

1. It is we creatures that change, not the Transcendent God, Creator of all that exists.

When Paul writes to Timothy: ‘God our Saviour desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’(1 Timothy 2:4), he is speaking of the way things have always been from the beginnings of the human race. God did not start saving with Jesus. Certainly something wonderfully new happened with Jesus, but the change was from the human side, not from God. God was always the way Jesus revealed God to be. God was always offering himself to his creation, gracing human beings to enjoy fullness of life through welcoming God’s Self-offering and living in divine love-communion.

We can misuse our freedom, we can reject love, we can opt not to do what it takes to 'live to the full'(John 10:10). God, however, has always been, and will always be, the way Jesus revealed him to be. There was never a time when God was not offering God's Self, loving, reaching out to forgive, inspiring, liberating, healing, saving

Salvation did not start with Jesus. Surely we have to leave behind the image of all the people before Jesus waiting for him to appear so that they could, at last, be saved (live in communion with God).

And what about people who have lived after the time of Jesus? What about those who have never heard of Jesus or who have been taught about him, but in such a defective way, that in rejecting what they have been taught they think they have rejected him? There have been times in the past when we were led to think that there was no hope for them.

The clear teaching of the Second Vatican Council and statements since by the Church reject such negative thinking.

In the Decree Ad Gentes we are reminded that ‘in ways known to Himself God can lead to faith those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel’(Vat II AG n.7).

Indeed, ‘God our Saviour does desire everyone to be saved’, and, from the beginning of the human race, God has been pouring God’s loving Spirit into people’s hearts to inspire them to respond to grace and to their deepest longings, and to ‘come to the knowledge of the truth’.

The wonder of Jesus is that he believed this with all his heart and responded fully to God's gift of God's Self to him. In Paul's words: 'He [Christ] lives for God'(Romans 6:10). He revealed God as God truly is, and revealed what God has willed always and in every place. The fact that Jesus was rejected by the 'religious' people of his day is dramatic proof of how difficult it can be to see and accept God as God is.

- Witness Jesus' effect on his contemporaries
- Witness our need because of the persistence of notions of God that miss what Jesus revealed.

The human race needed Jesus to reveal God as love and to show that it is through loving (through the gift of ourselves to others, as God gives God's Self to us) that we human beings can find full meaning and freedom to be.

As the author of the First Letter of John experienced it: ‘We have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them’(1John 4:16). ‘We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another’(1John 3:14).

Paul experienced this as ‘the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord’(Philippians 3:8). It has always been true that God wants to be ‘everything in everyone’(1Corinthians 15:28).

Thanks to Jesus we can know this to be true, and we can discover it for ourselves through communion with Jesus.

It was Jesus' grace-filled response that opened the way for God to enter fully into the human condition. In the Prologue to John's Gospel we are reminded of God bringing about creation through his Word (John 1:1-5), echoing the "Let it be!" of the creation account in Genesis 1.

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was towards God, and the Word was God.

The Word was in the beginning with God.

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'

We are reminded, too, that, though God's Word (God's gift of God's Self) was often rejected, even in Israel (John 1:10-11), there were always those who welcomed God's gift and lived as God's children (John 1:12-13).

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

God's Word was in the world,
and the world came into being through him;
yet the world did not know him.

God's Word came to what was his own,
and his own people did not accept him.

But to all who received him, who believed in his name,
he gave power to become children of God,
who were born, not of blood
or of the will of the flesh
or of the will of man, but of God.

However, it was only, finally, in Jesus, that God's Word was embraced fully, and entered into the communion with creation that God had always willed (John 1:14). This is what those who knew Jesus experienced when they experienced Jesus' love, and it is this that they wanted to share with everyone.

The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of the gift of truth.

From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

The law indeed was given through Moses;

the gift truth came through Jesus Christ.

No one has ever seen God.

It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart,

who has made him known.

Thanks to Jesus, and through communion with him, we are able to ‘live and live to the full’(John 10:10). Not knowing of Jesus we can hope that our longing for life can be fulfilled. Knowing Jesus we have assurance that our longing is God-given and that God truly wants us to be ‘saved’(to experience the fulfilment of our deepest longings in love-communion with God and so with creation).

In Paul’s words” ‘in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself’(2Corinthians 5:19).

In John’s words: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’(John 3:16).

Hence the conviction of Jesus’ followers that they must carry on the mission of Jesus by sharing the Good News with ‘all nations’(Matthew 28:19).

It was Jesus' communion with God that was the source of his life. It nourished and sustained him throughout his life and ultimately in his dying. At the Last Supper, with a broken heart, he said: 'You will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone'(John 16:32). He went straight on to add: 'Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me.' From the cross he prayed: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit [my life-breath; the Spirit of communion we have always shared]'(Luke 23:46). This love was the source of the love he shared with everyone who was open to welcome it.

More on this shortly

Down through the centuries there have been people who have found life through the communion with Jesus that they experienced. The Christian community, however, is not like the Ark of Noah, a place of salvation surrounded by the swirling waters of chaos. Rather it is a 'light to the world'(Matthew 5:14) keeping alive what Jesus revealed about God and about what it means to be human. Jesus promised: 'When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw everyone to myself'(John 12:32), and so to the God he called 'My Father'.

It would be so good for people to know this, consciously and explicitly, but, as Jesus makes clear in his parable about final judgment, if, though no fault of our own, we never reach this consciousness, it is still true that whenever we were responding to others in genuine love we are responding to the inspiration of Jesus' Spirit, and we will find meaning and fullness of life with him and with God.

The wonder of Jesus is that, for those who know him and for those who do not, he is, as we hear in John's Gospel 14:6, the 'way' that shows how God wills to grace us, and how we are to live to the full. He is the 'truth', for it is the real and only God that he reveals, a loving Father, willing to free us from the burden of sin, wanting 'everyone to be saved'. He is the 'life', the life of intimate divine communion which everyone is invited to share.

Thanks to Jesus we have learned that death is the end of dying, not the end of living. Beyond death, we, like Jesus, will experience fullness of life, provided, of course, we have not obstinately rejected God's Self-offering to us.

Our hope is that our experience now of Jesus, of God our Father, and of the Spirit of love that flows between them and is their gift to us, the Spirit that Jesus gives ‘without measure’(John 3:34) –

our hope is that this experience will embolden us to commit ourselves trustingly into God’s hands as we breathe our final breath, and be taken into the embrace that God wants for everyone.

There is value here in reflecting on this from an evolutionary perspective.

We observe a process of matter emerging into life and awareness, and in ourselves a self-consciousness whereby we know ourselves as yearning for complete communion with the universe and with God. Becoming is a process of self-transcendence to a higher way of being.

God is communicating God's Self to creation, which experiences an inner dynamism drawing it to transcend its way of being to be better able to receive God's Self-gift. God does not come from the outside to draw creation into communion. God is drawing creation into communion from within.

The process of evolution is effected by God's presence and love drawing everything into communion. The evolution of more complex organisms is a step in the process towards awareness, and then self-consciousness – an ever deeper receiving of grace. We human beings experience this drawing to transcend ourselves towards God.

Paul speaks of this: 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies'(Romans 8:22-23).

Jesus is a man who completely transcended himself. In him nature experienced the fulfilment of its yearning. He revealed in its fullness God's self-communication as well as the capacity of creation to receive God's Self-gift.

Creation reaches the fulfilment of its inner dynamism in the man Jesus. Jesus reveals God's will for the divinization of the world.

He shows us who we really are: people called to share in Jesus' divinity (his intimate communion with God whom he calls 'Father'). We see in Jesus what we are all called to be. By God's complete Self-communication to Jesus, God brings about the complete human self-transcendence into divine communion (what is called 'eternal life'). In so doing God shows what is promised to every human being: a communion offered for our free acceptance, a communion that we can experience by being 'in Christ', enjoying the intimacy he has with God whom he experienced as 'Father', the Source of all he is, the intimacy of sharing the Father's Spirit of Love.

Jesus' disciples came to see him as a human being who, at last, opened himself completely to grace, who experienced to the full the longing that defines who we are as human beings, and who responded to the intimacy of this communion without ever giving in to self-centredness. In Jesus a human being dared to follow the way of self-transcendence that we know as love, and he did so till his last breath.

Jesus' love, for God and for them, was unconditional and knew no bounds. He awakened in them the desire to follow him in this, and they felt that it was his love for them that made this possible for them. He not only showed them what we are meant to be as humans, he challenged them to live their humanity to the full, while promising to stay with them and sustain them as they tried.

At last a member of the human race got what it means to be human. What this made possible was for God to give himself to Jesus without reserve. This was God's aim in creation, and from the beginning God continued to give God's Self to creation, in every culture and people.

But God utterly respects human freedom, and God's Self-giving kept coming up against the choices we make, to welcome this grace, but also to reject it when the demands of self-transcendence prove too hard. At last in Jesus a member of the human race said a complete and unconditional yes to God's self-bestowal. In him the divine Self-gift and the human openness to receive met in a perfect and so unsurpassable way. Jesus is beautifully human and so in seeing him his disciples were able to see themselves as they are called to be. In seeing him they are, at last, able to see God as God reveals God's Self in our human condition and history.

In Jesus they saw how a human being acts [his 'human nature'], and how God acts [his 'divine nature']. In Jesus they saw revealed the human and the divine.

His disciples had to struggle with the meaning of their experience of Jesus. Jesus' death brought them to a major crossroad. His manner of dying, however, and their post-crucifixion experiences issued in the conviction that defined the rest of their lives. It is this conviction that is at the heart of Christianity.

Jesus' manner of dying revealed his total trust in God. His being raised from death assured them of God's total acceptance of Jesus, including Jesus' understanding of God.

It gave rise to the hope that if they followed Jesus they would share in the fulness of his communion with God.

If we look to Jesus and dare to follow him, if we let his response to God fill our hearts and lives, we will know that sin need not have the last word. God is love. God wants us to live to the full. God's forgiveness, if we open ourselves to welcome it and if we determine to live in God's love, will set us free from whatever it is that holds us back from living our God-given and God-graced humanity to the full.

Because he perfectly responded to grace, Jesus is a gift for everyone. In Jesus, at last, we can see God reconciling the world to Himself (see Colossians 1:20 and 2Corinthians 5:18-19). Living in communion with Jesus we are able to live in such a way that God can be 'everything to everyone' (1Corinthians 15:28).

2. In the light of what Jesus reveals, who am I? Who are we?

In the light of earlier chapters, and as a preliminary and part response to the question ‘Who are we as human beings?’, I offer a number of propositions for reflection.

1. We human beings experience a longing for love (for communion) that motivates our striving to know.
2. This longing and striving keeps beckoning us beyond. We want to be in communion with everything. We want to discover how best to give meaning to what we experience.
3. Since our longing and striving is proven to deepen our connection with what is real, it is reasonable to conclude that there exists a Reality which can fully satisfy our longing for love and our striving to know. This Reality is always beyond our comprehension, but is present wherever we come to love and to know.
4. We name this mysterious and sacred Reality ‘God’.

5. It is this 'God' that sustains everything in existence. Creation is the effect of divine Self-giving.

6. Evolution is the process of a creature letting go what it is in response to a mysterious presence calling it on to better receive the divine communion that it is offered. Evolution comes from within creation, but is in response to divine grace.

7. In us humans creation is conscious of this yearning and this striving. Our response is a mixture of good (when we respond by self-giving) and evil (when we refuse to give ourselves in love).

8. In Jesus of Nazareth creation reached the realisation of its full potential, the complete welcoming of grace and the complete human self-giving into divine communion. In Jesus of Nazareth God gave himself to creation as fully as this is possible, granted the limits inherent in Jesus being human. Jesus is God fully present to creation. Jesus is creation fully present to God. Watching him we see the divine and the human in action (his divine and human 'natures').

9. In Jesus we see that God is Self-giving love, and that we too are called to be self-giving love. He is the new Adam (1Corinthians 15:45) revealing what it is to be created in God's image and likeness.

10. Jesus lives on in the community of his disciples. He is the Vine, we are the branches. At the heart of the Christian community is the life-giving breath ('Spirit') of God, which is the love-communion of Jesus and God.

II. Because we humans do not always honour our yearning for love and our striving to know, we need healing from the 'sin' of our origins and from our personal sin. God alone is our Creator, our Redeemer and Saviour: 'there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist'(1Corinthians 8:6). By loving us, Jesus draws us into the communion he enjoys with God, and so it is through him, through our communion with him ('through him and with him and in him'), that creation enjoys the freedom to attain its goal. Paul continues the statement just quoted: 'and there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist'. Because of the perfect union of Jesus with God, it is through Jesus that God is reconciling the world to himself. We speak of Jesus, therefore, as our Redeemer and Saviour.

12. This liberating love is experienced fully in the Christian community. Just as Jesus is the Sacrament, the Symbol, of God, in whom we experience the Mystery of God, so the Church is the Sacrament, the Symbol, of Jesus. In the Church we experience the Mystery of God. The Church is the sacrament of God's love to the world.

3. Selecting a starting point and choosing a trajectory

There are two ways of approaching the study of the place of Jesus in the Christian faith (Christology). One is called ‘Descending Christology’, the other ‘Ascending Christology’.

Descending Christology

‘Descending Christology’ begins with the Dogma of the Trinity, and the Word of God (called the ‘Second Person of the Trinity’) becoming man in Jesus of Nazareth. The advantage of this approach is that it ensures that we learn from the hard-won achievements of the debates that raged in the early centuries of the Church and the decisions that emerged from the early Church Councils.

In the Gospel of John we hear Philip say to Jesus: 'Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied', and we hear Jesus reply: 'Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father'(John 14:8-9). The danger that kept emerging in the early centuries of the Church was to make a break between Jesus and God. The assurance that we have from the early Councils is that to make such a break is to totally misunderstand Jesus and what he reveals about God. It undermines the very basis of the Christian faith. The advantage of so-called 'Descending Christology' is that, from the outset, we see God incarnate in Jesus. To see Jesus the man is, indeed, to see God as God chose to reveal himself to us.

Descending Christology also underlines the truth that Jesus experienced his life and his mission as coming from God.

However, it can be argued that the disadvantages of starting our study with the Trinity outweigh the advantages.

A key problem is that the word 'person' when applied to the Trinity has quite a different meaning from what we mean by person today. When we think of a person we think of a unique being with his/her own distinct consciousness and distinct ability to make free decisions. To say that in God there are three persons of the kind just defined would indeed be heresy, for it would mean that there were in reality three gods.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, because of the way many of us were trained, in spite of our thinking of ourselves as monotheists, we were, however unconsciously, tritheists.

Another disadvantage is that the power of Trinitarian thought is such that it can blind us to the reality of Jesus' humanity. We declare that we believe that Jesus is man. 'He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect'(Hebrews 2:17): 'one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin'(Hebrews 4:15), but, without realising it, we are in danger of falling into the oldest heresy that faced the Church: we are in danger of thinking of him as God inhabiting a human body, seeming to be a human being, but thinking, deciding and acting as God, not man.

If we attempt today to present Jesus beginning with his divinity, it is too easy for our thinking contemporaries to dismiss what we are saying as 'a strange myth that can no longer be grasped and understood'(Rahner A New Christology, page 7).

Ascending Christology

Much better to begin our thinking about Jesus with the experiences and thinking of his first disciples as we find them expressed in the writings of the Newer Testament: especially the letters of Paul (composed between 48 and his death in the middle 60's), the Letter to the Hebrews, and the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke (including the second part of his book, the so-called 'Acts of the Apostles', which tells us of some of the experiences of the early Christians), and the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple as edited by his community after his death (the Gospel of 'John').

This approach ensures that we take Jesus' humanity seriously. The conclusions of the early Councils, while not our starting point, do offer us an essential compass, directing us away from paths that lead to error and, instead, taking us into the heart of the Trinity, enabling us to see in Jesus what attracted his first disciples to him: his special communion with God that revealed the Father to them, and drew them to share in the Spirit of Jesus' love for God and for people.

We will be following this trajectory.

- We will begin by examining the Newer Testament to see how Jesus' disciples came to think of Jesus of Nazareth as they knew him in his public ministry ending with his death (Catechism numbers 422-440, 470-478 and 512-570). This will include a reflection on how they came to think of his dying and his death (Catechism numbers 571-637).
- We will then reflect on their experiences of Jesus after his death, and how they spoke of the risen and exalted Jesus (Catechism n. 638-682, 441-463 and 484-486).
- We will follow with an examination of how Jesus' disciples came to understand Jesus of Nazareth when, in the light of the Resurrection, they reflected back on their time with him.
- Finally, we will examine the teaching of the early church from the second to the fifth centuries, finishing with the Council of Chalcedon 451AD (Catechism n.464-469).

How did Jesus' disciples come to think of Jesus of Nazareth as they knew him in his public ministry ending with his death? This will include a reflection on how they came to think of his dying and his death.

I am satisfied with the lecture given in 2006 and this is available as text files and audio files on my website.

They experienced Jesus as a man. They experienced his love.

They thought of him as God's Son, God's 'only' Son who revealed God to them and showed them how to respond to God.

They experienced him as a 'poor man', a 'just man', a 'wise man'.

They experienced him as a prophet, a Servant of YHWH.

They heard him speak of himself as 'The Son of Man'.

He became for them the way to the Father, the Christ, the crucified Christ.

Here I want only to focus on the key experience that underlies all the rest: Jesus' special relationship with God.

Jesus' special relationship with God

At the heart of their attraction to Jesus was their experience of his special relationship to God. Again and again the Gospels speak of Jesus' prayer. Having described a busy day in Jesus' ministry, Mark writes that Jesus left the house to find a secluded place where he could be alone in prayer (see Mark 1:35). Luke tells us that 'many crowds would gather to hear Jesus and to be cured of their diseases. but he would withdraw to deserted places and pray'(Luke 5:16). Before selecting his twelve disciples, 'Jesus went out to the mountain to pray, and spent the whole night in prayer to God'(Luke 6:12).

It was after he had been praying alone that he asked his disciples who they thought he was (see Luke 9:18). Matthew, Mark and Luke all describe the scene where 'Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray'(Luke 9:28). They go on to describe the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36).

Luke records a prayer that burst from the heart of Jesus: ‘At that time Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”(Luke 10:21-22; see Matthew 11:25-27).

This prayer reveals the special intimacy Jesus experienced with God, whom he addresses as 'Father'.

It was this special relationship that fascinated Jesus' disciples, and, more than anything else attracted them to him. It was this, too, that scandalised the religious leaders (John 5:18). Jesus knew that his being and his mission were from the Father (John 5:26; 5:30).

Luke records that on one occasion the disciples, seeing Jesus at prayer asked him: 'Lord, teach us to pray'(Luke 11:1). Jesus spoke of God as their Father, too (see Matthew 6:14-15; 6:26; 6:32; 7:11; Luke 11:13; 12:30), and they wanted to share the kind of intimacy with God that was so apparent in Jesus. This intimate communion with God is what John calls 'eternal life'(see John 3:16; 4:14).

Matthew, Mark and Luke describe Jesus' anguished prayer in Gethsemani (see Matthew 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46; compare John 12:27). Jesus' humanity, but also his faith in God are, perhaps, nowhere shown more poignantly than in his cry from the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). It is his faith in God that Luke highlights when he records Jesus' prayer from the cross: 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit' (23:46).

No one brings out the intimacy of Jesus with God better than the Beloved Disciple, who leaned against Jesus' breast at the Last Supper, and stood with Jesus' mother at the foot of the cross. This is especially clear in his account of the Last Supper.

Everything Jesus said or did came from this special communion. John writes: 'The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands'(John 3:35). His special communion did not protect him from the suffering that is part of the human experience, but it sustained him, and the fruit of this communion was a loving that his disciples had never previously experienced: a love for them, indeed for the world, that flowed from his loving communion with God



The Man God Chose



Words and Music: Peter Kearney.

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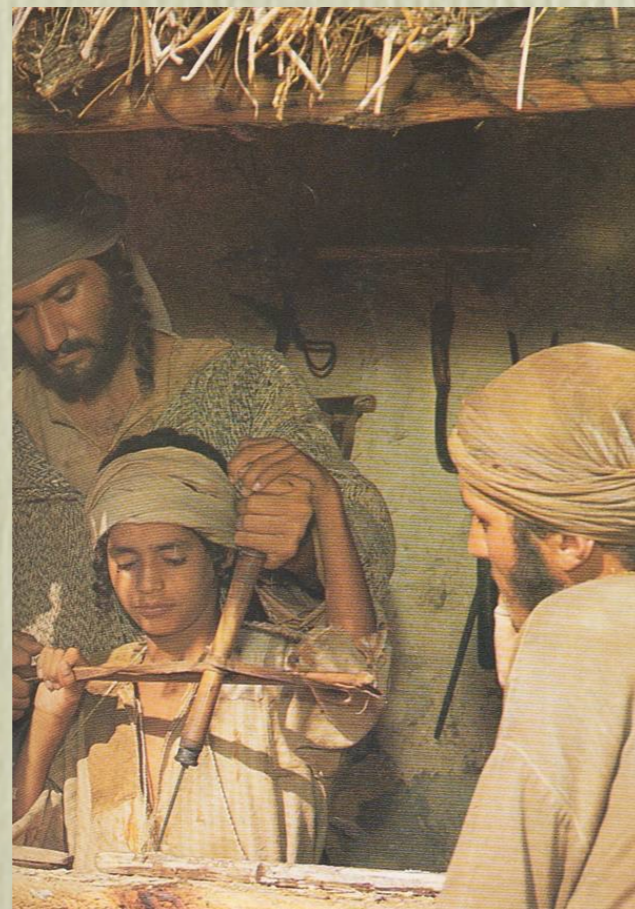
We can hardly believe what has happened,
hardly believe if we try.

The wonderful man God has chosen
was here in our midst all the time.

He grew up in a place with no promise
like a tree taking root in dry ground.

he walked the streets of our city.

He came from the wrong side of town.



We didn't think that kind of man
would be at the heart of God's plan
He was just a lonely loser in ragged clothes
the man God chose.



Nothing was special about him,
no beauty attracting our eyes.
We crossed the road if we saw him,
he was someone we despised.
That man was so burdened by sorrow,
so far gone in his pain,
We thought he was someone punished,
struck by God, marked like Cain.



By force of law he was taken
and nobody pleaded his cause.
We saw he was harshly treated,
but we carried on without pause.
Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
he went never saying a word.
He was torn from the land of the living,
but no complaint was heard.



Oh weep for the man we have wounded.

Weep for the one we have killed.

This man whom we showed no mercy
the mercy of God has revealed.

And something deep down has happened –
he was emptied and we are filled.

Life has come through his dying,
and by his wounds we are healed.

