

CHAPTER TEN

JESUS IN THE REFLECTED LIGHT OF GLORY

Jesus the Wisdom of God

In Chapter 9, we looked at how the early disciples came to look upon the risen, exalted Jesus. It is in the light of this that they came to penetrate more deeply into their experiences of Jesus during the years they spent with him. They realised that they had been with Jesus who was the incarnation of God's Wisdom, of God's Word. They came to realise that he was their Lord, in the sense that the Lord, YHWH, was in him, as the Redeemer and Saviour of the world.

In the light of their post-crucifixion experiences, Jesus' disciples continued to reflect on Jesus and on how he mediated God to them. Jesus had promised them that he would give them his Spirit and 'when the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth' (John 6:12-13). As they reflected on their experience with Jesus they came to see Jesus as the 'sacrament' – the symbol – of God. John has Jesus say:

'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9).

They came to see Jesus as on a mission from God, and as God's instrument to liberate people from all that was holding them back from 'salvation' – from finding meaning in life and from living to the full the life of communion with God for which we are created and for which we long (see Catechism n. 515).

The Wisdom of God

When, in the light of their post-crucifixion experiences, Jesus' disciples reflected back on their experiences with him during the brief years of his life and ministry among them, they came to think of him as the one who had God's Wisdom in its fullness:

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

Jesus revealed the goal of our existence and the means of achieving this goal. Paul speaks of him as 'Christ, the image of God' (2Corinthians 4:4). This is to be our destiny, for we are called to live his life now and to share his life after death:

'Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven' (1Corinthians 15:49).

An early Christian hymn speaks of Jesus in terms taken from the Wisdom literature:

'He is the image of the invisible God the firstborn of all creation; for in him were created all things ... all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together' (Colossians 1:15-17).

Jesus – God's Word-made-flesh (Catechism n. 456-463)

In the light of their experience of Jesus after his resurrection, Jesus' disciples came to recognise him as God's 'Word-made-flesh' (Catechism n. 461-463).

God's 'Word' is God effecting God's will:

'The word that goes forth from my mouth does not return to me empty without carrying out my will; and succeeding in what it was sent to do' (Isaiah 55:11).

‘While gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, carrying the sharp sword of your authentic command’ (Wisdom 18:14-16).

God’s Word issues from God’s Wisdom, reveals God’s Wisdom and teaches God’s Wisdom. God’s Wisdom is God reflected in the beauty and order of creation, of history, of the Torah, and finally of the exalted Jesus. God’s Word is God bringing about this beauty and this order, especially through the words of the prophets and most especially through the teaching of Jesus. Jesus is, as it were, God’s focal Word. Looking upon him we see what all God’s other ‘words’ have been saying, for it is Jesus who is the perfect human expression of God’s Word.

Nowhere is this better expressed than in the Prologue to John’s Gospel.

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

All things came into being through the Word.

Without the Word not one thing came into being.

What came into being in the Word was life,
and life was the light of all people.

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

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

The Word was in the world.

The world came into being through the Word.

Yet the world did not know the Word.

The Word came to what was God’s own,
and God’s own people did not accept the Word.

But to all who did welcome the Word, and believe,
the Word gave power to become children of God,
born not of human generation [‘bloods’]
or of human striving [‘the will of the flesh’]
or of male power,
but of God.

And 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.

The Law indeed was given through Moses;
the gift of truth came through Jesus the Christ.

No one has even seen God.

It is God’s only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made Him known.’

Jesus is God's Word

This hymn is to be read in the light of the Prologue to John's First Letter:

'We declare to you what was from the beginning,
what we have heard,
what we have seen with our eyes,
what we have looked at and touched with our hands,
concerning the word of life—
this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it,
and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father
and was revealed to us —
we declare to you what we have seen and heard
so that you also may have fellowship with us;
and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.
We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.'

The opening words of John's Prologue echo the opening words of the Book of Genesis ('In the beginning'), for John wishes to invite us to look anew at the purpose of creation and at the relationship we are meant to have with God our creator who sustains us in existence and offers us a share in God's being. But first he takes us outside time and space to contemplate a Word already uttered in the eternal mystery of God's being. (We will return to this when we reflect on the dogma of the Holy Trinity in Chapter 13.) In the beginning this Word was already with ('towards', 'in the bosom of') God, sharing in the being of God. From the beginning to the end of the Gospel John wants us to hold in our minds and hearts the picture of this intimate communion of God and the Word, for the Gospel is about how this Word, made flesh in Jesus, reveals the true nature of God as love, and invites us to share in the communion which we are here contemplating.

In reminding us that everything that has come into being has its existence through the Word, John is saying that creation is essentially an act of revelation (see Chapter Two). In creating, God is revealing the communion of love that he enjoys with the eternal Word. This is God's glory and it is this that is expressed in creation. The splendour of God's being, the love he shares with the Word, radiates throughout creation. This is why it is full of the glory of God.

'Life' for John always means communion with God – a communion that is not limited to space and time nor brought to an end by physical death. Here he is stating that the life we are designed to experience is the life of the Word. Later we will hear Jesus say: 'I am the life' (John 14:6). He will also say: 'I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly' (John 10:10).

This life is the life which he receives from God: 'Just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself' (John 5:26).

John assures us that the Word of God is present at the heart of creation, calling on God the creator of all and summoning everything and everyone into divine communion.

This Word of God is present everywhere. In Jesus we see the Word present among us in a new way, in 'flesh': sharing in the weakness, the vulnerability, and, in a particular way, the death that is part of our being as humans. Jesus gave himself completely to the mission given him by God in perfect obedience to God, who, for him as for us, remains beyond human comprehension.

When Moses prayed to see God's glory (Exodus 33:18), he was told: 'You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live' (Exodus 33:20). He was given the Law and so, as it were, he saw God's 'back'. He saw the path he was to follow in order to respond to God's offer of covenant love, but he could not see God's face. The Beloved Disciple has seen the face of Jesus. He has gazed on him and Jesus' words have found a home in his heart.

In telling us that we see the glory of the Word in the flesh of Jesus, John is saying that it is precisely in the weakness of human flesh that we see God's Word, God's Wisdom, God's Glory fully revealed. Who God is and what God calls us to be is finally and fully revealed in Jesus, who shares our human condition, who knows weariness and misunderstanding, who suffers betrayal and rejection, and who suffers a terrible death by crucifixion. It is above all when we look upon Jesus on the cross that we behold 'the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2Corinthians 4:6).

As God's Word (Paul speaks of him as 'the New Adam'), Jesus reveals who we human beings really are. Jesus' communion with God is the perfect realisation of what it is to be human. Created in God's likeness, we are to be, like Jesus, 'towards God' (John 1:1), 'in the bosom of the Father' (John 1:18). We are to be a word of God to each other, to creation. We are made to transcend ourselves in the self-giving that is love. It is this human self-transcendence that has reached its perfect fulfilment in Jesus. Because of Jesus I may dare to believe that God has promised to give himself to me.

In Jesus we experience the presence and action of God (this is Jesus 'divine nature'). In Jesus we see a human being present and acting and responding whole-heartedly to grace (this is Jesus' human nature').

We understand ourselves best when we see ourselves as created to be the self-expression of God which we see in the man Jesus. In Jesus we find in the flesh that which is the most blessed realisation of the highest possible communion with God that a human being can experience. Jesus is God's perfect word to us, and the complete human response to God. It is in the light of Jesus that we really begin to understand what ultimately is meant by being human. Jesus shows us who we really are: people called to share in Jesus' divinity – his complete communion with the God he calls 'Father'. We are to believe this now. We will see it when God is 'all in all'.

Jesus – The Lord (Catechism 446-451)

In Chapter nine we noted that the risen Christ was called ‘Lord’. We noted also that the term ‘Lord’ (Greek: *Kyrios*) was used in the Greek Version of the Hebrew Scriptures to translate the divine name YHWH. Because we are free, and because we can reject the call of grace, Jesus is not only the one who reveals what we are all called to be, and the one whose love (self-giving) continually draws us to say ‘Yes’ to grace, he is also our ‘Lord’. His Spirit is the Spirit of God, of YHWH, who is exercising his redemptive action in and through Jesus. As Paul says: ‘In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself’ (2Corinthians 5:19). YHWH, the Redeemer God, is redeeming through Jesus.

Related to this is John’s use of the expression ‘I AM’ in relation to Jesus. ‘I am’ translates the Hebrew *’ehyeh*, from which the word ‘YHWH’ derives (see Exodus 3:11, 14). Note the following texts in which John identifies Jesus as ‘I AM’ (‘YHWH’):

‘I AM. Do not be afraid’ (6:2 – Jesus walking on the lake).

‘If you do not believe that I AM, you will die in your sins’ (8:24).

‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man you will know that I AM’ (8:28).

‘Before Abraham ever was, I AM’ (John 8:58).

‘I tell you this now so that when it happens you may believe that I AM’ (13:19).

‘Jesus said: Who are you looking for? They said: Jesus of Nazareth’. Jesus replied: ‘I AM’ (18:6).

Seven times in John’s Gospel we find this expression ‘I AM’ related to various aspects of Jesus’ redeeming action:

‘I AM the bread of life’ (6:51);

‘I AM the light of the world’ (8:12);

‘I AM the gate of the sheepfold’ (10:7);

‘I AM the good shepherd’ (10:11);

‘I AM the resurrection’ (11:25);

‘I AM the way, the truth and the life’ (14:6);

‘I AM the vine’ (15:5).

God

It is important to examine the title ‘God’ in relation to Jesus. In the Newer Testament ‘God’ refers to the One whom Jesus called ‘Father’, as is clear from the following texts:

‘The God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory ...’ (Ephesians 1:17).

‘The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, a gentle Father and the God of all consolation ...’ (2Corinthians 1:3).

‘In his great mercy, God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has given us a new birth as his “sons” by raising Jesus Christ from the dead (1Peter 1:3).

'There is one God, the Father, from who all things come and for whom we exist. And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things come and through whom we exist' (1Corinthians 8:6).

'There is only one God, and there is only one mediator between God and mankind, himself a man, Christ Jesus' (1Timothy 2:5).

Jesus speaks about and prays to God. The following are from John:

'On the Son of Man, the Father, God himself, has set his seal (6:27).

'The one who comes from God has seen the Father' (6:46).

'My glory is conferred by the Father, by the one of whom you say: "He is our God"' (8:48).

'Jesus knew that the Father had put everything into his hands. and that he had come from God and was returning to God' (13:3).

'Eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'(17:3).

'Tell the brothers that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'(20:17).

Early in the second century Ignatius of Antioch refers to Jesus as 'God' – a practice that has continued down to the present time. Can we find any examples of this in the Newer Testament? Some manuscripts of John's Prologue refer to Jesus as 'God the only Son' (1:18). When Thomas exclaims 'My Lord and my God' (John 20:28) is he addressing Jesus as 'God', or is he declaring his faith that in Jesus he recognises the presence and action of God? Peter speaks of 'the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2Peter 1:1). Certainly God and Jesus are thought of together, for Jesus' disciples could not think of God without thinking of Jesus, but is Peter actually calling Jesus 'God'? One thing is clear, even if these texts intend to speak of Jesus as 'God', we can be sure that there is no intention of contradicting monotheism. Rather, these texts seem to be asserting the complete communion in being between God and Jesus - a key theme in John's Gospel in which Jesus declares: 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me'(John 10:48; 14:10; 14:11).

Jesus experienced an intimate communion with God - the kind of communion which we are all called to and which is the experience we look forward to at the conclusion of our life's journey. We speak of it as the 'beatific vision', for there is no place in it any more for suffering, for doubt, for sin, for death. Jesus' direct communion with God was not yet 'beatific', for he experienced ignorance and doubt and death – not sin, for, unlike us, he always said 'Yes' to grace. But his disciples knew him as having a unique communion with the one he called Father. We are not in a position to speak of how Jesus understood this when he reflected on his experience. But it is clear that he was conscious of this communion, and that it was this that attracted disciples to him and that opened up for them the promise and the hope. He revealed God to them, and he revealed communion with God - the communion for which we all long – as the goal that God is offering us in his Son.

Jesus – The Saviour

We saw earlier that Jesus' disciples came to see him as 'Lord', that is to say as our Saviour, our Healer, our Liberator, our Redeemer (Catechism n. 430-435). The old man, Simeon, holding the child Jesus in his arms, exclaims: 'My eyes have seen the salvation, which you have prepared for all the nations to see, a light to enlighten the pagans and the glory of your people, Israel' (Luke 2:30-32). Jesus liberated people from fear – from the storm, from the broken mental condition of the Gadarene, from death, as in the case of Jairus's daughter (Mark 4:35 - 5:43).

Salvation is offered by Jesus, it is not imposed, nor can it happen without our cooperation. God absolutely respects our freedom. This is brought out by Mark when he speaks of Jesus' ministry in Nazareth: 'Jesus could work no miracle in Nazareth. He was amazed at their lack of faith' (Mark 6:5-6).

Jesus liberated people from false images and concepts of God, and from traditions that failed as 'religion'. Jesus is our brother, our leader, our shepherd, 'the saviour of the world' (John 4:42) 'the only one by whom we can be saved' (Acts 4:12). There never was and there never will be another way of responding to grace that issues in life than the way revealed by Jesus

Conclusion

We conclude our study of the Newer Testament with the Beloved Disciple contemplating the pierced side of Jesus on the cross, and with Thomas putting his hand into Jesus' wounds. Contemplating with the Beloved Disciple we may come to see Jesus as he saw him, as the revelation of God and of ourselves. Committing ourselves with Thomas to compassionate involvement with those who are suffering (with Jesus' wounds) we may come to recognise our 'Lord and God' in the obedient, humble and faithful Jesus of Nazareth.

Having come to this grace-filled insight into the meaning of our existence, we may build a world that reflects the will of God: an orchestra in which every instrument is sensitive to every other instrument, and in which the resultant harmony gives glory to God; a garden in which the contributing perfumes of every flower give off a fragrance that is a perfect offering to God, expressing the communion for which we all long.

We give the last word to Paul who declared: 'I live now in faith, the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me. I cannot give up God's gift' (Galatians 2:21).