

# **CHAPTER EIGHT**

## **1. JESUS**

**(Catechism nn. 422-682)**

## Preliminary Thoughts

### **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’(1Timothy 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 (see Karl Rahner SJ *A New Christology*, Burns & Oates 1980 pages 24-25).

Salvation did not start with Jesus. Surely we have to reject 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). Thus 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. 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. 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). 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.

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 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.

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.

## Evolution

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), 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 (see Karl Rahner *Theological Investigations* volume 5, 157-192). 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.

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, and how God acts. In Jesus they saw revealed the human and the divine.

His disciples had to struggle with the meaning of their experience of Jesus. As we will see in the following chapters, 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.

Who are we?

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.

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.

11. 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 (we will return to this in Chapter 11).

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 its 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.

## Jesus of Nazareth

We will be following this trajectory. In this chapter we will examine 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). In the following chapter we will reflect 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).

This will be followed by 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).

The section on Mary (n.487-511) we will leave till we reflect on our faith in the Communion of Saints.

### **Jesus of Nazareth (c. 4BC – c.33AD)**

In the light of Matthew's reference to Herod the Great in chapter two, tradition has placed Jesus' birth before Herod's death, which we now know occurred in 4BC. (The sixth century monk who first worked out the date of Jesus' birth in relation to world history was inaccurate by four or so years.) Relying on John's account of the crucifixion which places Jesus' crucifixion on the day prior to the Passover Sabbath, scholarly opinion places his death as either 30 or 33AD.

Our main source of information about Jesus is the Newer Testament. The earliest text is perhaps Paul's Letter to the Galatians, which may have been written as early as 48AD, only fifteen or so years after Jesus' death. Otherwise the texts of the Newer Testament were composed in the second half of the first century.

The Jesus' movement is more than adequate evidence of Jesus' existence. However, it may interest the reader to note the witness of non-Christians writing between 90 and 120AD.

Josephus in his *Antiquities*, composed c.93AD, records the death of James, whom he describes as 'the brother of Jesus who was called Christ' (20.9.1).

Pliny the Younger, while governor of Bithynia (bordering the Black Sea), wrote back to the emperor Trajan c.110AD, telling him how he dealt with those who were reported to him for being Christians:

'I considered that I should dismiss any who denied that they were or had ever been Christians when they had repeated after me a formula of invocation to the gods and had made offerings of wine and incense to your statue ... and furthermore had reviled the name of Christ ... They meet regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god' (10.95).



Tacitus composed a history of the Roman Empire, *The Annals*, c.115AD. Unfortunately Books 7 to 10 have not survived. These include the history of Judaea under Tiberias and Caligula, where we would have expected him to chronicle something of Jesus and the phenomenon of the early Christian church. Be that as it may, he does mention Jesus in Book 15 in his account of the fire of Rome (64AD):

‘To suppress this rumour [that Nero had set fire to Rome], Nero fabricated scapegoats – and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called). Their originator, Christ, had been executed in Tiberius’s reign by the governor of Judaea, Pontius Pilate. But in spite of this temporary setback the deadly superstition had broken out afresh, not only in Judaea (where the mischief had started) but even in Rome ... Dressed in wild animal’s skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark ... Despite their guilt as Christians, the victims were pitied. For it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man’s brutality rather than to the national interest’ (44.2-8).

### **Jesus of Nazareth: a man**

As will be noted shortly, Jesus’ disciples were attracted to him because of his special and unique qualities – human qualities of a man who shared their human condition.

‘Jesus became like his brothers and sisters in every respect’ (Hebrews 2:17).

‘We have one who in every respect has been tested as we are’ (Hebrews 4:15).

‘Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know – you crucified this man, but God raised him up’ (Acts 2:22-24).

‘The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven’ (1Corinthians 15:47).

‘The grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many’ (Romans 5:15).

We need to understand the role of the ‘miracle’ stories that we find in the Gospel narratives, otherwise we could be in danger of falling into the earliest heresy of the Christian community, which was to think of Jesus’ humanity as unreal, nothing more than an appearance that revealed God, not a man like us. We will have more to say on this in Chapter 11.

A miracle in the terminology of the Newer Testament is something that arouses wonder, and is a sign of God’s presence and action. Accounts such as the miracle at Cana, Jesus’ walking on the lake, the multiplication of the loaves and the resuscitation of Lazarus are not describing events. Rather, in the long tradition of story-telling that we find in the Hebrew Scriptures, they illustrate aspects of Jesus’ ministry as the longed for Messiah, who perfected the ministry of Moses and the prophets. As to the accounts of Jesus’ healing and liberating, we would do well to reflect on the ‘miracles’ that love brings about in our own lives. It is not surprising that people experienced ‘miracles’ of healing and liberation when they encountered love such as was shown them by Jesus.

### **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 (John 13-17).

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.

## Jesus' Love

Those of his contemporaries who followed Jesus did so because he impressed them by his love, a love that welled up from his loving communion with God.

The Catechism (n. 470) quotes from the Vatican II *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*:

‘The Son of God ... worked with human hands. He thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will. He loved with a human heart ... He was like us in all things except sin’ (GS n. 22).

If the essence of sin is a saying No to love, what impressed people most about Jesus was that he never failed to respond with love (he never sinned). Those who chose to follow him came to see him not simply as a very loving man, but as one who opened them to God and revealed God to them as a God of love. This is how his loving is portrayed in the Gospels. Something about their experience of Jesus brought them in touch with their own religious experience. In loving people, Jesus was inviting them to share in his own religious love. Speaking of the nourishment provided by Jesus’ word and revelation, John has Jesus say:

‘As I, who am sent by the living Father, myself draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will draw life from me’ (John 6:57).

‘Father, I have revealed you to them and will continue to do so, so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and so that I may be in them’ (John 17:26).

When Jesus loved people, his one desire was that they would come to know God as their Father too:

‘that the world will realise that it was you, Father, who sent me, and that you have loved them even as you have loved me’ (John 17:23).

It is this dimension of love that is highlighted in what we speak of today as ‘the spirituality of the heart’. We are encouraged not to be content with watching Jesus from the outside, but to seek to enter into Jesus’ sentiments: into his ‘heart’. The Catechism (n. 478) includes a quote from an encyclical of Pius XII, *Haurietis Aquas* (1956):

‘The Sacred Heart of Jesus, pierced by our sins and for our salvation “is quite rightly considered the chief sign and symbol of that ... love with which the divine Redeemer continually loves the eternal Father and all human beings” without exception.’

## Jesus – a wise teacher

Luke tells us that ‘Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour’ (Luke 2:52).

Mark writes:

‘His teaching made a deep impression on them because, unlike the scribes, he taught with authority’ (Mark 1:22).

A poor man

Jesus had the wisdom to discern those elements of the received tradition that truly expressed God's will, and those that showed the limits of human comprehension:

'It was said to you of old, but I say to you' (Matthew 5:21ff).

We might reflect on the following texts:

'The people were astounded: Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him?' (Mark 6:2).

'The queen of the south came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here' (Matthew 12:42).

'Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1Corinthians 2:24).

'In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Colossians 2:3).

The whole of the Gospel story bears witness to Jesus' teaching about God, and about how we are to respond to God. It could appear that Jesus failed in this mission. He himself was killed and only a generation after his crucifixion his land was ravaged by war. His worst fears were realised. Towards the end of his short ministry his apparent failure bore in upon him and we find him weeping over the city (Luke 19:41), and undergoing his own personal agony (Luke 22:41-44). But the story of Christianity is the story of Jesus' success. Some listened to his teaching and believed him. He had said once: 'I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already' (Luke 12:49). He started a fire in people's hearts, and in spite of his own short-term 'failure' to avert the 'hell' that was threatening, he left his contemporaries with what John calls 'the Way, the Truth, and the Life' (John 14:6): the truth that God is Love; the life of intimacy with God that enables us, as it enabled Jesus, to live life to the full even amid failure; and the way of communion with God that bears fruit in love.

### **Jesus – a poor man**

Jesus welcomed his total dependence on God, and when he was in distress he cried out to God, knowing-in-faith that God would hear his cry. This is the defining quality of those the biblical literature calls the 'poor'. Nowhere is this more clearly portrayed than in Jesus' final suffering, agony and death:

'Abba (Father), for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, may your will be done, not mine' (Mark 14:36).

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me' (Mark 15:34).

These are the opening words of Psalm 22, which, after a prolonged cry, issues in a cry of praise:

'praise the Lord who did not despise the poor man when he cried out to him. He did not hide his face from me but heard me when I cried' (Psalm 22:24).

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus is portrayed by Luke as choosing a passage from Isaiah that summed up for him the essence of the mission given him by God:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor’ (Luke 4:18).

It is not that Jesus addressed himself only to certain group. Rather, it is the ‘poor’ – those who recognised their total dependence on God – who welcomed his message.

### **Jesus – a just/righteous (‘right-wise’) man**

Jesus is obedient to God’s will and in carrying out his mission showed that God is just, that is to say, faithful to who God is – a God of love. God’s justice is God’s fidelity to love. Jesus shares in this:

‘I can do nothing by myself. I can judge only as I am told to judge, and my judgment is just, because my aim is to do not my own will but the will of the One who sent me’ (John 5:30).

Jesus’ mission was to make others just. He shared with us his communion with God in order to make us able to do God’s will as he did it, and thus make justice possible. As Paul says:

‘Put on the new self that has been created in God’s way, in the goodness and holiness of the truth’ (Ephesians 4:24).

### **Jesus – a prophet (‘and more than a prophet’, Matthew 11:9)**

It was obvious to many of his contemporaries that Jesus spoke out of the intimacy of his communion with God. It is not surprising that people looked on him as a prophet, inspired to speak words that reveal God:

‘He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old’ (Mark 6:15).

‘Jesus of Nazareth was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people’ (Luke 24:19).

‘He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure’ (John 3:34).

‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world’ (John 6:14).

‘It is the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known’ (John 1:18).

Jesus, in his person, in his actions and in his words, is God’s focal word, bringing the prophetic words of the Older Testament to their full flowering (see Matthew 5:17).

### **Jesus – a Servant of YHWH**

The Hebrew scriptures like to speak of the great characters of their history as ‘servants of YHWH’, thereby underlining the fact that they were committed to doing God’s will and carrying out God’s mission.

## Jesus the ‘Son of Man’

When the temple singers from exile in Babylon are describing the kind of leader that the exiles need to take them back to the Promised Land, they speak of him as ‘the Servant of YHWH’. Throughout the New Testament there are many quotes from and allusions to the four Servant Songs of Isaiah (42:1-9, 49:1-6, 50:4-11 and 52:13 – 53:12). We find the opening words of the first song quoted by Matthew who sees Jesus bringing these promises to their perfect fulfillment:

‘Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory. And in his name the Gentiles will hope’ (Matthew 12:18-21).

A number of times in the Acts, Jesus is described as God’s ‘servant’:

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

‘Your holy servant, Jesus’ (Acts 4:27, 30).

### **Jesus – the Son of Man**

Though Jesus himself frequently identified with the name ‘Son of Man’, it was not a description that was easily translatable for Gentile Christians, so it is not picked up by Paul or the other New Testament authors outside the Gospels. To understand why Jesus identified himself in this way we need to go to the Book of Daniel where we find that it is used for a figure who is the heavenly counterpart of the people of God who are being persecuted and crushed by the Syrian army (168BC), but who will be vindicated in God’s judgment.

‘As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool ... The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened ... As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed ... The kingship and dominion ... shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High; their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey them’ (Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14, 27).

In Mark, Matthew and Luke the title ‘Son of Man’ is associated with judgment, identification with the oppressed, and the revelation of God through obedience. In John, these same themes are present as well as the ideas of ascension into glory (return to God), the presence in Jesus’ ministry of God’s judgment, and focus on the cross as Jesus’ hour of glory, judgment, and vindication. In John Chapter One, people attribute various titles to Jesus: ‘Son of God’, ‘Lamb of God’, ‘Rabbi (Teacher)’, ‘Christ (Messiah)’, ‘King of Israel’. Jesus speaks of himself as the ‘Son of Man’, which provides the perspective within which the other titles are to be understood:

'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man' (John 1:51).

Other key texts are:

'The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost' (Luke 19:10).

'The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for the many' (Mark 10:45).

Some texts focus on Jesus as the one coming as judge from God to vindicate the oppressed:

'The Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels' (Mark 8:38).

'You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven' (Mark 14:62).

'The Father has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man' (John 5:27).

Other texts focus on the suffering Jesus experienced because of his identifying with the oppressed:

'The Son of Man must undergo great suffering' (Mark 8:31).

'The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head' (Matthew 8:20).

'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM' (John 8:28)

In speaking of himself as the Son of Man, Jesus is highlighting his prophetic mission, stressing the fact that what he reveals is what he himself has experienced in the special intimacy that he has with God. The title underlines the finality of God's saving revelation as well as the ultimate judgment that is based on people's acceptance or rejection of this revelation. Above all it stresses the spirituality of the Servant of the Lord, for the title Son of Man identifies Jesus with the poor and the outcast. It focuses our attention on the cross, where we see God's love finally revealed, as well as the ultimate revelation of what it is to be a human being, a 'son of man' who is faithful to love-giving, even unto death.

The story of the man born blind is a story of conversion and baptism into the Christian community. It is no accident that the question posed to the man born blind is: 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' (John 9:35).

### **Jesus – the Way to the Father**

There is tension in the Newer Testament between Jesus who saw the Torah (the 'Law') as the Way of journeying in obedience to the mysterious God (see Catechism n. 577-582), and those who saw the Torah as a law, investing the written word with the immutability of God, with the danger of following the law independently of faith or conversion of heart. Jesus declared:

'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27).

Jesus the ‘Way to the Father’

He criticized the scribes:

‘How ingeniously you get round the commandment of God to preserve your own traditions’ (Mark 7:9).

‘Go and learn the meaning of the words: What I want is love not sacrifice’ (Matthew 9:13 & 12:7 – quoting Hosea 6:6).

In his Prologue John declares:

‘Though the Torah (the ‘Law’) was given through Moses, the gift of truth has come through Jesus the Christ’ (John 1:17).

In the last supper discourse he has Jesus say:

‘I am the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6).

It is interesting to observe that Christianity is called ‘the Way’ (Acts 9:2, 18:12, 19:9, 22:4, 24:14, 24:22).

### **Jesus – the Christ** (‘Messiah’, ‘Anointed One’) (Catechism n. 436-440)

It is abundantly clear from the Newer Testament that the Jews who followed Jesus came to see him as ‘the Christ’: the one who fulfilled the hopes of Israel. The Greek word ‘Christos’ refers to someone who is anointed (Greek: ‘*chriein*’).

Oil was used to consecrate places where God was believed to have revealed his presence:

‘Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it’ (Genesis 28:18).

Oil was used to consecrate those who were to minister in the sanctuary:

‘Moses took the anointing oil and anointed the tabernacle and all that was in it, and consecrated them ... He poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron’s head and anointed him, to consecrate him’ (Leviticus 8:10,12).

Oil was used to consecrate those chosen to speak God’s word:

‘The spirit of the Lord Yahweh is upon me, because Yahweh has anointed me’ (Isaiah 61:1).

‘Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm’ (Psalm 105:15).

Elijah is told to ‘anoint Elisha as prophet’ to succeed him (1Kings 19:16).

Oil was used to consecrate the king, chosen to bring about the reign of the Holy One in Israel:

‘I have found my servant David; with my holy oil I have anointed him’ (Psalm 89:20).

‘Your God has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions’ (Psalm 45:7).



The end of Davidic rule in 598BC gave rise to the hope that one day God would restore the fortunes of Judah and place an anointed king (a 'Christ', a 'Messiah'), once again, on the throne. At the time of Jesus some expected an anointed priest or prophet.

Jesus is called 'the Christ' ('the Messiah') over 200 times in the New Testament. This is not surprising in light of the fact that Jesus saw his mission as proclaiming the kingdom ('reign') of God (Catechism n. 541-570). The synoptic Gospels trace the beginnings of this belief back to Peter's statement at Caesarea Philippi, where in response to a question addressed to his followers by Jesus, Peter responded: 'You are the Christ' (Mark 8:29). It is not clear how much this and other texts are a reading back into the period of Jesus' public ministry of insights that came clear only after his death. In any case, Jesus is portrayed as not being comfortable with this identification, fraught as it was with so many possibilities for misunderstanding. Jesus' focus was on God and on his mission to bring about the reign of God's love.

If Jesus accepted the title 'Messiah', it was only in terms of the 'Son of Man' (see Mark 8:31). At his trial before the Sanhedrin we read:

'The high priest put this question to Jesus: "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One". Jesus replied: "I am. And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power (Daniel 7:13) and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Psalm 110:1)' (Mark 14:61).

At his trial before Pilate, the leaders accused Jesus:

'We found this man saying that he himself is the Messiah, a king' (Luke 23:2).

This was stated by Pilate as the reason for his judgment condemning Jesus to death:

'They crucified Jesus. The inscription of the charge against him read: The King of the Jews' (Mark 15:26).

Whatever the extent to which his followers thought of Jesus as the Messiah during his public ministry, they certainly saw him this way after his death. At Pentecost Luke has Peter proclaim:

'Since David was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying: "He was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption." This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says: "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool'". Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified' (Acts 2:30-36).

## The 'Christ'

Luke also gives us a typical statement of Paul from his preaching in the synagogues about the exalted Jesus:

'We bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm: You are my Son; today I have begotten you' (Acts 13:32-33).

Jesus' disciples experienced the power of the Spirit of the living Jesus in their lives. They understood this as an expression and proof of the power of the exalted Jesus to bring about the reign of God in the world. Jesus was now definitively King ('Christ'), in a position ('at the Father's right hand') to fulfill the most ambitious hopes associated with the promised Messiah.

### **In conclusion**

Two things stand out in the Gospel record. The first is that Jesus' followers were attracted to Jesus because they sensed in him a quite extraordinary kind of communion with God. Furthermore he awakened in them a longing to share this communion, a longing which they recognised was at the heart of who they were and who they aspired to be. This was no less real because it was so mysterious. The second is that Jesus himself was very conscious of this communion. He identified with it. It was not a communion that lifted him above the human. On the contrary it led him to experience the heights and depths of the human condition, brought him intense love, and sustained him through a dreadful rejection that climaxed in his being crucified.

Each of the Gospel narratives bear this out. It is the Beloved Disciple who best captures the essence of Jesus' communion with God, sense of mission, and fidelity to sharing with others what he had come to experience:

'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work'(John 4:34).

"I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me'(John 5:30).

'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).