

CHAPTER SEVEN JESUS' TEACHING ABOUT OUR RESPONSE TO GOD

In Chapter One, and again in Chapter Four we contemplated Jesus, the Son, living out his response to God his Father. Here, I would like to concentrate more closely on this aspect of his person, and, at the same time, to listen to his teaching on the response to God that he encouraged in others. In this way we can hope to come to a deeper appreciation of what it meant for him to be the Son of God, as well as acquire a more accurate understanding of Jesus' vision of what we are called to be.

Jesus was convinced that God was the Father of all, and so his heart went out to everyone without exception and his teaching was addressed to 'anyone who has ears to hear' (Mark 4:9).

At the same time, it is clear from the Gospels that Jesus saw himself as having a special mission to the poor. We have already noted that on a visit to his hometown he chose to preach on a text from Isaiah, which began: 'The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has appointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor' (Luke 4:18 = Isaiah 61:1). The text goes on to give examples of the poor: the 'captives, the blind, and the downtrodden. The same picture emerges from the beatitudes. The first reads: 'How blessed and happy are you who are poor: yours is the kingdom of heaven' (Luke 6:20; Matthew 5:3). The poor are described as those who are hungry, who weep, who are hated, driven out, abused and denounced. Elsewhere, Jesus gives as examples 'the crippled, the blind and the lame' (Luke 14:13, 21).

This is consistent with the meaning of 'poor' that is found throughout the Bible, as can be seen from the following oracle from the prophet Amos: 'For the crimes of Israel I have made my decree and will not relent: because they have sold the virtuous man for silver and the poor (*'ebion*) for a pair of sandals, because they trample on the heads of ordinary people and push the poor (*'anawim*) out of their path' (Amos 2:6-7). *'ebion* and *'anaw* are the words used most frequently in the Hebrew scriptures for the poor.

'ebion focuses on the ideas of need and powerlessness. The image is that of a beggar, arms outstretched, utterly dependent on others for what he needs, unable to cope on his own; the redundant person, the lonely person, the person without a voice, the last in the line; the hungry person, the thirsty, the blind, the deaf, the paralyzed. The word has nothing to do with imaginary 'needs', distracting desires, superficial, self-inflicted frustrations. It is referring to basic human needs that are required for life itself. The *'ebion*, the poor, cannot supply these basic needs for themselves, but have to rely on others for them.

'anaw accents the idea of oppression. The image is of a person who is stooped, burdened by other people's unjust oppression. The *'anawim* are the downtrodden, the deserted, the deprived, the outcast, the cast aside, the despised, the humiliated, the roughly-treated, the yoked, the trapped, the captive, crushed by the blows of misery. It adds to the idea of *'ebion* the fact that the poor are in need because of other people's actions in their regard.

Jesus understood that he had a special mission to the *'ebion* and the *'anawim*, to those in need and to the oppressed. This was not because there was some special merit in being in need or in being oppressed; nor was it because the poor, by virtue of their poverty, necessarily had

some special quality that made them fit to receive and enjoy the good news. When Jesus said 'How blessed and happy are you who are poor' (Luke 6:20), he was not admiring them in their poverty, or holding them up as examples, he was assuring them that God was determined to redeem them from their poverty. The hungry were about to be satisfied, the weeping were about to laugh (Luke 6:21), the blind were about to see again, the lame to walk, the lepers to be cleansed, the deaf to hear and the dead to be raised to life (Matthew 11:5; Luke 7:22). The good news was that God was about to reign, and God would meet their needs and take away their oppression, as God had done for their ancestors in Egypt.

There are many ways of being in need, and there are many forms of oppression. The heart of Jesus went out to them all, offering them release. The greatest need of all was the need to be loved, and Jesus offered that to each. With love came a challenge that varied according to each one's need. To some the challenge was to unclutter themselves from the material possessions that were stifling their spirit. We see Zacchaeus, 'one of the senior tax collectors and a wealthy man' (Luke 19:2) accepting Jesus' challenge and welcoming Jesus and the good news with joy. On the other hand we read of another man 'of great wealth' (Mark 10:22; Matthew 19:22; Luke 18:23) who had a deep longing for life and who approached Jesus begging for help. Jesus, we are told, 'looked steadily at him and loved him' (Mark 10:21). He invited him to come with him, and told him to unburden himself of his wealth and give it to those who needed it. This man was unable to accept the challenge and 'went away sad' (Mark 10:22). For others the challenge was to let go their pride, whether based on learning, or reputation, or position in society. We see Nicodemus attempting to meet this challenge (John 3:1-21) by coming to the light (John 3:21). We see many others going away empty from Jesus' love and from the challenge of the good news (Luke 1:53), unrepentant (Luke 3:8), unforgiven (Luke 18:9-14). Jesus himself declared: 'Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the person who humbles himself will be exalted' (Luke 14:11, 18:14). For others the challenge was to stop worrying, to cease being preoccupied with distractions (Luke 11:38-42).

Each person has to make his or her own journey in response to Jesus' love and to the good news he preached. There are obvious material and psychological needs that cause us to classify certain people as being in need (*'ebion*). There are certain obvious oppressions that cause us to classify people as being among the *'anawim*. Jesus recognized that our most profound need is for love, for God's love. He saw that our greatest oppression is to be deprived of love. The leper suffered from this in one way, Zacchaeus in another. Jesus' heart went out to all. His mission was to all. He challenged us to take whatever steps are appropriate to open ourselves to God's love.

Jesus' universal mission was limited by the fact that his ministry lasted only two or three years. He had little opportunity to go outside Galilee and Judea. Another limitation was from people's response to him. It seems that those whose needs were greatest, since they were trapped in their own pride and possessions, were most resistant to Jesus' message and offer of love, whereas those whose needs were more humiliating, being harder to hide, were those who responded to Jesus' offer and sought his company (Luke 15:1). So we find Jesus sharing table-fellowship with people of all classes of society, but his reputation was for 'eating with sinners and tax collectors' (Mark 2:16). We find him preaching and reaching out in love to people of all conditions, but in fact surrounded by the outcasts of society.

This was not simply the result of people's response to him, though this no doubt played a large part in what happened. Jesus did not just wait around and remain available! He had a mission from God, and he purposely chose to be with those in need. He chose to take the side of the oppressed.

Jesus' conviction that God did indeed want to save those in need and those suffering oppression was based on his own personal experience. He experienced need himself, and suffered oppression, and he experienced the love of his Father meeting his need and liberating him from oppression. His teaching was a matter of inviting others to share his own experience of the love of his Father.

From what we have already noted it is obvious that there is no automatic connection between being poor and experiencing the blessing of God. Need and oppression can lead to greed, violence and despair. In holding out hope for the poor, Jesus also taught us the kind of response that is necessary from us if we are to enjoy relief and experience redemption. The effectiveness of his mission was essentially related to people's response, for he offered them love, and they were free to accept or reject the offer.

The essence of Jesus' teaching was that the poor were to recognize that God is their Father, and so learn to respond to God as children. Jesus himself, as we have seen, related as Son; he called for the same response from others: 'I tell you solemnly, anyone who does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it' (Mark 10:15; Matthew 18:3; Luke 18:17). Let us examine the response of a child under three aspects: children cry out to their father when in distress; children listen to their father and obey him; children place their trust in their father's love and believe in him. This was how Jesus responded to God; it was the advice he gave to others.

In our distress we are invited to call on God

By definition, the poor cannot satisfy their own need, nor can they rid themselves of the yoke of oppression. What else can they do but cry out for relief? This is what Jesus did throughout his life (see Hebrews 5:7), but notably in his final hours. Mark describes the scene in Gethsemane.

'Jesus took Peter and James and John with him. And a sudden fear came over him, and great distress. And he said to them: my soul is sorrowful to the point of death. Wait here, and keep awake. And going on a little further he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, this hour might pass him by: 'Abba (Father)!' he said. 'Everything is possible for you. Take this cup away from me. But let it be as you, not I, would have it' (Mark 14:33-36; Matthew 26:37-39; Luke 22:41-42; compare John 12:27).

We find the same cry rising to the Father from Jesus in his dying moments. Mark (15:34) and Matthew (27:46) place on his lips the first words of Psalm 22, in this way inviting the reader to pray this psalm as a way of reflecting on the way in which Jesus suffered, cried out to God, and accepted his final agony. Let us accept their invitation here, for a reading of Psalm 22 does give us a profound insight into Jesus' heart and mind at the end of his life; it also expresses powerfully the attitude he tried to inculcate in the poor.

'My God, my God, why have you deserted me?
How far from saving me, the words I groan!
I call all day, my God, but you never answer,
all night long I call and cannot rest' (Psalm 22:1-2).

The 'poor of YHWH' are those who call to God in their distress. We are encouraged to call because of the fidelity of YHWH in the past:

'Yet, Holy One, you who make your home in the praises of Israel,
in you our fathers put their trust, they trusted and you rescued them;
they called to you for help and they were saved,
they never trusted you in vain' (Psalm 22:3-5).

Sustained by faith, the poor remind God of God's personal promise to them and of the care God offered them in times past.

'Yet here am I, now more worm than man, scorn of mankind, jest of the people,
all who see me jeer at me, they toss their heads and sneer:
He relied on God, let God save him! If God is his friend, let God rescue him!
Yet you drew me out of the womb, you entrusted me to my mother's breasts;
placed on your lap from my birth, from my mother's womb you have been my God,
Do not stand aside. Trouble is near. I have no one to help me!' (Psalm 22:6-11).

The poor man goes on to describe his condition with phrases like:

'I am like water draining away, my bones are all disjointed,
my heart is like wax, melting inside me ...
they tie me hand and foot and leave me lying in the dust of death' (Psalm 22:12-18).

He concludes his plea with a final cry and a promise to praise God:

'Do not stand aside, YHWH. O my strength, come quickly to my help ...
Then I shall proclaim your name to my brothers, praise you in full assembly' (Psalm 22:19-22).

God, the redeemer, hears the cry of the poor, who cries out in exultation:

'You who fear YHWH, praise him! Entire race of Jacob, glorify him!
Entire race of Israel, revere him!
For God has not despised or disdained the poor man in his poverty,
has not hidden God's face from him, but has answered him when he called' (Psalm 22:23-24).

What we contemplate when we watch Jesus is what we hear when we listen to his teaching. He tells the poor to cry to God for their 'daily bread' (Matthew 6:11; Luke 11:3). He tells them

to pray to God to keep them safe in the time of destruction that was imminent (Matthew 6: 13; Luke 11:4). He tells them: 'Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For the one who asks always receives; the one who searches always finds; the one who knocks will always have the door opened to him' (Matthew 7:7-8; Luke 11:9-11; also Mark 11:24; Matthew 21:22; John 16:24; Matthew 18:19-20). Jesus concluded his story about the persistent widow with the words: 'Will not God see justice done to his chosen who cry to God day and night, even when God delays to help them?' (Luke 18:7).

We are to listen to God and follow God's inspiration

There is no point in crying to God if we fail to listen to God and respond to God's inspiration. God does want to answer our need and release us from oppression. As children of God, we must be 'obedient'. Note the Latin roots of the word obedience: 'ob-audienti' = close listening in response to the call of another. The Hebrew and Greek words for 'obedience' also derive from words meaning 'listen'.

Jesus hungered for every word that came from his Father (Matthew 4:4). He said once: 'My food is to do the will of the One who sent me' (John 4:34; see also John 5:30, 6:38, 7:28-29, 12:48-49). The Letter to the Hebrews says of him: 'Although he was Son, he learned to obey through suffering' (Hebrews 5:8). His cry of agony in Gethsemane is followed by the words: 'Let it be as you, Father, not I, would have it' (Mark 14:36). This is the attitude one would expect from a son towards his father. It is an attitude that characterizes Jesus, and an attitude that he tries to inculcate in the poor: 'It is not those who say to me, "Lord, Lord," who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father' (Matthew 7:21). 'Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother' (Mark 3:35; Matthew 12:50; Luke 8:21).

The obedience that Jesus lived and taught was not a blind resignation to fate or destiny, as though we are puppets in the hands of an autocratic deity. It is an obedience that comes from a free heart (John 10:18) that trusts in the wisdom of God's will offering us the way to salvation and freedom. It is an obedience that requires all our courage and creativity, qualities possible only if we trust that God is indeed our Father.

Jesus' constant and faithful attention to the will of his Father drew him into his mission of love. In spite of the sinful intransigence of his opponents, he sustained this love even when it was taking him on a course that led to the cross. Jesus kept obeying his Father, because he knew that if obeying in love meant his dying, somehow God would use this death to save and liberate. He also knew that God would 'save him out of death' (Hebrews 5:7). In other words, both the crying out to God, and the attentive listening to God, are expressions of the fundamental attitude of a child to a father: an attitude of trust.

We must keep believing in God

Jesus' trust in God his Father is evident throughout the Gospels. As he journeys through the desert of this world, and leads others along the way, he shows them how to believe; how to 'be' in the 'love' of God their Father, and how to remain in that love (see Hebrews 2:13, 12:2). Even when he is faced with death, he keeps believing that his Father will be faithful to him, and

will raise him, through death, into glory (Mark 8:31; Matthew 16:21; Luke 9:22; Mark 9:31; Matthew 17:23; and Mark 10:34; Matthew 20:19; Luke 18:33; Luke 13:32).

Jesus encourages this same attitude in others. What do the poor have to offer except their humble readiness to receive? Only such an attitude would open them to God's gracious Spirit, and so to the power to be able to listen to God and carry out God's will (see Romans 3:21-22). 'Everything is possible', says Jesus, 'to a person who has faith' (Mark 9:23). He tells us not to worry about food or clothing or length of life (Matthew 6:25-34; Luke 12:22-31). He tells us not to worry even about persecution (Mark 13:11; Matthew 10: 18-20; Luke 21:14-15). He tells us never to be afraid of God, for God cares for us far more than any father on earth, even to numbering the hairs on our head (Matthew 10:30; Luke 12:7). Jesus encourages us: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God still, and trust in me' (John 14:1).

Mark summarizes the preaching of Jesus in the command: 'Believe in the good news' (Mark 1:15). Jesus' heart rejoices at the healing that flowed through him from his Father to those who did believe: those like the paralyzed man (Mark 2:5; Matthew 9:2; Luke 5:20), the woman with a haemorrhage (Mark 5:34; Matthew 9:22; Luke 8:48), and the blind man (Mark 10:52; Luke 18:42). Jesus encourages Jairus to 'have faith' and God would answer his prayer (Mark 5:36; Luke 8:50). When Peter was disturbed by the withering of the fig tree and the emptying of the temple, and was wondering what to build his life on, Jesus tells him: 'Have faith in God' (Mark 11:22; Matthew 21:21). He questions his disciples when they lose heart during the storm: 'How is it that you have no faith?' (Mark 4:40; Matthew 8:26; Luke 8:25). It is her faith that opens the poor lost woman to God's healing forgiveness (Luke 7:50). It is the same with the leper (Luke 17:19).

Jesus is our 'leader in faith' (Hebrews 12:2). When we are being loved, and open ourselves to that love, and respond in love, a whole new world opens up before us. Faith opens us to insights we could never have without it, and it makes things possible that, without faith, are not possible. When people place their trust in Jesus' love, and recognize the religious dimension of his love, and so open themselves to believe in God's love because of him, all kinds of marvellous things become possible. No wonder Jesus prayed that, whatever might happen to Peter, his faith would not fail (Luke 22:32). No wonder he pleaded with Thomas: 'Doubt no longer, but believe' (John 20:27).

There is a beautiful statement of faith in the final verses of the prophecy of Habakkuk:

'Even though the fig tree does not blossom, and there is no fruit on the vine;
even though the yield of the olive fails, and the fields afford no food;
even though the sheep vanish from the fold, and there are no cattle in the stalls;
I will rejoice in YHWH, I will exult in God my Saviour.
YHWH my Lord is my strength, who makes my feet as light as a doe's,
and sets my steps on the heights' (Habakkuk 3:17-19).

Such was the exultation of Mary, Jesus' mother, who was blessed by God and who 'believed that the promise made to her by the Lord would be fulfilled' (Luke 1:45). Such was the trust manifested by Jesus himself as he hung upon the cross. Such was the basic attitude encouraged

by Jesus in the poor. He not only encouraged this attitude in them, he also made it possible by his own faith, and by the love with which he met them, witnessing as he did to the love of God. It was this basic attitude of faith that Jesus' disciples knew to be at the heart of their response to the good news: 'We ourselves have known and put our faith in God's love towards ourselves. God is love and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them' (1 John 4:16).

Faith is essentially something of the heart. Hence the warning given by Jesus: 'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. The lamp of the body is the eye. It follows that if your eye is sound, your whole body will be filled with light. But if your eye is diseased, your whole body will be all darkness. If, then, the light inside you is darkness, what darkness that will be ... Set your hearts on the kingdom of your Father first, and on his righteousness, and all these other things will be given you as well' (Matthew 6:21-23, 33).

There are many things that can block our vision, or distract us, and so seduce our heart. Jesus revealed the good news of God's saving love. He taught those in need and those who were oppressed to recognize their total dependence on love – the love that is constantly offered them by God their Father as a free gift. He taught the poor not to seek relief in riches, but to see everything as a gift of love, to be enjoyed as a gift, and to be shared with those in need. He taught them that 'what matters is faith that makes its power felt through love' (Galatians 5:6). This is the bliss that he promised the poor (Matthew 5:3; Luke 6:20).

There is nothing mean, nothing small, nothing frightened or negative about the response asked of us. It is whole-hearted and broad-minded. The horizon opened up for us by the good news is as large as life, as comprehensive as the world. The reign of God is for all. At the same time, the focus is sharp: our hope is to be in God alone. God hears our cry, and we must listen for God's response. The poor who listen to the teaching of Jesus will accept and live out their total dependence on Love.

Jesus invites the poor to join him in being instruments of God's healing, saving and redeeming love to others. Our greatest poverty is our inability to love. Jesus invites us to love as he loves. He gives us his love to make this possible. Jesus' disciples, like himself, would have to live within the confines of place, time, opportunity, and acceptance or rejection. At the same time, Jesus challenges us not to stand by and wait, but to go out and meet the poor in their need, by giving bread to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, making a stranger welcome, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the prisoner (see Matthew 26:35-36). As his disciples we are to wait, but not for the hungry to come to us. We are to wait on God's love filling our hearts and moving us to be instruments of God's healing and liberating Spirit.

Jesus invites us to join in his mission of convincing people that their deepest need is for love, and that the love they need is being offered to them by God. This universal aspect of Jesus' mission is of its essence: 'Come to me all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest' (Matthew 11:28).

Our world is labouring and overburdened. Our world is seeking rest. We are desperately hoping for good news, especially the good news that our deepest need, our need for love, has an answer. The answer trumpeted forth by many has to do with possessions, as though they could fill our need. We are encouraged to be independent, to be self-made, self-reliant, self-centred.

Such directions lead only to isolation, loneliness and alienation. The teaching of Jesus challenges and enlightens us. He invites us to know that we all have the one Father, who hears our cry, knows our need, and is answering us. He invites us to be children of this Father, and so in our relations with each other to learn to be mutually interdependent; in other words, to love.

Those who listened to Jesus formed communities in which spiritual and material riches were shared with the object of meeting everyone's needs in love. These communities were open to all, without regard to racial, religious or economic background (Acts 2:44-45; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 4:16), and the catholic (universal) nature of their response has characterized authentic Christianity ever since.

There is an urgent need again in our times for disciples of Jesus to work out ways of sharing their spiritual and material gifts in ways appropriate to today's conditions, for only a community organized in love to bring the good news to the poor can claim to be a community that is following Jesus.

In the ultimate analysis we are all poor, in that we are all totally dependent on love for our existence. A tragedy occurs when we do not recognize our need, or, having recognized it, seek to meet it in distracting ways. Jesus, the Son of God, teaches us that the only hope we have is in God, and that our basic response is to be that of a child, a response of trust.

* We are to 'be merciful just as your Father is merciful' (Luke 6:36).

* We are to do all that we can that people will 'live and live to the full' (John 10:10). This is dramatically portrayed in Jesus giving life to a widow's only son (Luke 7:11-15), to Jairus's daughter (Luke 8:54-55), and to Lazarus (John 11:43-44).

* Jesus tells us to 'let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good words and give glory to your Father in heaven' (Matthew 5:16).

* 'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you' (Matthew 5:38-42).

* When chaos is threatening us we are to listen to Jesus and keep our eyes on him. Jesus demonstrates that nothing can separate us from God's love. If we listen for his call and if we keep our eyes on him, we can, like him, 'walk on water'. Peter witnesses to this:

"Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Jesus said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus. But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:28-31).

* We may, like Jesus, be 'crucified', but no one can take our life away. What matters is that, like Jesus, we love.

'The king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me' (Matthew 25:34-40).

* Jesus invites us to be with him, to walk with him. To do this we need to be enlightened, we need to see. 'They came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed Jesus on the way' (Mark 10:46-52).