). He noticed the miracle of wheat that grows quietly and invisibly while the farmer sleeps, "The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head" (Mk 4:28). In all these marvels of nature, Jesus saw the mysterious hand of God. He was a mystic and a poet.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus must surely have noticed that children have an unspoiled sense of wonder. Would that not have been one of the things he loved in children, their fascination with all of life? Would that not have been one of the reasons why he chose the child as a symbol of true spirituality? Would that not have been what he meant by welcoming the kingdom like a little child (Mk 10:15 par), namely, with a sense of awe and amazement?

### Wonder Today

An increasing number of people today are retrieving their suppressed sense of wonder. The movement of the new science from a mechanistic worldview to a new worldview that sees a

universe full of mystery evokes a profound sense of wonder and fascination in almost everyone who becomes aware of it.<sup>4</sup> In chapter 4 we saw something of the wonders and marvels scientists are discovering every day.

Wonder, however, is not a way of thinking or knowing. Wonder itself does not provide me with new information or new understanding. I see something or hear something or hear about something, and then I just stand there in awe, stunned and spellbound. Wonder isn't even a special kind of feeling or emotion. It is a profound experience, but, more important still, it is a form of consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

Wonder cannot be switched on and off at will. Nor is it the result of hard work and determined effort. All you can do is *allow* it to happen to you. Faced with mystery of one kind or another, a natural phenomenon or a human phenomenon, you can let go and allow your sense of wonder to take over. What then happens is that you are swept away by your consciousness of mystery.

As we have noted, our sense of wonder is of itself *useless*. It does not contribute directly to our success in life or to our moral growth or to any other goal we may set for ourselves—all the things that have to do with instrumental thinking and planning. Its value lies in the fact that it wells up from our true self and not from our ego or false self. The ego cannot make use of genuine wonder for any of its selfish purposes. In fact, the ego cannot control our sense of wonder at all. It can only suppress it.

All mystics insist that their experience of God is not knowledge or understanding. It goes beyond that. It is a kind of unknowing or darkness. Yet it is a reality, a real form of consciousness. It would seem then that mystical consciousness is closely related to awe and wonder. The mystic stands in awe at the mystery of God's love.

An important part of the inner work of personal transformation would be to allow ourselves to be carried away by wonder, as often as we can. Nature would be a good place to start—from flowering plants to birds weaving a nest. The new science

provides plenty of material for enthrallment and wonder. I mention two examples: the instructions contained in our genes woven together into a single DNA strand in each of our human cells would fill a thousand books of six hundred pages each! And we have billions of cells in our bodies. Our brains are more complex than any human technology. There are 100 billion nerve centers in the brain and each of them has up to 150,000 connections! What a marvel we are!

Human technology can also be an object of wonder. A computer is a miracle of human ingenuity. Then there is the marvel of human language. How do we make all the connections and interpret all the nuances and inflections to understand a sentence? And the human face itself is such a marvel of expressiveness! Eventually we can begin to see everything in the universe as a miracle and a mystery.

### Playfulness and Joy

Finally, I would like to draw attention to another quality that we associate with childhood: playfulness, laughter, and fun. Children know how to enjoy themselves by pretending. They pretend to be grown-ups (mother, father, nurse, bride, doctor) or to be driving a car or to be frightened by something. We know how children can double up with laughter and excitement when adults agree to pretend and to play with them. Jesus noticed the play-acting of children in the marketplace as they argued about whether they would play at, and sing the songs of, a wedding or a funeral (Lk 7:32 par).

There is a superficial similarity between playfulness and hypocrisy. Both involve pretending to be what one is not. The difference is that the hypocrite is serious, while the child does it for fun. The hypocrite is living a lie. The child knows the truth, and that is what makes it funny. In fact, the best way to deal with one's hypocritical ego is to learn to laugh at it.

Playfulness, like wonder, is one of the childlike qualities we tend to lose as we grow up and become more serious. While we may sometimes laugh and joke, few of us would associate such humor with spirituality and mysticism. But that is far from the truth. In her classical work on mysticism, Evelyn Underhill has a section on the joy, playfulness, and childlike gaiety of the mystics.<sup>6</sup> Jesus in particular is almost always portrayed as singularly humorless and deadly serious.<sup>7</sup> If nothing else, Jesus' love for children would belie such an image.

The problems of the world today are no laughing matter, we say. But as we learn to put our trust in God, really and truly, and as we learn to participate in God's great work with hopefulness and abandon, we will find that, despite everything, we can laugh again and be as carefree and joyful as little children.

### Beyond Childishness

There is a world of difference between being childlike and being childish. To be childlike is to imitate the characteristics of childhood that are deeply human and of permanent value, the attitudes most of us lose, unfortunately, as we grow up: humility and sincerity, basic trust and freedom from cares, a sense of wonder and joyful playfulness.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, to be childish is to imitate or perpetuate the child's temporary qualities that are immature and based upon the child's lack of experience. To imitate in one's adult years the innocence and naïveté of children is childish. To trust everyone and anyone who comes around, as a child might do through lack of experience, is naïve and immature. Children have to be taught not to trust just anyone on the street. To play with fire, as a child might do out of ignorance of the dangers, would indicate a serious lack of maturity.

A child's trust in God might also be somewhat naïve and immature. The child might picture God as a kind of Father

Christmas who gives us the presents we ask for, or as an invisible person who manipulates things around us to prevent us from stumbling and falling. This is an immature image of God and an immature form of trust that would be inappropriate and childish in an adult.

Unfortunately, this is what putting all one's hope and trust in God means for far too many adults. They imagine that they can trust God to manipulate events in their favor especially if they ask him "nicely." That is not childlike trust; it is childishness based upon an immature understanding of God. We should not blame people for this, but we must also not allow it to cloud our own understanding of childlike trust, the kind of trust that Jesus had.

Childish trust in God is also sometimes used as an excuse for not doing what we can and ought to do ourselves. I am thinking in particular of people who do not get involved in struggles for justice where they could do so, because they believe that all one needs to do is pray and then "let God take care of it." While this kind of trust should be avoided, it should not lead us to overlook the fundamental importance of childlike trust in God. Here everything depends upon the development of a more mature understanding of God, which we will explore later.

Jesus' choice of the little child as a model provides us with an image of the kind of person we need to become if we are to grasp the full significance of his spirituality. We see this in his famous prayer of thanksgiving: "I thank you Father for revealing these things not to the learned and the wise but to mere infants" (Lk 10:21 par; my translation). In other words, Jesus' message can be properly understood only by those who are childlike. Perhaps that is why some would say that the saint who most resembled Jesus was Francis of Assisi—with his childlike humility, his childlike trust in God, his sense of wonder, and his joyful personality.

8:34-35 parr). No wonder we are told to sit down and consider the cost before we think of following Jesus (Lk 14:25-33).

There can be no personal transformation without detachment. But what does that mean for us today?

## Detachment

Detachment is not a popular word today. It seems to imply aloofness and indifference. When we accuse someone of being detached, we usually mean that person lacks feeling or passion for something or somebody. But that is not what the word means in the many spiritual traditions that make use of it. Detachment, properly understood, means *freedom*, inner freedom. And, although it is not a word Jesus used, detachment expresses very well an important element in his spirituality: the ability to let go. In the Christian tradition this has been spoken of as “purity of heart” or as the process of becoming “poor in spirit.”

For Meister Eckhart, detachment is more fundamental than love itself, because without freedom from our attachments we cannot love fully and unconditionally.<sup>2</sup> We are not free to love until we are willing to stop clinging to our possessions of one kind or another. Otherwise, like the rich young man, our love and our commitment will always be impeded.

Our egos chain us down with a multitude of attachments. Our egos cling desperately to things, to people, to times and places, to reputation and image, to professions and ministries, to our ideas and practices, to success and to life itself. These are our chains. We need to take a closer look at them.

## Our Attachments

Money and possessions are among the most obvious of our attachments. Our possessions include luxuries, comforts, and

## CHAPTER 12

# Letting Go

The challenge Jesus addressed to the rich young man was to *let go* of his possessions (Mk 10:21-22 parr). The man simply could not bring himself to do that. He was too strongly attached to his wealth; he was enslaved to his possessions. What was being asked of him was not destitution or deprivation. “Sell your possessions,” Jesus said, “then come follow me.” The man would have become part of a sharing community and he would have had the security that comes from trusting his brothers and sisters—and God. But he was not sufficiently *detached* to do it.

What Jesus expected of those who followed him was complete detachment. They had to be willing to drop their nets and leave their boats, their homes, and their families (Mk 1:17-20 parr; 10:28-30 parr)—perhaps not for life, but at least for long periods of time while they went around the villages preaching. Moreover, when they were on the road preaching they were expected to travel lightly: no money, no bag, no provisions, no extra clothes (Mk 6:7-10 parr).<sup>1</sup> Like Jesus himself they would have to let go of all worries about food and clothing (Mt 6:25-34 par).

Nor was it only possessions they would have to let go of. They were expected to be detached from their reputations too: “Rejoice . . . when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you” (Lk 6:22-23 par). And, most demanding of all, they would have to let go of their attachment to their lives: “Those who want to save their life will lose it” (Mk

pleasures. Not that there is anything wrong with these things in themselves. It is our desperate clinging to them that enslaves us. Enjoying life is not a problem, nor is pleasure and desire. The problem is our selfish inability to let go of these things when we are challenged by the needs of others.

Unless we are planning to join a sharing community, we do not need to give away our money and sell all our possessions. We need to become detached from them. Of course it is easy to think we are detached and that we would be willing to give up anything if need be. The proof of our inner freedom comes when we respond to the needs of others generously and spontaneously. If for the sake of everyone we were challenged to lower our standard of living, would we have the personal freedom to do that?

We can become attached to any number of other things too, like cleanliness, neatness, and order. Good as these things are in themselves, we can become so obsessed with them that they become more important than the feelings of people who are not clean or neat or orderly. Then these things become our chains. They prevent us from giving ourselves to others in love.

The same is true of our likes and dislikes, our preferences in food and drink. Such preferences are harmless in themselves, but how easily we can become compulsive and unyielding about them. That is not freedom.

We can become attached to *people* too. Much of what passes for love in our upside-down world is in fact possessiveness. We cling to people because we think we need them. "I need you" is supposed to be an expression of love. Some people like to be told: "I cannot live without you." True love is not based upon my needs. True love is not possessive. True love gives other people freedom to breathe and to be themselves. Attachment to others and excessive dependence upon them is not love.

Many of us would be willing to give up anything except our *time*. How easily we cling to *our* time like some kind of

precious possession. The truly free person is able to say that whoever comes is the right person and whenever that person comes is the right time.<sup>3</sup> We see Jesus doing this when he wants to have some quiet time with his disciples. The people follow them. Jesus is sufficiently detached to attend to their needs and postpone his quiet time (Mk 6:30-34 par).

Of course, I may need to divide my time among several people and ensure that I still have some time for myself, but can I do this freely? Can I be detached about it?

One of the strongest of all attachments is to one's *reputation*. I might be willing to give up anything except my good name. Jesus' radical freedom included the freedom to do what was best for people, even at the cost of his good name. He caused a scandal by associating with prostitutes and other sinners. He was accused of being a drunkard and a glutton (Mt 11:19 par). Anyone who is attached to his or her public image will be seriously hampered in what he or she can do or say. What will people think? What will they say? Will I lose my reputation for virtue, for kindness, for punctuality?

The truly free person will even be detached from his or her *ministry or profession*. We can become so attached to our work that, like the rich young man, we could never give that up no matter who asked us to do so. We are enslaved to it with chains that cannot be broken. It is like our enslavement to success. Of course we try to be successful, but what happens when we fail? Would we have the inner freedom to accept failure—as Jesus did?

### Attachment to Ideas and Practices

Some people have a particularly strong attachment to *their ideas*. One gets the impression that such people have identified themselves so completely with their ideas that they think if they were to change them they would lose their identity and

just die. Truly free persons are open-minded. Their only commitment is to the truth, whatever that may turn out to be, wherever it may come from, and no matter how much they may have to change their most treasured thoughts and convictions in order to embrace it. Anything else is slavery.

Even more upsetting for some people is the undermining of their long held *certainties*. The challenge they face may not be that of changing one idea for another but rather that of replacing certainties with uncertainty. As we move into a world where many of the things that we took for granted in the past are now being questioned, and when the greatest of our scientists are telling us that they don't know, we can cope only by being truly detached from our own ideas and certainties.

Obsession with absolute certainty is yet another form of slavery. It is a way of finding security without having to put all our trust in God. It is fundamentally no different from clinging to our possessions for security.

The ideas and certainties from which we need to become detached may include our ideas and certainties about God. The search for God progresses as we recognize again and again the inadequacy of our thinking about God. We have to have the freedom to abandon some, if not all, of our former certainties. This can plunge us into a "dark night." But that may be the only way forward toward true union with God.

These chains and attachments are not only ideas but also *practices*, which can be cultural, religious, or spiritual. All the mystics warn us of attachment to devotions. I might find a particular devotional practice helpful and there may be no need to give it up as long as I do not become attached to it. Am I free to give it up if need be? The same is true of the practice of meditation that we spoke about earlier. It can become a chain around my neck if I do not have the inner freedom to do without it when for whatever reason I am called upon to do so. An example might be the need of my neighbor. If someone needs my

help here and now and for a long period of time, I might have to give up meditation for the duration.

Meister Eckhart, who preached ceaselessly about contemplation and mystical prayer, urges us to be detached even from our contemplation. In one of his sermons<sup>4</sup> he turns the story of Martha and Mary on its head by seeing Mary at the feet of Jesus as a symbol of someone who has become so attached to contemplation that she is unable to get up and help out in the kitchen when that happens to be what God wants her to do. Mary may have chosen the better part, but even the better part can become an object of attachment.

## Loss

Letting go of our attachments requires self-discipline. It is never easy, although the relief once we have become detached from something is a great joy. In some ways it is like giving up an addiction. We feel so much better afterwards, or at least when we have recovered from the withdrawal symptoms. We are free.

Sometimes instead of our letting go of attachments voluntarily, they are taken away from us. While we are still clinging to our money and possessions, for example, we can suddenly lose all of it or most of it. People to whom we were possessively attached might die. Our public image or reputation may be ruined by circumstances that are beyond our control. Our ideas might be publicly exposed as false.

This kind of loss is generally experienced as a tragedy, but it could also help us to become more detached. It could bring us to the realization that we can actually live without some of the things we were so attached too. It's the hard way. But, for some of us, it may be the only way. Spiritual writers call this "passive purgation."

### The Willingness to Die

We have emphasized the fact that detachment is not a matter of giving up everything but of being willing to give up anything when called upon to do so. That is true inner freedom. In this sense, Jesus was radically free. He was not hindered in his freedom by any attachments at all, not even an attachment to his own life. He was willing to die if that were to become necessary.

We recall Jesus' paradoxical statement that when we try to save our lives, when we cling to our lives, when we are not willing to give up our lives for others, we are already dead. But as soon as we are willing to die, we become fully alive—and free. Most of us walk around with the threat of death hanging over us. We cope by just trying to forget that one day we shall die. Death is, as Paul says, the last enemy. But if we can learn to embrace death, we can take the sting out of it and then be truly free.

The willingness to die is the ultimate detachment. It incorporates all other forms of detachment, because it is the ultimate letting go of our ego.

As we have seen, attachment is the work of the ego. Because the ego itself is an empty illusion, it seeks security and substance in wealth, titles, professions, being the author of a book or any other claim to fame. When we identify ourselves with our ego, we identify with these images of ourselves. Our attachments become our identity and our true self is overlooked. But when we gain our inner freedom, when we become detached from these images and "identities," we are able to sideline or transcend our self-centeredness. Our ego can be seen for what it is, an empty illusion. What is more, we no longer need to preserve or cling to our lives—we can let go.

### Trusting God

None of this is possible without putting one's trust in God. If it were possible to let go of everything without grounding ourselves in God, we would become like an astronaut who has let go of the spaceship and will now float forever in outer space. However, trusting God and being grounded in God does not mean attachment to God. It is not as if we become detached from everything except God, so that in the end we cling desperately to God because there is nothing else left to cling to.

Trusting God, as Jesus did, does not mean clinging to God; it means letting go of everything so as to surrender ourselves and our lives to God. There is a difference between attachment and surrender. In the end we must become detached from God too. We must let go of God in order to jump into the embrace of a loving Father whom we can trust implicitly. We don't need to hold on tightly, because we will *be held*—like a child in the arms of its parents.

There are people who cling to God. They make God into a crutch that they feel they must lean on because they are so wounded. That is understandable enough, and we should never lose our sympathy for such people. But there is a better way. We can let go. We can surrender. We can give ourselves in wild abandonment. We can trust God. Clinging, even clinging to God, is the work of a frightened ego. Surrender and trust come from the depths of our true self.

We do not know how Jesus felt or what he thought as he hung in agony on the cross, but there is a very ancient Christian tradition that he felt abandoned by God. In Mark and Matthew he is depicted as reciting Psalm 22, which begins: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" (Mk 15:34-35; Mt 27:46-47). The text is quoted partly in Hebrew and partly in Aramaic: "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"—which is unusual and in itself a

good reason for regarding the tradition as very old. But that does not mean that in the end Jesus did not surrender, as he always did, to the mysterious will of God. Luke indicates this by quoting Jesus' last words as: "Father, into your hands I surrender my spirit" (Lk 23:46; my translation).

Becoming free, radically free, takes time. Liberating ourselves from our attachments one by one is the work of a lifetime. It is based upon a growing experience of oneness with God. In that, Jesus, as always, leads the way.



# Reflection Questions

## Article 6:           **Personal Transformation**

Human beings are social beings. In our daily life we encounter many persons. We retain in our memory some of them. Others will be lost or forgotten. Some of them are important and others are not.

However, Jesus encountered people with sincerity and treated all with equal respect. Nevertheless, he also challenged them. His love for people is **critical**, because he wants them to mature in love by asking them to change old habits and thoughts, and therefore become a new creature.

- a) *How can your faith in Christ be challenge for your life and for your community?*
  
- b) *How can your faith in Christ be a **critical moment** which aims to make the “World” a better “World”?*