

**WHO IS JESUS?**

**Luke 9:1-50**

**<sup>1</sup> Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases,**

**<sup>2</sup> and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.**

**<sup>3</sup> He said to them, 'Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money –not even an extra tunic.**

**<sup>4</sup> Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there.**

**<sup>5</sup> Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.'**

**<sup>6</sup> They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere.**

compare  
Matthew 10:1,7-14  
Mark 6:7-13

### **It is Jesus whose mission is carried on in the Church**

Luke has already introduced us to the twelve, and to the fact that Jesus called them 'apostles' (6:13). Here Jesus shares with them his own mission. Like him they are to 'proclaim the kingdom of God', to 'bring the good news' (see 4:18,19,44; 8:1). Like him, they are to heal (see 6:19).

To share Jesus' mission, the twelve were given 'power and authority over all demons' – the power and authority of Jesus himself (4:1-13; 4:35-36; 4:39; 4:41-42; 6:18; 7:21; 8:2; 8:26-39). They also shared his power 'to cure diseases' (see 4:40; 5:12-15; 5:17,24-26; 6:18-19; 7:10; 7:13-17; 7:21-22; 8:40-56).

The 'good news' is that God is establishing his reign, carrying out his promise to bring redemption and salvation through the ministry of Jesus. The angel Gabriel announced this to Zechariah (1:19), the angel of the Lord announced it to the shepherds (2:10) and John the Baptist announced it to the crowds (3:18). The essence of Jesus' ministry was to demonstrate this good news and invite people to believe it.

Jesus' instructions echo the challenge issued by John the Baptist who told the people to share food and clothing, to act justly and to avoid all violence and excess (3:10-14). Jesus insists that his apostles are to place their trust in the providence of God (compare 1Corinthians 9:14; 1 Timothy 5:18).

They have already been warned to expect to be rejected because of their association with Jesus (6:22). There are those who refuse to welcome him (4:28-29); they will refuse to welcome his disciples too. Luke will give many examples of this when he comes to narrate the story of the early church (see Acts 4:1-22; 14:8-20; 16:16-24).

They are to make clear to those who reject them what this rejection means by shaking the dust from their feet (compare Acts 13:51). This was a Jewish custom when leaving pagan territory. They did not want unholy ground to pollute the Holy Land of Israel. The apostles are to make it clear to those who reject the good news, that in doing so they are excluding themselves from the kingdom of God. They will remain outside the community of the renewed 'Israel of God' (Galatians 6:16).

Typically, Luke, highlights the universal extension of the mission entrusted to the apostles by Jesus. They are to preach and heal ‘everywhere’. The theme of total reliance on grace in the carrying out of our ministry is expressed beautifully in the following prayer of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, in his Contemplation for Obtaining Love:

Take, O Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will, whatsoever I have and possess. You have given all these things to me; to you, O Lord, I give them back: all are yours, dispose of them all according to your will. Give me your love and your grace, for this is enough for me.

A similar prayer comes from one of his recent disciples, Pedro Arrupe, as he was about to hand leadership of the Jesuit Order to his successor:

More than ever, I now find myself in the hands of God.  
 This is what I have wanted all my life, from my youth.  
 And this is still what I want.  
 But now there is a difference:  
 the initiative is entirely with God.  
 It is indeed a profound spiritual experience  
 to know and experience myself so totally in his hands,  
 in the hands of this God who has taken hold of me.

### **Herod asks the question: Who is Jesus?**

Luke lists here a number of popular answers to the question: Who is Jesus? The following scenes will provide the faith-answer given within Luke’s community.

Popular superstition thinks that he is someone who has come back from the dead (see 7:11-17; 9:19). Herod Antipas (see 3:1, 3:19-20) recognises that he will not find the answer without seeing Jesus. He will have his wish granted towards the end of the gospel (23:6-12).

<sup>7</sup> **Now Herod the ruler heard about all that had taken place, and he was perplexed, because it was said by some that John had been raised from the dead,**

<sup>8</sup> **by some that Elijah had appeared, and by others that one of the ancient prophets had arisen.**

<sup>9</sup> **Herod said, ‘John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?’ And he tried to see him.**

compare Matthew 14:1-2  
 Mark 6:14-16

<sup>10</sup> On their return the apostles told Jesus all they had done. He took them with him and withdrew privately to a city called Bethsaida. <sup>11</sup> When the crowds found out about it, they followed him; and he welcomed them, and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed to be cured.

<sup>12</sup> The day was drawing to a close, and the twelve came to him and said, 'Send the crowd away, so that they may go into the surrounding villages and countryside, to lodge and get provisions; for we are here in a deserted place.'

<sup>13</sup> But he said to them, 'You give them something to eat.' They said, 'We have no more than five loaves and two fish – unless we are to go and buy food for all these people.'

### Jesus is God's manna from heaven

We approach this scene, as we must approach every scene in the gospels, with the eyes of one who is contemplating a mosaic, a fresco, a stained-glass window, or an icon. The primary question is not 'What exactly happened?', but rather 'What is the truth about Jesus that the author wishes to convey in this portrait, and why did he choose to express it in this way?'

The 'crowds', the 'deserted place', the 'groups of about fifty' (see Exodus 18:21,25), and the miraculous feeding are all elements of the narrative that are meant to remind the reader of the manna from heaven, which was enjoyed by the Hebrews in their journey through the wilderness (Exodus 16 and Numbers 11). Just as God looked after his people and satisfied their hunger, so Jesus wants his apostles to realise, as they begin their missionary activity, that it is not they who are feeding the people, but God.

The secondary theme of the fish is perhaps related to the Greek word for fish, *ichthus*. We have very early evidence that it was used as an acronym for the Greek words for 'Jesus(i) Christ(ch) of-God(th) Son(u) Saviour(s)'. This acronym may have developed in the oral tradition prior to Luke. Or, on the other hand, the fish may be meant to echo Jesus' first call of the disciples, when he said 'I will make you fish for people'(5:10).

Luke is also portraying Jesus as the Messianic prophet. His narrative alludes to the legend which portrays Elijah as miraculously feeding the widow of Zarepath (1Kings 17:8-16). There are even closer links with the following legend about Elisha:

A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, 'Give it to the people and let them eat.' But his servant said, 'How can I set this before a hundred people?' So he repeated, 'Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left.' He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.

– 2Kings 4:42-44

The ‘twelve baskets’, paralleling the number of the apostles, symbolise divine fullness, and so the universality of God’s saving grace. Luke wants us to see in the missionary work of the Christian community the beginning of the Messianic banquet promised by the prophets:

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,  
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?  
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,  
and delight yourselves in rich food.  
Incline your ear, and come to me; listen,  
so that you may live.  
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,  
my steadfast, sure love for David.

– Isaiah 55:2-3

As the anonymous prophet of the exile saw, the fulfilment of the promise made to David was to be experienced by the whole people. The disciples of Jesus took this even further, and came to see that God’s promise of salvation extends to the whole world, for God wishes to satisfy everyone’s hunger.

It is impossible, furthermore, to miss the close literary parallel between 9:16 and the following words taken from Luke’s account of the last supper: ‘He took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them’(22:19; see 1Corinthians 11:23-33). ‘On the first day of the week’ (Acts 20:7; see also 1Corinthians 16:2), in memory of the resurrection of Jesus (Luke 24:1), the Christian community would gather in a home for the ‘breaking of bread’(Luke 24:35; Acts 2:42; 20:7,11).

They celebrated in this way the memory of how Jesus allowed himself to be broken for them so that he could nourish them with his body and his blood. To nourish them with his ‘body’ is to share with them his life, his heart, his love. To nourish them with his ‘blood’ is to share with them his life given for them, his heart pierced for them, his love poured out for them.

They knew, moreover, that, in celebrating this memory, they were opening themselves to receive what they celebrated from the risen Christ really present among them. To be able to carry on the mission entrusted to them by Jesus, the apostles needed to realise that Jesus himself is God’s answer to the cry of people’s hungry and thirsting hearts.

**14 For there were about five thousand men. And he said to his disciples, ‘Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each.’**

**15 They did so and made them all sit down.**

**16 And taking the five loaves and the two fish,**

**he looked up to heaven,**

**and blessed**

**and broke them,**

**and gave [continued to give] them to the disciples to set before the crowd.**

**17 And all ate and were filled.**

**What was left over was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces.**

compare  
Matthew 14:19-21  
Mark 6:39-44

## The miracle of the loaves

Luke is drawing on all these rich themes, but, in the light of the context in which he presents this scene, we must look more closely to discern the key point he is making. The apostles have just returned from their first mission (9:10). Jesus wants to teach them something and it concerns their activity as his missionaries. They are sensitive to the people's hunger, but they seem to have forgotten the lesson of the Book of Deuteronomy:

Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

– Deuteronomy 8:2-3

Their first reaction is to 'send the crowd away', so that the people can get something to eat for themselves. Jesus, however, instructs them: 'You give them something to eat'. They do not understand. It is obvious that they do not have the resources to feed the people — and this is surely a basic realisation that every apostle needs to have. But this realisation is not enough. Jesus tells them to go and see what resources they have. They do so, and this makes their inadequacy all the more obvious. Then Jesus teaches them the lesson that Luke wants his readers not to miss. Jesus takes his apostles' inadequate resources and turns to God in prayer, his heart moved in praise and thanks, for he knows that he can 'do nothing on his own' (John 5:19).

Jesus breaks the bread and fish. At this point Luke changes tenses from the aorist to the imperfect, and it is important to indicate this change in the English translation: 'He *continued to give* them to the disciples to set before the crowd'. The miracle occurs in Jesus' hands, not in the hands of the apostles. Jesus gives them back no more and no less than they gave him. When this runs out, they have to come back to him each time to receive once again from him what is needed to feed the people. Luke's point is that we do have in our hands the means to carry out the will of God, but only if we consecrate our inadequate gifts by offering them to Christ, and only so long as we continue to recognise that 'apart from me you can do nothing' (John 15:5).

How can five loaves feed five thousand people? How can the little love we have be enough to meet the needs of those who call on us for help, enough to create a just and peaceful world? Luke's answer is in this scene. The parables have been telling us that the seed which we sow is so powerful that it can produce a hundredfold (8:8). We have just seen the power of the word of God to calm the chaos outside (symbolised by the raging sea) and the chaos within (symbolised by the raging mind), and even to penetrate beyond death and bring life (8:22-56). Our calling is simply to do the will of God, no matter what happens (6:47; 8:21), and to do it in total trust. The harvest will come because of the power of the one in whom we place our trust. There must be hundreds of memories lying behind this powerful scene: memories of the many times that Jesus nourished people by his smile, his compassion, his words and his deeds.

All his close followers had stories to tell of the miraculous way in which he touched their hearts, fed their deepest hunger, and quenched their deepest thirst. There was no limit to Jesus' generosity in providing for them, as there was no limit to the love which he showed to them or to the Spirit upon which he drew in his own ministry.

By the time the gospel was written, Jesus' disciples could also call on their own memories of how Jesus' Spirit, living in them, had worked similar miracles in their lives. They had found that they too had been God's instruments in miraculous ways, in nurturing people as they journeyed towards God through the desert of this world. Think of the way Luke chose to introduce the first disciples (5:1-11). We might think also of Luke's statement in the Acts of the Apostles:

Many of those who heard the word believed; and they numbered about five thousand.

– Acts 4:4

Nothing is impossible to God. Our talents, our hands, our hearts, our love, our acts of service can bring sustenance to a hungry world. It is radically important that we know that we do not, of ourselves, have the resources to do this. But it is equally important to know that we are not 'of ourselves'. Jesus, who was with his disciples, is with us. United to him and caught up in his prayer, we too can praise and thank God; we too can mediate Jesus' love to each other.

The early Church, in its catechesis, knew of no more important lesson than this for those called to be apostles in spreading the 'light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2Corinthians 4:6).

**18** *Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, 'Who do the crowds say that I am?'*

**19** **They answered, 'John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.'**

**20** **He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'**

**Peter answered, 'The Messiah of God.'**

compare  
Matthew 16:13-20  
Mark 8:27-30

### **Jesus is God's Messiah**

For centuries the Jews had looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. The Messiah was imagined in many different ways. Some thought of him as an anointed king who would bring about God's reign over the whole earth. Others were awaiting an anointed priest who would sanctify the world. Yet others expected the Messiah to be an anointed prophet who would fully reveal God's word.

The angel of the Lord has already announced to the shepherds the birth of the Messiah (2:11), and Simeon rejoiced that God has kept his promise to him that he would not die 'before he had seen the Lord's Messiah'(2:26).

Demons, with insight that goes beyond that of humans, were portrayed as recognising Jesus as the Messiah (4:41), but Jesus 'rebuked them and would not allow them to speak'. That Jesus is the Messiah is not just another piece of information which anyone can hand on. It's true significance can be grasped only by one who follows Jesus as a disciple.

Jesus has been preaching the good news by word and deed. The time has come to journey to Jerusalem to confront the temple hierarchy there, and to face the consequences. Is he to journey alone, or are his disciples ready to journey with him?

There have been questions about Jesus from the beginning of the gospel. Luke has presented Mary, Jesus' mother, as a model for his readers. Like her, they are to treasure God's words and ponder them in their hearts (2:19; see 2:51). After his first act of healing, the crowd are amazed at his power over demons (4:36). Peter senses the presence of the Lord in him (5:8). The Pharisees are astounded at Jesus' statement that the sins of the paralysed man were forgiven (5:21).

When Jesus restored the son of the widow to life, Luke tells us that 'fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, A great prophet has risen among us! and God has looked favourably on his people!'(7:16). John the Baptist sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus: 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'(7:19). When Jesus calmed the sea, the disciples said to one another: 'Who then is this, that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?'(8:25).

It is now Jesus' turn to ask the question. Notice Luke's setting: Jesus is in prayer. Jesus was also in prayer at his baptism (3:21), and Luke has twice since reminded us of the special intimacy with God that Jesus expressed in prayer (5:16; 6:12). To understand who Jesus is we must penetrate his prayer.

Jesus' first question is 'Who do the crowds say that I am? The answer takes us back to an earlier scene (9:7-9). He then asks: 'But who do you say that I am?' It is a very personal question, a question one asks only of those one loves. Peter, in an act of trusting love, responds by declaring that, for him, Jesus is 'the Messiah of God' (see 2:26; see also Acts 3:18; 4:26).

In calling Jesus the Messiah (the 'Christ'), Peter is saying that Jesus is the one for whom he and the Jewish people have been waiting. Jesus is the one who is fulfilling the hopes and aspirations of Israel. He is the one of whom Peter's parents and grandparents had spoken, the anointed one of God, the one in whom God's Spirit dwells.

How does Peter know? Because he has watched Jesus. He has watched him praying and reaching out to the poor and the lonely and the sick and the disturbed (7:22). Peter can no longer think of God without thinking of Jesus, without seeing the face of God in the face of Jesus, and without finding in Jesus the one who fills up his senses with the aroma (the perfumed chrism) of God.

Jesus does not ask Who do your parents say that I am? or Who does your Church say that I am? He does not ask Who are you expected to say that I am? or Who would you like to say that I am? He does not even ask Who were you accustomed to say that I am? He asks Who do you say that I am? This question penetrates to the depths of our hearts and tests our commitment.

If, like Peter, we can say that Jesus is the answer to our dreams, that he is the one who expresses our ideals, that he is the one who teaches us about love and about life, and about freedom, and about prayer, and about ourselves, and about God — then, like Peter, we are ready to join Jesus on the road to Jerusalem; we are ready to learn what it means to follow him as a disciple.

**Jesus is the Son of Man who must suffer and be raised to life**

**<sup>21</sup> He sternly ordered and commanded them not to tell anyone,  
<sup>22</sup> saying, 'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.'**

For reasons noted in the commentary on the previous passage, Jesus has responded to Messianic claims with an injunction demanding silence (4:35,41; 8:56). He reacts in the same way here. But at least Peter's response is an act of trusting love in Jesus. The implied commitment to follow Jesus gives Jesus the opening to begin instructing Peter, and any of the others who choose to join him, in what it means to be God's Messiah, and also in what it means to be his disciple.

This short passage introduces a theme which is central to the rest of the gospel: the theme of suffering that leads to life. Peter has just acknowledged that Jesus, whom he has come to know and love, is God's Messiah (9:20). Instead of the title 'Messiah', Jesus chooses an expression that was not so clearly defined: 'Son of Man'. We noted earlier (5:24) that it refers back to Daniel 7:13, and bespeaks solidarity with those who suffer and will be vindicated by God at the final judgment. If Peter is going to accept Jesus as the Messiah, he must be ready to accept a Messiah who suffers with the outcasts, but who will, ultimately, be vindicated by God.

Jesus has already spoken of himself as a bridegroom, and of the time when 'the bridegroom is taken away' (6:35). Now he is more explicit. His rejection at Nazareth (4:28-29), and the buildup of antipathy with the religious leaders (noted as early as 5:21,31 and 6:2, and clearly stated in 6:11), and the fate of John the Baptist (3:20), as well as a long history of prophets being rejected (6:22-23), has been enough to make Jesus realise what is in store for him.

Luke states that Jesus 'must' suffer and be raised to life. It is the third time that he has used this strong expression 'must', and each time it refers to God's providential design to which Jesus is completely obedient. When Jesus' parents found him in the temple, he replied: 'I *must* be in my Father's house' (2:49). When the people of Capernaum tried to keep Jesus with them, he replied: 'I *must* proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; I was sent for this purpose' (4:43).

compare  
Matthew 16:20-21  
Mark 8:30-31

It is obvious that God's will is not universally accepted: the rejection of the prophets, the rejection of Jesus and the rejection of Jesus' disciples give ample proof of this. Luke, however, is convinced that, while we are free not to accept God's will for ourselves, we cannot ultimately thwart God's design. Jesus' suffering is the result of human rejection of God's will, but it is not the last word. Jesus 'must' go through it, trusting in God, whose will is revealed in the resurrection.

Jesus' faith in the ultimate vindication by God is expressed here in the words: 'on the third day be raised'. There is an allusion to Hosea:

Come, let us return to the Lord; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; *on the third day* he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord; his appearing is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth.

– Hosea 6:1-3

In biblical usage, 'on the third day' is, as in the text just quoted from Hosea, an expression to indicate something definitive. We find this in another saying of Jesus recorded by Luke. The Pharisees warn Jesus to leave the territory of Herod who is determined to kill him. Jesus replies: 'Go and tell that fox for me, "Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and *on the third day* I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.'" (Luke 13:32-33). Whatever may happen today (in the present) and tomorrow (in the foreseeable future), ultimately ('on the third day'), God will act, and God's justice will triumph. The classical text concerns God's self-manifestation on Mount Sinai:

The Lord said to Moses: 'Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day, because *on the third day* the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.

– Exodus 19:10-11

It was 'on the third day' also that Abraham caught sight of Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:4). It was after three days' journey into the wilderness that Moses offered sacrifice to God (Exodus 3:18, 5:3, 8:27). King Hezekiah asked the prophet Isaiah:

What shall be the sign that the Lord will heal me, and that I shall go up to the house of the Lord *on the third day*?

– 2Kings 20:8

Jesus is confident that he will be raised to life by God 'on the third day'. In other words, ultimately, when God's will is revealed, God will vindicate him and all those who put their trust in God. He will suffer, but he is determined to continue carrying out his mission, trusting that suffering and death will lead to life.

### We find life by following Jesus

**23 Then he said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross *daily* and follow me.**

**24 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake [because of me] will save it.**

**25 What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?**

**26 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.**

**27 But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.'**

compare  
Matthew 16:24-28  
Mark 8:34 - 9:1

In the previous scene, Jesus asked 'Who am I?' Here he gives the key to his understanding of what it means to be human. The word translated 'life' in this passage is the Greek *psyche*. It has a wide range of meanings, depending on one's theories of psychology. It could be translated 'self' in the sense of one's aware self. It could be translated 'soul' in the sense of one's deepest, most intimate, and most mysterious self.

It is clear from Jesus' words that he has the deepest respect for a person's *psyche*. Addressing himself to 'all', he declares that he wants the *psyche* to be 'saved'; he recognises that gaining the whole world is of no value if it means losing one's *psyche*. A person's self, therefore, is sacred, for it is the unique individual person who is created by God, sustained in life by God, and loved by God as a son or daughter.

Herein is a paradox that lies at the heart of Jesus' teaching. There is a 'self' to which we must say No, if we are ever to discover and enjoy our true self. This 'self' that must be denied is the one that is focused on itself. It is the 'self' that is afraid to let go. It is the 'self' that will not give itself away in love, or waste itself in giving life to another. It is like a seed that will not submit itself to the earth, that will not break open and 'lose' itself, so that life might burst from it. It is the heart that refuses to dare to love lest it be hurt.

That surface self, that small self, that fearful self, that insecure self, must learn to trust itself to Christ, and to follow him in his way of living. In this context, we might note the following from Paul:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

– 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

Jesus has already spoken of what lies ahead for him. Of course, his disciples are frightened — for him, but also for themselves. However, he has already said that he will go ahead, because he trusts that his Father, God, will raise him to himself (9:22).

Here he promises them the same. If, because of him, they too have to carry a cross (under Roman occupation, the most common way for Jews to be killed in Jesus' day); if, because of him, and because they have shared his mission of proclaiming the good news, they, too, have to forfeit their life, he assures them that they, like him, will have their real life preserved for them by God. We are reminded of Paul's prayer that the real self, the hidden self, 'the inner being', might grow strong:

I bend my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who, by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

– Ephesians 3:14-21

The leaders have rejected him, as have the people of his home town. Jesus is warning his disciples that if they, too, are ashamed of him, and are unwilling to accept that carrying out his mission will involve suffering, then, when the final judgment comes, they will be the ones who will stand ashamed.

Speaking of the final judgment, Jesus once again uses the expression 'Son of Man', referring to the one who represents all the oppressed ones who have remained faithful to God and who have cried out to God in their distress (see commentary on 5:24). When God comes to vindicate them, those who have rejected Jesus will find that they are not among those called to share in God's glory.

The imagery here is familiar to those of Jesus' contemporaries who were interested in the literature, popular at the time, that explored the afterlife. Except for one word. Nowhere else in this literature do we find God spoken of as 'the Father'. We are here at the heart of Jesus' religious experience. On entering his maturity as a son of the Law, Jesus speaks of God as his 'Father' (2:49). At the baptism, he had a profound experience of being God's beloved son (3:22). He speaks of God as the Father of his disciples too (6:36).

Luke spoke of the glory of God in his prologue (2:9,14). He also prepared us to see this glory in Jesus (2:32). Glory refers to the hidden beauty of God at last radiantly manifest, in such a way as to evoke praise from all who witness it. The glory of God is revealed in God's judgment vindicating the oppressed against their oppressors, and giving the kingdom to the poor. Jesus is inviting his disciples to journey with him, so that they might enjoy with him his Father's glory.

However, to journey with him they have to be willing to give their life with him. In an early Christian hymn quoted by Paul, Jesus is spoken of as having 'emptied himself' (Philippians 2:7). His disciples are being asked to do the same.

## Following Jesus

In speaking of Jesus as the Messiah, Peter has implicitly expressed his desire to be Jesus' disciple. Here Jesus is teaching him that the decision to follow him is one that is a matter of life and death.

It is not easy to determine the meaning of the final sentence: 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God'. The Greek word translated here 'before' does not imply that they will taste death *after*. Jesus may be saying that they will *never* taste death. In which case, he is not speaking of physical death at all. They will have to suffer the common lot of mankind, but their physical death will not be a loss of life. In all their trials, including their death, they will experience the saving power of God's grace (compare Acts 5:40-41; John 11:26).

On the other hand, he might be saying that the end of history, and so the final judgment, is imminent. We know from the literature of the day that speculation linked the promised resurrection with God's final judgment. It was unavoidable that the experience of Jesus' resurrection would lead the early Christians to expect the imminent end of history and the final unfolding of God's design. Paul witnesses to this in his early writings (1Thessalonians 4:1-13), and it is not impossible that Luke may have understood Jesus' words in this way. He may have thought of the conflict between Rome and the Jews which flared into open warfare in 66AD as the final struggle that would bring about the ultimate intervention of God to establish the promised kingdom.

It is also possible, however, that Luke would have understood the words to be referring to Jesus' death and resurrection. If this is the case, then we see here in Luke the beginnings of an understanding of the death of Jesus that is well developed in John's gospel; namely, that the hour of Jesus' death is the hour of his glorification.

Everything Jesus said or did witnessed to his conviction of this truth, and this can be said in a special way about his manner of dying. For he chose death rather than stop preaching, healing and liberating people. He gave his life for the gospel which he was commissioned by God to preach, and in which he believed. Seeing this glorious manifestation of God's love, the disciples would, indeed, be see 'the kingdom of God'.

The fact that Luke follows these words with a scene portraying the resurrected Christ makes this final interpretation the most likely one.

## **Jesus is God's Son and Chosen One, who fulfils God's promises**

Jesus has just spoken of the intimate connection between his suffering and his glorification by God (9:22). He has also assured his disciples that it will be the same for them (9:23-24). In this magnificent portrait, God himself assures the disciples that what Jesus has just said is true: they are to 'listen to him'.

The three disciples, 'Peter and John and James', were the only three named when Jesus first chose disciples (5:1-11). They also were present when Jesus raised to life the daughter of Jairus (8:51).

A theological reflection of major significance is represented by the presence of Moses, the mediator of the Law, and Elijah, the father of the prophets. When commenting on the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish authorities as to appropriate behaviour on the Sabbath (see Luke 6:1-11), we noted that Luke's theology agrees with that of Paul. Jesus is the fulfilment of the Law (Moses) and the Prophets (Elijah). This becomes clear when we compare the magnificent scenes from the Old Testament which speak of the experiences of Moses and Elijah on the mountain with the even more magnificent scene painted here by Luke.

Moses, like Jesus, encountered God on a mountain ( see Exodus 24:12,15-18; 34:2). For Moses, too, a cloud descended and overshadowed the mountain (see Exodus 24:15-18; 34:5). God spoke to Moses from the cloud (see Exodus 24:16). Moses became radiant (see Exodus 34:29-30,35), and those who saw his radiance became afraid (see Exodus 34:30).

Come up in the morning to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to me, on the top of the mountain ... The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed ... The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation. ... Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ... When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

– Exodus 34:2, 5-7, 29-35

<sup>28</sup> **Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray.**

<sup>29</sup> **And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white.**

<sup>30</sup> **Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him.**

compare  
Matthew 17:1-3  
Mark 9:2-4

**<sup>31</sup> They appeared in glory and were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.**

**<sup>32</sup> Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.**

**<sup>33</sup> Just as they were leaving him, Peter said to Jesus, 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah' – not knowing what he said.**

**<sup>34</sup> While he was saying this, a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud.**

**<sup>35</sup> Then from the cloud came a voice that said, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'**

**<sup>36</sup> When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen.**

compare Matthew 17:4-8  
Mark 9:5-10

The Elijah journeyed 'forty days and forty nights' to this same mountain in the hope of seeing God. He was told:

Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

– 1Kings 19:11-13

Elijah encountered God, but in 'sheer silence': the word had not yet been expressed as in the scene before us. Moreover, Elijah's face, unlike that of Jesus, was 'wrapped in a mantle'.

On the mountain of transfiguration, Jesus is gazing on God's face and listening to God's voice. His whole being is caught up in God's glory. He transcends the Law and the Prophets, for he is God's 'Son', God's 'Chosen'. It is to him that they are to listen (compare Deuteronomy 18:15, which Luke quotes in Acts 3:22 and 7:37). So it is that, once the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. Moses and the Prophets prepared the way for Jesus. Now, God's word is revealed fully in him. Paul treats of the same subject in a number of places. We might recall here his words to the community at Corinth (c.56AD):

To this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

– 2Corinthians 3:15-18

The glory-cloud reminds us of the cloud that was a symbol of God leading his people through the desert (see Exodus 13:21). It was from within this cloud that God spoke to Moses 'that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after' (Exodus 19:9). Luke is portraying Jesus as the new Moses to whom they must listen.

The cloud reminds us, too, of God's presence in the temple (see 1Kings 8:10). Jesus is God's new temple (John 2:21). The words spoken by God recall the words spoken at Jesus' baptism (3:22). God who brought order to primeval chaos (Genesis 1:2) is beginning a new creation with his Son.

These same themes are reinforced by the mention of 'dwellings', that is to say 'tents' or 'tabernacles'. The Jewish New Year Feast of Tabernacles, which took place after the Day of Atonement, commemorated creation, God's giving of the covenant on Sinai, and God's presence in the temple. Jesus' disciples are to find in him the fulfilment of all these themes. It is not, however, for them to build a place where God can dwell (compare Acts 7:48; 17:24). God makes a shelter for them, and draws them, as he drew Mary (1:35), into his glory. They are afraid, for they know that to experience God in such intimacy means death (Judges 6:23; 13:22). They are right. To join Jesus in the transfiguration is to join him in his 'departure (Greek, *exodos*) which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem'(9:31).

It is rarely possible to penetrate the highly dramatised portraits of the gospel to discover, with any precision, the historical events that lie behind them. The gospels, as we noted in the introductory chapter, were simply not written to answer our modern interest in establishing exact factual data. Whatever the nature of the religious experience enjoyed by these three chosen disciples, the following passage (9:9-10) indicates that it was only after the resurrection of Jesus that they were able to reflect back on their experiences of him and discover some of the meaning which they carried for them. We should, however, recall also the following words from the Second Letter of Peter:

We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain.

– 2Peter 1:16-18

An appropriate response to this scene can be found in Luke's magnificent portrait of the Annunciation. Like the apostles in the scene before us, Mary is caught up in God's glory. God wants to love her, to cover her with his glory-cloud and to breath the Spirit of his love into her. God does not ask her to do anything except to say Yes to being loved. That Yes will mean that the child she is conceiving in love 'will be holy; he will be called Son of God'(1:35). Her response is the perfect response from a disciple: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word'(1:38). Her cousin Elizabeth praises God for Mary's faith when she exclaims: 'Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord'(1:45). We are asked to listen and to believe.

<sup>37</sup> *On the next day, when they had come down from the mountain, a great crowd met him.*

<sup>38</sup> *Just then a man from the crowd shouted, 'Teacher, I beg you to look at my son; he is my only child.'*

<sup>39</sup> *Suddenly a spirit seizes him, and all at once he shrieks. It convulses him until he foams at the mouth;*

*it mauls him and will scarcely leave him.*

<sup>40</sup> *I begged your disciples to cast it out, but they could not.'*

<sup>41</sup> *Jesus answered, 'You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.'*

<sup>42</sup> *While he was coming, the demon dashed him to the ground in convulsions. But Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father. <sup>43</sup> And all were astounded at the greatness of God.*

compare Matthew 17:14-20  
Mark 9:14-29

### **The glorified Jesus is the source of salvation**

This scene prefigures the redemption to be effected by 'the Messiah of God' (9:20). The boy represents us all, unable to free ourselves or be freed by others from the evil that holds us in its power.

There are echoes here of the scene in which Jesus restored to life the only son of the widow of Nain. This boy, too, is an 'only child' (compare 7:12). He, too, is given back to his parent (compare 7:15). Jesus, the beloved Son of God, has come to restore us all to the embrace of God who is our Father.

Jesus rebukes the crowd for their failure to believe. We might call to mind the following psalm:

O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror. My soul also is struck with terror, while you, O Lord – how long? Turn, O Lord, save my life; deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love. For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you praise? I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eyes waste away because of grief.

– Psalm 6:1-7

We might also recall here a statement made by Luke in Acts:

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

– Acts 10:48

Jesus can defeat evil and therefore heal the boy, because he is in prayer, his will totally conformed to that of his Father. This is the lesson the disciples must learn. All things can be done by one who believes, because there is no limit to the power of God to heal.

### **Jesus is the suffering Son of Man**

Jesus returns to his earlier prediction concerning his suffering, described here for the first time as a betrayal (though see 6:16). Luke underlines the failure of the disciples to understand.

The link between Jesus' suffering and his carrying out God's will is at the centre of Luke's gospel. Let us pause to reflect upon this link by examining more closely the problem of suffering as presented in the New Testament.

**<sup>43</sup> While everyone was amazed at all that he was doing, he said to his disciples, <sup>44</sup> 'Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands.'**

**<sup>45</sup> But they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying.**

compare Matthew 17:22-23  
Mark 9:30-32

Suffering in the life of Jesus

A superficial reading of the New Testament could leave one with the impression that God from all eternity had a plan for our redemption and that part of the plan was that Jesus should die on the cross. After all, Jesus did pray in his agony: ‘not my will but yours be done’ (22:42). We have just heard him telling his disciples: ‘The Son of Man *must* undergo great suffering’ (9:22). Later he will explain his suffering as the fulfilment of what was written about him in the Scriptures (18:31-33; 24:25-27; 24:44-46. See also Acts 2:23; 4:28).<sup>1</sup>

If, however, Jesus’ death could be described simply as God’s will, we would have to say that those who condemned Jesus to death and those who crucified him were carrying out God’s will. This would make what they did an act of obedience, and therefore virtuous. Such a conclusion obviously makes no sense. To imagine that it was God and not sinful human beings who willed the murder of Jesus can only lead to a gross misunderstanding of the place of God in Jesus’ life – a misunderstanding that it is hardly short of blasphemy.

It was not God who crucified Jesus; it was the Jewish leadership, the fickle crowd, the Roman prefect and the ‘obedient’ soldiers. God’s part in what happened is seen in the resurrection. This is clearly expressed in the early sermons which we find in Acts:

This man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

– Acts 2:23-24. See also Acts 3:13-15; 4:10; 13:28-30

The statement that Jesus was ‘handed over according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God’, is not to be understood as a temporal statement, for God does not exist in time. Luke is telling us to look beyond the sinful human activity to the design of God, for God can use even sin to bring about his will.

Our question here is: what is the will of God that is achieved through the crucifixion? What does it mean to say, on the one hand, that the suffering inflicted upon Jesus was the responsibility of those who refused to obey God’s will, and yet, on the other hand, that it all came within God’s providential design and grace?

Whatever we mean by God’s providential design, it cannot be such as to leave no room for human freedom. We are not automatons. We are not puppets of fate. We experience some freedom, however limited and conditioned. If so much human suffering results from our saying No to God’s loving design, it is also true that wonderful good results from our saying Yes. Without freedom there would be no sin. Equally, without freedom, there would be no compassion, no generosity, no heroism, no love. Freedom is at the very heart of what it means to be a person. God made us this way, and respects what he has made.

<sup>1</sup>On the suffering Messiah see Ezekiel 4:1-6; Zechariah 9-14; Daniel 11:31-35; 12:1-10; Wisdom 2:12-20.

God is also constantly inspiring everyone to behave in ways that are loving. To the extent that we, knowingly or unknowingly, respond to God's inspiration, we behave responsibly and creatively and God's will is done. To the extent that we, knowingly or unknowingly, reject God's inspiration, we behave irresponsibly, and God's will is not done. Any particular decision is likely to be a mixture: we partly respond and partly hold back.

The crucifixion of Jesus would have to be defined as an unjust act. God does not will that innocent people be sentenced unjustly to death. Paul includes the murder of Jesus with the persecuting of the Christians as acts that 'displease God' (1Thessalonians 2:14-15).

The Sanhedrin and Pilate condemned Jesus to death precisely because they refused to listen to God; they refused to face the truth. Their action was sinful, and so, by definition, contrary to God's will. John has Jesus say as much: 'You kill me because there is no place in you for my word' (John 8:37). Stephen links the crucifying of Jesus with the persecution that was inflicted on the prophets. In behaving in this way, they were 'opposing the Holy Spirit' (Acts 7:51). This point was made by Jesus himself:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

– Luke 13:34; compare Acts 7:52

God's attitude to sending his Son is expressed beautifully by Jesus himself in a parable which directly refers to his passion. It is about a man who planted a vineyard and kept hoping to enjoy its fruits. Everyone whom he sent to deal with the tenants was murdered or badly treated:

Then the owner of the vineyard said, "What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him." But when the tenants saw him, they discussed it among themselves and said, "This is the heir; let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours." So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

– Luke 20:13-15

Had we respected the Son and listened to him, there would have been no crucifixion. God sent his Son to 'give his life', in the sense of making every moment a love-offering of himself to others. Jesus gave himself to the leper, and to the paralysed man; he gave himself to the sinners and prostitutes and outsiders; he gave himself to carrying out the mission of love given him by the Father. This self-giving brought him up against the resistance of those who refused to listen (6:11). When, sinfully and resisting the Holy Spirit, they tracked him down to effect their evil purpose, what was he to do? His mission looked like a failure. The temple authorities were not listening; nor were the Pharisees.

There was division even among his chosen disciples, who did not appear to be strong enough to carry on without him. Death must have seemed to Jesus to make no sense. He needed more time to do what he knew his Father wanted him to do. There had to be another way.

## Suffering

As sometimes happens to us, the sinful decisions of other people left him no room to move. Heroically, he determined to continue carrying out his Father's will. He determined to continue giving his life. He determined to continue to preach the good news of God's saving love, knowing that the religious authorities did not want the truth to be spoken. He determined to remain prayerful and forgiving and patient, and to continue to take the side of the poor who were crying to God for help.

On the night before he died he gave a meaning to his approaching death. His life was all that he had left and he made his death, as he had made everything else, an offering of love.

When it is said that his death redeemed us, we mean, rather, that it was the way he died. His death was an atrocious murder performed in God's name by hypocritical people determined to protect their own interests. His death was brought about by others. The way he died, however, was determined by Jesus himself, and his manner of dying — in prayer, and faith and love and forgiveness and compassion — gave the final demonstration of the extent of his love (John 15:13). It was this love-giving, this self-giving, this life-giving that God willed. Thanks to Jesus' fidelity to his Father's will, not even the injustice and disobedience of those who crucified Jesus could thwart God's eternal design.

When we turn our attention from Jesus' relationship to his Father and focus instead on his relationship to us, a second consideration emerges. What Jesus did stands as an example for us. He shows us how to listen to God no matter how terrible our circumstances may be. His resurrection holds out hope for us all that God will vindicate us just as he vindicated his Son. Jesus shows us that when people behave badly towards us, we do not have to respond in the same way. 'Love one another', he said, 'just as I have loved you'(John 15:12).

However, his example would have had little power to persuade us had he not suffered. Suffering is very much part of the human condition, and Jesus' words and example are all the more powerful in that we see him loving even when everything was against him:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

– Hebrews 5:7-9

Jesus demonstrated his faith in God's love even when nothing supported such faith. He also showed us how to respond in love even in the worst situations. It is this which makes his message so convincing. It is this which draws us to follow him.

We needed something as shocking as a crucifixion to shake us out of our lethargy, and to save us from the futility of being caught up in a meaningless way of life. Left to ourselves we tend to react to sin with more sin till we lose all hope of finding our way to the fullness of life and love for which we all yearn. We needed to see Jesus loving on the cross, not because God demanded a crucifixion, but because nothing less could convince us that in our suffering we, like Jesus, are surrounded by the unconditional and persistent love of God. Suffering, even when unjustly inflicted, does not have to stop our loving.

We needed to see Jesus believing and forgiving, despite being faced with rejection and the apparent meaninglessness of doing so. For now, no matter what happens to us, we are able to 'look on the one whom we have pierced' (John 19:37), and learn from him the secret of a love that alone can free us from becoming lost in a maze of sin.

His example and the Spirit of love that he gives us from the cross make it possible for us to give meaning to our own sufferings by making an act of faith in God, and by allowing the Spirit of his love to transform our cross into a resurrection like his.

If in our human way we are to imagine God responding to the crucifixion, we should imagine God weeping, as Jesus wept over the city (19:41). This is God's reaction to all the terrible injustices that we humans inflict on each other by our sinful rejection of his loving inspiration.

In making us free, God takes our freedom seriously, permitting our decision to say No to love and so permitting the consequences of such a decision. But God does not stand by as a passive observer of our folly. God is actively inspiring everyone to bring love to flower where it is absent. If we follow the example of those who crucified Jesus and refuse to listen, we must not blame God for the effects of this refusal.

Through Jesus it is revealed to all who are willing to look and listen that God is love. Some rejected this love. Like the people in the desert who struck at the rock (a symbol of God), so those who murdered Jesus struck at his heart with a lance. Just as Moses saw water flowing from the rock to slake the thirst even of those who were rejecting God (Numbers 20:11), so the beloved disciple saw water and blood flowing from the heart of Jesus on the cross (John 19:34) to bring healing and forgiveness even to those who were crucifying him.

There in that darkest place, in that most meaningless event, in that symbol of humanity's rejection of God, love shines forth. God did not will the unjust murder, but he did will the love-response; for it is God's love that is revealed in the heart of Jesus. It is in this sense that one can say that the death of Jesus came within God's providential plan, so that 'by the grace of God, Jesus might taste death for everyone' (Hebrews 2:9). As Jesus himself said:

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him.

– John 8:28-29

## Suffering

When Jesus said in his agony ‘Not my will but yours be done’(22:42), he was expressing his determination to continue, in the face of death, to carry out the mission of love given him by the Father, whatever the cost. He trusted that, in spite of the apparently meaningless death and the apparent failure it represented, his Father would see that the cause entrusted to him would succeed.

When Jesus’ early disciples searched the Old Testament in an effort to make some divine sense out of the crucifixion, they discovered there a constant pattern of God’s love persisting through rejection. In this sense, his dying fulfilled the Scriptures, bringing to a stunning climax the revelation of divine love in the history of God’s people.

Jesus’ way of dying and God’s taking him into his embrace in the resurrection are at the centre of the Christian faith, revealing as they do God’s love-response to human disobedience.

Our disobedience matters. It matters that we sin, and that our sin has such terrible effects on ourselves and on other people. God cannot pretend that things are other than as they really are. Sin, however, can never change the truth that God is love. This love, demonstrated in the way Jesus died, is the source of all our hope. If we believe it, we may dare the journey out of sin. If enough people believe it, there is still hope of realising Jesus’ dream of God’s will being done on earth as in heaven.

### Suffering in the life of the disciple

Speaking of the cross, Paul has this to say:

Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block [scandal] to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

– 1Corinthians 1:22-25

It is natural to find suffering hard to accept. If we keep our eyes on Jesus, however, it is possible to glimpse in suffering a meaning that would otherwise evade us.

We have a basic need to value ourselves, and we experience a natural drive motivating us to become a person who is worthwhile. We desire to be of value in our own eyes and, since we are social beings, we experience the need and the drive to be recognised and respected also by others.

However, we have an even more basic need. The need which is at the very core of being human is to be entirely reliant upon God, the giver and sustainer of our being. The problem is that we do not experience a correspondingly natural drive to rely on God.

Even our 'religious experiences' tend to be drawn into and understood in terms of our natural urge to be someone in our own right. So it requires a grace from God that is above and beyond our natural gifts (a 'supernatural' grace) to make us aware of our need for complete dependence on God and to motivate us to do whatever is needed to attain this transcendent good.

Seeking this good demands a letting go of our reliance on our natural urges. It is here that suffering plays its irreplaceable role.

It is suffering which forces us to recognise the basic inadequacy of our natural drives and the basic flaw in our perception that we are meant to be self-reliant. It forces us to face our dependence and it invites us to trust, for we cannot reach the goal of our human fulfilment except in dependence upon and communion with God.

Without suffering, there is a tendency to stay fixed in a situation which works, which feels comfortable, and in which we feel affirmed. Suffering threatens this equilibrium, and psychic energy is engaged which drives us to face whatever it is that is causing the suffering and the effects it has upon us, and to listen at every level to what is going on in our psyche as well as in our body.

We may choose to stay put and defend our position. However, when we listen, we hear ourselves being asked to let go and to allow to die something that has seemed good, and perhaps has in fact been good, and to entrust ourselves to the grace that is being offered us in and through the suffering.

We are free to choose to avoid the pain of 'dying', or we can cry out in pleading prayer to God on whom we depend, entrust ourselves to God's grace, courageously endure whatever suffering is involved, and allow ourselves to 'die' (mortification) believing that God will raise us up.

Death is the ultimate situation in which this happens, but all along the road of life there are 'dyings': the ordinary psychic stages of maturation; any occasion which requires that we leave someone or something we value; coming up against our own or other people's limitations which require us to let go our self-image or our image of others and our unrealistic hopes and dreams and expectations. The pain of 'dying' can sometimes be in proportion to the success and duration of the adaptation we have made to whatever it is that is being threatened.

Each time we accept to 'die', we experience a deeper communion with God who loves us through our dying, and who raises us up to a fuller life of deeper intimacy with him. Our fidelity, generosity and courage enable God to keep offering us a fuller life beyond our experienced horizons. But each acceptance of the offer requires a new dying. This will involve suffering until all roots of resistance to God's love have been burned (purified) away by God's Holy Spirit, the living flame of love.

It is significant that the Rabbis considered the sufferings of Israel not only as something from which God would redeem them, but also as the means of this deliverance.

## Suffering

The truths contained in the above have been communicated by God to human beings in every culture and in every generation, for everyone in every situation is graced. However, the lesson is difficult to learn, and God chose that his Word would become flesh in Jesus to show us the pattern. By sharing his Spirit with us, Jesus encourages and enables us to follow him along the path of letting go, the path of suffering.

We are called to be human. To be human means to be finite, to be dependent, to receive all we are and have as a gift. As human beings, we are not immortal. Once life has been given to us as a gift, the only life we ever know comes through dying. The whole process of maturing is one of accepting the ‘dyings’ that the human condition, and our own and other people’s sinful decisions, inflict upon us. This certainly does not mean submitting inactively to injustice. But it does mean that even when a ‘dying’ is laid on us unjustly, we must come to an acceptance of the reality of the dying if we are to find a deeper life through it.

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to choose the ‘dyings’ involved in giving ourselves to and for others in love. To attempt to avoid this dying leads to a destructiveness in regard to self and others. The deepest roots of sin are in our refusal of dying. We desire to ‘be like God’(Genesis 3:5) — that is, to be immortal, in our attempt to build our own gods whom we can control and who will save us from dying. To resist death is to resist life, for death and life are organically related. By his dying, Jesus demonstrated this fact, released us from the fear of death (Hebrews 2:15), and taught us to persevere in trust to the end.

Perhaps the beginnings of an understanding of the cross as outlined above might help us grasp why the cross — or rather, the crucified one — is so central to Christian spirituality:

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

– Galatians 6:14

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings, by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

– Philippians 2:10-11

The fruit of Jesus’ suffering on the cross can be seen all around us, in those people who, sustained by their contemplation of Jesus crucified, have grown through suffering to a special wisdom, compassion and gentleness. The suffering itself did not produce the fruit, but it did provide an experience of powerlessness which invited the sufferers to focus upon the grace of God’s love, and to open themselves to receive this grace patiently, humbly and courageously.

We are called to love. We are called to suffer only in so far as suffering purifies our love. When in the cause of love suffering comes our way, Jesus shows us that we are not to stop loving in the hope of avoiding the suffering. Rather, through the suffering we are to open ourselves to a purer and more refined love. It is the love that gives meaning to the suffering.

There are some especially beautiful flowers that grow only in the bed of suffering. One of these is the self-knowledge that suffering can bring us. It strips away pretence and penetrates to the core of our soul, revealing the roots of our self-reliance, pride and presumption. It makes us aware of our helplessness in a way that is not easily avoided. When we learn to accept suffering and bear it patiently, it can purge away our pride. Humbled by pain, we turn to God, who delicately exposes the falseness of our self-reliance and draws us into his mysterious embrace. Suffering can bring us to the point where we come to recognise our need for love. This theme is particularly dear to Paul:

We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. But just as we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture – 'I believed, and so I spoke' – we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence.

– 2Corinthians 4:7-14

In our weakness and suffering, we experience a special strength that is not our own:

The Lord said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

– 2Corinthians 12:9-10

Much pain in our world results from our reaction to suffering inflicted unjustly on us by others. We tend to hurt back or to store up the hurt and pass it on to others. In either case, the pain goes on and on. If, however, we can bear suffering in love; if we can continue to offer love (we can 'offer the other cheek', 6:29); if, while working against injustice, and while working to alleviate suffering, we are hated, excluded, reviled and defamed because of Jesus (6:22) — then indeed we are blessed when the suffering stops with us. What is more, our suffering exercises an extraordinary power for the conversion of those who cause it. It can give courage also to those who suffer and who do not know how to bear it.

For the disciple of Jesus there is a profound sense in which suffering can unite us to him. Truly, love is the greatest gift. But if we love the way Jesus loved, it will not be long before suffering enters our lives as it entered his. If, like Jesus, we are to love the outsiders, we, like Jesus, will become outsiders. If, like Jesus, we are going to take the part of the oppressed, we, like Jesus, will be oppressed. Paul, however, could write:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me.

– Galatians 2:19-20

## Suffering

If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

– Romans 6:5

We are heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

– Romans 8:17-18

Perhaps the most wonderful thing about suffering is that through it Jesus invites us to join with him in redeeming the world. It is this truth that caused Paul to find joy in his sufferings:

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church.

– Colossians 1:24

It seems true that to experience Christ as exalted we have to experience him as crucified. To know the power of God's redeeming love, we need to look upon the one we have pierced (John 19:37). We need to put our hand into his pierced side and our fingers into his wounds (John 20:27) — the wounds of his brothers and sisters with whom, as the Son of Man, he still identifies.

The amount of good that is in our world as a result of suffering borne in love is immeasurable. Both Paul (Philippians 1:29) and James (1:2) consider such suffering a privilege. There is a mystery here that goes beyond our understanding. But our life-experience will not allow us to ignore it.

Christianity has no answers to the meaninglessness of suffering brought upon ourselves and others by our failure to listen to God. It does, however, show us a way to integrate suffering into our lives.

At the same time, it is apparent that there is excessive suffering in our world. People are degraded by it, dragged down by it, and have their lives rendered inhuman by it. Christianity lays upon everyone the duty to work against suffering and its causes. Like Jesus, we are to act as instruments of God, bringing healing and liberation to the sufferer.

Discernment is necessary, and the causes of suffering need to be named and opposed. But it is not for us to sit in judgment, to look for culprits or to apportion blame. We are to work for just institutions and just structures. But we cannot wait for this to happen. We are called upon to feed the hungry now. We are called, now, to give drink to the thirsty, to visit those in prison and to work to heal the sick.

Finally, we need to remember that death necessarily sets limits to any possibilities we have of alleviating suffering. There can be no solution short of the resurrection. In the words of Peter and Paul:

In accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

– 2Peter 3:13

Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

– Philippians 3:20-21

While we strive, in response to God's grace and call, to be faithful 'servants' of the Lord in bringing about the reign of God here on earth (11:2), we recognise that our ultimate homeland is in heaven (Philippians 3:20). In a future life we are assured of being finally and totally embraced by the Father of Jesus (2Corinthians 4:16 - 5:10).

If we think that whatever suffering exists in this world is willed by God (either directly intended by God or permitted by God), then we will see our task as one of accepting suffering in all its forms. We will see such submission as doing God's will while trusting in God's wisdom and love.

The truth, however, is that whatever the circumstances God's will is that we love and be faithful to love. Suffering is part of life and its causes are complex and sometimes quite contrary to God's will. If we recognise this, we will see our task as accepting the suffering which we are unable to prevent. We must not let suffering deter us from loving faithfully. We may even draw so close to Jesus through suffering that we embrace the opportunity to share with him in revealing God's love in this special way to those for whom Jesus gave his life.

We are called to believe that suffering comes within the loving and wise providence of God. We are called to believe that God's will is to heal us and to liberate us from suffering. This liberation will come about ultimately when we share his glory with his Son in heaven. It also comes about here on earth when love heals, and when healing leads to greater love.

If we or others continue to suffer, let us continue to believe in God's love. Let us keep hoping for God's redemption. Let us remain faithful to loving. Then suffering itself will be experienced as a grace, deepening our love and bringing about our own purification and redemption as well as the purification and redemption of others. If the cross must be part of Christian living, let us embrace him who died on it, knowing that we are never beyond his embrace.

**<sup>46</sup> An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest.**

**<sup>47</sup> But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side,**

**<sup>48</sup> and said to them, 'Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.'**

compare  
Matthew 18:1-5  
Mark 9:33-37

### **Communion with Jesus means communion with the lowly**

Jesus shows his disciples how they are to treat each other within the community. In the following scene he will insist that they must also be open to outsiders.

In Jesus' world, children were not considered significant in the world of religion, cult and law. Jesus took this 'little child', vulnerable, powerless and 'least among all of you', and he 'put it by his side'.

The disciples are arguing about greatness. Jesus' 'greatness' is found in the sacred respect in which he holds people, without regard to their social importance. If we want to be great, let us do what Jesus does: welcome, serve, care for and embrace every person, especially those of least significance in the eyes of the world. Let us welcome them, like Jesus, as people welcomed, served, cared for and embraced by God himself.

In welcoming this little child, Jesus identifies with him. He sees himself as among the least. Since greatness is measured by closeness to Jesus, we are to identify with him and so with the least. Luke is again inviting his readers to ponder the mystery of Jesus' intimate prayer. Jesus addressed God as "Abba!", and had towards God the absolute dependence and total trust which tiny children have in their parents. This is the measure of greatness in the Christian community.

The good news is that each and every person is a beloved son or daughter of God. It should come as no surprise that we are meant to treat everyone, even the tiniest child, with the sacred respect and reverence with which they are treated by God. Nor should it surprise us that God, who commissioned Jesus his Servant to preach the good news to all without reserve, should commission Jesus' disciples to do the same.

When Moses approached the burning bush, he was overwhelmed by the sacred Presence which he encountered there. He removed his sandals, because he was on holy ground (Exodus 3:5). We cannot be Jesus' disciples, and we will not carry out his ministry, unless we know that every encounter with another person is an encounter with God. Only then will the love we have for them be the love of God that filled the heart of Jesus. Only then will the words we speak and the actions we do be convincing witnesses of the gospel.

**Jesus' community is to be open to 'outsiders'**

A group of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem tried to stop Paul because he was not one of their group (Galatians 2:4; Acts 15:24-25). The community at Corinth was divided because people formed into sects that excluded others who were judged not to belong (1 Corinthians 1:12). In our day, we witness the continuing scandal of divisions among those claiming to follow Jesus, and no doubt Luke's community had similar problems.

This scene is a powerful statement against any kind of group or institutional arrogance. John is corrected for placing his own limited measure on the working of the Spirit of God.

A tree is to be judged by its fruit. If people are doing wonderful things that draw others to Christ, we can be sure that the Spirit of God is working in them. We are reminded of a scene from the Book of Numbers:

Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again. Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.' And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, 'My lord Moses, stop them!' But Moses said to him, 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!' And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

– Numbers 11:24-30

Jesus calls his followers to be open to the world, ready to recognise his Spirit working in every woman and man of good will.

**<sup>49</sup> John answered, 'Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us.'**

**<sup>50</sup> But Jesus said to him, 'Do not stop him;**

**for whoever is not against you is for you.'**

compare  
Matthew 10:42  
Mark 9:38-41