

The uniqueness of Jesus: a reflection

The Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin gives expression to sentiments that would be shared by many holy women and men from any number of the religious traditions that enrich our human family by contributing to what Justin Martyr calls ‘a symphony of salvation.’:

‘Those with a passionate sense of the divine cannot bear to find things about them obscure, tepid and empty, when they should be full and vibrant with God. They are astonished by the number of people linked in the unity of the same world, who are not yet fully kindled by the flame of the divine presence. There was a time when they thought that they had only to stretch out their hands in order to touch God to the measure of their desires. Now they see that the only embrace capable of enfolding the divine is that of all humankind opening its arms to call down and welcome the fire. The only subject capable ultimately of mystical transformation is the whole family of humankind forming a single body and a single soul in love’.

(The Divine Milieu, 1926, page 144).

A genuine religious sentiment cannot be sectarian. There is only one God. Everything and everybody is interconnected. We all belong, for we are all expressions of the one Source of all. Every genuinely religious person recognises that love gives us our key insight into the sacred. While recognising God’s self-communication throughout the whole of the created universe and the value of the response found in the various religions of the world, it is the conviction of Christianity that God’s self-communication and the response to it reached its perfect human form in Jesus of Nazareth. Every created thing is an expression, a necessarily limited expression, of God’s Word, but Jesus is, as it were, God’s focal Word, revealing without distortion, in his person and in his teaching, who God really is: a God of love. He also showed us how to respond to God in love. This conviction is expressed again and again throughout the documents of the New Testament:

‘In Christ the whole fullness of God was pleased to dwell’(Colossians 1:14).

‘Christ is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, who sustains all things by his powerful word’(Hebrews 1:3).

Such a claim is in no way disrespectful to the many human responses to God that find expression in other religions. Those of Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries who became his disciples, saw him, not as abolishing Judaism, but as bringing it to its perfection (see Matthew 5:17). People from other religious traditions who have become disciples of Jesus could say the same about their religious heritage. God’s self-communication is mediated to us, and so subject to all kinds of distortions. Furthermore, we human beings don’t always pick things up properly or respond appropriately. All this is, of course, true for those of us who wish to be disciples of Jesus. Heaven forbid that we should claim to be better than anyone else. The Christian claim is about Jesus, not about how others have presented him to us or how we are responding.

We have stressed the need for constant correction and purification of our concept of God. Christian tradition does this by focusing on the person and the life of Jesus, drawing on the experience of those of his contemporaries who found in him a perfect human expression of God. Their experience has been re-affirmed by the countless millions since who have looked to him, and committed themselves to live as his disciples. While sharing in God’s own respect for the genuine response to God of every person and of all cultures, Christians enjoy the immense privilege of knowing Jesus. Reflection on the life and significance of Jesus has been for Christians the richest source for their reflections on the meaning of God, and so for their reflections on the meaning of human experience.

The goal of our lives is communion in love with God. Christians have discovered that the way to the communion of love for which we are created is through Jesus. They have found in Jesus the way to connect with their deepest yearnings, and the way to connect them with God. Jesus lives this communion. He reveals the life-giving truth of God's love and, through the gift of his own life, he attracts us and enables us to share this divine communion. Addressing the Jewish Council, Peter speaks of Jesus and says: 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved'(Acts 4:12). In the Gospel of John Jesus says to Thomas: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'(John 14:6). One hears texts such as these being used in an attempt to prove that only those who are explicitly and consciously Christian can be saved. Such an interpretation is contrary to the teaching of the whole New Testament. The New Testament is asserting that God alone can save. On the lips of Jesus in John's Gospel we hear the Divine Word. John is stating that we cannot achieve communion with God in any other way than in response to God's self-giving, God's Word, of whom Jesus is the perfect human expression.

Let us ask, firstly, whom does God intend to come to God? The answer to this question is clearly 'Everyone'. Paul writes: 'God our saviour desires *everyone* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth'(1Timothy 2:4). He also writes: 'The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of *all*'(Titus 2:11). 'As one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's righteous living leads to acquittal and life for *all*'(Romans 5:18). 'God has assigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon *all*'(Romans 11:32).

This conviction is at the heart of Paul's belief that the gospel is to be preached to '*every* creature under heaven'(Colossians 1:23), for '*all* things have been created through him [Jesus] and for him' (Colossians 1:16). Jesus is the human expression of God's divine Word and 'there is only one God'(Romans 3:29), and 'from God and through God and to God are *all* things'(Romans 11:36). Paul is simply echoing the words of Jesus when he said: 'When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw *all* people to myself'(John 12:32). The essence of the Gospel is that God is indeed the Creator of every person conceived into this world, and that God's love for each is unconditional and complete. It is obvious from everything Jesus did and said that God intends to draw everyone into divine communion.

This leads to a second question: How does God intend to draw everyone to God? It is the Spirit of God that fills all things. Now that Jesus has been raised to fullness of life by God, it is the Spirit of God in Jesus – the Spirit which binds him in love to the Father – that fills all things, giving life to all who open their hearts to this Spirit. It is the belief of Christians that when we respond to God's invitation to live in divine communion, we are drawn to share the life, the prayer-communion of Jesus himself. It is God who transforms us by drawing us into ever more intimate communion. Transforming union happens as we allow ourselves to be drawn into divine communion by Jesus' own Spirit of Love. Paul writes: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us'(Romans 5:5).

To the Samaritan woman Jesus promised: 'The water that I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life'(John 4:14). On a later occasion Jesus promised that rivers of life-giving water would flow from the heart of those who believed in him. John adds the following comment: 'Jesus was speaking of the Spirit which those who believe in him were to receive'(John 7:38-39). At the last supper we hear Jesus say:

'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them'(John 14:23).

'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them'(John 17:21,26).

The sacrament of the Spirit of Jesus' love, the place where Jesus' Spirit is powerfully effective, is the community of the Church, an extension in the world of Jesus' body. It is in a special way in and through the church that God speaks God's Word and communicates himself to the world. Paul writes: 'God has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of God's will, according to God's good pleasure which God set forth in Christ as God's providential design for the fullness of time, to put *all* things under Christ as head ... God has made him head over *all* things for the Church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills *all* things completely, everywhere' (Ephesians 1:9-10, 22-23).

Those who shared Jesus' Spirit shared his commitment to all people. From the beginning, the church was called 'catholic' for the very reason that it was committed to universality. The church's mission is to carry on the mission of Jesus from whose love no one is excluded, and, as Ignatius of Antioch wrote in the first years of the second century: 'Where Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church'(Epistle to Smyrna 8.2).

Living by Jesus' Spirit is not simply a matter of words, or externals. It is a matter of faith, hope and love. As Jesus said: 'It is not anyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord", who will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father'(Matthew 7:21). Faith, in the whole biblical tradition, is a matter of listening to God's word, taking it seriously, and acting accordingly. The only kind of faith which Paul sought to inspire in people was 'faith working through love'(Galatians 5:6). We are to 'do the truth in love'(Ephesians 4:15). We can conclude that if we wish to be saved, each of us, from where we now stand, must draw closer to full communion with the 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic church'(Creed of Nicene-Constantinople, 381AD), and be committed to a life of deeper faith, more trusting hope, and more perfect love.

It follows that to reject, positively and explicitly, belief in Jesus as the revelation of God is to reject God's Word, and to refuse to welcome God's offer of life: 'Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved; whoever rejects belief will be condemned'(Mark 16:16). This is not because the exalted Jesus is not drawing everyone to himself and so to the Father, but because such a person refuses to receive the offer so lovingly made.

What, then, of those who have never heard of Jesus? What of people who think they are rejecting Jesus, but are rejecting only the false Jesus which has been presented to them? If God really intends everyone to be saved, is God limited by geography or by our sinful failure to preach the Gospel in an authentic way? Must those who through no fault of their own have never had an opportunity explicitly to come to know and love Jesus miss out on the opportunity to respond to the Spirit of the risen Jesus and be drawn to the Father?

Does not Paul say that Jesus 'fills *all* things, completely, everywhere'(Ephesians 1:23). Jesus is the Word of God made flesh (John 1:13). This Word spoke in the prophets for centuries before the Incarnation (Hebrews 1:1). This same self-communication of God has been operative 'since the beginning'(1John 1:1), 'enlightening *everyone*'(John 1:9). The risen Jesus is now drawing everyone to himself, drawing them in mysterious ways to 'everything that is true, everything that is honourable, everything that is upright and pure, everything that we love and admire'(Philippians 4:8). 'For those who aimed for glory and honour and immortality by persevering in doing good, there will be eternal life ... glory and honour and peace will come to everyone who does good'(Romans 2:7,10). Condemnation is only for those who sin 'without excuse' (Romans 1:20).

The Second Vatican Council in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World has this to say:

'The Christian partakes in the paschal mystery, becomes like Christ in his death and will encounter the resurrection fortified with hope. Nor does this hold only for those

who believe in Christ: it holds for all people of good will in whose hearts grace works in an invisible fashion. Christ died for everybody, everybody's ultimate vocation is the same, divine vocation; then we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers everybody the possibility of sharing in some way known to God in this paschal mystery'(n.22).

This does not lessen the importance of preaching the Gospel to everyone by word and example, and of welcoming everyone into the church which is the 'fullness of Christ'. God willed to reveal God's heart in the heart of Jesus. God willed to reveal God's face in the face of Christ. God willed to reveal God's word in the words of Jesus. We who have had the privilege of seeing 'the glory of God on the face of Jesus'(2Corinthians 4:6) and hearing his words and experiencing the intimacy of his heart will surely want to respond to his mission to draw all to Jesus so that they will know who it is who is drawing them to the Father. Let us listen also to the following exhortation from Pope Paul VI:

'It would be useful if every Christian and every evangeliser were to pray about the following thought: people can gain salvation also in other ways, by God's mercy, even though we do not preach the Gospel to them; but as for us, can we gain salvation if through negligence or fear or shame – what Saint Paul called 'blushing for the Gospel'(Romans 1:16) – or as a result of false ideas, we fail to preach it? For that would be to betray the call of God, who wishes the seed to bear fruit through the voice of the ministers of the Gospel; and it will depend on us whether this grows into trees and produces its full fruit.

Let us therefore preserve our fervour of spirit. Let us preserve the delightful and comforting joy of evangelising, even when it is in tears that we must sow. May it mean for us – as it did for John the Baptist, for Peter and Paul, for the other Apostles and for a multitude of splendid evangelisers all through the Church's history – an interior enthusiasm that nobody and nothing can quench.

May it be the great joy of our consecrated lives. And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelisers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervour, who have first received the joy of Christ, and who are willing to risk their lives so that the Kingdom may be proclaimed and the Church established in the midst of the world.'

(Evangelisation in the Modern World, 1975, n. 80)

The risen Jesus is already drawing every person to himself and so to his Father. People will be saved if they respond to his Spirit, even if they do not come to an explicit awareness of who it is who is drawing them. The task of the Christian Church is to be the instrument of Jesus for drawing everyone to the fullness of his life. Christians are to grow to be able to say: 'It is no longer I, but Christ who lives in me'(Galatians 2:20). We are to be the face and the heart of Jesus in the world. We are to mediate his grace and draw everyone to the fullness of life in him and the assurance of salvation that comes with living his life. The Church is to be a 'seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race'(Vatican II, The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, n.3).

Let us then in our dealings with each other generously share what we have experienced of God's Word and Spirit through our communion with Jesus, knowing that God is already speaking his Word to everyone and pouring over them God's own Spirit of love. As we speak, let us listen, trusting that in this dialogue we will all come to know and love Jesus better and so enjoy an ever more profound communion in the divine life of love. Let us do so in the profound hope that where Jesus is presented in an authentic way, those whose hearts are open will come to recognise

in him the fulfilment of any genuine religious experience. What is important is that we believe that this happening, not that we receive evident signs.