

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: SO, WHO IS JESUS?

This book has been about Jesus, a carpenter from Nazareth, known as the son of Joseph (John 1:45) and Mary (Mark 6:3), the friend of Peter, James, John and the other disciples. His life is recorded in the gospels. He is the person about whom Paul preached. The Christian community over the centuries has looked to him as the revelation of God.

We have been looking at him, not only as the object of people's love, gratitude, admiration and faith, but also as the subject of relationships with other people and with God. He is the one who asked Andrew and another disciple of the Baptist to come and see where he lived. He is the one who spoke the beatitudes, who wept over the city he loved, who dreamed and hoped, and who suffered and gave his life for his friends. He is the one who prayed to God as 'Abba'.

Jesus' humanity

Jesus of Nazareth is a man. At first glance this seems so obvious that one might wonder what is the point of stating it. However, the history of Christianity shows that it was Jesus' humanity that was the first thing to be denied. Ignatius of Antioch at the end of the first century, Justin of Flavia Neapolis a little later, and the Council of Chalcedon in the middle of the fifth century, all found it necessary to proclaim this simple and obvious truth against those who denied that Jesus was truly human, denied that he was 'like us in every respect' (Hebrews 2:17), 'except sin' (Hebrews 4:15) .

Even today there are those who, while giving lip service to the reality of Jesus' humanity, continue to portray Jesus in such a way that we find it impossible to identify with him. It is as though people today like to portray Jesus with all the beauty we can create, so long as we do not have to face up to the often harsh and quite demanding reality of his actual historical existence, with all that it implies for us about our aims, decisions, choices, life-style and commitment to God, to humanity and to the world.

Whatever else needs to be stated in answer to the question 'Who is Jesus?' it must never deny or alter the simple and obvious truth that he is a man. Jesus is not some kind of half-man, half-god. He is not a super-man. He does not have a unique humanity that puts him in a species all on his own. His body was a human body, just like ours; his psyche was a human psyche, just like ours. His feelings were human; his thoughts were human; his way of understanding was human; his way of coming to clarity, of pondering, deciding, and responding, was human, just like ours.

He did not have some secret source of information that enabled him to bypass the ordinary processes we have to go through in our search for understanding. When we watch him, we are watching one man's way of being a human being. No two people are the same. True, we all share what we term 'human nature' – which is another way of speaking of the limits within which we have to live our life – but we do it in uniquely personal ways. We may not be able to do everything Jesus did, because we are who we are, and he is Jesus; but we are not to look for an explanation of the uniqueness of his humanity in some extra, mysterious reality that is outside our ken. His insights, his religious experience, his decisions, his courage, and his heroically faithful love, as well as his hope and his faith, were all human qualities of this remarkable person.

Jesus was a man like us. Therefore, he had to live within the limits of human nature. However, the way he lived demonstrates the error of many cherished assumptions about what those limits are. According to those who were closest to him, Jesus did not sin. This truth opens up amazing possibilities for us all and demonstrates what human freedom can achieve when a person responds as beautifully as did Jesus to the call arising from his religious experience. We must take seriously the fact that Jesus, a man like us, was capable of such self-giving and such freedom and such love, for it opens up undreamed of possibilities for us all. We must take seriously also his faith, for it was his faith that was the spring from which everything else flowed. The secret of Jesus' personality is to be found in his intimate religious experience.

God is not an object of human perception. God is not an object for us. God was not an object for Jesus. Jesus' human religious experience was of the same nature as yours and mine. That is to say, he experienced himself as being loved unconditionally and without reserve by the one we call God, and he called, more personally, 'Abba'.

In our day, as in the days of Jesus, some people attempt to define God in ways that fit in with our distractions, or provide an object for our fears, or satisfy our fancy, or justify our power. Jesus accused many of his contemporaries of idolatry, as did the prophets before him, and we, today, are surrounded by idolatry. False gods flourish in our churches and in our minds and hearts. Particularly in recent years, reaction against idolatry has led many people into atheism or agnosticism. God is placed in the too hard, or the irrelevant, basket. This frees us from the mess into which idolatry gets us, and it appears to leave us in control of our own destiny. We are tempted to accept as true only what we can be sure of from the point of view we have adopted. The problem, however, is that this ignores the whole area of human experience that we call religious.

Or we can, like Jesus, take our religious experience seriously, and set out on a journey of discovery, responding in faith, in hope, and in love, to the mysterious Presence that is at the heart of our being loved. This does not lift us onto another plane. It does not remove the mystery and the harsh realities of suffering and death and sin, but it does shed light on the human condition, and the fruit of genuine religion can be discerned by anyone who cares to look.

When Jesus responded to the Sacred Mystery at the heart of his own existence, he responded with the word 'Abba'. Abba is a human word, arising in the human psyche of Jesus. Its explanation, like the explanation for everything else Jesus said and did, must be sought in his human experience. As the New Testament testifies, it is possible for others to share in the intimacy that Jesus experienced. We too can call God 'Abba' as we experience the Spirit of God's love flooding our hearts. It was Jesus of Nazareth who awakened us to the marvels that were going on in our lives – marvels we had failed to observe, or in which we did not dare believe.

The results of his response to God are recorded in the gospels. Problems did not disappear; people still managed to resist his overtures and his challenge. He was murdered by those who considered themselves the official custodians of truth and especially of the truth concerning God. But Jesus continued to believe; he continued to hope; and he continued to love, right up to his death. However unique and beautiful, Jesus' religious experience was human, and it must be understood as such. To do otherwise is to distort the picture given us in the New Testament.

Christians believe that Jesus of Nazareth, the same Jesus about whom we have said he is human, is also divine. This has been the constant belief of the faithful, expressed in our liturgical worship, in which we associate Jesus with our worship of God. We looked at what it means to speak of Jesus as divine in Chapter One.

When Jesus speaks of God, he is speaking of his experience of being unconditionally loved. The Beloved Disciple expresses this beautifully in his Prologue: 'No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known' (John 1:18). Jesus puts it this way: 'The Father knows me, and I know the Father ... The Father loves me' (John 10:15,17).

The Beloved Disciple in his gospel constantly focuses on Jesus' communion with God: 'The one who comes from heaven (from communion with God in prayer) testifies to what he has seen and heard' (John 3:31-32). 'The one who is from God has seen the Father' (John 6:46). Jesus experienced himself as on a mission given him by God: 'The living Father has sent me, and I live because of the Father' (John 6:57). 'I know the Father because I am from the Father and it is the Father who sent me' (John 7:29).

Jesus' words flow from his communion with God. 'He whom God has sent speaks God's words, for he gives the Spirit without measure' (John 3:34). 'My teaching is not mine but the Father's who sent me. Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own' (John 7:16-17). 'I declare to the world what I have learned from God ... I speak these things as the Father instructed me' (John 8:26, 28). 'I declare what I have seen in my Father's presence' (John 8:38). 'I know God, and I keep God's word' (John 8:55). Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak as from myself' (John 14:10). 'The word that you hear is not mine. It is from the Father who sent me' (John 14:24). In a prayer to God Jesus says: 'The words that you gave me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me' (John 17:8).

As early as the end of the first century, Ignatius of Antioch included Jesus when he spoke of God. He was giving expression to the faith of the Church, a faith expressed in the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple in which Thomas experiences the presence of God in the Risen Jesus and exclaims 'My Lord and my God' (John 20:28).

Jesus' divinity is his intimate communion with God, a divinity that he invites us to share.

Jesus' self-knowledge

When Jesus thought about himself, he reflected with a mind like ours. When he asked the question 'Who am I?' what insights did he have? What conclusions did he draw? We are not speaking of Jesus' consciousness here. We are exploring his self-knowledge. Bernard Lonergan SJ clarifies the distinction: "What is conscious is experienced. But human knowing is not just experiencing. Human knowing includes experiencing, but adds to it attention, scrutiny, inquiry, insight, conception, naming, reflecting, checking, judging' (*The response of the Jesuit as priest and apostle in the modern world*, in A Second Collection DLT, London 1974, page 172)

An obvious place to go to find an answer to our question about Jesus' self-knowledge is the New Testament; more precisely, the gospels. However, there are certain critical questions that need to be answered before we can simply accept every word that is placed on Jesus' lips as direct evidence of his personal psychic awareness. If Jesus had written the gospels, we could rightly see in them direct evidence of his thoughts on many matters, including himself. But he didn't write the gospels, his disciples did. If we could establish that Jesus actually spoke the words attributed to him and were sure of the context and the manner of his speaking, then we could use these words as data, and by assuming reasonable psychic consistency, we could deduce much about his own self-image and self-understanding. However, while we can reach a high degree of probability concerning certain sayings of Jesus, and while we can be confident that the gist of his words and their overall direction are not at variance with Jesus' own intentions, aims and character, we must accept that the gospels bring us, in the first instance, into contact with the way Jesus was understood by their authors and by those who accepted the gospels as authentic. Sometimes the context may have more to do with the questions and experience of the Christian community at the time than with that of Jesus himself.

I say this not to suggest that the picture we have of Jesus in the gospels may not be accurate – the whole of this book insists that it is. I say it only to alert the reader to the truth that it is one thing to know on the word of the Beloved Disciple that Jesus is indeed the 'light of the world' (John 8:12). It is another thing to suggest that that is the way Jesus saw himself. If the words can be shown to be those of Jesus, we have our answer. If, on the other hand, they are the Beloved Disciple's words, placed on the lips of Jesus to express the reality and so the truth, but without claiming to express also Jesus' own psychic awareness of the truth, then we ought not jump to the conclusion that the gospels give us evidence in regard to Jesus' psyche. Because the gospels are human documents, we can expect to find in them some evidence to help us answer our question, so long as we remember that the gospels were not designed to explore Jesus' psyche. We must be careful in our critical analysis of the texts.

Only when we can establish that Jesus actually spoke certain words can we use them as evidence in an argument concerning his self-understanding. At the same time, since the gospels are true to who he was and to his aims and mind and attitudes, we can be a lot more confident in the sayings than was once thought. If the Beloved Disciple had wanted to make the claim that Jesus was the light of the world, he could easily have done so. The fact that he chose to have Jesus himself make that claim is at least an indication, not only of its truth, but also of the fact that he considered it to be part of Jesus' own self-understanding as well.

There is ample evidence that Jesus realised the special nature of the intimacy he experienced in his relations with the God whom he called 'Abba'; a realization he expressed in speaking of himself as the Son of God. In Chapter One we noted that nowhere in the gospels is Jesus portrayed as claiming to be God. When he is accused of doing so, he defends himself against the accusation by proclaiming his total dependence on the Father. He is God's Son, not to be identified with the Father. However, we do find him claiming an authority that is divine, and in an unprecedented way.

Those who knew and loved Jesus came to the conclusion that in getting to know Jesus they were getting to know God. They based this conclusion on their experience of Jesus, including post-crucifixion experiences, which were of course not part of the data that Jesus could reflect upon

prior to his death. But when Jesus saw how people responded to him with a religious response, he must surely have reflected on the meaning of this for himself.

Any conclusions that Jesus reached concerning his relationship to his Father did not free him from having to live in the ambiguities of the human condition. Far from lifting him above faith, or removing him from wonder, they must have heightened for him the mystery of his human existence. If Jesus' disciples had to live with the profound mystery of their relationship with Jesus, and the recognition that it was God who was being revealed to them in Jesus, imagine what it must have been for Jesus to live with this same mystery in the depths of his own psyche. Imagine how he must have pondered its implications for his living and his dying and his mission. This did not short-circuit the journey of Jesus as he came to terms with his growing recognition of who he was in his relations with others and especially in the intimacy of his prayer with the one he called "Abba".

Doctrine of the Trinity

Coming to know the God Jesus called 'Father', and coming to know Jesus as God's Son, and coming to experience the divine life-giving Spirit, Jesus' disciples came to speak of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When the authors of the New Testament use this language, they are referring to God, Jesus, and the intimate communion between God and Jesus. When Christianity moved from the Semitic to the Greco-Roman world, people attempted to achieve a more abstract clarity in which to express their belief. Over the centuries, theologians found various Greek words that were useful as tools of expression of the Church's belief concerning Jesus and his relationship with God: words like *ousia*, *hypostasis*, *physis* and *prosopon*. None of these words could hold the mystery, and each of them had to be understood as carrying a new weight of meaning. Believing Christians, enlightened by their faith-experience could be protected by these definitions from going up the dead-ends that were declared heresies. Keeping faithful to the creeds, they could be led into prayer, and into their profound encounter with God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Without a full comprehension of what is essentially mysterious, people came to think of God as communion in love. While we cannot comprehend this, we can have some inkling of it from our own experience of the intimacy of love and communion between lovers. Truth about any person can be attained only by one who loves that person. Truth about Jesus can be attained only by one who is committed to the journey of discipleship and who has experienced redemption and salvation in the community that is committed to him. It can be attained only by reflection on personal and communal Christian religious experience.

Conclusion

The effect of the various creedal statements is to demand that we take Jesus seriously, recognizing the reality of his human experience, human consciousness and human commitment, as well as recognizing that it is this human life that is our most precious revelation of God and, in human terms, a coherent and trustworthy statement of the way God has chosen to reveal God's Self to us.

All our ideas about God must be checked against the actual attitudes of Jesus of Nazareth. All our understanding of God's revelation, through all the experiences of humanity and the many sacred

books that are cherished by us, including the sacred books of Jesus' own people (the Bible) – all these have to be checked against the words spoken by Jesus as interpreted by his contemporaries and expressed in the New Testament, and as interpreted by the community of Jesus' disciples in the changing circumstances of history since.

Before the time of Jesus, people could look at nature, and look at history and infer certain things from them about God. They could point to the Exodus event and say, 'that is what God has done!', and so 'that is what God is like!'. People could reflect on their own religious experience, they could listen to the prophets; they could examine the Torah and come to know about God. Jesus' disciples learned to point to Jesus and say 'That is what God has done! That is what God is like!' Jesus, whose human existence we can see, reveals to us in a human way the character, the will and the being of God.

The next step

Our investigations have attempted to find in the New Testament answers to the question 'Who is Jesus?' Enlightened by the answers, our next task is to investigate what meaning Jesus might have for us and for our world.

We find the following scene in Luke's history of the early Christian community in Jerusalem:

'Once, when Peter and John were going up to the Temple for the prayers at the ninth hour, it happened that there was a man being carried past. He was a cripple from birth; and they used to put him down every day near the Temple entrance called the Beautiful Gate so that he could beg from the people going in. When this man saw Peter and John on their way into the Temple, he begged from them. Both Peter and John looked straight at him and said, "Look at us". He turned to them expectantly, hoping to get something from them, but Peter said, "I have neither silver nor gold, but I will give you what I have: in the name of Jesus the Nazarene, walk!" Peter then took him by the hand and helped him to stand up. Instantly his feet and ankles became firm, he jumped up, stood, and began to walk, and he went with them into the Temple, walking and jumping and praising God. Everyone could see him walking and praising God, and they recognized him as the one who used to sit begging at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple. They were all astonished and were unable to explain what had happened to him' (Acts 3:1-10).

Challenged by the religious authorities, Peter made the claim that Jesus was the only one who could save not only the crippled man but us all (see Acts 4:12). Whatever the forces crippling us 'we should throw off everything that hinders us, especially the sin that clings so easily, and keep running steadily in the race we have started. Let us not lose sight of Jesus' (Hebrews 12:1-2).

The history of the Christian Church has been a story of a struggle between fidelity and infidelity: fidelity to genuine religious experience and to a humble and courageous living out of the community's vision and values, inspired by the memory and the presence of Jesus; and infidelity, with the intrusions and distortions that have occurred when those who claim to follow Jesus lose sight of him.

Our aim in this book has been to clarify who the real Jesus of Nazareth is, so that, whatever the forces crippling us, we will not lose sight of him. Our next task is to name what it is that is crippling us, in the way Jesus named the oppressions that were crippling his contemporaries. In this book

we have not attempted to do this, except in passing. It is a task that must be attempted. Without some knowledge of the real Jesus we would not have the courage to do so, for a Jesus that is unrelated to history, to reason and to any real world, a Jesus that is not really concerned with bringing about God's will on earth, cannot give us the energy to face our real situation. Only the real Jesus can remove false religion that keeps us spiritually numb and encourage us to believe that we can 'get up and walk'.

Jesus, whom we have attempted to discover in this book, lived in a real world, and was concerned with real people. He named and vigorously opposed anything that made it difficult for people to live. In so doing he incurred the opposition of many people; hence his death. But he also won the confidence of the oppressed. They trusted him, and so learned to trust God, and to believe in themselves, in their world and their future. This was because Jesus revealed the powerful love of the redeemer God.

Keeping our eyes on Jesus, let us dare to face and name today's oppressions. As we seek to understand what it is that is crippling us, let us learn from Jesus to believe that God is really drawing everyone. Let us recognize the fact that everyone has a sacred religious experience that must be respected. Let us reject anything sectarian and trust our own and other people's personal religious experience. On this basis alone can we hope to find the peace that Jesus offers, and release on earth the healing and redeeming love of God.

Our world is desperately crippled, desperately hungry for meaning, and thirsty for love. Too much idolatry, too much false religion, too many false Jesus, have added to the confusion and driven too many honest people into a lifeless agnosticism. Those of us who claim to follow Jesus have an obligation to our world to ensure that when we present Jesus as the answer to our modern ills, it is the real Jesus of Nazareth that we present. He is the revelation of the one and only God. He is the 'only one by whom we can be saved' (Acts 4:12).