

CHAPTER FOUR: JESUS' COMMUNION WITH GOD

In this chapter we focus on Jesus' divinity, on his intimate communion with God, a communion, a divinity, that Jesus wants everyone to share. This communion can be seen in every aspect of Jesus' life. It is particularly obvious when we see him alone in prayer. His prayer is at the heart of what Jesus invites us to share.

Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:9-11; Matthew 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32-34).

We first meet Jesus when as a young man in his early thirties he joins a crowd who are seeking baptism in the Jordan from the prophet John. They are seeking what everyone is seeking: a communion that refreshes our souls and shows us how to live a life that has more joy than we find when our lives are superficial and distracted. They want to live to the full. So does Jesus. Jesus was 'praying' (Luke 3:21). There was something quite special about Jesus' prayer that day. He had what we would call a mystical experience: a profound experience of being loved by the One he looked to as the source of his being. This experience proved to be a turning point in his life. We know virtually nothing about him prior to this day. After it, we witness a preacher, a healer, and an extraordinary example of love as he gathers disciples around him and begins a movement that we know as the Christian community.

When his disciples looked back on Jesus' experience that day they spoke in terms of God's Spirit descending on him. To guide us in our reflections on this scene they point us to a beautiful song-poem in the Isaiah scroll. It begins: 'Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights' (Isaiah 42:1 = Mark 1:11). Jesus was so overwhelmed by his experience of being loved that he had to go into the wilderness to discover in silence its significance for him and for others. The poem continues:

'I have put my spirit upon him;
 he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice,
 or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
 and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
 he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be crushed
 until he has established justice in the earth;
 and the coastlands wait for his teaching.
Thus says God, the LORD,
 who created the heavens and stretched them out,
 who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
 and spirit to those who walk in it:
I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
 I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
 a light to the nations,
 to open the eyes that are blind,

to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness' (Isaiah 42:2-7).

Jesus' disciples found in this song a description of Jesus' life and mission! In the silence of the desert Jesus came to see that everyone needs to experience what he experienced that day at the Jordan. The source of our being, the one who sustains us in existence says to each of us, 'You are my son/my daughter whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights.' Jesus believed that he was being invited 'to be a light to the nations', to draw everyone to know that God's desire for us is that we know how loved we are. Set free in this way, we would find our unique capacity to welcome and respond to love by sharing Jesus' belief and by loving as Jesus loves: We would indeed be what we are created to be: 'in God's image and likeness.'

Alone with his Abba

After a busy day and night of reaching out in love to the sick, 'at daybreak Jesus departed and went into a deserted place' (Luke 4:42). 'He would withdraw to deserted places and pray' (Luke 5:16). 'Jesus went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God' (Luke 6:12). 'Jesus dismissed the crowds and he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone' (Matthew 14:23-24). Jesus' disciples could see that there was something very special about Jesus' prayer: 'He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). They came to realise that it was in prayer that Jesus experienced the communion with God that he was inspired to share with others. It was in prayer that he discovered God's will: 'In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, "Everyone is searching for you." He answered, "Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do." (Mark 1:35-38).

Jesus loved in response to an inspiration that he experienced deep in his consciousness, an inspiration that he believed had its source in God. He was not drawing people to himself. He was drawing them to God. He was drawing them to learn to trust their own hearts and learn to believe, as he believed, how lovable and loved we are.

The Transfiguration (Mark 9:2-8; Matthew 17:1-8; Luke 9:18, 28-36)

Jesus' communion with God radiated out from him. The gospel-writers record an occasion when 'Jesus was praying alone, with only his disciples near him' (Luke 9:18). He turned to them and asked what he meant to them. Peter responded that they believed that Jesus was the Messiah promised to Israel by God. They needed to unlearn much of what they had been taught to expect from the Messiah, so Jesus begins to speak about the suffering that he, and therefore they, would have to face. They could not comprehend what Jesus was telling them/

'Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white (In the words of Psalm Four 'the light of God's face shone upon him'). Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. Then Peter said to Jesus: Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make

three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said: This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him! When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. But Jesus came and touched them, saying: Get up and do not be afraid. And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone' (Matthew 17:1-8).

In this dramatic portrayal of Jesus' prayer on the mountain, the gospel-writers recall Mount Sinai and God's gift of the Torah through Moses and his intimate communion with God 'for forty days and forty nights' (Exodus 24:18). They recall also the prophet Elijah who encountered God in the silence (1 Kings 19:12). Then Moses and Elijah disappear and there is 'only Jesus, God's Beloved Son'. We are the 'listen to him.' In Jesus the Law and the prophets are fulfilled. They have achieved their purpose. They have brought us to Jesus. It is in sharing Jesus' prayer that we share his divinity and enjoy the communion with God that is the goal of our existence.

Jesus prays (Matthew 11:25-27; Luke 10:21-22)

Jesus declared: 'No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matthew 11:27). Jesus is using the word 'know' in its rich biblical sense. It is not knowing about, nor is it a logical conclusion formed by scrutinizing one's experience. Rather it is a knowing that comes from intimate communion. Jesus is speaking of the intimacy of his communion with the God in whom he places his trust, an intimacy that he invites us to know. We are offered a rare insight into the content of Jesus' prayer: 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have revealed these things to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will' (Luke 10:21). Jesus looked on God as his Father (Abba). He identified as a child (a son), and asked us to see ourselves as, like him, totally dependent on our Father.

Teach us how to pray (Luke 11:1).

Jesus' disciples came to realise that the secret of Jesus' life and ministry was to be found in his prayer. Not surprisingly they wanted him to teach them how to pray.

Note

In Chapter Ten we will explore Jesus' communion with God at the Last Supper and during his agony and dying.