

CHAPTER NINE

THE RISEN JESUS

(Catechism nn. 638-682; 441-463)

The Risen Lord (Catechism n. 638-682, 441-463, 484-486)

**I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord.
He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary ...
On the third day he rose again.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come to judge the living and the dead.**

After Jesus' death his disciples had experiences that convinced them that Jesus had been taken into life from the tomb and was in communion with God and with them in a new way. Their experiences and conviction are a matter of history. The words in which they expressed their conviction about the risen Jesus take us beyond the language that they used of him while he was living among them prior to his death. We are dealing with an understanding that is the fruit of faith, and so we should expect their language to be more poetic, more symbolic. How else can we speak of what lies beyond space and time as we know it? Real things happened to them and they understood these happenings as being related to Jesus. That much is fact. When, however, they attempted to communicate their understanding of the implications that these facts had for Jesus in his exalted state, they had no choice but to use metaphoric, symbolic language. As we read their words we must allow the wonder of their inspired art to draw us into what is necessarily beyond words. In this way we may capture something of their lively faith and even recognise some of our own experiences in theirs.

Matthew concludes his Gospel with a wonderful scene on a mountain in Galilee. We see portrayed there the mixture of doubt and faith experienced by the disciples, and we hear an account of the mission given to them by Jesus – a mission that is universal in scope, and supported by Jesus' promise to be with them forever: 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:18-20).

Luke has a scene in which two disciples are journeying away from Jerusalem and the community. They are inspired by reflecting more deeply and in the presence of Jesus on the sacred Scriptures, and they experience his presence powerfully at a Eucharist. They hurry back to the community where their experience is confirmed. This leads into a community Eucharist and a community experience of Jesus' real presence, the gift of the Spirit and the mission he entrusts to them. Jesus is no longer with them as he was prior to his death (he is 'in heaven' – he is with God), but they know-in-faith that he is truly present to them (see Luke 24:13-52).

John has a personal, intimate scene – this time with Mary of Magdala, who knows Jesus is with her when he calls her by name. As in Luke's Gospel this personal encounter opens up into a community Eucharist in which Jesus' disciples experience his presence and the gift of Jesus' Spirit, and with it a profound forgiveness (19:23). Thomas represents all of us who doubt. His doubts are allayed when he touches Jesus' wounds (20:24-29).

This is something familiar to all Jesus' disciples who experienced Jesus' presence and power especially when they reached out to care for the needy (touching Jesus' wounds). Those who edited John's Gospel after his death, added another scene, beautifully portraying the mission experienced by the disciples ('fishers of men'), an intimate Eucharist on the shore, forgiveness and the central importance of love, and its relationship to mission (John 21).

As we read these post-crucifixion scenes, we are very aware of the symbolic, metaphorical, nature of the literature. It is important to realize that the kinds of questions evoked by a love-portrait, a faith-portrait, differ from the kinds of questions evoked by a straightforward description of factual events. We are looking for the assertions being made by the evangelists in these symbolic narratives.

The earliest accounts of post-crucifixion experiences are not those found in the Gospels. In a letter from Ephesus back to the community in Corinth (c. 53AD), Paul writes (Catechism n.639):

'I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me (1Corinthians 15:3-8).

The risen Jesus is alive

The New Testament uses a variety of terms to speak about the Jesus whom the disciples experienced after his death. The simplest term is to say that he is 'alive'. John has Jesus say:

'You will see me; because I live, you also will live (John 14:19).

Luke writes:

'After his suffering Jesus presented himself alive to the apostles by many convincing proofs'(Acts 1:3; see 25:19).

We read in Peter's First Letter:

'He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit' (1Peter 3:18).

The risen Jesus has been 'taken up'('assumed') into 'glory'

Luke writes:

'He was taken up into heaven'(Acts 1:2).

'God has glorified his servant Jesus' (Acts 3:13).

He has Jesus say:

'Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?'(Luke 24:26).

Jesus is Lord

Paul declares: 'He was taken up in glory' (1 Timothy 3:16).

We are to share this destiny with him:

'He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory' (Philippians 3:21).

The risen Jesus has been 'raised from the dead'.

When the disciples speak of Jesus 'being raised' they are focusing on the whole reality of his human condition. They are asserting that the whole of his humanity, all that it means to be human, has been transformed and taken up into life by God.

'You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth. He is not here. He has been raised' (Matthew 28:6).

Paul tries to describe the difference between the present human condition and the condition of Jesus (a condition we are all destined for) after death:

'What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown an ensouled body, it is raised a spiritual body' (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).

Titles used of the risen Jesus

How did Jesus' disciples think of Jesus in his resurrected state? They experienced his power working in them and through them bringing about the healing and redeeming reign of God. They experienced his Spirit filling their hearts and re-creating their world. As already noted in Chapter 8a, they spoke of him as the Christ, fulfilling in his exalted state all their messianic hopes. As king he was also 'Lord'. In a special way he was consecrated Son of God, enjoying the fullness of the Father's Spirit and power. From his throne in heaven he exercised the kingly functions of judge and high priest. They saw him, too, as the peak of creation, as God's Wisdom, perfectly expressing God's providential design for humankind, and indeed for the whole of creation. In each case these exalted titles were understood in the light of Calvary.

Lord (Catechism n.446-451).

This title could be used as a respectful greeting, something like our 'Sir'. As such it occurs frequently in the Gospels when people address Jesus. It had a special use as an honorific title for the king, emphasizing his power and authority. It is this usage that we are interested in here. Calling Jesus 'Lord' is another way of asserting that he is the Messiah. The risen Christ is 'King of kings and Lord of lords' (Revelation 17:14 and 19:16). He is 'Lord of all' (Acts 10:36), for 'God has put all things into subjection under his feet' (1 Corinthians 15:27). In the appendix to Mark's Gospel (16:19-20), we read:

'The Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.'

We might meditate also on the following texts:

‘I, Paul, was set apart for the gospel of God ... concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh, and was declared (or ‘constituted’) to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord’(Romans 1:1-4).

‘Christ died and lived again so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living’(Romans 14:9).

‘God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father’(Philippians 2:9-11).

‘Lord’ is also used in the Greek Septuagint version of the Older Testament to translate the Hebrew name of God ‘YHWH’. Calling the exalted Jesus ‘Lord’ sometimes picks up this more mysterious meaning. We will speak of this shortly.

Judge (Catechism n.678-679)

The Creed claims that Jesus ‘is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.’ John writes: ‘Just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man’(John 5:26-27).

In Paul we read: ‘We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ’(2Corinthians 5:10). ‘I solemnly urge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead’(2Timothy 4:1).

Luke has Peter say: ‘God has appointed Jesus to judge everyone’(Acts 10:42).

Likewise, Paul: ‘God has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead’(Acts 17:31).

To speak of Jesus as ‘judge’ is to recognise that what matters in our lives is that we respond to God’s inspiration, as Jesus did, by living lives of love. As Jesus himself said: ‘I have one commandment: love one another as I have loved you’(John 15:12). This is also clear from Jesus’ parable: What ultimately matters is that ‘I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink’(Matthew 25:35).

Son of God (Catechism n.441-445).

Earlier we noted that ‘Son of God’ was a title for the king of Judah. God declares: ‘I will be a father to him and he a son to me’(2Samuel 7:14). ‘You are my son. Today have I begotten you’(Psalm 2:7). This text is applied to Jesus in Acts 13:33 and Hebrews 1:5; 5:5. ‘He shall cry to me, “You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!” I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth’(Psalm 89:26-27). Newer Testament authors use the imagery of Psalm 89 to speak of the risen Jesus as being the ‘firstborn’ into the risen life (Colossians 1:15, 18; Revelation 1:5).

Jesus is God's Son

Many texts speak of Jesus as 'God's Son'. Mark features this title in his opening verse:

'The beginning of the Good News about Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God' (Mark 1:1).

John concludes his Gospel with the words:

'These signs are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through him' (John 20:31).

In another significant text we see how people misinterpreted Jesus' claim to be God's Son, and how Jesus responded to his critics:

'They were seeking all the more to kill Jesus, because he was calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God. Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing' (John 5:18-20).

In claiming to be God's Son Jesus is acknowledging that everything he is and has comes from God. Jesus was confident in God's special love for him, and it is his intimate knowledge of God as Son that he wants to share with others. In one of his parables he refers to the prophets whom God had sent to Israel. He adds: 'Last of all the owner of the vineyard sent his beloved son' (Mark 12:6). On another occasion he declared: 'No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matthew 11:27).

Jesus is God's Son (Catechism n.460, 537). He receives his life from God: 'I draw life from the Father' (John 6:57). He receives instruction from God: 'The Son can do only what he sees the Father doing' (John 5:19), 'I come from him. It was he who sent me' (John 7:29). Jesus' one desire is to do his Father's will: 'I always do what pleases my Father' (John 8:29). Jesus hands on to others the life he has received from God: 'The Father who is the source of life has made the Son the source of life' (John 5:26). He is the living image of God: 'To have seen me is to have seen the Father' (John 14:9); 'The Father knows me and I know the Father' (John 10:15); 'The Father and I are one' (John 10:30); 'The Father is in me and I am in the Father' (John 10:38).

To welcome Jesus' life is to be adopted as 'sons': 'God sent his Son to enable us to be adopted as sons' (Galatians 4:4); 'God the Father of our Lord Jesus, the Christ ... chose us to live through love in his presence, determining that we should become his adopted sons through Jesus Christ' (Ephesians 1:3-5).

The uniqueness of Jesus is highlighted by speaking of him as God's 'only Son': 'The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14); 'No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known' (John 1:18); 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life' (John 3:16); 'God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him' (1John 4:9). To say that Jesus is the only Son is to recognise his unique communion with God. We share in this communion by sharing Jesus' life and Jesus' Spirit.

Paul writes:

'Jesus Christ our Lord was declared to be Son of God with power by resurrection from the dead' (Romans 1:4).

'Then comes the end, when Christ hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "All things are put in subjection," it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all' (1Corinthians 15:24-28).

In the Creed we declare:

'I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary'.

Each human being is unique. In Jesus' case, his disciples focused on the uniqueness of his relationship with God. They believed that it was this relationship that Jesus wanted everyone to have. His disciples knew that if they were to share in Jesus' intimacy with God it would only be if they welcomed his offer to be attached to him. John speaks of Jesus as God's vine, drawing life from God and bearing the fruit that is God's love. He does not have Jesus showing us how we, too, can become a vine. Rather he speaks of us as branches. If we are to enjoy the divine intimacy we see in Jesus we must be like branches that cling to, and draw life from, the vine.

Everything Jesus is and has comes from his Father. His conception, his human life, is itself a gift of God's Holy Spirit. He was conceived in the womb of Mary, his mother, because of the special intimacy of Mary with God. Mary is called a 'virgin' because she gave her first love to God, and so, as Luke says:

'the child will be holy, and will be called Son of God' (Luke 1:35).

High Priest at God's right hand (Catechism n. 659-667)

In the Newer Testament the Letter to the Hebrews is the only document that speaks of Jesus as a priest. The reason for this is not difficult to find: Jesus did not belong to the tribe of Levi and was not eligible to be a priest in the Jewish cult. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews, however, recognised that in his person and in his ministry Jesus brought to perfection the priestly ministry. Priesthood focuses on the holy. In the presence of God (in the 'sanctuary') the priest was to mediate God's word and God's blessing to the people, and to receive their gifts and offer them to God. In this way he was to draw the people into communion with God.

'The priests officiate in the sanctuary and approach YHWH to serve him' (Ezekiel 45:4).

'The Lord set aside the tribe of Levi ... to stand in the presence of Yahweh, to do him service, and in his name to pronounce blessing' (Deuteronomy 10:8).

Jesus is High Priest

‘Moses consecrated Aaron ... to bless his people in the name of the Lord ... to offer sacrifice to the Lord ... to make atonement for the people. He entrusted him with his commandments, committed to him the statutes of the law, to teach Jacob his decrees and enlighten Israel on his law’(Sirach 45:15-17).

The high priest carried out his special function on the feast of Yom Kippur (the ‘day of the cover’). He took the sins of the people into the inner sanctuary of the temple to the ‘cover’(the ‘mercy-seat’), God’s throne. This is the meaning of to ‘expiate’ or ‘atone’: bringing sin into contact with divine mercy annihilates sin, for nothing impure can survive in God’s presence.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews describes Jesus as a high priest, the perfect mediator between the divine and the human:

‘Jesus had in all things to become like his brothers and sisters so that he might become a merciful and trustworthy high priest for the things of God, in order to expiate the sins of the people. For in what he has suffered himself, being tested, he is able to offer help to those who are being tested’(Hebrews 2:17-18).

While Jesus was not a Levitical priest, he brought to fulfilment their ministry, not by offering cereal and animal sacrifices in the sanctuary, but by offering himself, to God and to the world. The Levitical priests mediated between God and the people when they spoke God’s word from the sanctuary and when they declared God’s will as inscribed in the Torah. Jesus speaks only what he receives from the Father (John 8:28), and he reveals God’s will, thereby showing not only who God is but also how we are to respond to God and so enjoy the divine communion in which holiness consists. The Levitical priests mediated between the people and God when they received gifts from the people and offered them to God as sacrifices. Jesus gives God’s Spirit without measure (John 3:34), welcomes everyone and offers to God all who are in communion with him. Through this communion in self-offering, he sanctifies and saves all who come to the Father through him (Hebrews 7:25).

The high priest offered the sacrifice of expiation (atonement) for the sins of the people. Jesus self-offering was ‘for the sins of the world’ to bring about communion of love for the whole of humankind:

‘He is the expiation-sacrifice that takes our sins away, and not only ours but the whole world’s’(1John 2:2; also 4:10).

‘All are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation-sacrifice by his blood, to be received by faith’(Romans 3:24-25).

Psalm 110 recognises the priestly role of the king by speaking of him as ‘a priest according to the order of Melchizedek’(Psalm 110:4), the priest-king of Jerusalem (Genesis 14:18). The priestly role of the king transcended that of the Levitical priests, for his sanctuary was not just the temple, but the ‘Holy Land’. He was a sacrament of God and was to bring about God’s reign, firstly in Israel, but then throughout the world. He was to do this by governing the people according to God’s Law and in such a way that they would be faithful to the Covenant and ‘be holy as the Lord God is holy’(Leviticus 19:2).

As the ‘one mediator between God and humankind’ (1Timothy 2:5), Jesus is priest as Shepherd-King whose mission is to bring about the reign of God’s love in the whole world, to draw everyone to himself and so to God, to make the world the holy place that God wills it to be. This high priestly dimension of the on-going mission of the risen Christ is the central theme of the Letter to the Hebrews. There we read:

‘We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek’ (Hebrews 6:19-20).

‘He lives to make intercession for us’ (Hebrews 7:25).

‘We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God. Let us, therefore, hold fast to our confession and approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need’ (Hebrews 4:16, 18).

In Peter’s First Letter we read:

‘Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ’ (1Peter 2:4-5).

Conclusion

Each of these ‘titles’ picks up an aspect of the relationship which Jesus’ disciples had with Jesus after his death, different aspects of the way Jesus was experienced as being with them, forming them into a community and commissioning them to continue his mission in and to the world.

When tradition insists that Jesus’ resurrection is physical, it is claiming that the whole of Jesus’ human reality, everything that made him the man he was (not just his ‘soul’), exists now in communion with God, but totally transformed. Resurrection is not resuscitation. We are wrong to imagine the risen ‘body’ as somehow like the ‘body’ we experience now.

