

CHAPTER THREE: JESUS' IMAGE OF GOD

Jesus' disciples found in him the answer to the need and the longing that fills the pages of the Old Testament. Here at last was a human being who was truly 'in God's image and likeness'. Walter Kasper writes: 'Whenever something new arises, whenever life is awakened and reality reaches ecstatically beyond itself, in all seeking and striving, in every ferment and birth, and even more in the beauty of creation, something of the being and activity of God's Spirit is manifested' (*The God of Jesus Christ*, page 227). This divine activity came to perfect flowering in Jesus of Nazareth. Denis Edwards writes: 'God gives to creatures themselves the capacity for the new. Because of God's creative and redeeming presence to creatures, they can become something they were not. When matter comes to life on earth, when life becomes self-conscious and personal, this occurs through God enabling creation to transcend itself and become something new. Above all when one of us in the human and creaturely community, Jesus of Nazareth, is so radically open to God, so one with God, that we rightly see him as God-with-us, then we can say that in this person creation transcends itself into God' (*How God Acts*, page 158).

There is something very different about Jesus, and it is to this difference that we will now turn, for it takes us to the heart of Jesus' thinking about God, and gives us an insight into Jesus' own personality. Jesus shared the faith of his people. He was faithful to the religious insights we described in the previous chapter. He penetrated to their deepest meaning. He also revealed God in a manner that, while faithful to the religion of Israel, went beyond it. Jesus' teaching about God came as a surprise to his contemporaries, as something quite unexpected. **Jesus showed how wrong in some ways was the image of God held and taught by the religious leaders of his day.**

The first indication that Jesus had a message that was different even from that of the Baptist comes early in Mark's Gospel: 'One day when John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting, some people came and said to Jesus: Why is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not?' (Mark 2:18). Jesus' reply is most instructive: 'Surely, the bridegroom's attendants would never think of fasting while the bridegroom is still with them?' (Mark 2:19). Like John, Jesus could see signs of an approaching catastrophe for his nation. Unless people made a radical conversion towards God, he could foresee the approaching end to his world (he seems to have shown no interest in the speculative point about the end of *the* world: see Mark 13:32, Acts 1:7). Like John he looked to God to bring about redemption once again for his people. He sensed that he was living at a crucial time (Mark 1:15), a time when God's judgment would soon be manifest. But he was not expecting God to come from outside, as it were, to destroy the wicked world, as did John and the others who shared his expectations. If Jerusalem was to be destroyed, if the people were to go through another hell (*'gehenna'*) this would not be an act of God's punishing justice. Rather it would be the result of people's refusal to listen to Jesus' message of peace (Luke 13:34-35 and 19:41-44).

For Jesus, the judgment of God is the judgment of the 'bridegroom'. The 'reign of God' that he sensed to be 'close at hand' (Mark 1:15) was the release of the active power of God, the Redeemer and Saviour, the Lover of mankind. This is what made Jesus' message 'good news' (Mark 1:15). Insofar as the world was wicked, God's powerful presence (the 'Spirit') was there,

not to condemn and destroy, like an axe, or a fire, but to forgive, purify and save (John 3:17). Insofar as the world was confused, God was present to enlighten. Insofar as the world was paralyzed, deaf and blind, God was present to heal. Matthew and Luke both record the following incident: 'Now John in his prison had heard what Christ was doing and he sent his disciples to ask him: Are you the one who is to come, or have we got to wait for someone else?' Jesus answered, 'Go back and tell John what you hear and see; the blind see again, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor; and happy is the person who does not lose faith in me' (Matthew 11:2-6; see Luke 7:18-23).

At the beginning of his Gospel Mark gets to the heart of Jesus' teaching: 'Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying: The time is fulfilled. The reign of God has come near. Repent. Believe the good news' (Mark 1:14-15). Jesus is calling people to repent, that is, to think differently, especially about God. The good news is that God is Love and that God is calling everyone to enjoy communion with God. It is welcoming this that makes repentance possible. Mark writes: 'They went to Capernaum; and when the Sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not like the scribes' (Mark 1:21-22). Jesus' teaching about God flowed from his experience, from his heart. Mark records the scene when the disciples return from their first mission. Jesus invites them to come aside with him for a while, so they get into boats and row to a deserted place. But people hear about it and reach the spot before them. Mark writes: 'As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them at some length' (Mark 6:34). Jesus' teaching was so powerful because people felt that it flowed from his compassion,

Luke writes: 'Filled with the power of the Spirit, Jesus returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding countryside. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone' (Luke 4:14-15). Luke then portrays Jesus reading from Isaiah in the synagogue of Nazareth. Jesus found the place in the scroll where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release from captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free" ' (Luke 4:16-21). The good news is that God wants us to be freed from everything that distracts us and holds us bound. God wants us to 'live and live to the full' (John 10:10). God.

Jesus taught in words what he demonstrated in his life. In examining his teaching about God, we are, at the same time, exploring his relationship to his Father. His key teaching is that God is 'Father', and that it is possible for us, woman or man, to be 'sons' of God in the sense that Jesus shares with us his experience of being son: his communion with his Father. We are graced to share Jesus' own communion with God, his Spirit

While others were placing their hope in fidelity to the Law and in exact observance and ritual purity, in the hope that those who behaved thus would be spared when God in his justice destroyed the world by fire, Jesus was working to bring about the conversion of his world by revealing God's love, and he was inspiring others to join him in deeds of love born of prayer.

Another saying of Jesus recorded by both Luke and Matthew helps us understand how Jesus understood his mission in relation to John the Baptist. 'Up to the time of John it was the Law and the Prophets; since then, the kingdom of God has been preached, and by violence everyone is getting in' (Luke 16:16; see also Matthew 11:12-13). Jesus was aware of the determination of his Father to redeem his people, and of the violence that God's love was doing to the limited expectations of the religious authorities including John. Nothing was going to be able to stand in the way of God's love. There was room for everyone in the community drawn together by Jesus. The power of God's Spirit was working through him, not to destroy, not to uphold the limited regulations of the tradition, but to heal and to save. It was this conviction that showed itself in his actions. It was this conviction that inspired all his teaching about God.

From a number of points of view Jesus failed. 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 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 the Beloved Disciple calls 'the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14:6): the way of prayer that issues in love. Jesus gives us an example in his prayer 'Father, may your reign come, your will be done on earth as in heaven' (Matthew 6:9-10); the truth that God is our Father; the life of intimacy with God that enables us, as it enabled him, to live Life to the full even amid failure.

Mark states that his purpose in writing is to present 'the good news of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God' (Mark 1:1). His focus throughout is on Jesus as God's Messiah and Son. When we watch Jesus and listen to him we are watching God act and speak through him, for God is Jesus' Father: the source of all that Jesus is and says and does. It is Jesus' mission to reveal God by bringing about the 'reign of God'. It is God who liberates through Jesus. It is God who heals through Jesus. It is God whose compassionate love we see as we watch Jesus (Mark 6:34). It is God who invites everyone (Mark 11:17) to enjoy living in God's kingdom, and to contribute to it (Mark 12:41-44) by opening our hearts to receive and give love. Mark's presentation of what God is teaching and doing through Jesus reaches its climax when Jesus gives his life in love from the cross. The curtain which veils our eyes is torn asunder (Mark 15:38) and now anyone who looks can see God revealed as Self-giving Love.

Matthew adds some sayings of Jesus that reveal Jesus' image of God. Jesus invites us to love our enemies, because God loves them (Matthew 5:45-48). God is the one who provides 'our daily bread' (Matthew 6:11). God loves to forgive (Matthew 6:12; 18:27). Jesus draws our attention to the power and beauty of creation as a revelation of God (Matthew 6:26-30; 10:29). God is our 'Father', the source of all we are (Matthew 11:27). God has compassion for the stray sheep (Matthew 18:13-14). Jesus' favourite image for the kind of world God wants everyone to enjoy is a wedding banquet (Matthew 22:9).

Luke assures us that Jesus brings good news to the poor, frees captives and enlightens, because he is anointed by God and sent for that purpose (Luke 4:18, 43). In other words, it is God who

is revealed in Jesus' ministry. God does not reject sinners; God calls us to change, to open ourselves to welcome God's love (Luke 5:32). Jesus calls us to 'be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate' (Luke 6:35-36). Jesus is revealing God's judgment. In declaring that his mission is to seek out and save the lost (Luke 19:10), Jesus is revealing his image of God. Jesus goes to the heart of how he sees God in his story of the father and his two boys (Luke 15). The younger boy shows complete disregard for his father's feelings, sells off his heritage and wastes everything in 'dissolute living'. What is the father's (God's) response? Longing, hoping, delight when he sees the son, compassion, love and joy.

Jesus' image of God is so different from that of the religious leaders.

* They thought that God hated Israel's enemies. The God in whom Jesus believed wants us to 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matthew 5:44). And why? Because 'your Father in heaven makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous' (Matthew 5:45). They did not picture God as being 'kind to the ungrateful and the wicked' (Luke 6:35). They did not see the Messiah as 'the saviour of the world' (John 4:42), including the despised Samaritans.

* They expected the promised Messiah to liberate Israel as they pictured God liberating their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. They did not expect a gentle Messiah who would invite us: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls' (Matthew 11:28-29). Jesus' disciples watched him, listened to him, and came to acknowledge him as the promised Messiah, a Messiah very different from the one they had been taught to expect (Luke 9:20).

* The religious leaders pictured God according to the way they experienced their rulers, punishing anyone who does not obey their will. They did not expect one who would not 'break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick' (Matthew 12:20). The God in whom Jesus believed was determined to rescue the sheep that strayed from the flock: 'It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost' (Matthew 18:14).

* When a sinful woman anoints Jesus' feet while he is at table at the house of a Pharisee, the Pharisee and his other guests are scandalized. They see her sins. Jesus sees her sins, too, but he sees her love and declares that she must have been forgiven or she could not love so much (Luke 7:47).

* They were shocked at Jesus picturing God as celebrating the return of the prodigal son. They identified with the older brother who was angry and refused to join in the celebrations (Luke 15:11-32).

* When they caught a woman committing adultery they saw themselves as being obedient to God in having her stoned to death (Leviticus 20:10). Jesus was not blind to her sin, but the God Jesus knew did not condemn her or punish her in her sin. She was suffering more than enough from the consequences of her behaviour. He loved her that she would find the strength to change her ways (John 8:1-11).

* They saw riches as being a proof of God's favour. They did not expect the Messiah to declare: 'Woe are you who are rich' (Luke 6:24), and 'you cannot serve God and wealth' (Luke 16:13).

* Because they were afraid of leprosy they thought that they were obeying God by banishing from the community people who might have the disease (see Leviticus 13:45-46). The God in whom Jesus believed wants to embrace the man, and welcome him back into the community, not banish him (Mark 1:41).

* Because they believed that God controlled whatever was happening, they presumed that people who were paralysed were being punished by God for some sin. Similarly they thought that a man who was blind from birth must have sinned, or, if not, his parents must have sinned (John 9:2). The God is whom Jesus believed wants to forgive sin, not punish the sinner (Mark 2:5). God wants us to see (John 9:7), and to walk free (Mark 2:11-12).

* They thought God wanted them to keep away from sinners. The God in whom Jesus believed wants people to love us sinners. How else will we see that there is another way to live, and find healing? (Mark 2:15-17).

* They thought God wanted them to obey the laws of fasting, whatever the situation. Jesus respects that there is a place for fasting, but it is much more important that we believe in God's love for us. God wants us to see life as a wedding banquet, a celebration of love (Mark 2:18-22).

* They were convinced that it is God's will to consecrate the Sabbath to God, and they spelt out what was required to do so. Jesus shared their respect, but not when obeying human traditions means that we neglect love and care for others. He was grieved at their hardness of heart (Mark 3:5-6). 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. You do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them' (Matthew 23:13). 'Woe to you lawyers! For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them' (Luke 11:46).

* Because of their hardness of heart they refused to listen to Jesus' message. They rejected the peace he was offering. 'How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing' (Matthew 23:37). Jesus could see that this rejection would lead to the destruction of the city and the temple: 'See, your house is left to you, desolate' (Matthew 23:38). He wept at their failure to welcome the good news that God is love and wants us to welcome that love (Luke 19:41-44).

They saw their role as teaching the people about God and how we are to respond to God. Jesus challenges them: 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written: "This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrine" (Isaiah 29:13). You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human traditions' (Mark 7:6-8). Jesus' teaching was very different because his image of God was very different. 'Jesus saw a great crowd and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd and he set about teaching them at some length' (Mark 6:34). People 'were astounded at Jesus' teaching, for he

taught them as one having authority, and not like the scribes' (Mark 1:22). On the whole the religious leaders persisted in their failure to listen to the good news about God, and they failed to see Jesus as the promised Messiah. They had him crucified, and 'the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking Jesus among themselves and saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe' (Mark 15:31-32). By rejecting Jesus they rejected the image of God which he reveals.