



~ Roy Clements ~

# INTRODUCING JESUS

FOREWORD BY JOHN STOTT



INTRODUCING JESUS

Roy Clements



# *Introducing Jesus*

ROY CLEMENTS

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## Foreword

Nothing is more necessary for the maturing of the church than conscientious, biblical and contemporary preaching. One such preacher is Roy Clements. Cambridge University students flock to Eden Baptist Church in their hundreds to listen to the word of God through his ministry. And I can understand why. For I have myself profited from his expositions, have sat under his able chairmanship at Council meetings of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, and have now read this his first book. In it he expounds the seven main discourses of Jesus in John's Gospel, beginning with the conversation with Nicodemus and ending with the Prologue. In this way, he introduces Jesus, as the book's title indicates. The marks of authentic Christian preaching are here.

To begin with, Roy Clements is *faithful* to the biblical text. He knows Greek but does not parade his knowledge. He has read the commentators, but does not follow them slavishly. He is not afraid to adopt unfashionable positions, if integrity requires him to do so. For he interprets the text in both its historical and its biblical contexts. When there are alternative possibilities, he tells us not only which he chooses, but why. I admire his robust common sense and balanced judgement.

Secondly, Roy Clements is *contemporary* in his applications. He moves freely in the world of Marx and Freud, Sartre and William Golding, of religious pluralism and scientific secularism, of empty existentialism and revolutionary violence. He is also familiar with the modern theological and Christological debates. It is against the background of all this intellectual ferment that he invites us to listen afresh to the message of Jesus, and to grasp its relevance to our lives.

Thirdly, he is *serious* in his purpose. True, he knows the foibles of fallen beings, and sometimes pokes fun at them. But there is nothing flippant here. For Dr Clements is concerned that we should see Jesus. He wants to get behind the discourses to the speaker, behind the popular image to the real person. He portrays him as John witnesses to him, defends him against his detractors, and commends him to modern men and women. No attempt has been made to disguise the fact that these chapters began their life as sermons. So the preacher still addresses us directly and outspokenly. Some readers will surely be brought by the Holy Spirit to faith in Jesus. Others will have their faith clarified and strengthened. None of us can fail to be enriched.

JOHN STOTT  
December 1985



## *Preface*

It is a wise man who has learnt to recognize his own limitations. Long ago I discovered that I was no writer. It is, therefore, with a considerable amount of hesitation that I offer this book to you. In mitigation I can only plead the persuasion of many friends who have insisted that it ought to be published. If I had the necessary gift and time it would have been more satisfactory I am sure to have rewritten this material from scratch as a book. Possessing neither, I can only present you with an edited transcript of thirteen sermons as they were delivered verbatim at Eden Baptist Church, Cambridge in 1984.

All preachers are plagiarists, and often unconsciously so. Inevitably one reads much in preparation for preaching, and in the process of its digestion other people's material gets woven into the text of the sermon. Where direct quotations from books have been made I have tried to identify the source. But the discerning reader will probably recognize allusions to and dependencies on other authors which pass unacknowledged. May I apologize in advance to any who feel slighted by the omission of their name in the credits. Please take it as a most sincere form of flattery.

Thanks are due to a number of folk without whom this book could not have made progress. In particular may I mention Mrs Pat Blake for her tireless work on the tape-recordings and manuscripts; the Publications Committee and the deacons of Eden Baptist Church for a large amount of related administrative work; and to Kingsway Publications for encouraging the venture and offering considerable help in its achievement.

The series of sermons from which this book is taken were an example of the kind of expository and evangelistic preaching with which I am most comfortable. My hope is that they may perhaps bring encouragement to the Christian and challenge to the seeking non-Christian. It is often said that preachers are six-feet above contradiction. If so, then authors are even more remote from the criticisms of their audience. It would be helpful therefore to receive constructive comments from those gallant enough to read it.

ROY CLEMENTS  
*Eden Baptist Church,*  
*Cambridge*

# I

## *Born Twice*

John 3:1–21

Have you noticed how popular television chat shows are becoming? You know the sort of thing I mean. The set is always the same. There is a big armchair, a sofa, a coffee table with a carafe of water on it. On one side sits the interviewer, on the other some celebrity or other. And then for fifteen minutes or so, they talk. John Freeman pioneered the format with a programme called *Face to Face* back in the 1960s. Since then Michael Parkinson has made a fortune out of the idea, so that we now have Russell Harty, Terry Wogan and goodness knows who else getting in on the act—not to mention all those phone-in programmes. It is surprising in a way that a population fed on the high drama of soap operas and cops-and-robbers can still find mere conversation so entertaining!

It must I think have something to do with the desire people have to get to know famous people more intimately. We have come to realize that publicity, ironically enough, often conceals a person's true identity, even in the process of making them what we call 'well-known'. Think of Arthur Scargill, for instance. He is detested by huge numbers of people today. They are even employing aeroplanes to trail insults about him. Yet what do we *really* know about the man? Ian Paisley is another example.

I suppose these men really could be as obnoxious as their media image suggests. But I give odds that fifteen minutes on a chat show would reveal aspects of humanity or even humour



in them that the general public would find hard to believe. Perhaps that is why President Woodrow Wilson once told his students in Princeton that he never read a book if it was possible to talk for half an hour to the man who wrote it. Conversation has the power to expose to us the heart and thoughts of a man in a way that his speeches or his articles seldom can.

Of course what is true of twentieth-century celebrities is equally true of great men of the past. And it is true of a man like Jesus. If we are really going to get to know Jesus, we need to sample not just his formal teaching but his private discussions too. We have to see him not only interacting with the crowds, but also to observe him in those more relaxed, one-to-one, personal encounters. He will always be a distant, even remote figure to us—unless by some means we can listen in on his conversations. And that, it seems to me, is the great bonus of the gospel of John. Of course, Matthew, Mark and Luke each have their distinctive contribution to make towards an understanding of Jesus, which stem from each author's special interests and target audience. But the image that those three gospels present to us is by and large shaped by the public ministry of Jesus. They have that in common: the stories he told, the miracles he performed, the teaching he gave, as these stories and incidents were deliberately committed to memory by his disciples and passed down, often in quite rigid oral traditions. And the result is that Matthew, Mark and Luke all paint a remarkably similar picture of Jesus. That is why scholars sometimes call them the 'synoptic' gospels, from the Greek word which means 'viewed together'. They all look at Jesus, broadly speaking, from the same angle. But not so John.

You only have to read a chapter or a few verses of John to realize that this gospel stands on its own. To start with, much of his material is unique to his account. And even that material which does find parallels in the other gospels is told in such a different manner that it's impossible to determine whether John used them as sources for his information or not. Every word of John's gospel bears the hallmark of his own distinc-



tive style. Sceptics, of course, have not been slow to interpret this divergence from the other gospels as meaning that this book is a work of pious fiction. According to them, John was a second-century Christian philosopher writing theology in the guise of history. But there is no concrete evidence to support that view. In fact, recent scholarship, even liberal scholarship, has increasingly confirmed the gospel's historical accuracy, its Palestinian origins, even its early date.

The easiest way, in fact, to understand the difference between John's gospel and the other gospels is to compare it to the difference between a chat show and the nine o'clock news. John has not been content merely to compile and edit a collection of biographical snippets from Jesus' public life handed down from others. He wants us to meet Jesus in a far more intimate way than that, and that means through conversation. He wants us to hear Jesus talking. Accordingly he makes no attempt to chronicle everything about Jesus that he knew. Instead he selects from his memory just a handful of events and records those in very great detail.

If you study the whole gospel it is structured around just seven miracles. The other gospel writers would think little of including that many miracles in a single chapter. But John is not embarrassed by the paucity of his events because he is not interested in reproducing Jesus' diary. He is interested in painting Jesus' portrait. So he uses these seven miracles, or 'signs', as the narrative pegs on which to support seven great discourses – seven conversations, if you like, which expose to us the heart of Jesus, and how he understood himself. The result is similar to that of a television chat show; we feel we get to know Jesus through reading John in a way that the other gospels never quite achieve.

John takes us behind the public image to discover the inner personality of Jesus. And the remarkable thing is that the person you discover in that much more intimate setting is not only much more human than the synoptic news-reels might convey, he is also much more divine; he is not only easier to love, he is also much more compelling to worship.



In the course of this book we are going to be studying these seven great discourses in John's gospel. My hope is that as we do so, we will feel that we have been watching a chat show between Jesus and an expert interviewer. That is why I have called the book *Introducing Jesus*. And our first study, in John 3, is very typical of the kind of conversation we are going to be listening in on.

There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no-one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him' (3:1-2).

Here is just the sort of man we have been talking about; someone who was looking for the kind of personal chat with Jesus in which John is so interested. He had witnessed Jesus' public ministry, and he had been impressed. He had realized that this was no ordinary Jewish rabbi, but he wanted to know Jesus better, and that meant getting behind the media image somehow. So he sought a private interview.

John tells us he came by night. Some suggest that that was because Nicodemus, being an important man in Jewish society, did not want everybody to know that he was interested in Jesus. Others, more kindly perhaps, argue that it was simply the only way he could find of getting Jesus on his own for the kind of serious and unhurried conversation that he wanted to have with him. We do not really know what his motivation was. But for myself, I strongly suspect that the main reason why John records the lateness of the hour is that he sees a symbolic significance in it. Nicodemus not only met Jesus by night, but when he did so, he was in a very real sense a man living in the darkness. And the question his conversation ultimately revolves around is: did he love that darkness—or was he the kind of man who was willing to come to the light?

Let us look at the conversation together.



### **A vital experience (verses 3–8)**

I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God (3:3).

It's a characteristic of human beings like ourselves that we are always searching for something. Some of us interpret that 'something' in political terms; a just society, a better world. Others express it in more personal, religious or philosophical terms. We are looking for a sense of fulfilment, a meaning to life's existence.

For the Jews in Jesus' day, these perennial human aspirations were all bound up with what they called 'the kingdom of God'. Like us, some of them saw it politically, a coming day when they would be emancipated from imperialism, and their national independence restored under the rule of God's Messiah. But others put more stress on the personal, religious side of things. The kingdom of God for them meant the achievement of moral perfection through obedience to God's law.

Nicodemus would probably have expounded the phrase 'the kingdom of God' in both ways, because he was a Pharisee. It was the distinctive vocation of the Pharisees to prepare the way (as they saw it) for the political kingdom of God by their personal dedication to the religious kingdom of God. As one scholar puts it: 'The Pharisees tried by obedience to the law to be the true people of God preparing the way for the Messiah.'

We know, both from other parts of the New Testament and from first-century Jewish writings, that Nicodemus would have been a man of very high moral standards and almost fanatical spiritual commitment. He would have been a strict sabbatarian for a start—no watching televised sport on Sunday afternoon for him! He would have been punctilious in his attendance at church and generous—in a legalistic kind of way—to the poor. In his dress he would have been a bit old-fashioned, even to the point of eccentricity. But perhaps it would be in his attitude to the Bible that he would interest us most. Nicodemus would have been an extreme fundamentalist,



reverencing not just every word of the sacred text, but every letter of it.

In other words, Nicodemus would in many ways have been what we would call 'Christian'. I suspect that is what most people meeting him today would think him to be. He believed that the key to a better world meant a return to the Ten Commandments, and he confidently expected a coming day of judgement when God would send to hell those pagan advocates of permissiveness that thought otherwise.

So here is a fascinating encounter—Jesus meeting a 'Christian'. Perhaps we would expect Jesus to pat Nicodemus on the back, congratulate him for his theological conservatism, applaud his moral zeal and welcome him as an ally in their joint campaign to build the kingdom of God. But the surprise is that in point of fact Jesus' response to Nicodemus is quite different from that. Jesus very gently, but very firmly, draws a complete line of separation between the two of them. 'Nicodemus,' he says, 'you must be born again—yes, you and your Pharisee friends.' In fact, without such a regenerating experience, says Jesus, not only can you not enter this kingdom of God that you are searching for; you can not understand what it is, nor even see it. Everybody must be born again.

With that phrase Jesus separates himself not just from the Pharisees but from every ideology, every philosophy and every religion that the world can offer. The answer to our deepest human quest, he says, cannot be found by human effort, be it political revolutions or religious disciplines. Utopia is never going to arrive however much you campaign for justice. Perfection will never be achieved for all your moral zeal.

You must be born again, he says. For evil is not some learned response. It is not some product of our social conditioning, but an intrinsic component of our genetic make-up. It is an incorrigible tendency inside us to self-centredness and to pride, and it perpetually frustrates our best attempts to make either ourselves or our world a better place. No amount of social reorganization, no amount of education, no amount of



self-discipline can ever eliminate that fundamental moral perversion in the human heart.

How mistaken, then, are those people who equate Christianity with conservatism! Jesus is revealed in these verses to be one of the most radical thinkers the world has ever seen. According to him, the trouble with the Marxists is not that they are revolutionary, but that they are not half revolutionary enough! Man does not just need a new economic order, he needs a new birth. No wonder Nicodemus is flabbergasted. 'Born again, Jesus? Born again, me? But that's impossible!'

How can a man be born when he is old? . . . Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born? (3:4).

To be fair to Nicodemus, it is most unlikely that a man of his education would have misunderstood Jesus in the crudely literalistic way that his reply might suggest. I doubt very much whether Nicodemus seriously imagined that Jesus was suggesting a physical return to the womb.

No, Nicodemus was wise enough to realize that the adult human personality is not something you can change easily, if at all. He didn't need the insights of modern biochemistry and psychiatry to tell him that every individual is the product of his past—his parents' genes, his foetal trauma, his infantile parenting, his childhood experiences, his adolescent crises, his habits, his decisions, his relationships. Every man is constructed out of these influences on his personality. John Clare the poet once wrote: 'If life had a second edition, how I would correct the proofs!' But by an unchangeable policy of the publishing house, we are never given that opportunity. Much as we might cry with Tennyson 'Ah for a man to arise in me, that the man I am may cease to be,' it cannot be so. We can never turn the clock back to re-discover our intra-uterine innocence. That, says Nicodemus, lies outside the range of possibility. It cannot be done. Not so, replies Jesus. It may lie outside the range of human possibility, but it does not lie outside the range of divine possibility.

I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit,



he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again' (3:5-7).

Those of you who study your Bibles a lot will know that there has been a good deal of debate about precisely what that word 'water' means. Some take it to be a reference to natural birth—perhaps the waters in which a baby lies in the womb, or even the male seed from which it is conceived. That would obviously follow on from what Nicodemus said earlier. Jesus would be saying that unless a man supplements the physical birth which Nicodemus is talking about, with the spiritual birth which he is talking about, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. But it has to be admitted that water is a very strange way of talking about natural birth, and one would have thought that Jesus would have found less obscure terminology.

A second, perhaps more likely, suggestion is that the word 'water' is symbolic. Water, as we will see in the next chapter, is often used in John's gospel as a picture of the spiritual life Jesus comes to bring. And in fact in a very important Old Testament reference, the prophet Ezekiel speaks of the kingdom of God as a time when God's people will be washed with water and indwelt by the Spirit (cf. Ezek 36:25-27). If that verse with its symbolism is in the back of his mind, then Jesus is saying that unless a person is born again from that spiritual fountain of cleansing and renewal of which the prophet speaks, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. But again, that does seem to be reading rather a lot into a few words.

Undoubtedly the commonest interpretation of the word 'water' takes it to be an allusion to baptism. It is certainly very difficult to believe that John's Christian readers would not see such an application, knowing as they did that Christian baptism was a dramatic pictorial representation of precisely this new birth that Jesus is talking about. But though John may have intended us to catch that overtone in the words, I think that it can hardly have been the primary meaning of the word as Jesus originally spoke it, for two very simple reasons. First



of all, if that was the primary meaning of the reference to water, it would imply that baptism is necessary to salvation—a concept quite contrary to the tenor of the rest of the Bible. And secondly, if water meant Christian baptism, it is a little unfair on Nicodemus, because he was not a Christian and could not be expected to understand Christian baptism as John's later readers did.

If the word 'water' does refer to baptism, I think it must be a reference to the baptism of John the Baptist. If you look back to verse 33 of chapter 1, you will see there a key verse in which John the Baptist draws a distinction between his watery baptism and the baptism of the Holy Spirit which would be Jesus' unique prerogative. And if that is the context in which we are to understand it, then what Jesus is really saying here is this: 'John's waters of repentance aren't enough, you need the spirit of regeneration too, if you are to enter the kingdom of heaven.'

It is difficult to choose between all these possibilities, though for myself I think that the last one is probably the most likely. It would be quite like John, of course, to have all these meanings to some extent in mind and to have left the ambiguity there intentionally in order to generate as many reverberations in his readers' minds as possible. Suffice it to say, that 'water', whatever it precisely means, is not the most important word in verse 5. The most important word is 'spirit'. Jesus makes that very plain in the next verse.

Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit (3:6).

In plain words, what Jesus is getting at here is that this new birth he describes is miraculous. There is no way human nature can evolve into the life of the kingdom of God naturally. There is a qualitative discontinuity, separating sinful man from the fulfilment of his highest aspirations. But the Spirit of God, says Jesus, has the creative power to perform the inner transformation needed to enable a man to make that quantum leap into a new world. Yes, the new birth may be supernatural, but not impossible. And to prove it he gives an



illustration.

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit (3:8).

The point of that verse, of course, is that the word in Greek and Hebrew for wind is the same as the word for Spirit. So Jesus is making a kind of elaborate pun here. Nicodemus cannot believe this new birth business; he finds it too incomprehensible. Jesus replies, 'You understand the wind, don't you? No, of course you don't. But you believe in it readily enough. Well, there is something profoundly mysterious about the new birth too. Like the wind, God's Spirit moves sovereignly among the human race. You cannot control him, you cannot predict his next move or fathom the laws of his operation. In that sense, he is rightly called the wind. All you can do is observe the effects of his intervention in people's lives—his sound. But those effects are real,' says Jesus. As real as the havoc wrought by a typhoon such as those we see on TV news.

A little boy once asked a sailor on the quay, 'What is the wind?'

'The wind?' replied the sailor, 'I don't rightly know what the wind is; but I can hoist a sail.' That's pretty much what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus. You do not have to know *how* the Spirit creates new life in people. It is miraculous, mysterious. No psychiatrist will ever explain it. No theologian will ever fully formulate it. But you can *experience* it! You can hoist a sail.

This is why Jesus says that we should not be surprised at his phrase 'you must be born again'. Notice carefully that word 'must'. Jesus does not say 'may'. This is not a spiritual extra for the specially religious. It is a spiritual necessity. The story is told that George Whitefield's sponsor, the Countess of Huntingdon, once asked him why he was always preaching on John 3:5: 'You must be born again.' Whitefield replied, 'Madam, because you *must*.' It is as simple as that. In the most



literal sense of that word, this is a *vital* experience, a matter of life or death.

Perhaps some of you reading this are like Nicodemus, pillars of the establishment: scholars, academics, religious people. Jesus says to you, 'You must be born again!' Perhaps some of you are as different from Nicodemus as chalk from cheese: uneducated, with no academic pretensions, irreligious people even, with no claims to moral excellence such as Nicodemus had. But Jesus says the same to you. 'You must be born again!' For unless we are born again, we are never going to find the answer to that inner restlessness that drives us on in search of a better world and a fuller life. Unless a man is born again, says Jesus, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

### **A Unique Person (verses 9–17)**

'How can this be?' Nicodemus asked.

'You are Israel's teacher,' said Jesus, 'and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony' (3:9–11).

Nicodemus thought his problem was that he couldn't understand Jesus' teaching. What Jesus is leading him to realize here is that that was not really his problem at all. His real problem was that he had an inadequate estimate of the person to whom he was talking. In fact that had been his problem right from the beginning of the conversation. Consider his opening remarks. He came to Jesus and said, 'Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God.' A flattering remark, of course; but also a trifle condescending. 'We know.' To whom does he refer by that 'we'? I suppose to himself and to all his pharisaical cronies. 'Yes, Jesus,' Nicodemus is saying, 'we on the Sanhedrin have been quite impressed by your performance, you know. We are disposed to think you are a teacher come from God.' Big deal! Frankly, that's a little bit like the fourth-form 'O' level maths set complimenting Albert Einstein on his arithmetic.



Jesus was certainly a teacher come from God, but not at all in the way Nicodemus thought! And it is quite clear that one of the reasons Jesus embarked on this mystifying discussion of the new birth was precisely to bring this patronizing Pharisee down a peg or two. 'You're *the* teacher of Israel aren't you?' (He uses the definite article there in the original. Nicodemus had called him *a* teacher.) 'You pretend to be. You are the board of accreditation. You decide who the faculty are going to be. You are the one who tells people who is a teacher come from God and who is not. Then surely *you* know about these things.' Can you not hear the gentle mockery in his tone as he echoes that first person plural with which Nicodemus had introduced himself? 'We speak of what *we* know,' says Jesus. 'We testify to what *we*'ve seen. Your problem, Nicodemus, is not that you cannot understand what I'm saying, but that you do not think sufficiently highly of me yet to believe that I know what I am talking about.'

When Jesus speaks to us about the things of God, he is not offering us the speculations of a philosopher, nor the expositions of a preacher, nor even the inspirations of a prophet. He's offering us first-hand knowledge, divine revelation of a quite unique kind: 'We testify to what we have seen.' That being so, it is not ability to understand that is the real crux, but our willingness to believe.

I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? (3:12).

It is not totally clear what Jesus means by 'earthly things'. But I think, all things considered, he must be referring to the analogy he has just drawn between the Spirit and the wind, which proved so perplexing to Nicodemus.

'You do not take my word for it Nicodemus,' Jesus is saying, 'even when I use the language of material things to explain it to you. But there are many aspects of the revelation that I bring for which no earthly analogy is available. They pertain wholly to heavenly realities that defy comparison to anything you have ever experienced, Nicodemus. If you can-



not trust me when I tell you about the way of the wind, how ever will you trust me when I tell you about the way of salvation?

No-one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (3:13–16).

These are momentous words, of course. They are among the most famous in the whole Bible. But here I just want you to focus on what these verses have to teach us about the uniqueness of Jesus. Notice his titles: 'the Son of Man', 'the one who came down from heaven', 'The one and only Son of God'. Notice too his mission. 'God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it.' No other man who has ever walked this earth has claimed an identity or a mission so stupendous. To a Jew like Nicodemus, who understood far more of the background of titles like the Son of Man and the Son of God than we do, these words were blasphemous, heretical and outrageously ridiculous. It is little surprise that we do not find him speaking again. A stupefied silence was about all one could expect after such a mind-blowing exposition of Jesus' self-understanding.

There is no possible way, of course, that claims like these can be scientifically verified. There is no experiment that you can perform in order to prove that these verses are true. These are 'heavenly things'. Such things can only be known by revelation and can only be appropriated by faith. But is faith really such a difficult thing? Nicodemus seems to have found it so.

But perhaps he should not have done. Think of those Israelites in the wilderness. The people were rebelling against God and a plague of poisonous snakes were sent into their camp to chasten them. In their desperation, Moses tells us, they confessed their sin and cried to him to provide some remedy for



the venom. And Moses was told to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole; and any Israelite who looked at that snake would be healed (cf. Num 21:4–9).

It's a puzzling story in lots of ways. Making an animal image like that seems a very uncharacteristic thing for God to tell Moses to do. Some of those Israelites may have looked at it with a gaze bordering on superstition or even idolatry. They certainly cannot have understood how a bronze replica of a snake could take the bite of the real thing away. They simply had to take Moses' word for it and believe. They had no other choice.

Jesus is saying here that it is the same for us and for Nicodemus. 'One day soon, Nicodemus,' he explains, 'you will see me lifted up on a pole, arms outstretched, just like that snake in the desert. You will not be able to understand that, any more than the Israelites could understand the snake. Nobody will, not really, not fully. But, Nicodemus, if only *you* can trust me! Trust me enough to believe that I know what I'm talking about, that I know what I'm doing. For I tell you this, Nicodemus, every man and woman who looks up at me on that ignominious stake, feeling their need of salvation, conscious of their failure, knowing they need the mercy of God to deliver them, is going to find rescue in that look, rescue in that faith. More than that, they are going to find the life of the age to come—the new life of that kingdom of God that we have been talking about. Do you not see, Nicodemus, that you are asking the wrong question? The right question is not '*How* can this be?' The question you should be asking as you stand there looking at me is '*Who* can this be?'

That's the question you too have to ask as you read this. All too often you find people like Nicodemus who dabble wistfully on the margins of Christian commitment. And all too often, their arguments are the same. 'Oh, I can't believe a loving God would send people to hell' . . . 'I can't believe in substitutionary atonement' . . . 'I can't believe in predestination' . . . 'I can't believe in the inspiration of the Bible' . . . 'I can't believe this, I can't accept that.'



Do you know what they are? They are all subspecies of the genus Nicodemus! 'How can this be?' they ask. 'If only I could believe this or that doctrine I might be able to follow Christ. But I have my intellectual doubts, you know.' They preclude the possibility. If that is what you are doing, you are fooling yourself, because it does not work like that. Christianity is not the intellectual acceptance of a set of theological propositions which you have managed to convince yourself of by rational demonstrations. Christianity is a response of personal trust, directed towards Jesus himself.

Of course you will have intellectual problems. I have had intellectual problems ever since I became a Christian, and I expect I shall have them until I die and faith turns into sight. It is not your theological problems that hinder you from experiencing the new birth, any more than it was for Nicodemus. It is your unwillingness to surrender your mind and heart to the authority of Jesus. And that brings us to the final part of the conversation.

### **A critical verdict (verses 18–21)**

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son (3:18).

The curator of an art gallery was immensely proud of his collection of fine paintings, but he was rather intolerant of the cultural philistines who sometimes came to view them. One day as he was walking through the gallery he heard a tourist comment, 'Oh what a dreadful picture! I can't understand why they should hang such a monstrosity in public.' Incensed, the curator stepped forward, and turning to the visitor, he said, 'Sir, the merit of these paintings is not in question. It is those who view them who are on trial!' It's a good point. Sometimes our verdicts judge us more than they judge others.

And that, according to Jesus, is certainly true of our verdict upon him. 'Human destiny,' he says, 'is ultimately sealed by how people respond to me.' With a single exception, God will



forgive a man absolutely anything. Whatever is on your conscience today, God will forgive it. He loves the world, and does not want it to perish. He gave his one and only Son that it might not perish.

There is only one thing that he will never forgive. And that is the blindness, the arrogance, the downright ingratitude of those who reject that gift.

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God (3:19-21).

Some of you reading this are not Christians. May I ask you why? Will you tell me, 'Well, I'm looking for the answer to one of those intellectual problems you wrote about earlier?' Will you tell me that you are waiting to be zapped by some spiritual experience that will blow your mind? Will you tell me that you are too busy to consider it, postponing it until some later day when you have more leisure? Will you tell me that you are simply indifferent to it, unable to feel that this Christianity business is really your scene.

I would not wish to criticize the sincerity of your reasons for being an unbeliever. I would not be so rude. But Jesus would. He is rude enough to question your excuses, and he does so right here. Jesus, in these closing verses of his conversation with Nicodemus, says that all such excuses are really just a smoke-screen, a tissue of self-deception. Jesus insists that the real reason you do not believe in him today is not your intellectual problems, not your lack of spiritual experiences, not your busyness, not your indifference. The real reason, he says, is your sin.

People do not want to become Christians for one reason and one reason only, and that is because they know it will mean moral change. And they do not want to change. Deep down at the deepest level of our personal honesty we know



who he is, and we know that he is telling the truth. Our problem is that we are not willing to live by that truth. We would rather sacrifice our integrity than lose our pride. We would rather stay in the dark, says Jesus, than move into the light and admit what we are really like. Jesus insists that our excuses do not hold water. Our spiritual blindness, he asserts, is a culpable blindness. It is not that we cannot see the light. It is that we *will* not see it. This is the verdict. Light has come into the world but men love darkness.

I wonder how long Nicodemus chatted to Jesus. Obviously, John has only given us a resumé of their conversation. I expect it went on for much longer. Could it be that they talked all night? It would not surprise me if they did. Nicodemus arrived in the dark. Could it be, do you think, that as he left, the first glimmerings of dawn were hovering on the horizon? And did he smile, I wonder, at that rising sun—or turn his back upon it, glueing his eyes to his own shadow? Such a choice confronts us, does it not? We have seen what Jesus had to say about this *vital experience*: ‘You must be born again.’ We have seen what he has to say about *his own uniqueness*: ‘God sent the Son into the world to save the world.’ Now, he insists, a *verdict* will be given. He is not asking that we understand everything he has said in this conversation. Nobody can do that. The greatest theologian cannot do that. He is asking simply that we believe in him.



## 2

# *The Empty Life*

John 4:1-42

Life, said the critic James Huneker, is like an onion. You peel off layer after layer, only to discover at the end that there is nothing in it—nothing except tears, perhaps. I think that the woman of Samaria would have agreed with that sentiment. It is not difficult from the little bit we are told about her to imagine the kind of person she was. Like most of us, she was looking for happiness.

But unfortunately happiness kept on eluding her grasp. The current man in her life, we are told, was number six. Some advocates of the permissive society and female emancipation would no doubt hail this as a testimony to the unfettered joy of sexual liberation. But I am pretty sure she did not see it that way.

She had hoped, like many, that love and marriage would make her life worthwhile, giving it meaning, and direction. But somehow every relationship had turned sour on her. Each time she had found a new man she had thought at last this is it, her Mr Right. She hoped she would not make the same mistake again. But she did. And the more emotional tragedy she experienced, the more onion-like her life became. Already the romantic idealism of her youth had hardened into a frustrated cynicism about things.

And as for the future, well, that did not bear thinking about. Age would steal her beauty. Her men friends would turn to younger sport. There would be little left for her except

the gutter. She could see herself in it now. A loathsome old piece of laced mutton pathetically courting the favours of any man drunk enough or desperate enough to want her. If the truth were known she was already half-way there. Her self-respect was in tatters. Why else would she choose to come to this isolated travellers' well at the hottest time of the day, except to avoid the embarrassment of being shunned by all those respectable neighbours of hers?

She would give anything to relieve the depression that haunted her. She felt so insecure, so lonely. But most of all she felt so dissatisfied. 'In the small hours,' wrote Cyril Connolly, 'when the acrid stench of existence rises like sewer gas from everything created, the emptiness of life seems more terrible than its misery.' Yes, this woman knew about those small hours that Connolly speaks about, those sleepless nights born not of overwork, but simply of the unrelenting futility of it all.

Take the wretched water pot she had carried from the village for instance. There it stood, empty again. She had filled it yesterday. She would fill it again tomorrow. It was like her life—a symbol of never-ending thirst. She would spend the remainder of her days filling that pot and at the end its appetite would be as insatiable as ever. I do not know if you have ever had one of those days when you felt so irritated that you wanted to smash a perfectly innocent piece of pottery against the wall. But I suspect that this woman sometimes felt like that about her water pot. Empty. Empty again. That was her water pot and that was her.

Is that how you often feel? Kirk Douglas, the Hollywood actor, once likened his life to the script of a second-feature movie. 'It was that corny,' he said. 'If someone offered me the screenplay of my life to film I'd turn it down flat.' There are millions of people with lives far less exciting than Kirk Douglas' who would say something similar. They are bored—bored out of their minds by the sheer tedium of existence. Like a rat trapped in an insoluble maze, or like a wheel caught in a never-ending rut, they long for something to shatter the



monotony, to fill the vacuum.

But the irony is that they do not even know what it is that they really want, let alone where to find it. They try another job. They try another marriage. They try alcohol. They try drugs. They try the ersatz thrill of the latest fantasy movie. They try the hypnotic stupor of the TV screen. They try the pools coupon and the holiday brochure. They try the Mills and Boon romance and page three of the *Sun*. But none of it works. At best these things offer no more than temporary escape. Those sleepless small hours always return, and with them the emptiness.

No, we do not really need John to spell out what the woman of Samaria felt about life, do we? For she is a woman in whose face we can see mirrored the inner anguish of millions, who daily peel off the layers of their onion-like existence only to discover nothing. Nothing but tears, that is. There may be some parts of John's gospel that we will find hard to relate to. But no one can say this woman is not relevant to the twentieth century. You can see a thousand like her within a square mile of where you live. And that being so, I hope you are going to consider what I am saying here very carefully. For our study tells us how one day, quite out of the blue, quite unexpectedly, this empty woman met Someone who in the space of a single conversation transformed her emptiness into a sparkling fountain of satisfaction and joy. That is the second conversation which John recounts to us, because he is convinced that that Someone can do the same for us.

### **A question of curiosity**

[Jesus] had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar . . . [and] tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Will you give me a drink?' (4:4-7).

It is interesting that John starts off by saying that Jesus *had* to go through Samaria, because the fact is there was no neces-



sity about it at all, humanly speaking. Pious Jews avoided that particular route like the plague, preferring to go several miles out of their way rather than risk social intercourse with the despised Samaritans. If Jesus had been in some particular hurry, his breach of normal practice might have been understandable. But there is no evidence to suggest that his journey was a particularly urgent one—quite the opposite in fact. Verses 1–3 indicated that had it not been for some animosity in Jerusalem, Jesus would have stayed in Judea longer. He certainly is conscious of no pressing appointment in Galilee.

The only reason, then, for saying Jesus *had* to go through Samaria must be that an important encounter awaited him *en route*. It is, in other words, John's subtle way of telling us that this meeting with the woman of Samaria was no chance matter. It took place, like everything in Jesus' life, by divine arrangement. There was a 'must' about it. The woman had no idea about it of course, nor did Jesus give her any hint of it in his opening remark to her. Unlike some Christians who would leap heavily in with boorish questions such as 'Are you saved, sister?', Jesus is a model of tact and discretion. 'Will you give me a drink?' He gives no hint that there is going to be a religious element in this conversation at all. And yet the woman's interest is aroused by the remark.

You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink? (4:9).

The reason for her surprise is simple. Jesus was flouting two deeply embedded social conventions of his day. Firstly, he was ignoring the hatred which had kept Jews and Samaritans in mutually exclusive communities for four centuries. As John puts it, 'Jews do not associate with Samaritans' (v.9), and that is putting it mildly. But secondly, Jesus was ignoring the gentlemanly decorum which forbade any respectable Middle-Eastern man from having a private exchange with a woman in public. The Rabbis held that it was even improper for a husband to talk to his wife in public. Whatever would they have thought about a man chatting to a woman of such



mongrel pedigree and such low moral reputation as this! There can be little wonder, then, that the woman is taken aback by this strange Jew who wants to talk to her.

There is a moving lesson for us in that. Jesus is not bothered who you are, or what the world thinks of you. He is not hampered in his dealings with people by those discriminations which affect us so much, be they racist or sexist or any other. Maybe society has given us a low self-image, and told us, for example, that we are not worth much because we are black, or working-class, or even just because we are a woman. Jesus does not think like that. In the previous chapter we saw him talking to a male Jewish aristocrat, Nicodemus. Here he is talking to a female Samaritan peasant. The social contrast could not be more extreme. But Jesus speaks to both with equal concern, and with equal respect.

So whoever you are, you need have no fear that Jesus is not interested in you. On the contrary, he may well have brought you to read this just in order to meet with you. You have not realized it yet of course, any more than did this woman of Samaria. All you feel at present is a mild curiosity. You have met some Christians, maybe, and you have seen they are a little different. You have read a bit of the Bible and perhaps it seems strange. You are reading this book out of mild curiosity; that is all you feel. Well, be warned! For once you are in conversation with Jesus Christ, anything could happen. That is how it began for this woman. She was intrigued. That is all. But it did not stay like that for long!

### **A sense of need**

If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water (4:10).

So the small-talk is quickly dispensed with. With the skill of a master conversationalist, Jesus breaks through the chit-chat to challenge that spiritual emptiness in this woman's life. It is hardly surprising that she is not really prepared to be



manoeuvred into a religious conversation of that sort quite so easily.

Sir, . . . you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob? (4:11-12).

Commentators differ about how we ought to take that retort. Some think she has genuinely misunderstood Jesus. She has taken his words about living water literally and thinks he is offering to tell her about some hidden spring nearby; and knowing the place as well as she does, she is understandably sceptical.

Personally, I think that a rather unlikely explanation. She was an intelligent woman. She knows that Jesus was bantering with her, playing word-games. This is the sort of woman who had been chatted up by quite enough men to know when they were working some conversational angle. She was not naive.

No, she had decided to play along with him. I suspect there was a mischievous glint in her eye, perhaps even a hint of flirtatiousness, as she retorts to what she took to be Jesus' little jest with feigned indignation. 'Oh that's big talk, that is! Who do you think you are then? Tormenting a poor working girl like me with offers of running water when you haven't even got a bucket to help yourself to this stagnant pool you are sitting on! Obviously, water that was good enough for the patriarchs isn't good enough for the likes of you, is it?' But Jesus is not to be diverted from his purpose so easily.

Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. (4:13-14).

Have you ever been walking the hills and found yourself in the middle of nowhere, with an empty flask and a long way to go? Then suddenly you stumble on one of those little ice-cold mountain streams that flow down from the rocks. It is crystal-clear, sparkling, invigorating, refreshing—better than any-



thing the City Water Board can provide.

That is what Jesus says he can give to men and women—an inner fountain of bubbling vitality that satisfies a person's spiritual thirst, not just once but permanently. He is saying, in other words, that he is the answer to the emptiness that gnaws our souls as it gnawed this woman's soul. Life with him is no onion! It's a cascade of fulfilment and joy, he says; and this time, the woman's reply is just a little less dismissive.

Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water (4:15).

Once again, I strongly suspect that there is an element of playfulness in her words. I think she is being sarcastic, urging him, 'Please give me some of this wonderful water, Sir. I can't wait! Carting this water pot to and fro every day is driving me slowly up the wall.'

But there is, at the very least, a certain wistfulness underlying her words, even if they are flippant. For all her humour, Jesus has struck a serious cord in her heart. It is as if she is saying, 'It would be a very nice trick if you could do it, stranger. Would that you could wave your magic wand and free me from this cycle of drudgery to which I am victim.' And for Jesus, that invitation, half-joking though it may well have been, is enough. All he was after was some conscious confession on this woman's part of her sense of need.

The trouble with most of us is that we are not willing to make such a confession. We insist on pretending everything is OK, because, if the truth were known, we all live a lot closer to despair than we can afford to admit. So we erect all kinds of defence mechanisms against anything that threatens to expose our inward spiritual poverty.

Lighthearted self-mockery is one of the most common. 'Me get religious? Oh yes, I can just fancy myself in a halo,' we say. But deep down beneath that tongue-in-the-cheek humour there is a real spiritual longing. We would not joke about it if it were not so.

If you are going to find Jesus' answer to that emptiness of



which I have spoken, you have got to be willing to confess your need. Jesus once put it this way: 'People who are healthy do not need a doctor, only those who are sick.' What can the doctor do for the patient who refuses to admit he has a problem? So do not come to Doctor Jesus telling him that you are fine. If you do that, you will be completely unhelped. He will do you no good at all. You must be willing to admit that your life is empty, willing to tell him that you are longing for something to satisfy your spiritual thirst; that like the Psalmist, your soul is longing, panting for the living God.

If you say something like that to him he will be at your side in a moment. But be warned! Once you admit a need to Doctor Jesus, no matter how sardonically, you may well find he will prescribe surgery before he gets down to giving you the medicine you are after!

### **A stab of conscience**

He told her, 'Go call your husband and come back.' 'I have no husband,' she replied. Jesus said to her, 'You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true' (4:16-18).

So Jesus can be sarcastic too when he wants to be! Why does he suddenly introduce this sordid dimension into the conversation? Surely this woman's love life is her own concern. All Jesus is doing by such an unwarranted intrusion into her private affairs is to risk her storming off in fury, with all kinds of 'How dare you' and 'I don't have to put up with this!' falling on the ear. Until now, Jesus has been a model of discretion. Why does he now suddenly display such uncharacteristic tactlessness?

The answer, of course, is that he has to; and not just in the case of this Samaritan woman, but in that of all of us. We assume that the root of our emptiness is boredom. 'If my life were more interesting,' we say, 'it would be all right. If only I could find the right job. If only I could find the right marriage



partner. Then my feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction with life would all evaporate.' Countless thousands of people say that to themselves. But it is not so. It is not so because our real problem is not with our jobs, or even with our marriages. Our real problem is with ourselves.

Our emptiness is at root not circumstantial in origin—it is moral. We human beings were made by God with certain behavioural norms in mind and we have deliberately flouted them. We have rebelled against God's rules for our lives like disobedient children kicking against their parents' authority. And God has locked us in the bedroom to teach us a lesson. We feel bored up there. Of course we feel empty inside. We are designed to share the life of God with him. But our foolish insistence on our own way has severed that relationship and the water of life that flows from it, leaving us lonely, insecure, and directionless. We are at odds with ourselves, at odds with one another, at odds even with the universe.

And what do we do in response? Why, we spend all our days trying to plug that gap which God's absence has left, and as often as not these days we try to plug it, as this woman did, with sexual adventure. But it never works. For no human relationship, no matter how emotionally intense, can be a substitute for the relationship with God that we were made for. No, before Jesus can meet our need, he has to show us the diagnosis. And the diagnosis is our moral failure. It is always a painful experience to have that exposed to us.

There is a story told of a Mexican who was arrested outside a police station while admiring his own photograph on the 'wanted' poster. But most of us find guilt something we would far rather not face up to. It is certainly not something we admire in ourselves; rather it makes us feel ashamed, and embarrassed. But Jesus insists that it is not enough just to admit that you have a sense of need. You must also be willing to admit a sense of sin. No answers can be found until surgery has exposed that inner moral cancer.

We all have our skeletons in the cupboard. We all have things in our lives that we cannot remember without embar-



rassment. We all have thoughts lurking in our imaginations that would make us blush if they were displayed for public view.

But such is our pride that most of us engage in a kind of inner psychological conspiracy to conceal that secret shame from everybody, even from ourselves. We think we are safe. We can pretend we are good people. We can even believe that lie ourselves. But I have to tell you that is not true. Jesus sees through our subterfuge. There is no way we can hide from him those things we hide from other people, or even try to hide from ourselves. There is nothing hidden he cannot see. Our lives are transparent to his gaze. He sees those deeds. He sees those thoughts as clearly as he saw this woman's six love affairs. And he insists that we see them too, that we build this new kind of life he wants to give us on the humiliating self-knowledge that we are fallen failures, spiritual bankrupts, sinners. He will not let us get away with anything less than that. For the water of life that we are looking for is the gift of God and God gives it, by a policy to which he strictly adheres, to penitents only.

### **A response of heart**

I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem (4:19-20).

Now most commentators interpret this as a red herring thrown into the conversation by the woman in a desperate attempt to change the subject. And I am sure that, in measure, that is exactly what it was. Nobody likes talking about their sin longer than they have to. Theology is a much less threatening subject. Those of you who have had any experience at all in counselling people about their spiritual need, know just how frequently this particular kind of red-herring is fished up in order to divert attention from more personal issues. 'What about the pagans?' . . . 'What about other religions?' . . . 'What about all these Christian denominations?' It is all the



same thing—‘Jerusalem or Samaria?’ And it is perfectly true that it is often no more than a smoke-screen, with which people try to avoid the moral challenge of the Bible.

But to give this woman her due, I feel that in her case it was more than that. Jesus’ exposé of her immoral lifestyle had gone home, and had made a profound impact on her and she may well have been grateful to get off the subject of her previous husbands, but the question she raises here was not necessarily a mere ploy.

She had suddenly realized that this man, whom she had taken for a rather liberal-minded Jew, was nothing less than a prophet with supernatural knowledge of her sin. She knew enough about religion to realize that in such an encounter she was being summoned to get right with God. The obvious question for a woman with her particular background was, where could she do so? ‘You point at my sin, you tell me my life is wrong. Where do I compensate for that? Where do I offer sacrifice for it? Where do I try and make it right? At the temple in Jerusalem, or one in Samaria?’ It may have been partly a red-herring, but it was also a very valid question.

The multitude of world religions can be a mere diversionary tactic but it can also be a genuine intellectual problem for people. It does need an answer, and Jesus graciously gives her one.

Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is Spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth (4:21–24).

These vitally important words express some very important things about the nature of Christianity. Notice first what Jesus does *not* say. He does not say what our hyper-tolerant pluralist liberal twentieth-century world would very much want him



to say—namely that all religions are true. We would like him, of course, to mouth comforting platitudes about the difference between Jews and Samaritans being superficial and historical. We would prefer him to praise Samaritan religion and to urge that Samaritans were already finding God in their own way, to echo Gandhi's opinion that 'the soul of all religions is one' and it's only in outward form that they differ.

But Jesus says nothing of the kind. On the contrary, if you look carefully, you will see here that Jesus insists upon the unique religious privilege of the Jewish people as the historical focus both of divine revelation and divine redemption. They worshipped what they knew and the Samaritans did not. If that was embarrassing or offensive to this woman's Samaritan pride, Jesus does not spare it. Salvation, he reminds her, is from the Jews. The Jew alone within the spectrum of world religions is the recipient of the Word of God. He is delivered from the superstition and the speculation of human ignorance.

Furthermore, Jesus says, nobody is ever going to find spiritual emancipation in this world unless they have dealings with Jewish culture. For deliverance from sin is something which God has accomplished inescapably in a context of Jewish history. Of course this offends many. But Jesus insists that that is the way it is. The Jews were the chosen people of God. If we are disposed to call that unfair, he might reply that the Jews have paid for their privilege many times over the centuries.

It is most important that we understand this. There is a tendency these days to bathe in nationalistic sentiment. The last night of the Proms shows that the British are still capable of it. 'God who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet,' we sing. Go to Africa, Asia, or America, to many of the developing countries, and you find this same kind of patriotism. We will not accept that we are indebted to any other culture than our own. But it is not true! Each one of us, whichever culture we come from, British, Chinese, Indian, Russian, Ethiopian, African, whatever it is, depends on the Jewish people for our knowledge of God and for the way salvation



has come to us. The Bible makes that abundantly clear, and we cannot escape from it.

So if you had asked this woman's question, thirty years before, as to which mountain we should worship God on, the answer would have been unquestionably Jerusalem. But what I want you to notice is that Jesus goes beyond that in his reply. 'Believe me,' he says to her, 'you stand on the threshold of a new age. A new era is dawning. A new hour is coming—and yes, it has already come.' And he says that one of the characteristics of that new age will be that access to God is no longer tied to any one race or nation as it was in the past. The historical privileges of the Jews will become obsolete and irrelevant. It will be neither a matter of Jerusalem nor Samaria. In the new age, it is going to be a matter of spirit and truth.

Now we need to be very careful in interpreting what Jesus means by those enigmatic words. It is often said, of course, that what Jesus is teaching here is that God is non-material, that is he is not localized in any particular place. So it is not a question of *where* you worship but *how* you worship, namely in sincerity of heart. That is true up to a point; the words, 'spirit and truth', undoubtedly do emphasize that true worship is not a matter of mere form. However, if we said no more than that, we could be excused for thinking that Jesus is endorsing precisely the kind of liberal universalism that is so appealing to twentieth-century man. 'It does not matter what you believe, so long as you are sincere.'

But that would be to misunderstand completely what Jesus is trying to establish. For the fact is that heart attitude has always been necessary to true worship. That is nothing new. God has always despised cant and hypocrisy. He has never been satisfied with mere religious formality. 'The sacrifices of God,' says David, 'are . . . a broken and contrite heart' (Ps 51:17); 'Rend your heart and not your garments,' we read in Joel 2:13. There is nothing novel in such thoughts. And yet Jesus is speaking quite distinctly here about a radical change in the way in which men and women relate to God. A new hour. A new age.



Clearly, then, spirit and truth cannot just be mere synonyms for sincerity. There must be something more to it than that. And there is! If you study John's gospel as a whole, you will quickly discover that 'spirit and truth' are key words in his vocabulary. And they are not trite or trivial in their meaning. They are far-reaching, and very profound. The vital thing about these words when John uses them is that they are very closely bound up with the person and ministry of Jesus himself.

When John speaks of 'spirit' he is not actually emphasizing that God is non-material, but that the inner life of God in this new age becomes available to men and women *through Jesus*. When John speaks of 'truth' he does not mean mere sincerity of heart. He is talking about the *inner reality* of God's being, which has never been fully seen, but which in the new age actually becomes visible to men *through Jesus*.

When you realize that, it is easy to see that far from endorsing a kind of bland universalism in these words 'spirit and truth', Jesus is in fact doing the very opposite. He tells us here that it is no more a case of everybody worshipping God in his own way in the new age than it was in the old. Truly, the exclusiveness of the Jews has been demolished in the new age. But it has been replaced by a new kind of particularism—the exclusiveness of Jesus. True worshippers must worship the Father in spirit and truth, and what John means by these words can relate only to who the Man Jesus is and what he has done. 'I am the way and the truth and the life,' says Jesus. 'No-one comes to the Father except through me' (14:6).

It is, then, only people who have received the spiritual life and the spiritual reality of God which Jesus brings who, Jesus says, are those true worshippers for whom God is looking in the new age. It is a heart-response, all right; but not to some vague generalized idea of God. It is a heart-response to Jesus himself.

### **A commitment to Jesus**

'I know that Messiah' (called Christ) 'is coming. When he comes,



he will explain everything to us.' Then Jesus declared, 'I who speak to you am he' (4:25-26).

If you are going to get the full power of that final affirmation by Jesus, you have to realize that what John actually wrote was not 'I who am speaking to you am he,' but 'I who am speaking to you *I am*.' To a person like this woman, familiar with the Old Testament, such a bald and unqualified use of the first person of the verb 'to be' would be shatteringly bold, perhaps even blasphemous. Long before, Moses had stood before God at the burning bush and asked God for his name. 'When I speak to the people, what shall I tell them you're called?'

'I am that I am,' replied God, 'tell them *I am* has sent you. That is my name.'

So Jesus here is not only claiming to be the Messiah. He is as good as claiming identity with God: 'I am.' It is a majestic statement. It means that this eternal life he has been talking about, this water which will satisfy us, is not an article that we can add to our list of personal possessions. No; Jesus is the divine life personified. He gives us life by giving himself to us. The answer to our need is not a new religious technique, not even a new religious experience. It is a relationship with him, the Living One. It is to such a relationship, to such a mutual commitment, that Jesus invites this woman at the close of their conversation. Just look at the effect it has on her in verse 28.

'Leaving her water jar . . .' John is a master of such apparently incidental detail. The symbol of her emptiness lies abandoned there at his feet. She had found the living water, for she had found him! Things would never be the same again.

Look all around you. There are thousands of people, like that woman, with empty lives. You can meet them practically anywhere. Some Christians are disposed to tell us that we must wait for revival; that when revival comes, there will be many, many people turning to God and becoming Christians.

'No,' says Jesus, 'do not talk like that. It is not a matter of



waiting for a special time of blessing. The harvest is already here (v.35)! Just open your eyes and look all around you—the fields are white to harvest. There are people like this woman everywhere. You do not have to wait for anything special to happen. You simply have to start talking to them. Start engaging them in conversation as I did.'

The steps are simple: a stimulated curiosity, a conscious need, an awakened conscience, a heart response, and a personal commitment.

Perhaps as you read this you are aware of being somewhere along that chain of conversation with Jesus, too. If so, then stop pretending you are OK. Face up to the fact that you are empty. Stop trying to blame other things, and accept the fact that it is your moral failure that has broken the tie between you and God and left you in this vacuum of emptiness you feel. Commit yourself to Jesus. Jesus does not ask that you abandon your cultural identity. He does not say you have to become a Jew. He does not give you a long list of rules to keep, or tell you of some pilgrimage you must go on. He does not give you rituals to perform. He simply says, 'Come to me realizing who I am, and ask me for the water of life.'



### 3

## *The Son*

**John 5:16–47**

Jesus has always been a controversial figure. There is nothing unusual about that, of course. Controversy has surrounded many great and important men of history. But the debate about Jesus is rather a special one. Normally it is a man's ideas that provoke the argument. Take for instance a thinker like Karl Marx. He is controversial because of the revolutionary political and economic theories that he espoused. Or take a man like Sigmund Freud; he was the source of enormous outrage in his day because of the bizarre and unconventional explanations he gave of mental illness. The quarrels which these seminal thinkers have generated in our century all centre around the opinions they had. And I think you will find that is the way it is with 99.9% of all controversies.

But with Jesus it's different. With few exceptions, the ideas of Jesus are universally applauded. Which of us would want to quarrel with his ethic? 'Love your neighbour as yourself' . . . 'Turn the other cheek' . . . 'Sell what you have and give to the poor'. Everyone agrees upon the wisdom and laudability of this kind of advice. The moral values of Jesus have rarely, if ever, been contradicted. On the contrary, they have been a source of inspiration to multitudes both of Christians and non-Christians alike.

No, unlike Marx and Freud, what makes Jesus controversial is not the ideas that he expressed but the person he was. If Christians had been prepared to call Jesus just a great



man, or a philosopher, or genius, even a prophet, there would have been no controversy about him at all. He would have gone down in history as a saint and have been revered by just about everybody. It was not what he *taught*, but who he *was* that has caused the argument. Christianity has been a controversial religion simply because Christians have insisted that no category was sufficient to contain their Master, except the category of divinity itself. Jesus was God, they say; God in the flesh.

It is that which provokes the humanist's contempt, which inspires the Muslim's rage, which severed Christianity from its Jewish roots and which is still today the major obstacle to faith for many thinking people. 'I can accept the Sermon on the Mount,' they say. 'It's the supernatural dimensions with which you Christians invest your Jesus that I find so difficult.' Well, I want us to examine that controversy about the person of Jesus. I want us to think about why it is that Christians confess Jesus as God and about the great issues that hang upon that confession.

### **The extraordinary claim (verses 16–23)**

'My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.' For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God (5:17–18).

According to John, the controversy about Jesus' divinity had already begun during the years of his public ministry in Palestine. That is really an enormously important observation, for this reason. For some time now, perhaps a century or more, the most heated debate about the person of Jesus has not been taking place outside the church at all, but inside it. The ordinary Christian who has no pretensions to theological expertise probably looks back to 1963 as the watershed in this regard. It was in that year that John Robinson, a former don of Cambridge University, but then Bishop of Woolwich, published a notorious book called *Honest to God*.



In it he argued, among other things, that the old credal formulae by which the church back in the fifth century had sought to express the divine nature of Jesus were meaningless to the modern world. The whole idea of God coming to earth in the shape of a man was a fantastic fairy tale, he said; and it would have to be acknowledged as such. To be fair, Robinson was not by any means the first person to say such things, but that book did represent the first surfacing in the public eye of a theological revolution that had been going on in this century.

Since then the christological debate has continued to make news. In 1971, for example, the Reverend Michael Taylor, Principal of Northern Baptist College, similarly denied the deity of Jesus Christ in a public address. He prompted a huge correspondence in the *Baptist Times* and the affair eventually resulted in the secession of a number of Baptist churches from the Baptist Union. Then in 1977 it hit the headlines again, in an Anglican context this time, with a symposium called *The Myth of God Incarnate*. In the years since the publication of that book one of its authors, Don Cupitt, again a Cambridge scholar, has repeatedly been at the forefront of the controversy. He has pushed it into the public eye both by his books and by his television series. His most recent offering, *The Sea of Faith*, was first screened on BBC Television on Sunday evenings in 1984. He not only questions whether Jesus is God, but whether there is such a thing as a God for Jesus to be.

The root of all this scholarly attack on the traditional Christian view of Jesus goes very deep and involves a whole host of complex issues to which we can't really do justice here. But there is a fundamental assumption which underlies almost all of this scepticism, and without which it simply collapses. That is the assumption shared by all these scholars that there is a radical discontinuity between the original Jesus of history and the later Jesus of the church's confessional statements.

Scholars like Cupitt and Robinson insist that an alien 'God-incarnate' identity has been superimposed upon the Jesus of history by Christians who came after him. They insist that Jesus never claimed deity, nor did his immediate circle of



acquaintances attribute deity to him. They say it was only when Christianity moved outside its Palestinian origins into the pagan world of Greek philosophy and religion that this divine nature was assigned him. Hence their favourite adjective is 'mythological'.

The deity of Jesus, they say, is a 'mythological' statement. That is not quite the same thing as saying it is false. According to them, it is a tool by which the early Christians sought to express the enormous significance Jesus had for them. But it is not rooted in objective facts. It is a pious fiction. Today, they say, we have outgrown such myths and need new conceptual tools by which to understand what Jesus should mean for us.

To use their word, we must 'de-mythologize' Jesus. This particular point of view is pressed with intimidating scholarly confidence in books by these theologians. It is often not so much argued as assumed, that anybody who knows anything about it will accept the indisputability of this primary assumption; and Christians who wish to take a less sceptical, more conservative line are often treated with a patronizing contempt.

I want to take issue with what I can only call this conspiracy of academic terrorism, by which many humble Christians are being quite needlessly shaken in their faith and many non-Christians quite irresponsibly confirmed in their unbelief. No one can deny that the church's understanding of Jesus' deity was developed and refined in the years after his death. No one can deny that the great Council of Chalcedon, which eventually formulated the doctrine of the divine and human nature of Jesus, used vocabulary which was indebted more to Greek philosophy than the Bible.

But I insist that our understanding of Jesus as God is not a pious myth invented by second-century Christians. It is rather a doctrine that evolved, like the flower from the bud, as an inevitable consequence of the divine consciousness of Jesus himself; a consciousness which he expressed verbally in the days of his flesh and which his contemporaries clearly recognized albeit with a sense of outrage. That is the eyewitness



testimony of John in this chapter. It can be denied only by calling John a downright liar, and a hypocrite to boot, because nobody in the New Testament speaks more about the importance of truth than John does.

'He called God his own Father, making himself equal with God.' There was nothing particularly unusual, of course, about a Jew calling God 'Father'. The point John is making here is that the Jews recognized that Jesus was using this title in a particularly exclusive and personal manner. He did not say 'Our Father' as they would have done. He said 'My Father'. He did not speak of himself as *a* Son of God. He spoke of himself as *the* Son. The way he talked clearly suggested to these Jews who were listening to him that he claimed a filial relationship to God which was utterly unique to himself. He called God his own Father, peculiarly so; and that is what offended them. They were not so naive as to miss the implications of that. Such a claim, they realized, made Jesus equal with God.

The astonishing thing is that Jesus, according to John, knowing that such an interpretation of his words and his attitudes was being expressed, instead of repudiating it as a blasphemous slander merely qualified and endorsed it.

I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does (5:19).

In the five verses that follow we discover some of the most extraordinary claims that any human being has ever made. First of all, Jesus says that his deeds are *divine deeds*. They are a perfect reproduction in miniature of the cosmic activity of God. 'He can only do what he sees his Father doing.' That's why he healed on the Sabbath contrary to Jewish law; because as God the Father did not stop making people better on Saturdays, no more could he. That was his rationale. His imitation of the Father did not stop there. *Whatever* the Father does, the Son does too.

He is like one of those angled mirrors you sometimes see in



a cathedral, by which they show you the gothic ceiling. Everything that Jesus sees in God he reflects horizontally out to the world around. He is the image of the invisible God.

What is more, Jesus goes on in verse 20 to claim that his knowledge is *divine knowledge*.

The Father loves the Son and shows him all he does.

Prophets at best enjoyed a partial and hazy glimpse of God; but Jesus is claiming here that his contemplation of the Father was complete, unlimited, undistorted, born of a quite extraordinary intimacy. He totally embraced the mystery of God's being in his spiritual vision, far beyond anything any human being had ever experienced before.

Thirdly, Jesus claims *divine prerogative* in verse 21. Life and death lie in his hands, he tells us.

Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.

Indeed the full dimensions of this extraordinary assertion are spelt out even more clearly in verse 26.

As the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself.

Ordinary human beings rely upon God for every breath they take. We are dependent creatures. We are like light bulbs, only alive while we are connected to the mains. Should that source of life be switched off, our lights go out. But not Jesus's. 'I am the mains,' he says. 'I am the source of life. And I have at my discretion the power to give life.' That was something which every Jew knew that only God could claim.

Fourthly, Jesus claims here *divine authority* (verse 22).

Moreover, the Father judges no-one, but has entrusted all judgements to the Son.

One of the most extraordinary things about Jesus is the way we constantly find him saying to people that their sins are forgiven. C. S. Lewis indicates the outrageousness of this in his



book, *Mere Christianity* (Collins).

This is so preposterous as to be comic. We can all understand how a man forgives offences against himself. You tread on my toe and I forgive you . . . but what should we make of a man, himself untrodden on, who announced that he forgave you for treading on other men's toes? Asinine fatuity is the kindest description we should give of his conduct. Yet this is what Jesus did.

Just as if, in fact, he had the power to declare men innocent or guilty at the bar of God's justice; and it is clear from the passage that that is precisely the authority he did claim to have. It would be he who called men to account on the last day, and judged the world.

Lastly and most remarkably of all, Jesus claims here *divine worship*:

That all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father (5:23).

It is not hard to imagine how scandalous that would have been to his Jewish listeners. Many of them regarded it as idolatrous merely to bow down before the Roman Emperor and call him Lord. Yet Jesus insists here that men venerate him as they venerate God, drawing no distinction between the two. Indeed to fail to do so, he says, is in itself an act of sacrilege and profanity.

He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him (5:23).

Even more remarkable; men and women did worship Christ. We have it on the authority not just of the New Testament, but also of first-century pagan authors, that the early Christians worshipped Christ as God. What more compelling evidence of the primitiveness of the church's confession of Jesus' deity do we need?

So Christ claimed divine deeds. Divine knowledge, the divine prerogative, divine authority and divine worship. It is not surprising that the Jews said he was making himself equal to God. If these things do not amount to a claim to deity, what does constitute such a claim? Yet perhaps the most remark-



able thing of all about these verses is that there is not the faintest suspicion of megalomania within them.

Jesus accomplishes an extraordinary feat. He makes his stupendous assertions sound for all the world as if he is issuing a modest disclaimer. 'I can do nothing by myself, I can only do what the Father does.' He claims personal omnipotence and personal helplessness in the same breath.

By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear . . . I seek not to please myself but him who sent me (5:30).

Jesus then sees himself not as a rival to God's throne but as a humble recipient of God's grace. Here is no arrogant grasping at deity, no conceited revelling in deity. Here is deity wrapped in meekness and lowliness of heart. For all his claims and divine titles, here is a man, an unpretentious and unassuming man, utterly emptied of self-assertion and pride. A man content to be utterly subordinate and obedient to God the Father. Here is Man as we are meant to be, Man in the image of the invisible God. In a word, here is incarnation: true God, perfect Man. Here is the paradox that we can never resolve, the equation we can never solve: one plus one equals one. Two actors but one role, two wills but one purpose, two persons but one life.

It is no wonder that the early Christians had such a struggle to formulate their doctrine of the person of Jesus. One must have some sympathy for them. It is no wonder either that theologians today are dissatisfied with their work. But we can be sure of this. That early conviction that Jesus and God were one was no invention born of theological imagination. It was the product of witness they received from the mouth of Jesus himself—that is John's claim.

It will not do therefore to make out that Jesus was an ordinary human being to whom subsequent generations ascribed the status of divinity. On the contrary, according to those who knew him, Jesus himself made it impossible for them to come to any other conclusion by his own divine consciousness. Again C. S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity* (Collins)



expresses it very well.

People often say . . . . 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who is merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us.

### **The rejected evidence (verses 30–47)**

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me yet you refuse to come to me to have life (5:39).

If you have followed my argument so far, you are probably thinking: 'If Jesus made such claims as these, why is it that so many liberal theologians of our day deny his deity and insist it's a second-century Christian myth?'

The answer is quite simple! These theologians deny the deity of Jesus for the same reason these Jews denied it—because they do not accept the evidence. Jesus in this passage cites four types of evidence about his own person. The Jews rejected them all. So do many liberal theologians of today.

First of all, he cites the evidence of *his own claims*. He freely accepts that on their own these would lack credibility:

If I testify about myself my testimony is not valid (5:31).

Jesus is not saying that his own divine consciousness can be ignored. But he is saying that if a man were to turn up in a church and claim to be the Son of God, most people would not immediately conclude that a miracle had happened. Most would conclude that somebody had just escaped from a



mental hospital. That would not be an unreasonable assumption in the absence of any supporting evidence. It was a rule of Jewish law that evidence had to be corroborated if it was to be accepted. Jesus recognizes the wisdom of that. His claims are stupendous. It is unrealistic to expect people merely to take his word for it. But he is equally clear that confirmatory evidence was available to those who were willing to heed it.

There is another who testifies in my favour and I know that his testimony about me is valid (5:31).

It is pretty certain that this 'another' to whom Jesus is referring is the Father himself. After all, it's from the Father that Jesus gained his own confidence of his divine Sonship, and it is from a similar experience of the Father that he is telling us here that any who are going to believe in his Sonship must receive inner conviction on the point.

This is not to say that the divinity of Jesus is something that can be perceived only by some kind of mystical intuition. No, as Jesus goes on to say, there are concrete, objective evidences through which this divine testimony is further confirmed.

There is the evidence of *believing men and women*, such as John the Baptist. People had been to John and *he had testified to the truth*. Once again Jesus is anxious to disabuse us of any thought that the testimony of Christian believers can prove who he is.

Not that I accept human testimony; but I mention it that you may be saved (5:34).

When you think about it, no human being can prove the divine authority of Jesus, for the simple reason that there is no human authority sufficiently great from which such an accreditation might validly be drawn. Only God can authenticate God.

But, says Jesus, though human beings are fallible and cannot prove my divinity, there is a valid persuasive force in human testimony:

John was a lamp that burned and gave light, and you chose for a



time to enjoy his light (5:35).

In other words, if a man of undisputed integrity and spiritual sensitivity points to Jesus and says he is the One who has come from heaven, the Son to whom the Father gives the Spirit without limit, then that is surely significant. It may not prove anything in a technical sense, but it surely removes the divinity of Jesus from the realm of the utterly implausible.

Everybody was agreed, Jesus says to his listeners, that John the Baptist was somebody special. They were prepared to go along and be seen in public conversation with him and bathe a little in his reflected light. Why then were they so fickle as to discount the testimony he bore to Jesus?

One can say the same today on a much grander scale. Look at the history of the world and consider the many great men who have been utterly convinced of the divine identity of Jesus: men of great holiness, huge intellect, men of vast public reputation. Think of some of the people you know personally who are Christians. Do you really think such people are dupes, or hypocrites, or deceivers?

Just consider the church today. When Don Cupitt and others like him say so emphatically that modern man cannot possibly believe in a supernatural Jesus, I am tempted to ask in which particular ivory tower do they spend their waking moments? For it is not the churches that preach the anaemic and philosophical Jesus of liberal theology that are packed to the doors today. It is those that stand for the old orthodox Jesus! True God and true Man. Indeed if the evidence of television audiences figures is anything to go by, Don Cupitt has a long way to go to catch up on Billy Graham.

So are we so arrogant as to dismiss all these believing men and women as naive and gullible? The fact is that these sceptical theologians who claim to speak for the modern world do nothing of the sort. They speak for no one but their own pretentious little coterie of avant-garde philosophers. The masses of Christian people are still on the side of John the Baptist, not of Don Cupitt. It is Don Cupitt's faith that is all at



sea, not theirs.

Then, Jesus gives the evidence of *his own life and works*.

I have testimony weightier than that of John. For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me (5:36).

There is a story I rather like about the nineteenth century artist, Paul Doré. He was travelling in a foreign country and lost his passport. He found himself confronted by a very suspicious immigration official at a border. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I've lost my identification documents. But I can tell you I'm Paul Doré the painter.'

'Ah,' said the sceptical guard, 'well, we will soon see about that.' So he gave him a pencil and paper. 'Prove it!' he said. Whereupon Doré made a lightning sketch of some nearby travellers with such inimitable skill that the official could only say, 'There is no question about it—you must be Doré!'

Well, that may be a fanciful story, but it is true that unique men carry their own credentials with them. Jesus did not need a passport saying 'Country of origin—Heaven. Father's name—God. Occupation—Saviour of the World.' His very deeds were evidence in themselves, those works which the Father had given him to do. Usually when John uses the word 'works', he speaks specifically of the miracles Jesus did, so that in all probability that is the primary reference here. These Jews had just seen a chronic invalid healed by Jesus at the pool of Bethesda. Such supernatural signs surrounded Jesus on a scale so prolific they have never been equalled before or since. 'Don't you realize,' he says, 'these are not just wonders to amaze you? They are signs, God-given points to direct you to my divine identity.'

The same evidence is available today. Even if we treat the Gospel records only as uninspired human reminiscences of Jesus, it is impossible to avoid the fact that Jesus was a supernatural person. In the last century attempts were made by liberal scholars to sift the Gospel material cutting out all the miraculous elements in Jesus' story. They were sure that under-



neath all these accretions to Jesus, they would discover a coherent picture of a perfectly non-miraculous Jewish rabbi with a purely ethical message.

It is now widely agreed that that attempt failed miserably. History does not witness to any other than a supernatural Jesus. The supernaturalness of Jesus is woven into the warp and woof of the historical testimony to him in a way which cannot be cut out. There is no such historical animal as a non-supernatural Jesus. As far as any historical research can discover Jesus was in his own day what Luke claimed just after Jesus' death. 'Jesus of Nazareth was a Man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst as you yourselves know.'

But the Jews, just as they refused to believe the testimony of John the Baptist, refused also to believe the weightier testimony of Jesus' miracles. It is, of course, precisely the same with sceptical twentieth-century scholars. They are not prepared to accept a supernatural Jesus whatever the evidence for it in the gospels may be. They would rather believe that the gospels are a tissue of fantasy and fabrication than accept such a conclusion. If you ask, however, why are they so reluctant to accept the supernatural Jesus it has got nothing to do with the nature of the historical evidence. It has everything to do with their own philosophical presuppositions. Miracles are unbelievable in a modern world. They are 'unscientific'.

What nonsense! If science has made progress in our generation, it is precisely by taking seriously anomalous observations. The graph that was not quite straight. The number that was not quite right. The pattern that wasn't quite symmetrical. True science never dismisses anomalies on the grounds that they do not fit current theories. It reshapes its theories to accommodate them. And Jesus is challenging his doubters here to do the same thing with him. Of course the miracles he performed before many witnesses were anomalies. Otherwise they would not be miracles. The open-minded response, however, is not to say 'such things are impossible—they must be fiction,' but rather to say 'if such things happened they are



extraordinary; and the Person concerned must be an extraordinary Person.'

There is nothing unscientific at all about taking seriously the possibility of the miraculous. What is unscientific is to act as the scholars of Padua did when they refused to look down Galileo's telescope for fear of seeing what they did not want to see. To shut your eyes to the possibility that Jesus could be God and refuse to give him the opportunity to prove otherwise—that is being unscientific.

Lastly, Jesus cites here the evidence of *the Bible*.

The Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me . . . . You diligently study the Scriptures because you think by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me (5:37, 39).

The scepticism of these Jews is so ironic, because nobody studied the Bible harder than they did. Yet Jesus says that in spite of all their study they totally missed the conclusion to which the Bible, in the intention of God, was designed to bring them. So, in a strangely similar way, have liberal theologians of the twentieth century. Many of them are outstandingly fine biblical scholars, and we should not underestimate that. But like these Jews their scholarship is spiritually sterile. It may lead to doctorates. It does not lead to life.

Notice the reasons that Jesus gives for the blindness of these Jews regarding his divinity in Scripture. First, he says that it was because of a fundamental lack of personal knowledge of God on their part.

You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent (5:37–38).

Every now and then I have to give references for people applying for jobs or colleges, and there is one question which is always at the top of the form. *How long have you known the applicant?* They ask this because they know better than to put weight upon the opinion of somebody who has no personal acquaintance with their candidate.



Yet so often, I fear, those who destroy the credibility of Jesus in the minds of ordinary men and women are themselves totally without any personal experience of God. All too often, if the truth were known, they are worldly-minded, career academics. Like these Jews, they study Moses in their libraries but they have never stood before a burning bush in their lives. That is one reason why they cannot see the divinity of Jesus in the Scriptures which they study—they lack a personal knowledge of God who wrote them.

The second reason Jesus hints at here is because they study the Bible the wrong way.

You *diligently* study the Scriptures.

The word he uses has the flavour of minute analysis or microscopic scrupulousness. In the case of these Jews, of course, this scrutiny was in the interest of scribal accuracy. So devoted to the Bible were they, they demonstrated an almost superstitious reverence for every letter and punctuation mark in the sacred text. Today scholarly investigation is every bit as meticulous, but it is usually in the interest of textual criticism rather than of textual reproduction.

Nevertheless Jesus' point is equally valid. For in both cases it is a scholarship which for all its intensity never goes beyond the academic. It isn't really motivated by an urgent sense of personal need. At best it is motivated by intellectual fascination, at worst by professional ambition.

Which brings us to the third reason Jesus says they were blind to his divinity. They were more concerned about their scholarly reputation than they were about God's truth.

I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God? (5:43-44).

What a subtle trap this is, and how many great scholars have fallen into it. The prevailing tide of scholarly opinion



says that Jesus is a charlatan. Many notable rabbis have written papers in the *Jerusalem Journal of Theology* to prove the point. Only a lecturer who wants to look like a fool in the senior common room would dare to say anything to the contrary. It was so in the Jerusalem of Gamaliel. It is so today in the Cambridge of Cupitt. Scholarship conspires to conceal the truth by its own mutual admiration society.

But fourthly and perhaps most important of all, the reason that they were blind is because they had misunderstood the purpose of Scripture.

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life (5:39).

What are you saying, Jesus? Are you suggesting they were wrong in that? Surely eternal life *is* to be found in the Bible? The strict answer to that is yes, and no. According to Jesus eternal life is there in the Scripture but it is there only because *he* is there.

These are the Scriptures that testify about me yet you will not come to me to have life (5:39-40).

The Bible is God's testimony to his Son. Its purpose is to direct men on divine authority to Jesus as the source of life. The Bible is a signpost. It cannot give life itself. It can only point you to the One in whom life can be found. It's a prescription. It cannot cure sin, but it can specify the medicine that will. It is vital that those of us who call ourselves evangelical understand this. The Bible is never an end in itself. And if we are ever found treating it as such, we fall into the trap of which some validly accuse us; bibliolatry, worshipping a divine book rather than its divine author.

Of course we value the Bible highly, but we do so because it is the Father's testimony to Jesus. We treasure it in the same way that a girl treasures her lover's letter, because it speaks to her of him. Bible study can never be an end in itself. It is a pilgrimage intended to lead us to an ever deeper and more intimate knowledge of Christ. We must remember that. But if



evangelical Christians need to understand this purpose of Scripture, the liberal Christian needs to understand it even more. For the fallacy of the liberal scholar is that he can find eternal life without the Scriptures. He can tear down the signpost and still find the pathway. He can mutilate the prescription and still take the medicine. So as far as he is concerned, the Scriptures are not an authoritative divine testimony to anything, least of all to the divinity of Jesus Christ. To the scholar they are just a jumble of garbled folk tales, pious myths with just the occasional snippet of real history thrown in.

Consequently, they come to the Scriptures in essentially the same way as the Jews did, in order to confirm their own sceptical preconceived ideas about Jesus. They have no intention of discovering a divine Jesus in these pages. When they open its pages, their minds are already closed to the possibility of such a result.

You refuse to come to me to have life (5:40).

Like Nelson, who put the telescope to his blind eye, they see no God made flesh, because they choose not to see him. But we can be sure of this, the root of their blindness lies not in their intellects, great though they may be, but in their wills: 'You *refuse* to come to me.' That, of course, is the final irony.

Do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say? (5:45-47).

This is the tragic end, says Jesus, of all such sceptical Bible scholars. On the last day it will not be Jesus who condemns them. The very authors of the books they have pored over with such sterile diligence will rise to indict them of their unbelief. For those who cannot believe in the Scripture cannot believe in Christ, for the only Christ there is, is the Christ of Scripture.



### The critical decision (verses 24–29)

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life (5:24).

There is a fascinating nuance in John's use of words here, because he does not actually say *from* death to life. To be strictly accurate he says *out of* death into life. In other words, he thinks of death and life not so much as descriptions of a man's physical condition but as spiritual spheres or environments within which a man exists. It is almost as though John imagines death and life as parallel universes. One is converging to extinction, and the other expanding into an ever-richer possibility of experience.

By nature, he says, we all start in the shrinking world of death. If our situation were not to change, we would be doomed to perish along with that dying universe. But something has changed. Jesus has come. It is because Jesus is the unique person that he is that we have hope. For Jesus is a singularity in space and time, a man from that other world, precipitated into our dying one. He is a man who has life in himself, yet has broken into the sphere of death. He has thus created in his own person an interface between the two, a corridor leading from the world of death to that of life. 'I am the door. I am the way. I am the life.' It is the unique person he is that makes that access possible.

Furthermore men and women are already passing through that spiritual passageway which is Jesus.

I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live (5:25).

So eternal life is not something for which a Christian waits. It is a sphere of existence into which he has already passed through Jesus. One day that new identity he has in the other universe is going to become a glaringly obvious reality to everybody.



Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned (5:28–29).

The controversy which we have discussed in this chapter is not a mere academic debate. It is a life and death issue! In the first chapter of Don Cupitt's *Sea of Faith*, Cupitt told how, as a young curate, he was called to a deathbed at Salford Royal Hospital. It was three in the morning. The patient was alone and unconscious and within a few minutes he was dead. Cupitt says that he gave the rite of absolution but afterwards wondered what had he really done. 'I did not hold the magical view that giving him the last rites would actually alter his eternal destiny from what it would otherwise have been,' he says. 'And yet I still thought it had been worthwhile. I hope somebody else does the same for me when my time comes' (*Sea of Faith*, BBC Publications). Religion, according to him, is a way of affirming human dignity in the face of an indifferent universe.

Don't you find that sad? I find it pathetic. Here is a scholar of Cambridge University. A theologian of the first order and that is the best he can offer: symbols without substance, sacraments without significance, religion without rationality. I would ask him, is that the religion which is going to see men into the next millennium? Is that anaemic nonsense the faith that will steer us through the terrors of nuclear holocaust? Don't people like Don Cupitt realize that man at the end of the twentieth century needs hope not platitudes? He needs salvation not sentimentality!

Jesus is not offering us here an affirmation of human dignity in the face of an indifferent universe. He offers us personal access through his divine person into a new universe. Supernatural? Of course it's supernatural.

Jesus is a supernatural person. He claims to be so. Men and women of God throughout the ages confess him to be so. His mighty deeds confirm him to be so. The Bible declares him to be so. When I have got only three more minutes to live, I will



need no yawning, atheistic priest to come to my bed-side to affirm my human dignity with empty cant, because I will have the Son of God himself at my right hand. He will be saying to me 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies' (11:25).

Tell me, when you have got only three minutes to live, who would you rather be: Cupitt or Clements? Jesus puts us on the spot here. He calls us to make a decision. We may join the ranks of the sceptics and refuse to come to him so that we may have life. Or we may place our faith in him and join the ranks of those believers who are proving the truth of his promise.

Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life (5:24).



## 4

### *The Bread*

John 6:25–31

‘Let’s consider your age to begin with—how old are you?’

‘I’m seven and a half exactly.’

‘You needn’t say “exactly”,’ the Queen remarked: ‘I can believe it without that. Now I’ll give *you* something to believe. I’m just one hundred and one, five months and a day.’

‘I can’t believe *that!*’ said Alice.

‘Can’t you?’ the Queen said in a pitying tone.

‘Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.’

Alice laughed. ‘There’s no use trying,’ she said: ‘one *can’t* believe impossible things.’

‘I daresay you haven’t had much practice,’ said the Queen. ‘When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.’ (Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*.)

Lewis Carroll is, of course, commenting in his deceptively childish style on the enigma of faith. Why is it that some people manage to believe things which other people find utterly incredible? In the upside-down world of the White Queen it seems that faith was all a matter of effort. ‘Hold your breath and shut your eyes,’ she advises. ‘You can believe anything if only you try hard enough.’ But on this side of the looking glass we, like Alice, know that it is not that simple. There is all the difference in the world between faith and mere wishful thinking. To fail to observe that distinction is to confuse reality with fantasy. Holding your breath and shutting your eyes is not belief. It is make-believe. And by definition,



anything you have to make yourself believe cannot be real, for reality constrains belief effortlessly. As Alice puts it, 'It is no use trying,' because 'one just cannot believe impossible things.' Yet people do so, and that is the mystery.

Take Christians, for instance. When you think about it in the cold dispassionate light of reason, what Christians believe is really quite extraordinary. God became Man and walked about the earth! Alice could be excused for calling it impossible. Yet a Christian does not feel that he is forcing himself to believe the impossible. He is not playing a game of 'Let's pretend'. There is no self-hypnosis involved. He believes under the constraint of what he intuitively feels to be the truth.

How do Christians do that? It cannot just be a matter of gullibility. No doubt there are Christians who are naive and credulous, but it will not do simply to portray them all as dimwits or dupes. There is an enigma here—the enigma of faith. Some people have got it and others have not. The question is why? That is the question I want us to consider here as we study John 6.

This passage reveals very starkly that the polarization we have observed between belief and unbelief was already apparent in Jesus' own day. In the final verses, Jesus notes that some of his hearers did not believe. On the other hand we find Peter announcing that the disciples did believe. The conversation which Jesus has, leading up to this concluding paragraph, goes a long way towards explaining this fundamental division of opinion. So let us consider it in more detail.

## **The reasons unbelievers do not believe**

### *(1) The spirituality of Jesus' message*

I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you (6:26–27).



In order to understand what Jesus is saying here it is necessary to look back over preceding events. Jesus has just performed a most notable miracle by the side of the Sea of Galilee, feeding a crowd of 5,000 people from the meagre rations provided by a small boy's lunchbox. Inevitably it caused a stir; but not, apparently, the kind for which Jesus was looking.

After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say; 'Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world.' Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again into the hills by himself (6:14-15).

It is important to remember that this is Galilee, where feelings of antipathy towards the central Roman government ran very high. It was a place notorious for violent protests against the Romans, and where men were always on the lookout for some new charismatic figure to lead them in their efforts in this direction. Indeed their religion encouraged them to do so, for it laid great emphasis on the great messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. Passages like Deuteronomy 18 which they quoted in verse 14, where God promises to send a prophet like Moses to the people. Moses, the Galileans reasoned, had been a freedom fighter liberating their forefathers from bondage to Pharaoh. Surely, they thought, the Messiah when he came would be a freedom fighter too, liberating them from their bondage to Caesar.

Not only was this place Galilee; John also tells us in verse 4 that the time was Passover time. Now Passover was to loyal Jews in the first century what the Battle of the Boyne is to loyal Protestants in Northern Ireland today. It was the historical focus of all their political dreams. Every year they commemorated how God had triumphed over the forces of Egypt and led their people out of the land of bondage, across the Red Sea and into freedom. Passover was a time of intense nationalist fervour. So if you wanted to start a revolution in Judea, the best place to go was Galilee; and the best time to go there was Passover time.

So it is not surprising that these Galileans so quickly enter-



tained revolutionary and political thoughts of Jesus. 'Let us make him King,' they said. His miracles had kindled hopes in them that their messianic expectations were at last being fulfilled. 'Perhaps this is the Prophet like Moses,' they wondered. 'This is the Passover we've been waiting for.' Yet what I want you to notice is that even while they were talking to one another in those tones, Jesus was escaping into solitude. He knew that they intended to come and make him king by force so he withdrew again into the hills by himself. It is against the background of that reluctance on Jesus' part to accept the political role into which this crowd wanted to force him that we must understand these rather cryptic words in verses 26 and 27, which he spoke to the same crowd after they had pursued him round the lake to Capernaum.

Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life (6:27).

'What you Galileans have got to realize,' Jesus is saying, 'is that there are two kinds of bread. There is bread that nourishes our physical existence which is doomed one day to perish, but there is also bread that nourishes our spiritual existence which is destined to last for ever. And the trouble with you Galileans is that your whole mindset is orientated around the former. In a word, you are materialists. You ate the loaves and had your fill. You perceived the economic benefits of what happened on the other side of the Lake and you've got all excited about it. But you completely missed the spiritual significance of what happened!

'You may have seen a miracle but you did not see the sign. Don't you realize,' Jesus implies, 'that when I looked at that crowd by the Sea of Galilee I didn't just see a bundle of hungry bodies incapable of providing for themselves materially? I saw a multitude of human beings, searching in vain for something to satisfy that spiritual vacuum that was gnawing at their hearts. I didn't just see empty stomachs. I saw empty souls! And my willingness to feed them physically was just a symbol, a pointer, a sign of my willingness to meet that much



deeper spiritual need.'

Jesus must offer the same advice to us in the twentieth century. We must not misunderstand him. Jesus never said that issues of political freedom or economic justice were unimportant. No one could accuse Jesus of being indifferent to the plight of the poor and the oppressed. But, uncongenial as it was to the political activists of Jesus' own day and uncongenial as it is to the political activists of the present, the fact remains, Jesus was not a political messiah. He could have been, but he chose not to be. He faced a world in its own way just as militarily insecure, just as socially divided, just as economically deprived as our own. But he faced it with a message that was unashamedly spiritual in its emphasis.

It is vital we understand that. For throughout history there has been a tendency within the church to politicize the Christian message. It happened in this country at the time of Oliver Cromwell, and around the turn of the century in the so-called Social Gospel movement of the United States. In Latin America today, Liberation Theology is exhibiting exactly the same kind of thinking, urging us to let the political aspirations of the oppressed set the agenda for the church.

One can sympathize with the phenomenon. We are, rightly, passionate in our concern for justice and freedom. When we feel that way it is all too easy to identify the kingdom of God with the progressive and the radical political ethos of our day. But it simply will not do! For Jesus was *not* a political messiah. There were plenty of zealot revolutionaries around in Galilee in those days. He had every opportunity to be one had he wanted to be, but he did not. He categorically refused to endorse the politicized aspirations of this Galilean mob, in the same way that he earlier refused to accept Satan's offer of power as the route to his kingdom. It is true that he spoke of a kingdom. But he would not let them make him king, for the very simple reason that the kingdom of God about which he spoke and the kingdom of God they had in mind were completely different.

Indeed, if you read John's gospel carefully, one of the



things that you will discover is that John, unlike the synoptic evangelists, goes out of his way to avoid the phrase 'kingdom of God' altogether. He probably did so in order to evade exactly the kind of politicized misunderstanding of that phrase in which these Galileans would have so happily indulged. John chooses to speak not of the 'kingdom of God' but of 'eternal life'. As far as John is concerned, those two ideas are synonymous. For Jesus' message is a spiritual one, a message not about food for the body, but about food for the soul.

It is precisely because of the spirituality of Jesus' message that, in the end, the Galilean peasantry abandoned him. The same thing happens today. If we could stand up and offer Christ with integrity as the One who can tell us how to implement our utopian dreams of distributive justice and international disarmament about which we mouth such rhetoric at party political conferences, then thousands would flock to Jesus. It is because he tells us to be less concerned about our physical bodies and more concerned about our eternal souls that he is treated with contempt by those who are looking for political answers to Man's problems.

## *(2) The supernaturalism of Jesus' claims*

At this the Jews began to grumble about him because he said, 'I am the bread that came down from heaven.' They said, 'Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, "I came down from heaven"?' (6:41-42)

If you look again at the last chapter you will recall the extraordinary statements that Jesus made concerning himself in John 5. There, of course, he was in conversation with the conservative and scholarly rabbis of the city of Jerusalem. In this chapter he is in controversy with quite a different audience, the militant peasants of rural Galilee. And yet there is something that you will observe which those two discourses have in common; and that is the egocentricity of Jesus' words—an egocentricity which, as we said earlier, one could only call megalomaniac if it were not coupled with the most extraordinary modesty. Read verses 35 to 40 and count the



number of times Jesus uses 'I' or 'me' or 'my'; it comes to 17.

Most of us would consider it bad manners to talk so much about ourselves. Jesus does not seem to be embarrassed about it—just look at the assertions which he makes in the midst of all those first person pronouns. He claims a divine origin.

I came down from heaven,

he says in verse 38. If somebody told us that they had arrived in a flying saucer it would scarcely be less preposterous. He also claims a divine mission. 'I'm here to do the will of God who sent me.' What is that will? Is it something nice and ordinary like being a pastor or an evangelist? 'No,' says Jesus, 'My mission is to raise the dead.' King Canute was hardly less ambitious.

But most remarkable of all, and most central in this paragraph, he claims a divine ministry.

I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty (6:35).

According to Jesus, the reason spiritual things must take precedence over material in our scale of priorities is because, in the final analysis, material things cannot really satisfy the human soul.

Man, Jesus reminds us, does not live by bread alone. Life is more than meat. Of course for many people these days, such talk is a form of conservative seduction. As Marx said, religion is an opium to keep the poor content with their lot. But, according to Jesus, the truth is the very opposite. It is materialism that is the narcotic, which so anaesthetizes men to the reality of spiritual things that real contentment, real satisfaction is rendered permanently inaccessible to them. All that the pursuit of material things does is to create in men an ascending spiral of acquisitive expectation that can never be appeased, in the same way that these Galileans could never be satisfied with one meal.

This year it is the new car, next year it will be the new washing machine and then the new house and after that the



new video. It is insatiable. It never ends, because man is victim to spiritual hunger and no amount of material bread will appease it. Jean Paul Sartre, the novelist, was an atheist. But he once wrote of this human dilemma with painful honesty: 'That God does not exist I cannot deny, but that my whole being cries out for God I cannot forget.' That cry of the human spirit for something eternal around which to integrate itself is universal. We all feel it. You would not be reading this book if you did not feel it too. It is a fundamental need of the human soul.

The preacher in the Old Testament says that God has 'put eternity into our hearts'. But the extraordinary thing is that Jesus did not claim to feel that longing for spiritual satisfaction. He claimed to meet it. '*I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry. He who believes in me will never be thirsty.*' That is extraordinary! If you were to go to any clergyman and say that you have got a spiritual problem, or aspiration, a longing in your soul, then if the clergyman was any good at all, he would direct you to God. He would say that God is the answer to that hunger and thirst in your soul. You must find him, and thus the solution of your problem. But Jesus did not say that. 'Come to *me*,' he said.

'If only you knew it,' he tells these Galilean militants, 'that supernatural manna you are looking for is staring you in the face. It is not a something but a Someone. It's me! I am not just the giver, I am the gift.'

The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. *I am the bread of life* (6:33, 35).

But this was bread they just could not swallow. After all, Jesus was a local lad. If he had had angel's wings and arrived in a fiery chariot, it might have been different. But he was so ordinary, so human. 'Is this not Jesus the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say "I came down from heaven?"' It seems ridiculous. It is one thing to go around working miracles. Quite another to go around claiming to be a miracle. But that was Jesus' assertion.



It remains his assertion today, and it is still an obstacle in the path of faith for many, many people. If Jesus had come and said to us that eternal life is a matter of giving to charity, there would be plenty of people willing to go out and buy their spiritual fire insurance. If Jesus had said that eternal life is a matter of practising yoga in your bedroom three times a day, there are thousands of people in this country who would be willing for that discipline. But Jesus said that eternal life was something we find by finding him. It is tied up with the supernatural person he is in himself. It is not a possession, but a relationship with him, the living One. And the response of many to that extraordinary supernaturalist claim is, 'Isn't this just Jesus, the son of Joseph? How can he say "I came down from heaven"?'

### (3) *The scandal of Jesus' cross*

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If a man eats of this bread, he will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. Then the Jews began to argue sharply among themselves, 'How can this Man give us his flesh to eat?' (6:51-52).

We come here to a major controversy in the area of interpretation that we can no longer avoid. If you read most commentaries on this chapter you will find that commentators regard the whole discourse, but particularly verses 51 to 58, as referring very directly to the Lord's Supper (or to Holy Communion). One has to be honest and state that there are strong arguments for believing that John did indeed have that sacrament of the Christian church in mind as he wrote.

There is little doubt that John's readers would feel sacramental vibrations running through it which, to say the least, would be amplified two or three fold by verse 54.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.

But it is my strong opinion that this sacramentalist line of interpretation has been grossly over-emphasized. To begin with, at this point in time the first Lord's Supper was still a



year away. Jesus could hardly have expected either his disciples or this crowd to understand words that relied upon the institution of that sacrament for their meaning, even assuming that the idea of the sacrament was sufficiently developed in his own mind at the time to make such a reference possible.

But by far the most important argument as far as I'm concerned centres around verse 53.

I tell you the truth, unless you can eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

If Jesus is referring here directly to the Lord's Supper, the natural sense of that text is that participation in Holy Communion is essential to salvation. This is a conclusion that would leave the Salvation Army a bit embarrassed, not to mention the Quakers and numerous other non-sacramental groups within the Christian church. No, I am convinced in my own mind that when Jesus speaks here of eating his flesh and drinking his blood there is no direct reference to Holy Communion.

There are three clues to what he does mean. The first clue is in verse 63.

The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.

So Jesus is speaking symbolically here, not literally. If his words generate sacramental overtones in our minds, it is because the Lord's Supper also is symbolical. It happens to represent in a dramatic way precisely the same truths that Jesus is seeking here to represent in a metaphorical way. But Jesus is not speaking directly about the sacramental symbol, but about the spiritual reality.

The second clue to what he is talking about lies in verse 51, in the words 'for the life of the world'. If you study this gospel carefully you will find that whenever John uses the phrase 'for the world', it refers to the death of Jesus. That being so, it seems to me that by far the most satisfying interpretation is to say that Jesus is looking forward to Passover time twelve



months hence; not to the institution of the Lord's Supper, but to Calvary itself.

When he says the 'bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world', he is pointing to the fact that this eternal life about which he has been talking can come to men and women only as a result of his own violent death on the cross. He can give us life only by being willing to give up life.

The third clue to his meaning lies in comparing verse 54 with verse 40. If you do that you will see that the verses are closely parallel.

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day (verse 54). Everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day (verse 40).

The only difference is that one speaks of eating and drinking Christ's flesh and blood and the other speaks of looking to him and believing in him.

So it seems a reasonable deduction to me, given that Jesus is using parabolic language, to conclude that the former is a symbol for the latter. As Augustine puts it, if you believe in Christ then you have eaten him. Jesus is not speaking in these difficult verses of a literal consuming of his flesh, as for example, in the Roman Catholic mass or indeed in any Holy Communion service. He is referring to that spiritual participation in his divine life which those who believe in him experience as the result of his death on their behalf. So he says in verse 56,

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood [That is, 'whoever is united to me by faith'] remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.

Faith is not just a tribute that we offer to Jesus. Faith is an adhesive that incorporates us organically into the very nature of his divinity. In a very real sense, his death becomes our death and his life becomes our life. We may have sympathy for the perplexity of some in the crowd who were interested in



following Jesus, but found his words too bizarre or even too repulsive to tolerate. For there is a deep mystery here. Verse 60 tells us,

On hearing it many of his disciples said, 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?'

We can have some sympathy with that. But notice how Jesus responds in verse 61:

Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, 'Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before!'

In other words, Jesus says, 'If you find my symbolic language gruesome or incomprehensible, how on earth are you going to cope next year with the real thing?' If Jesus had spoken in plainer terms about his cross, these Jews would have been even more offended. For the cross is a scandal to men and women, even when it's only spoken about indirectly as Jesus speaks about it here. That was Paul's experience at Corinth: 'We preach Christ crucified,' he wrote. 'To the Jews it is a stumbling block, to the Greeks it is foolishness.'

It is always so. The very idea of God having to suffer and die in public humiliation is to the unbelieving mind at best a ridiculous absurdity, at worst a blasphemous obscenity. However, it was not Paul who chose so unpopular a theme for his sermons but Christ himself who ordained that it must be so. 'For this bread is my flesh,' he says, which 'I will give for the life of the world.'

There were three causes of offence, then, three reasons for the unbeliever's unbelief: the spirituality of the message, the supernaturalism of Jesus' claims, and the scandal of the cross.

In fact, with so many intellectual obstacles in the way you may be thinking to yourself that faith is even more of an enigma than ever. It is a message so uncongenial to the materialist, so incredible to the rationalist, so offensive to Jew and Greek, that surely Jesus must have been tormented by the anxiety that no one would ever believe in him at all. But that



is not the case, which brings us to the final element in our study:

### **The reason believers do believe**

Three verses in this chapter tell us why there will always be believers.

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away (6:37).

No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day (6:44).

And

‘There are some of you who do not believe.’ For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. He went on to say, ‘This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father had enabled him’ (6:64–65).

These three verses confront us with an area of biblical truth which many profess to find even more difficult and offensive than the three about which we have been talking so far. Theologians in the past have sometimes called it the doctrine of effectual calling. Others, rather less happily, have referred to it as the doctrine of irresistible grace. It is a subject that has occasioned enormous debate.

Perhaps the easiest way of summarizing it is to give you an illustration I once heard from Dr Jim Packer. When he was a student at Oxford, he had been punting on the river and fallen head first into the water. He said it was a most unpleasant experience because there were a lot of thick weeds that entangled his legs and his arms and the water was very deep. Indeed he was afraid that he was going to drown because he just could not get to the shore. ‘Imagine the possible reaction of some of my undergraduate colleagues in the boat,’ he said. ‘Some of them might have said, “Oh, you’ll be all right, Jim, you can get out if only you try. Keep struggling!” Others



might have said, "Oh, I'd like to help, old chap; but you see, I have a problem of conscience about interfering with people's free will. I can give you some tips on swimming, if you like."

Dr Packer said that these two possible responses represent ways in which people have seen Christ's work of salvation throughout history. The first is called Pelagianism. Man has the natural ability to save himself if only he would work at it. It is the White Queen, telling Alice that you can believe if only you practise more. The second is often called Arminianism. 'I'll assist you as much as I can, but there are limits to how much even God can help a human being.' It is the White Queen once more, offering advice on how to hold your breath and shut your eyes. But both of those ways of looking at salvation are saying, in one way or another, that if you want to be saved you must try harder; it is up to you; it is your self-effort that will get you there.

The question is: What do you do when you are, like Dr Packer, drowning because self-effort is not enough? When you feel like Alice that it is no use trying because 'I just can't believe impossible things?' What do you do in that situation? Packer pursued his illustration further and said how glad he was that on that particular occasion, when he fell into the river, his colleague in the boat was not a Pelagian or an Arminian, but a Calvinist. He jumped personally into the water and overcame his friend's helpless struggles. He got him free of the weeds, brought him to the shore, gave him artificial respiration and put him back on his feet. As Dr Packer said, 'That's what I call a rescue!'

According to John 6, that is what Jesus calls a rescue too. He is fully aware of the insuperable obstacles that prevent sinful men and women from believing in him, the bread of life. He could see it in their eyes. But he was not discouraged because he knew that salvation was not ultimately a matter of self-effort, but of divine grace from first to last. It is divine grace, says Jesus, that draws men and women. It does not do so with the crude brutality of a rapist, but with the gentle wooing magnetism of a lover. 'No one can come to me unless



the Father who sent me draws him.' It is grace, he says, that enables men and women by giving them what they need to engage with him, by illuminating their minds, by renewing their affections, and by liberating their wills, so that they embrace him by faith. It is not a case of making themselves believe, but spontaneous, intuitive, effortless, through God's grace. And because Jesus knew that was the way it was, he could say, 'All the Father gives me will come to me.' There was no question in his mind about it. He could even say, in verse 39, 'I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up on the last day.' He did not ascend to heaven after his work on the cross was done wringing his hands in anxiety because no one was believing in him. No; he knew from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him. As he says to the twelve in verse 70, 'Have I not chosen you?'

Some people profess to find this an offensive and a difficult element of the Bible's teaching. I have to tell you that I have never understood it that way. It is for me the only answer to the enigma of faith. I do not see how anybody believes anything as preposterous as the New Testament gospel unless it be by a miracle of divine grace. This emphasis on God's initiative brings me encouragement in all sorts of areas.

It brings me encouragement as a preacher. We are all disappointed when we preach our hearts out and find people going out through church doors unchanged. It is a comfort to realize that people walked away from Jesus' preaching just like that too. He was demoralized by it but still said, 'All that the Father gives me will come.'

It is an encouragement to the believer, because all of us at times in our lives have periods when our assurance is weak. 'How can I know I'm really going to heaven?' we say. 'How can I feel sure that I'm not going to fall away and perish?' The answer, of course, is that if salvation were a matter of our own efforts we never could be sure. But Jesus can give us security. 'I *will* raise them up on the last day,' he says. It is his hold on us, not ours on him, that counts in the long run.



But most of all, I believe that there is immense encouragement in this final aspect of our passage to the seeker. When Jesus says here, 'All that the Father gives me will come to me and whoever comes to me I will never drive away,' he means that it is not a case of our tormenting ourselves with futile questions as to whether we are on God's list or not. Such enquiries, says Jesus, are utterly pointless. The question he puts to us is 'Do we *want* to come to him?' Do we find in our hearts some glimmering of spiritual desire no matter how weak? Some concern for eternal things no matter how faint? Some attraction towards Jesus? Some faint stirring of faith in him? Do we feel anything of that?

If so, then praise God! For it is perfectly possible to translate verse 37 like this, 'Whoever is in process of coming to me I will never drive away.' If God were not drawing you, if he were not enabling you, if he were not giving you to Jesus, do you think that for one moment that you would entertain such preposterous notions as Christians are supposed to believe? Do you suppose you would even give it serious consideration? Do you think you would give it more than half-an-hour of your time?

See what Jesus says in verse 45. 'Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.' That is the way it is. Ask any Christian and you will discover that is how faith arrived for him. It was not an achievement, or something he congratulated himself about. It was a *gift*. It was not the result of trying, but of listening, listening for the voice of God addressing us, informing us, calling us graciously to himself. That is the way it is. Of course there are plenty of things about Jesus that are hard to accept: the spirituality of his message, the supernaturalism of his Person, the scandal of his cross. Every Christian has wrestled with those things. But, mercifully, faith is not a mere subscription to a creed, but a loving attachment to him, to the Person of Jesus. The question is not 'Do we understand everything he says?', but, 'Are we ready to commit ourselves to everything he is?'

Verse 66 says that from this time many of his disciples



turned back and no longer followed him. You can just imagine what they were saying. 'Oh, we really thought after that miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 that he intended to bring about social reform, you know. But it seems he is just one of those religious cranks after all. Talking about pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die, a lot of super-spiritual claptrap about coming down from heaven and offensive gibberish about eating his flesh. It's a pity. A person with his gifts could have changed the world.'

'You do not want to leave too, do you?' Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God' (6:67-68).



## 5

### *The Light*

John 8:12-59

By and large, people these days disapprove of controversy. I know we have our fair share of it. The miners' strike of 1984-5 was a pretty clear example. But if you were to ask the majority of men and women in the street, I think you would discover that they had very little sympathy for either Scargill or MacGregor in that particular conflict. One housewife expressed it to me the other week like this, 'I'd just like to bang both their silly heads together,' she said. 'The endless wrangling all seems so pointless, doesn't it? Such a waste of energy. Why can't they just settle their differences like reasonable men?'

It frustrates us to see the endless debate. In fact, it is more than frustrating; we find it frightening too, because as the picket lines showed during that strike, quarrelling very quickly leads to violence. That is why there is no doubt that most people today take the view that we would be a lot better off without controversy. People should be less obstinate, they say; less contradictory, more willing to compromise and make concessions to one another. What a happy and peaceful world it would be if only everybody would agree with one another, wouldn't it? But unfortunately they never will. That is one reason why Christianity is sometimes an unpopular religion today. For, as everybody knows, Christians love a good argument. They have been arguing for two thousand years. They argue both among themselves, and with everybody else.



Christianity has probably been responsible for more controversy in this world than any other single religion or philosophy in the history of man. And as with the miners' strike, it has not always stopped at hostile words. Christianity has sometimes caused revolutions and wars. Some would argue that in Northern Ireland it is still doing so.

That, of course, is why many people today claim that the old style of Christianity will not do any more. It is too aggressive, too intolerant, and too exclusive. If it is going to further the cause of international peace and harmony, which is so important to us in the twentieth century, Christianity has got to change. There must be less dogmatism, they say, and more open-mindedness to other people's ideas.

You can see this trend all over the place—in the Ecumenical movement for instance. 'It is time that Christian denominations forgot old animosities and closed ranks in one universal expression of ecclesiastical solidarity.' You see it too in the universalism of many of our contemporary theologians. Scholars such as Karl Rahner, for instance, suggest that we should stop distinguishing between Christians and non-Christians. We are all Christians really, he claims. Some of us know we are, while others of us do not. Or a scholar like John MacQuarrie, who says that there is no longer any place for Christian evangelism, and that what we need is a common mission, undertaken by all the great faiths in collaboration.

Indeed it is this trend towards tolerance that has made Eastern religions so attractive to some influential twentieth century Christian thinkers. If you read Don Cupitt's *Sea of Faith*, you will discover there a classic example of what I mean. Buddhism and Hinduism—the faiths of India and the Far East—are, he argues, much more accommodating by nature to the insights of other religions than Christianity has ever been. Why cannot we follow the lead of Annie Besant and the Theosophists, or Swami Vivekananda and the Vedantist movement, and look for a drawing together of the great faiths of the world in a global religious community?

It is a very appealing thought. I know not a few today who



would argue that it is precisely what Jesus himself would have wanted; he talked so much about love, surely he could not have approved of all the aggression in which his followers have been engaged down through the centuries? He said, 'Blessed are the peace-makers.' Surely the last thing he would have wished was to be a party to controversy. Is that what you think? Well, if you do, I am sure that you will find John chapter 8 a nasty shock.

Here we find Jesus in the midst of an altercation as fiery as anything Messrs Scargill and MacGregor generated during the miners' strike. John tells us that it all happened at the Feast of the Tabernacles, or Harvest Thanksgiving as it is called today. In fact chapters 7 and 8 of John really form a continuous record of the debate that was going on over that whole week of festivities. Big crowds had descended on Jerusalem to celebrate the holiday. As usual there was plenty of gossip flying around. But this year, John tells us one topic was dominating everybody's conversation: Jesus.

At first everyone was spreading rumours about whether he would dare to come down to the feast at all, especially since the last time he had been in Jerusalem, the authorities had sought his life. But then halfway through the festivities their speculations on this point were answered. Suddenly Jesus was in the midst, teaching in the very Temple precincts.

Immediately the subterranean smoulderings of debate about him erupted into volcanic action. Some began to take his side. He is a good man, they said; perhaps even the Messiah. But others, particularly amongst the Jewish establishment, became more and more militant in their antagonism towards him. John tells us in chapter 7 that before the week was out they had made several attempts to arrest Jesus. But such was the strength of his public support and the power of his personal charisma that the guards they sent just lacked the nerve to carry out their orders.

So as time went on a direct confrontation between Jesus and these leading Jews became practically inevitable. At length, on the final day of the holiday, Jesus stood up and



spoke to the crowds one last time.

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (8:12).

It was a very appropriate metaphor. During the Feast of Tabernacles, the Temple courtyard where people presented their harvest gifts was illuminated by huge chandeliers, symbolizing perhaps the pillar of fire that had guided the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings. John tells us in 8:20 that Jesus delivered his final speech standing precisely in this very part of the Temple. So it may well have been just as these giant festival lights were being extinguished and dismantled that he offered himself to the departing multitudes as an alternative illumination. 'Follow me,' he says, 'and you'll find your way out of the darkness of your directionless existence. I am the light of the world. Just as the pillar of fire guided your forefathers to the promised land, I can guide you to life.'

It was a huge claim; but as we have seen, earlier in this book, it was in every way typical of Jesus. For the Jewish hierarchy, it was clearly the last straw. They felt they just had to take some action to deflate the popularity of this dangerous megalomaniac. So, with the prestigious Pharisees leading the attack, they launched a public assault on his credibility. 'You can't say that,' they argued. 'You're appearing as your own witness. Your testimony is not valid.'

Now a representative of our liberal, tolerant, undogmatic twentieth century would have listened very politely to their objections and sought some conciliatory form of words with which to defuse the situation. 'Why don't we all go to Arbitration and sort these things out, brothers.' But what I want you to notice is that Jesus in this passage does nothing of that sort. Far from appeasing them, he repudiates their criticisms and, turning defence into attack, vehemently challenges them in return. If what follows is not to be called a controversy, I do not know what is.

The Jews cast veiled aspersions on the legitimacy of Jesus'



birth, and some very direct aspersions on the sanity of his mind. 'Where is your father?' they asked sneeringly. 'We were not born out of wedlock. Aren't we right in saying that you are one of those mongrel half-breed Samaritans? And demon-possessed to boot!' But if we are going to be honest we have to say that Jesus, for his part, gives as good as he gets in this exchange of verbal fireworks. He calls them liars and would-be murderers. He even calls them children of the devil.

All of which, of course, causes some embarrassment to our modern, liberal commentators on the passage. Such language is surely not really consistent with the doctrine of the universal brotherhood of man. I suppose it is just possible to accept Archbishop William Temple's suggestion and envisage Jesus calling his opponents all these rude names, but with a consistently benign and loving expression on his face! But such a view stretches my imagination to breaking point.

It is certainly important to note that it is Jesus' opponents and not he himself who, at the end of the debate, introduce the element of physical violence by picking up stones to pelt him. On the other hand, it must be said that Jesus does nothing to placate this rising hostility in them. On the contrary, his attitude throughout seems almost calculated to provoke it. Agreeable as it would be to portray Jesus as one of your liberal, tolerant, ecumenical theologians of the twentieth century, I do not think the cap fits. Jesus was a controversialist.

Indeed it is one of the central purposes of John's gospel to map the growing bitterness of that controversy in which he was involved as it inexorably accelerates during the final year of his public ministry to its bloody finale on the cross. Chapter 8 is in many respects a critical point in this escalation towards violence. For our purposes in this study, we will concentrate on verses 31-35, at the centre of the controversy.

### **What Jesus says about Truth**

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the



Truth . . . .’ (8:31–32).

I find something particularly compelling about that phrase, ‘You will know the truth.’ All through history men have been convinced that behind the complexity and variety of the universe there must lie some absolute and unitary principle of order and coherence. We feel intuitively that must be the case. In the East this ‘Truth’ has been interpreted religiously in terms of a spiritual force which man discovers through mystical experience. In the West it has been interpreted, at least in recent times, in scientific terms; as a mathematical or physical principle, which man discovers through his own intellectual efforts.

It is fascinating to observe that one consequence of the contemporary rapprochement between Eastern and Western thought is that a synthesis is developing of these scientific and mystical approaches to Truth. For instance, in *Star Wars* you find Luke Skywalker seeking Buddhist enlightenment in between adventuring in his high technology space ship. Such is the irony of twentieth-century thinking!

But so far as our passage here is concerned, the important thing to notice is that Jesus is overturning both Western and Eastern presuppositions in this quest for Truth. He has nothing to do with either of them. ‘Real Truth,’ he says, ‘is neither a mystical force nor a mathematical formula. Ultimate reality is a relationship with a Person; with me in fact. If you hold to my teaching, if you are really my disciples, then you will know the Truth.’

In other words, Truth is not something that you experience through yoga or discover through science, it is Someone to be encountered and followed. ‘Commit yourselves to me,’ he says, ‘and you will know the Truth for which you are searching. In fact if you did but know it, when you look behind this universe for some great unchanging and abiding principle of coherence, you are looking for me.’ As he would say to his disciples in John 14 later, ‘I am the Truth.’ That claim is a really momentous one, and it has some very important impli-



cations for us.

First of all, it exposes the fallacy of those who think you can only become a Christian by committing intellectual suicide. Faith, they claim, is a blind leap in the dark. It is not an act of reason, but of desperation. As the schoolboy wrote in his RE exam, 'Faith is believing what you know ain't true.' I cannot find words sufficiently strong to repudiate that nonsense. Jesus says here that we do not give up the quest for Truth and receive him instead. It is as the Truth that Jesus wants to be accepted, or not at all. Indeed because he is the source of all truth, he is far more concerned about our intellectual integrity in receiving him than we are ourselves. He wants a discipleship that is motivated by the quest for Truth, not by a flight from it.

Secondly, we can see here why it is that mere intellectualism is never going to satisfy any human being's longing for Truth. It is for the simple reason that Truth is not an idea which we must conceptualize, but a Person with whom we must become involved. Maybe you are a mathematician, dreaming that one day you will win the Nobel Prize for being the first person to complete the unified field theory. You are going to integrate all known physical phenomena in one set of equations that will thereafter be known by your name.

Suppose you succeed in that ambition. Do you think that when you have fulfilled your dream you will know the Truth? No, all you will have done is to find out a little more precisely how the universe behaves. But the answer to the question *why* there is a universe at all and what makes it a *universe* rather than a *diverse* or a *multiverse*, would be as incomprehensible to you as ever. Answers to the question 'how' may be describable by your higher mathematics, but answers to the question 'why' are, according to Jesus, discoverable only by Christian discipleship.

That is why there are many humble, non-intellectual souls in this world who can barely recall their two times table but who may be incomparably closer to the Truth than you are, in spite of your knowledge of general relativity and quantum



mechanics.

The third thing that we learn here is why it is utterly pointless either to demand or to attempt to give scientific proofs of the Christian message. You constantly find people who are trying to do so. 'Prove it to me,' they ask. Sometimes they are looking for logical demonstrations, a list of mathematical symbols with 'QED' at the bottom. Sometimes they are searching for miraculous demonstrations. 'All right God, if you are there, write it in the sky: I'm here, OK? Yours truly, Jesus.' But either way, the logic is always the same. 'I won't believe *unless* . . .' They put a conditional clause on their discipleship—'I'll follow Jesus, *if* you prove to me it's true.'

But it cannot be done. Such people want to put the cart before the horse. Christianity cannot be proved first and practised afterwards. According to Jesus, the proof is dependent on the practice, which is why he puts the conditional clause the other way round. He doesn't say, '*If* it's the Truth, follow my teaching.' He says, '*If* you follow my teaching, you will know the Truth.'

I cannot stress to you enough how important that is. It makes all the difference in the world to the way in which we speak to non-Christians about finding faith. There is a splendid example of it in Rebecca Manley Pippert's book, *Out of the Saltshaker* (IVP). She tells the story of Sue. Sue was a very bright student, but an agnostic. She was interested in Christianity but had many intellectual questions about faith. So she came to Rebecca and told her 'I'm plagued with doubts. I can't pray to receive Christ because it would be dishonest. What should I do?' So Rebecca advised her, 'Tell God, or the four walls if that's what you think you are speaking to, that you want to find out if Jesus is truly God, and that if you could feel more certain you would follow him. Then begin to read the gospels, every day. Each day as you read, something will probably hit you and make sense. Whatever that is, do it as soon as you can.'

Sue gulped and replied, 'That's radical. But I'll do it.' So she started having what she called 'pagan quiet times', praying



to the walls and then reading her Bible.  
This is what happened:

One day, I read in the Bible, 'If someone steals your coat, don't let him have only that, but offer your cloak as well.' For whatever reason, that verse hit me between the eyes. So I said to the four walls, 'Listen walls—or God if you're there—I'm going to do what this verse says if the opportunity arises today. I want to remind you that I am trying to do things your way in order to find out if you exist and if Jesus really is who he says. Amen.'

The day went by and I forgot the verse. Then I headed to the library to continue working on my senior thesis. Just as I sat down at my designated thesis desk this guy comes up and starts yelling at me. He told me the school hadn't given him his thesis desk so he was going to take mine . . . I started yelling back and pretty soon we caused quite a ruckus. It was when he glared at me and said, 'Look I'm stealing it from you whether you like it or not,' that it suddenly hit me.

I just looked at him and moaned. OHHHHH, no. I can't believe it . . . 'Look God, if you're there, I do want to know if Jesus is God. But isn't there some other way of finding out besides obeying that verse? I mean, couldn't I tithe or get baptised or give up something else? But **DON'T TAKE MY THESIS DESK!** I mean with my luck I'll give up the desk and then discover that you don't exist.'

But I couldn't escape the fact that I had read the verse the very same day that someone tried to rob me. Before, I'd always been amused to see how Jesus aimed for the jugular vein in his conversations with people in the Bible. But now it didn't feel so funny. I took a deep breath, tried not to swear and said, 'OK, you can have the desk.'

He looked bewildered . . . he grabbed my arm and asked me why in the world was I going to let him have it. I told him he would think I'd really flipped out, but I was trying to discover if Jesus was really who he claimed to be. I was attempting to do the things he told us to do. 'And today I read that if somebody tried to rip me off I was supposed to let them and even throw in something extra to boot.' All I could see were the whites of his eyes. 'So I'm going to give you the desk but don't press your luck about the something extra.' Then he asked, 'Why in the world would



Jesus say such a crazy thing?’ Then I said, ‘Hey, if there’s one thing I’ve learned from reading about Jesus and meeting some real Christians, it’s that Jesus would give you a whole lot more than a thesis desk if you’d let him. I know Jesus would give it to you. So that thesis desk is yours.’

And this is the sentence I want you to think about:

As I said those words *I just simply knew it was all true*. I kinda felt like God was saying, ‘Well done. That’s the way I want my children to behave.’

[*Out of the Saltshaker*, IVP, pages 98–100.]

That is exactly what Jesus is saying here. ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples and you will know the Truth.’ It is rather like marriage. You may think you know what marriage is like before you commit yourself to it, but you don’t. You don’t know the half, because marriage involves a personal relationship. Jesus says that Truth is the same. You cannot discover it without commitment to the person concerned.

To put it another way, you cannot approach Jesus on the lines of purely theoretical analysis. Your interest in him has to be experimental from the beginning or you will never get anywhere. Jesus is making a remarkable promise. He says here that without reading tomes of philosophy, or mastering Boolean algebra, or practising yoga meditation techniques, you and I can touch the ultimate reality behind the universe. In the daily routine of living we can find our existence becoming integrated and meaningful. Instead of going nowhere, we shall find we are going somewhere. Instead of feeling alienated we shall feel we belong, that we know who we are, why we are here and where we are going. We can know what the world is for and why we are in it. We can know the Truth, and through nothing more complicated than placing our faith in him and proving our commitment to him by our adhering to his teaching.



## What Jesus says about Freedom

You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (8:32).

If there is one thing that has generated as much or more human motivation in history than the quest for Truth, it is the quest for Freedom. For most of us the word immediately evokes political associations. We think of the many thousands of people who fought and died to emancipate themselves from dictatorial régimes. Think of the French Revolution and its street cry of 'liberté'. Or of Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous fourfold definition of freedom in his speech to Congress in 1941: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear. Freedom, according to Roosevelt, was something that you had to achieve through democratic government and social justice, which is the way that most of us think about it today.

Though the Jews of Jesus day would not have expressed it in quite the same way, they were basically thinking along political lines too. 'What do you mean?' they asked. 'We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say we shall be set free? That future tense is out of place, Jesus. We're Israelites! Slavery is anathema to us.' To be honest, their retort was a little optimistic, because like countless others at that particular time they were part of the Roman Empire. But the Jews had noble thoughts, as they always have done. They did not think of themselves as slaves, even if other people did.

But it is not for that reason that Jesus talks about a need for freedom. In fact the vital thing to notice about what he says here is that when he speaks of freedom, his mind is not on political liberation at all.

I tell you the truth. Everyone who sins is a slave to sin (8:34).

In other words, in Jesus' mind the most vicious form of bondage to which we human beings are victim is not bondage to oppressive political systems at all. The fundamental slavery of the human race, he says, is slavery to moral failure—to sin.



It is the evil habits we cannot break, the selfish desires we must gratify and the shameful guilt we are unable to escape which are our real masters.

While we serve them all, proud talk about political freedom is just so much empty facade. Freedom of speech you may have, but control of your tongue you do not. Freedom of worship you may have, but love for God in your heart you do not. Freedom from want you may have, but contentment with what you have, you do not. You may be free from fear, but you do not enjoy peace of conscience. What is more, Jesus teaches, even if you were to admit to yourself the seriousness of your bondage to moral failure, you could not do anything to emancipate yourself from it. Since you are a slave, your position is one of powerlessness in the moral realm.

A slave has no permanent place in the family. But a son belongs to it for ever (8:35).

There is only one person in the universe, says Jesus, who can liberate you from the servitude to which you are so inextricably victim. That is someone who does not share your captivity. Only the person who can say, 'Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?' (v.46) or 'I always do what pleases [God]' (v.29) can also say 'if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.' Once again, Jesus is making an immensely important claim.

First of all, it makes absolutely clear to us why it was Jesus refused to be a political messiah. As we saw in John 6, his Galilean fellow countrymen were very enthusiastic about making him king of their anti-imperialist liberation army. But Jesus refused their offer. His reason is now obvious. Political liberation was not his mission. He had something far more important to do in the way of deliverance than merely the deliverance of men and women from their political oppressors. He was here to do something about the dominion of sin over human lives.

In his eyes it was that which ruined the world, and it succeeds in doing so no matter who holds the reins of power.



That is why no matter how many revolutions you have, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred you finish up with another dictator ten times worse than the one you got rid of. The philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau said that man was born free and it was society that put him in chains; Jesus says that is not the case at all. We are *born* in chains. That is the measure of our helplessness.

That is why, of course, the extreme Left will always be made up of very young men and women. It has to be so, because only those who are young enough not to have been disillusioned by the inveteracy of evil in this world will be capable of the necessary utopianism about the human race. Old men have learned by bitter experience to be cynical about the perfectability of humanity. There was some famous correspondence in *The Times* at the turn of the century. The newspaper asked for people's opinion of what was wrong with the world. Predictably, there were all kinds of letters, some of which blamed the system, some education and some the government. The letter from author G. K. Chesterton was however very short. It simply said, 'Dear Sir, I am. Yours faithfully, G. K. Chesterton.' That is the truth to which Jesus is trying to point us here, namely, that *we* are the problem with the world. You want to understand what is wrong with the world? Look in the mirror! I remember a Marxist student once told me with great glee about the marvellous classless society that socialism would one day set up. So I asked him, 'Are you sure that when this marvellous classless society appears, you won't spoil it?' To give him credit, he admitted that he was not so sure about whether he would or not. As Golding demonstrates in his book, *Lord of the Flies*, evil is not some superficial rash on the surface of the human race, born of our capitalistic economics, or our bourgeois education. It is a moral cancer that eats at the heart of every individual member of the human race. No matter how young we may be, or how idyllic our environment, evil will out. You can call Jesus a reactionary if you will. I prefer to call him a realist. If this world is going to be changed, he says, it is not radically new politics we



need. It is radically new people. And that is what Jesus is offering: 'The Son can make you free.'

That brings us to the second thing which this passage makes very clear: the difference between real Freedom and that with which it is often confused these days: permissiveness. The 1960s coined the phrase the 'permissive society'. Of course, when people used it, they did not mean that the 1960s were a deeper den of vice than any era that had preceded them. What made the sixties different was that freedom became radically re-interpreted. For the first time, really large numbers of ordinary people began to define freedom as the liberty to do as you want. Moral values, they said, were just social conventions.

Of course, scholars had been saying things like that for a long time; but this was the first time that such a view gained widespread popular credence. To be really free, it was argued, we had to be willing to defy the inhibiting influence which social conventions had over us. We must add to Roosevelt's famous four freedoms a fifth; freedom of choice, freedom to 'Do your own thing', to be your own person. It is a very intoxicating thought. But according to Jesus it is utterly wrong. Devising a new morality no more liberates men and women than creating a new society does.

You see, moral values are built into this universe by the moral God who made both it and us. When we sin, therefore, we are not just flouting social conventions that men have invented. We are like elephants trying to fly. We are defying laws which we have been made by nature to obey. That is why Jesus says that anybody who sins is a slave to sin.

There is a story from Australia which illustrates the point a little. A snake managed to enter a home one day and saw a canary in a cage. It decided that the bird would make a tasty morsel, and so went through the bars of the cage and ate it. Unfortunately once the bird was in its throat, the snake was too big to get back out of the cage again. It was 'a prisoner of appetite'! To me, that is a model of what the human race has done. We have refused to accept the moral limits which the



Creator has placed upon us. Determined to find our way through the bars, we now find ourselves not free at all, but imprisoned. All our so-called permissiveness has brought us is a miserable bondage to self-indulgence.

True freedom is not liberty to do as you want. That is licence, or anarchy. True freedom is the liberty to do as you *ought*. It involves the recognition that we are not here simply to 'do our own thing'. We are here as sons and daughters of God, to live our lives in accordance with our Maker's plan. He gives us huge liberty to enjoy. Those no-entry signs which are there are displayed not to spoil our fun, but to protect our Freedom. Jesus would show us that true Freedom. He wants to re-introduce it to us, and he can do it, for he possesses the key to the cage. He is the Son. If the Son makes you free you will be free indeed.

### **What Jesus says about himself**

[Jesus said] 'You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins' (8:23-24).

When Jesus offers men and women liberating truth, it is never an optional extra. So far as he is concerned it is not the icing on the cake of life. It is a vital necessity. Without this liberating truth we will die in our sins. For most of us, the thought of dying is bad enough, but not for Jesus. He could say, 'I tell you the truth, if a man keeps my word, he will never see death' (v.51). In other words, death will pass by like a bridge on a train journey, so innocuous as hardly to be noticed.

It is no terrible thing to die. But it is a terrible thing to die in your sins, to die unliberated by the Truth that is in Jesus, with the weight of guilt and shame still like a noose round your neck and face the judgement of the God who made us. But 'unless people believe in the unique Person that I am,' says Jesus, 'that will be their destiny.'

Now do you see why Jesus was so controversial? He does



not engage in controversy just for the fun of it. He was naturally of an irenical spirit. If Jesus gets so excited about those who deny his claims, you can be sure that absolutely vital issues are at stake. So we must not be seduced by the bland assurances of liberal twentieth-century theologians who tell us that everything will be all right for everybody in the end. Certainly, Jesus is the light of the world. But Jesus was not a universalist. He did not believe that everybody was going to heaven. In fact, in his own way the faith he brought was every bit as exclusive, as narrow, yes even as intolerant as the Judaism which it supplanted.

For Jesus did not believe that the truth lay in all great religions, or that men could find freedom anywhere and everywhere they wanted. He insisted that Truth and Freedom came from him, and him alone. 'I am the light of the world,' he said. The emphasis in that verse falls not on the universality of the word 'world' but on the exclusiveness of the pronoun 'I'. Photographers know that one of the things light does is to cast shadows, thereby creating contrasts. The more intense and the more uni-directional the light is, the deeper those shadows, and the starker those contrasts. So Jesus as the light of the world did not come to dispel controversy. His purpose was to dwarf all previous controversies into insignificance by the polarizing effects of his own person. Of course he had to be a controversialist! The issues at stake were far too serious, much too far-reaching to be weak-kneed about them. 'If you don't believe that I am he,' he said, 'you will die in your sins' (cf. 8:24).

As he spoke those very words, the spectators in the crowd were being ever more sharply divided. The contrast was appearing: for him or against him. And it will be so for some of you reading this. Some of you will turn your face towards the light, and others of you will turn your back to it. Of the former, he says, 'If you hold to my teaching, and stick to it, you will really be my disciples. You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.' The proof of the pudding is in the eating. To the latter he says, 'Why is my language unclear? It



is because you are unable to hear what I say. You are of your father the devil.' Is it not a terrible thing to be numbered with those who crucified Jesus? And to those of you who are still sitting in the twilight zone, between light and darkness, he issues this solemn warning: 'If you do not believe that I am the One I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.'

There is no decision any human being can make which is of greater importance than that. That is why Jesus had to be a controversialist. That is why those of us who follow him may sometimes have to be controversialists too.



## 6

### *The Shepherd*

**John 10:1–42**

Heaven as conventionally conceived is a place so inane, so dull, so useless, so miserable that nobody has ever ventured to describe a whole day there, though plenty of people have described a day at the seaside. (*Misalliance [or Parents and Children]* Constable, 1914.)

That is George Bernard Shaw in the preface to one of his plays, expressing a sentiment with which I confess I have some sympathy. Heaven in most people's minds, I fear, is not a particularly inviting place. Indeed as a child I can distinctly remember being deeply apprehensive at the prospect of going there.

'What do you do there?' I asked. 'It will be so boring!' Part of the trouble was that my infantile image of heaven was largely shaped by the Gothic architecture of the local parish church. It was, I recall, a place associated in my mind with interminable dreariness and hard pews on which one was not permitted to fidget. However, as I reflect a bit more deeply, I realize that my reservations about heaven actually go rather deeper than that. It was not simply the austerity of St Michael and All Angels on the corner of the High Street that was to blame. I had as a child a distinct uneasiness with the whole concept of eternity generally. Whenever I asked people what eternity was, they always told me that it means 'living for ever and ever, dear.'

Frankly I found such an idea quite appalling. It was hard



enough to keep myself amused during the six weeks of the school summer holiday. To have to do so for years and years on end, by my reckoning, was no recipe for perpetual bliss but rather one for perpetual tedium. Indeed, if heaven really was anything like St Michael and All Angels, there would not even be any toys to play with up there—just a monotonous droning of the organ, not to mention the Vicar. No, George Bernard Shaw was quite right. Give me a day at the seaside any time in preference to heaven!

I sometimes wonder whether, underneath the intellectual objections that many sceptics raise to the Christian faith these days, there does not lie a very similar disquiet, albeit a sub-conscious one. Certainly, when I talk to many young people outside the church I often come away feeling that they have rejected Christianity not because they are strongly convinced that it's false, but simply because the distinct impression has been given to them that it is dull.

It is a very great pity, because as I realize now, it is all founded on a tragic misconception. The idea of living for ever and ever is not only a very inadequate description of heaven, but also a positively sub-Christian one. Spiritualists may be satisfied with simply surviving beyond the grave. But Christians are not! Even the ancient Greeks perceived that mere immortality would not be a blessing for the human race but a curse. Jesus, however, never offered mere immortality. Notice what he says:

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full (10:10).

Heaven for Jesus was not an extension of the duration of life, but an intensification of the experience of life. Jesus did not come merely to offer us more life quantitatively, but more life qualitatively—'life to the full'.

I do not know much about heaven. Nobody does. But I can guarantee one thing. Nobody there is ever bored. I doubt whether anybody in heaven ever thinks so much as to look at their watch. Have you not sometimes had, for a fleeting



moment or two, such an experience? As a student perhaps, when you sat up late talking about things with your college friends, just talking and talking. The hours flew by but you were never conscious of their passing, because there was a kind of glow inside you generated by the companionship which you were experiencing. You never wanted the evening to end. That is what heaven is like—'life to the full'.

Or perhaps some of you have felt that thrill, that very sublime rapture, when reading a great book, or watching a great play, or listening to great music; as if joy had so totally enthralled you that it lifted you for that moment out of time and space altogether. Have you ever felt that? That is what heaven is like, 'life to the full'.

Or maybe you have climbed a mountain in the early morning and stood there on the summit, captivated by the grandeur of the scene. You felt that you could stand there for ever, and never grow tired of looking at it. Or maybe you have fallen in love, and know that very peculiar euphoria at the prospect of seeing him or her once again. 'I was just existing till I met you,' we say. That too is what heaven is like—'life to the full'!

Forget about the Gothic architecture, about the hard pews. Take the deepest enchantment that you have ever known, the loftiest ecstasy that you have ever felt. Take the greatest fulfilment you have ever experienced. Take that moment when you felt most totally alive. Then intensify that instant a million-fold, and perhaps you will be getting within range of imagining what heaven is like. Jesus did not come to give us more time to kill. He came to give us more life to live. 'I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.'

Some of you may find that difficult to believe. I respect your incredulity, though I would like to have the opportunity to change it. But if any of you says he finds that too dull to interest him, or too unattractive to be worth investigating, I am at a loss to imagine what you *would* consider exciting or important.

Jesus has come to offer us life to the full. We need to discover three vital things about that life if we are going to enjoy



it as Jesus wants us to. They come out of the parable of pastoral life which Jesus first tells us, in John chapter 10, and then progressively interprets to us.

### The source of life

I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber (10:1).

They did not possess bank vaults in Jesus' day. Their wealth was measured in cattle or sheep, not in pieces of coloured paper. But security against theft was of course still very important. So every town and village had the equivalent of a bank, namely the sheep pen; an enclosed space where the animals could be looked after, with high walls and a gate. Beside the gate or perhaps even lying down in its entrance was a guard.

Bona fide shepherds would of course recognize the watchman and be recognized by him. They would be allowed through the gate to summon their flock. On the other hand, anyone who tried to climb over the walls to get in was obviously up to no good. They were out to steal the sheep or to slaughter them. As Jesus puts it, they were thieves and robbers (the word 'robber' had the additional connotation of violence as well as larceny). So everybody in Jesus' audience knew exactly what he meant when he said that the only legitimate way into the sheep pen was through the gate.

I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved (10:7-9).

This is another one of those startling and very emphatic statements to which we have grown accustomed in these discourses in John's gospel. Notice once again the emphasis on the first person singular pronoun. '*I* am the gate.' Jesus is distinguishing himself here, very forcibly, from certain others whom he derogates not just as rivals but as criminals, 'thieves



and robbers'. In order to understand what he is talking about, we first have to identify who these others are.

There are two possibilities. The first is that Jesus is referring here to the Jewish establishment of his own day. If you look back at previous chapters you will see that this discourse in chapter 10 follows straight on from the controversy which Jesus had begun to have with the high-ranking Jews (we looked at that in the previous chapter of this book). In fact at the very end of chapter 9 we find Jesus contradicting the Pharisees in a very outspoken way, telling them that they are not really competent to lead others because they are spiritually blind. And he says that their refusal to admit their spiritual blindness renders them all the more culpable.

So it is tempting to identify the thieves and robbers that Jesus goes on to describe immediately in 10:1 as these Pharisees and others like them. Jesus was saying that they were not the true shepherds of God's flock, though they claimed to be. They were, in fact, just vandals causing irreparable damage to God's sheep. There are many commentators who pursue that line of interpretation through these verses.

But there is a serious flaw, to my mind, in that theory, and it is revealed by Jesus' comment in verse 8, 'All who ever came before me.' That seems a very unnatural way to speak of the Jewish establishment. Firstly, they were not Jesus' predecessors, but his contemporaries. So why does he talk about them coming before him? Secondly, because of the comprehensiveness of the word *all*. What about Nicodemus and the others of whom we read among the Jewish aristocracy putting their faith in Jesus contrary to the general trend among their peers? Jesus was surely not offering a blanket condemnation of every priest and scribe who had ever exerted influence on the Jewish people.

It seems to me that the only way in which we can make sense of what Jesus says in verse 8 is to say that in fact it was not the Jewish establishment at all that was in his mind here, but someone else; that he was referring to the false messiahs who had arisen in Israel and with whom he was constantly in



danger of being confused by the people at large. We know from other first-century historical sources that there were many such charismatic leaders in the century or so immediately preceding Jesus' ministry. Indeed Galilee, his own home area, was notorious as a seed-bed for their movements.

It is not surprising that Jesus alludes to them, for John seems to have a special interest in demonstrating to his readership the radical distinction between these political activists, who were so common and so well-known to the people of his day, and Jesus. We have noticed several references to that already, especially in chapter 6 when Jesus rejected the invitation of the Galilean mob to be their king. This is one more example of the evangelist's concern to show us that Jesus was not a political messiah.

The imagery of thieves and robbers was of course much more obviously applicable to these self-styled saviours of Israel than it was to the Jewish establishment. They were, without exception, men of violence. They sought to free Israel from the yoke of imperial Rome by revolution. We would call them freedom-fighters, or even terrorists.

Whatever moral verdict you pass on their activities, the important thing so far as Jesus was concerned is that they exploited the messianic expectations of the people. 'Once we have thrown out the Romans,' they said, 'then the new age of peace and plenty that the prophets talk about in the Old Testament will finally dawn.' Some of them in fact made quite personal claims to be the messiah. They did not say they were just shepherds, in the general sense of being national leaders. They arrogated to themselves the title *The Shepherd*. This was the messianic title used by Ezekiel in the Old Testament when God said through him 'I will save my flock [Israel] . . . And I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them and be their Shepherd' (Ezek 34:22-23).

So when Jesus says 'All who ever came before me are thieves and robbers,' he is saying very emphatically that without exception, all those who had claimed such messianic titles in the past had been impostors. Their violent methods, he



says, were in themselves evidence of their imposture. 'I am the gate. I am the only One who has the right to be called the Christ, the Messiah. The way to the promised kingdom of heaven is through me, and through absolutely nobody else.'

If we are right in detecting this allusion to the revolutionary movements of the first century in these verses, it means of course that this passage has a very direct and important relevance to our twentieth-century situation. For the only real hope for the future which modern man can embrace, in his disaffection with the traditional Christian idea of heaven, is some kind of alternative humanistic utopia.

The classic expression of that, of course, derives from the genius of Karl Marx, as embodied in his classless society. In many respects this is just a secularized version of heaven. Marx said that people can only discover their true happiness or fulfilment, once they have liberated themselves from economic oppression and exploitation and discovered in the collapse of the capitalist system the bliss of participating in a paradise on earth. In such a state, all the old alienations would be dissolved and man would be free to develop his full human potential.

That is the Marxist dream, and it is a very powerful thought. There clearly are grave weaknesses in the capitalist system. It is very tempting for us to blame all our frustrations and misery in life upon its victimization of us. Yet, in a very real sense, that was precisely what these false messiahs in Jesus' day were saying too. It was imperialism, they said, that was the problem. If they could only overthrow the Romans then the kingdom of God would arrive. Notice the response which Jesus makes to that—it is an emphatic 'no'. 'Do not be duped by these messiahs of violence,' he says. 'They are not saviours at all, but brigands.' See the hallmark of their stock in trade. A blatant disregard for personal property—'They come to steal'. A ruthless indifference to human life—'They come to kill'. An irrational contempt for anything of value—'They come to destroy'.

Two thousand years have not changed the pattern. This trio



of criminality has been characteristic of every revolutionary movement the world has seen, not least the Marxist variety with which our twentieth century is so plagued. I know that we often cite the appalling genocide of Hitler against the Jews as a symbol of the degree to which man's inhumanity to man can go. Yet the cold statistical truth is that compared to the vast millions who have perished under Lenin, under Stalin, under Mao, under Pol Pot, in our century, the death toll of fascist Germany seems almost modest.

What has been achieved by all this hideous carnage and revolutionary violence? Where is this perfect society of which Marx dreamed? Do you find it in Russia? Or in China? No, Jesus is right. It is not the Christian doctrine of heaven that is the myth, but the humanist dream of utopia. That is the thing which never materializes. Of course, revolutions do accomplish something every now and then. Jesus is not such a fool as to forget that the life of his nation had occasionally benefited from a *coup d'état*. He would, however, have us realize two very important things here.

Firstly, whatever revolutions achieve they do so only at the expense of much property, many lives and incalculable destruction of culture. The thief comes to steal and to kill and to destroy. Secondly, and more significantly, whatever these revolutions achieve, they never bring to man that new quality of fulfilment in life that their ideological messiahs promised. 'I am the gate,' said Jesus. He, and nobody else, had come that they might have life. People who go his way are the ones who will find true liberty. 'They go in and they go out.' They are the ones who find true deliverance. 'They are saved.' They are the ones who find true fulfilment. 'They find pasture.' A man must enter by Christ if he wants to find real liberation, real satisfaction, real life. 'I am the gate.' And note very carefully, he doesn't carry a machine gun. He carries a cross.

### **The cost of life**

I am the good Shepherd. The good Shepherd lays down his life



for the sheep (10:11).

It is important to realize that the phrase 'good shepherd' would not generate the kind of sentimentality in a Jew which I suspect it does in us. For some reason, in English culture shepherds are viewed as rather romantic figures who spend most of their time cuddling little lambs and roaming hillsides with their faithful dogs. That was not the image which a shepherd had in Israel. They were men who lived dangerous lives.

Even more important than that, however, when 'shepherd' was used with the definite article (*'the Shepherd'*) by somebody like Jesus, it had a messianic significance. It evoked feelings not so much of sentimentality but of royalty. That is why Jesus' audience was thrown into such a state of bewilderment. If he had said, 'I am the Shepherd come to lead Israel to freedom,' there is not one of them who would have missed what he was talking about. But Jesus did not. Instead, he insisted on welding this messianic metaphor of the Shepherd on to the thought of death. Jesus' messiahship was not going to be like that of the impostors who had come before him. Their messiahship had taken the lives of men. Jesus' messiahship was going to give life to men, but only at the expense of his own.

There are three things about Jesus' death which he emphasizes very clearly here. The first thing you will notice is that Jesus is quite convinced that his death is going to be a *loving one*.

The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, . . . I lay down my life for the sheep (10:12-15).

Of course, the word 'good' can mean various things. We can talk about a good car, if it works; we can talk about a good man, if he is morally upright. The interesting thing about the



word 'good', which John uses here, is that it is not the normal one that you might associate either with efficiency or with moral uprightness. It is a word that has a distinct overtone of attractiveness. It often means 'good to look at'. Perhaps John is suggesting that people are not won to Jesus by the efficiency of his party machine, nor because they embrace his political ambitions but that it is the magnetism of his personal goodness that draws them to him. They are persuaded that he really cares for them.

Nowhere is this goodness seen better than in his willingness to die on their behalf. Of course there are those who appear to be shepherds, but are actually hired men, in it for what they can get out of it. They are motivated by self-interest and as a result, when you really need them you cannot rely on them because they are not really interested in you. They are just professional do-gooders. We have all met that kind of person. But Jesus is not like that. He is really concerned about us. He really wants us to enjoy fulfilment in life and he has proved it. If we had any doubt about it, he has demonstrated it conclusively by dying for us. It was a loving death. Nowhere do we see the love in Christ's heart more clearly than there on the cross.

The second thing that I want you to notice is that it was also a *planned death*.

No-one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again (10:18).

William Barclay tells the story of a young man in the First World War who was wounded in the trenches during an attack. The medic who came to treat him had to say to him, 'I'm sorry soldier, you've lost your arm.' The young soldier is reputed to have replied, 'Doc, I didn't lose it. I gave it.' Jesus is saying something rather similar here. But he is not just saying that he came into this world willing to die, if necessary, like a soldier going into battle. He is stating that he came into this world knowing that death would be necessary. It was planned, and right through his life that plan was never



thwarted. He was in control of his destiny all the time. He never saw himself as the tragic victim of circumstances. Such was his personal authority over events that he claims no one could take his life from him against his will. His death was a voluntary act of sacrifice, the most voluntary act of sacrifice of which any man has ever been capable. Furthermore, his death had a specific goal.

I know my sheep and my sheep know me . . . and I lay down my life for the sheep (10:14–15).

As Jesus looked out on the world, his eyes were able to penetrate through time and space. Everywhere, he saw people who in some very intimate way belonged to him, and whom he calls 'my sheep'.

'I know them,' he says. They are not just a faceless multitude, but are personally known to him. In fact he continues, 'There are other sheep outside this sheep pen. I've got to bring them also.' He is thinking here almost certainly of going outside Israel to the Gentile nations. 'In all the four corners of the earth there are people who belong to me,' he says. 'And it is for them that I am dying, for my sheep.'

I know we sometimes say that Jesus died for the world. John himself says so, and in a very real sense that is correct. But at the same time, it is also perfectly true to say that Jesus was not dying for a generalized mass of humanity. He tells us here that he knew for whom he was dying. He had them in his mind. There is no doubt in his voice either. His planned death for them would be successful. 'I will bring them,' he says. 'They will listen to my voice. There shall be one flock and one Shepherd.' He has complete confidence that this planned death would achieve what it set out to achieve.

That brings us to the third thing we have to notice if we are going to make sense of what Jesus is saying here: it was a *saving death*. In both verse 11 and in verse 15, he says, it was:

for the sheep.

What do you make of that? Some people suggest it means



that Jesus died to set the sheep an example of unselfishness. A shepherd's death does of course prove that he is a very unselfish person. As distinct from the hired hand, he has a personal interest and care for the sheep. Otherwise he would not have died.

But what sense does it make to say that the shepherd dies in order to set the sheep an example? I mean, suppose you were a sheep, out in the wilderness somewhere and your shepherd said to you, 'I love you sheep and I'm going to jump over this cliff to prove it.' Can you make any sense out of that? No! Even if sheep were more intelligent than they are usually supposed to be, they would be utterly bewildered. Only in circumstances where the sheep were *in danger* would the death of the shepherd make sense as an example of love. That is the only possible situation that can arise where a shepherd would die for his sheep as an intelligible act of devotion to them.

One travelogue of the Middle East actually recounts such an occasion, when a Semitic shepherd defended his flock against three Bedouin robbers and was cut to pieces in the act. That makes sense to us, as a demonstration of love and dedication to the sheep. But jumping off a cliff would not.

That is, of course, why Jesus has to mention the wolf.

When he sees the wolf coming [the hired hand] abandons the sheep and runs away (10:12).

The reason many people have difficulty understanding why Jesus had to die for them is because they do not realize what danger they are in. It is as simple as that. There is a wolf coming and Jesus knew it. Sinful men and women like us are one day going to die, and we will then have to face God in judgement. Jesus knew that was our situation and that it was an immensely perilous one.

Have you ever seen a sheep flock when there is a predator near, even when it is only a dog? They rush around in a completely futile panic. That is our human condition. We know we are doomed to die, and that knowledge mocks us. It



starts mocking us from the very moment in our youth when we realize we are going to die one day. It continues mocking us through middle age and it goes on mocking us right up until the end. The wolf is coming! 'It is appointed to men once to die, and after death the judgement.' That is why we need a shepherd—the good Shepherd, not a professional do-gooder. We need the kind of shepherd who is willing to take our death from our shoulders and bear it himself. That is what Jesus means when he says that he is the good Shepherd and gives his life for the sheep. He did not give his life just to prove how much he loved us. He gave it to save us from the wolf.

### **The gift of life**

You do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life (10:26–27).

Jesus is doing here what we have seen him do so often in John's gospel, separating human beings into two groups. On the one hand, he says, there are some people who do not understand the cross. They do not understand Jesus. They do not realize how much danger they are in. They feel happy. They feel safe. They sense no wolf prowling around and so they feel no need of a shepherd to protect them. 'I'm OK,' they say. They do not believe in Jesus because they are not his sheep.

But, Jesus adds, there is another group and they feel totally differently about things. They know their lives are empty and spoiled. And they desperately want to find that life in all its fullness that Jesus claims to provide. Is that the group which you belong to?

Jesus gives us here some very clear tests by which to know whether we are of that company.

My sheep listen to my voice (10:27).

They have heard other voices clamouring for their attention: the revolutionaries, the philosophers. All kinds of people



have been saying 'Come my way'. But some kind of gut intuition has told them that all their claims are false, that their ideas are not going to meet the deep need of their hearts. They might dabble in them for a little while, but they quickly grow disillusioned. Eventually, they run away from those strange voices because they can hear another voice beckoning to them. They hear it through the pages of this book, the Bible. And somehow that voice compels their attention. They recognize it as the voice of the One who can really meet their need.

They follow me (10:27).

I like the way that Jesus puts it. Some people have the idea that when you become a Christian, Jesus shuts you in, puts you into a cage, limits your freedom and takes away all your fun. It all goes back to what we were saying earlier about Christianity being dull.

But that is not the pattern as Jesus sees it. His sheep follow him *freely*. They are not coerced or whipped. They are not driven as though by a butcher. They follow voluntarily, because they know that is where their true freedom and true fulfilment lie. There may of course be some stupid sheep who prefer life in the sheep pen, or with one of those thieves and robbers, or even the hired hand. 'But,' says Jesus, 'my sheep know where they are well off. They follow me, and it's in following me that they discover that life which I have been talking about.'

That brings us to the third thing that marks out these sheep. They hear the voice of Jesus and recognize it for the authoritative voice that it is. They follow Jesus, changing their lives in order to be obedient to him. Then:

I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand (10:28).

All around this world today there are people who are feeling insecure. They are not necessarily neurotic people, bowed down by their inadequate upbringings. They might be quite



sane, well-adjusted people. But they still feel insecure, because they have no idea where they are going, or what they are here for. They do not really feel they belong, or that anybody loves them. They are cynical about life, about relationships, about careers, about just about everything, and at the root of that cynicism is insecurity.

Am I not telling the truth when I say that what they need to feel is the security of the Shepherd's hand? 'I give them eternal life,' says Jesus. 'It is a free gift to my sheep. They will never perish, and no one can ever remove them from the security of that new relationship they have with me. It is impossible. For it is my father himself who has given them to me and he is greater than anything. His hand is invincible.'

There is a story I love about John Brown, the great Scottish pastor. He once visited a lady on her death-bed. 'Jane,' he said, 'what would you say if after all that he has done for you, God should let you perish?' The old woman thought for a moment and then she said, 'Well, if he did, he'd lose more than I would, I reckon. For I'd only lose my soul. He'd lose his honour, for he has said "they shall never perish".'

Dare I ask you whether you have heard the voice of the Shepherd? Dare I ask you whether, having heard it, you've followed him? That is what Jesus is calling us to. A life of discipleship; a life in that group who respond to his call. I cannot tell you where that life may lead you. It would be irresponsible of me to tell you that it will be a bed of roses, or that all the problems you are conscious of now will evaporate overnight. It is not going to be like that. Conversion is crossing a Rubicon. You might be in for anything. But one thing I do promise you. You will never find life with Jesus boring, even though it does last for ever.



## 7

# *The Way*

**John 14:1-14**

There are very few experiences that are more distressing to the human heart than loss. Even if the object concerned is no more than a sentimental trinket or a pet animal, we still feel heartbroken. And when we lose a person, our sense of emotional devastation can be almost unendurable. Ask any widow, or orphan, or even a divorcee and they will tell you. Love's power to enrich our lives is matched only by its power to embitter them with tragedy when we lose what we have loved.

As we come to these verses in John's gospel just such a tragedy is about to engulf the disciples. Judas has gone off into the night intent upon his act of betrayal. Jesus knew that it was now only a matter of hours before that moment arrived towards which his life had been inexorably moving for the last three years: the moment of his death.

The supper that he is sharing with his dear friends will be the last one they will have together. The premonition of that separation hangs dark and brooding like a pall over their whole conversation around the table. For their part, the disciples just cannot understand what's going on. They have never seen Jesus in this mood before. It bewilders and frightens them. Their hearts are troubled. Jesus speaks on the one hand of imminent triumph, 'Now is the Son of Man glorified.' But if that is so why does such dark sorrow furrow his brow? He challenges them with the importance of their



mutual affection. 'Love one another,' he says. But why does he add that ominous past tense — 'as I have loved you'?

Most disturbing of all, of course, is the way in which he keeps on echoing the depressing word 'going'. 'I am going,' he tells them. 'I'll be with you only a little longer, my children. You will look for me, but where I am going you cannot come.' In the same way that a dying parent tries to warn his little ones of the blow that is just about to strike their family, so Jesus here, with a tenderness almost unparalleled even within his gentle manners, prepares the disciples for his departure.

It is little wonder that this seventh and final discourse in John's gospel is often called the Farewell Discourse. No valedictory sermon ever preached is more moving or more sensitive. Such is its depth of interest for us that though we have skimmed over earlier discourses in John's gospel quite quickly, we are going to invest several chapters in the study of it. I hope you are going to feel that it is worth the effort. After all, we have called this book *Introducing Jesus*, and I think that many would judge that there is no passage in all the Scriptures that introduces Jesus quite so intimately as this conversation upon which we are embarking.

For our first study, we are going to focus our attention on three questions with which the disciples of Jesus, in their downcast and perplexed mood, respond to his air of gloomy foreboding. Each of the questions tells us something about the character of the enquirer and each represents a different kind of response to grief.

### **The question of Peter—the fanatic**

Simon Peter asked him, 'Lord, where are you going?'

Jesus replied, 'Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later.'

Peter asked, 'Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you' (13:36-37).

One often observes that the first stage of grief is simply nonacceptance, a refusal to believe the bad news. 'It can't be



true Doctor,' people say, 'there must be something you can do. I won't let it happen!'—and Peter, being an impetuous and excitable person, was an obvious candidate for that kind of semi-hysterical reaction. 'Why can't I follow you now?'

There is a kind of infantile petulance about his impatience. You can almost imagine him pouting as he says the words. The thought of separation had reduced this strong man to the self-pitying sulkiness of a whimpering child. We are not to blame him for that. Desperation in bereavement can very quickly reduce even the sanest of men to such irrational, immature protests. We dare not condemn him for his grief-stricken emotions. He was devoted to Christ.

Yet sympathy must not blind us to the peril implicit in his wild remarks either. 'I will lay down my life for you.' There is an irony there for, as we saw in the previous chapter, it was just a few months earlier that Jesus himself had used those very words. 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.' Here Peter, consumed with love for his master, cannot bear such a thought. He would rather reverse the roles. 'No, Lord,' he is saying, 'you must not lay down your life for me. I will lay down my life for you!' I wonder if there was just a trace of an indulgent smile flickering on Jesus' lips, as he reflected this bravado back to Peter for a little maturer reflection? 'Will you?' he says. 'Will you really lay down your life for me?'

For all its veneer of self-abnegation, there are delusions of grandeur here. There is pride; fearless, courageous even admirable in some ways, but pride all the same, the pride which earlier in 13:8 had sought to isolate itself in a little personal island of independence and self-sufficiency. 'No Lord, you shall never wash my feet,' he had said. Now that same pride is still there an hour later, asserting its own individual superiority. He speaks not on behalf of the disciples but for himself alone. Though everybody else may be a weakling and a craven coward, Peter will not be. 'I will lay down my life for you. Surely it can be different for me, Jesus.'

'But, Peter,' says Jesus in effect, 'don't you realize that



there are moments when you can do nothing? Nothing but be a spectator of somebody else's sacrifice? Nothing but be a recipient of somebody else's generosity? You cannot put me in your debt, Peter! It is impossible.' Jesus owes us nothing. It is we who depend on him for charity. Devastating as that may be for our egos, we have to get to the point where we are willing to see it that way. Pride is the one passion with which Jesus cannot allow any disciple of his to arrive at the dawn of Good Friday.

I tell you the truth, before the cock crows, you will disown me three times! (13:38).

So Jesus answers the irony of Peter's boast with the even greater irony of Peter's denial. This brave disciple will, before the night is out, despise himself for his cowardice. This devoted disciple, before the dawn, will howl in self-reproach for his disloyalty. This superior disciple, before the night is out, will be blushing in shame at his failure. It will be a hard lesson to learn. But Peter must learn it, as indeed we all must learn it. For Jesus does not love us because we are faithful to him. He does not love us because we are willing to die for him. He loves us in spite of the fact that we are perfidious weaklings, and our devotion to him must be built on the embarrassment of that humiliating self-knowledge.

Maybe there are times when you feel that you have failed as a Christian. You have read missionary biographies and instead of inspiring you, they depress you in the extreme. 'Oh, if only I could be as committed as that,' you say to yourself. You go to your Bible study group and you come away feeling thoroughly inadequate. 'Oh, they are all so much keener than I am.' So you sit in a corner bowed down under your spiritual inferiority complex, dazzled by all the haloes that seem to be surrounding you.

Take heart. Jesus is not as impressed as you are by the veneer of super-spirituality which some of us project. He is a master psychiatrist, and he knows how much of it is just a defence-mechanism against our inner vulnerability. Wild



gestures of discipleship, rash promises, intense Christian activity, crazy heroics: these are all the marks of a fanatic. And fanaticism is a neurosis, born not out of spiritual strength, but of chronic spiritual insecurity.

Jesus is not looking for fanaticism from you, any more than he was looking for it from Peter. The first thing he requires of any of us is *faith*.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me (14:1).

These famous words have cheered many a funeral in their time. But let it be noted, they were spoken first to a group of disciples who under the pressure of intense emotional battering were just about to fail. Jesus is encouraging them here, first and foremost, not to be cast down by that impending failure.

'Yes,' he is telling them, 'like Peter all of you, before the night is out, will feel like failures. But your infidelity will not forfeit your hope. This Christianity that I'm talking about is not based upon confidence in what you can do for me, but confidence in what I have done for you. Trust in me.'

In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you (14:2).

'Yes, even for you Peter, failure though you will shortly prove to be.'

That phrase 'many rooms' has led of course to a considerable amount of rather fanciful speculation on the part of commentators. Some, encouraged by the Authorized Version rendering of it as 'many mansions', have pictured each of the redeemed in heaven as furnished with some kind of spiritual equivalent of Buckingham Palace. Others have traced a connection to Jewish apocalyptic thought and believe that Jesus is talking here about degrees of bliss which the redeemed can enjoy in heaven; rather like on a luxury liner, with first-class, second-class and third-class berths. Still others point out that the Greek word used is employed by some classical authors to



mean stopping places on a journey. So they conclude that Jesus here is speaking of our pilgrimage to heaven as an ascent undertaken in stages, like the grades through which you have to pass when you learn the piano.

These are all attractive theories, but none of them carry a great deal of conviction with me. By far the most satisfying interpretation of what Jesus means by the phrase is simply that in heaven there is room enough for all. 'Don't worry then, Peter. Life is not like an entrance examination in which you must show yourself superior to everybody else in order to gain one of those places of very limited availability in the higher institution. It is not a competition in which only those who are prepared to be heroes and martyrs have any chance to win. No, for a Christian, heaven is "my Father's house". In other words, it is home. That is how you are to think of it. Heaven is where you belong. Trust God. No, more than that, trust me, for I know what I am talking about in this matter.

'If there was any possibility of any disciple of mine forfeiting his right of abode in the heavenly country, I would have told you about it. Take my word for it, there is a place reserved there for you and for every Christian believer. It is precisely to confirm that reservation that I must leave you now. That is why I do not want you to despair about my going. This parting will not be for ever. Some of you, like Peter, will follow me through the corridor of death later on. You will find me there waiting for you at the other end of that corridor. Some of you perhaps will still be alive when I return to this world on the Last Day to wind up history, and you will meet me that way. It really makes no difference.

'Either way, I am going to make sure of our personal reunion. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me, so that you also may be where I am. That is a promise. So let there be no fanaticism, Peter. You do not have to die for me; which is just as well, because you will soon discover that right now you could not do it anyway, for all your good intentions. What you have got to do is to trust me. Trust me through the bitterness of these coming days; the



bewilderment of disappointment, the tears of failure, the darkness of bereavement. Trust me that I do know what I am talking about and that the path I am treading is not a dead-end, but a throughroad.'

### **The question of Thomas—the agnostic**

Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' (14:5).

If the reaction of some to bereavement is hysteria, there are others of a more morbid disposition whose characteristic response is to lapse into depression. I suspect that Thomas was one of these. I find something just a trifle amusing about his gloominess. He reminds me distinctly of A. A. Milne's famous donkey, Eeyore. Thomas is so pessimistic about the possibilities of unravelling the mysteries of which Jesus speaks that he shrugs his shoulders in melancholic resignation. His enquiry is not so much a question as an affirmation that all questions are pointless. 'We don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?'

Far from seeking spiritual illumination, Thomas is in a mood only to exaggerate the hopelessness of the darkness. In short he is an archetypal agnostic, the sort of man who won't take 'Know' for an answer. He gains perhaps some perverse satisfaction from what he takes to be his irremediable ignorance. We cannot know, so what is the point of talking about it?

At least we must compliment Thomas on his honesty. There are some people who never admit to perplexity about anything. They always insist they understand. It would have been very easy for Thomas to have donned such a mask of super-spirituality and made fawning noises of agreement in this situation. 'Oh, quite so, Jesus. Of course we know the way you're going. Peter is just a pompous ass, we are always telling him so.'

The church has more than its share of such spiritual yes-men, with their plastic piety and boring orthodoxy. They



make life very dull for a pastor. At least Thomas is candid enough to admit that he has got a problem. There is no stereotyped testimony of faith to which he feels he has to conform. If he does not know he will say so, with unrepressed candour and we must conclude from Jesus' uncritical response to his remarks that he entertained a good deal of respect for that kind of integrity. Maybe there is, as the poet says, 'more faith in honest doubt than in half the creeds'. Certainly Jesus does not rebuke him as an unbeliever because he says he does not know.

But what he does do is to redirect the conversation in a very thought-provoking manner.

Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me' (14:6).

Just think about that. Up till now he had spoken of heaven as the Father's house and himself as the guide to lead us there. It seems that part of Thomas' confusion was tied up with the fact that he found it very hard to imagine the next world as a place like that, or indeed to understand how anybody could journey there.

Perhaps like many a contemporary rationalist, knowledge for him had to be empirical, scientific, founded on concrete material realities, not upon abstractions and metaphors. 'Where is this Father's house, Jesus? The third street on the right past Mars? And how do you plan to get there? Rocket ship—or will you beam up, like Captain Kirk of the starship *Enterprise*? No, all these metaphysics are too airy-fairy for me. They leave too many unanswered questions. Let us face it, Jesus, we don't know about this heaven you talk about. We can't know about such things. So how can we believe in them, let alone find the way?'

'I am the way!' replies Jesus. 'No-one comes to the Father but by me.' Do you see what he is doing? He is substituting persons for places. Instead of speaking of the Father's house, he speaks to Thomas of going to the Father. Instead of talking about himself as the guide on that journey, he speaks of him-



self as the path, the way itself. It is as if he is saying to Thomas, 'Look, your rationalistic mindset is taking my physical metaphors too literally. If you find it hard to think of heaven as a place, think of it instead as a Person, someone who, far from being unknown to you, is in fact a familiar face. It is me, Thomas. Think of heaven as me.

'Your problem, Thomas, is that you do not know me. You fail to realize what you have got in me. Of course I have not analysed for you the molecular formula for death and resurrection; I do not need to. *I am the way.* Of course I have not derived for you the mathematical equation for ultimate reality; I have no need to. *I am the truth.* Of course I have not explained to you the philosophical nature of eternal existence; I do not need to. *I am the life.* Thomas, you are like a man who complains he cannot get into the car when all the time the car keys are jangling in his pocket. Do you not realize that the answer to your agnosticism is staring you in the face? You *do* know the way. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on you do know him and have seen him. Heaven is not a location to which you must journey, Thomas, it is a relationship with me which you have already begun.'

Let me be frank with any reader who would claim to be an agnostic, because if you are such a reader then Jesus, in addressing Thomas' scepticism is saying something of great relevance to you. First of all, Jesus says that you must *take him seriously*. He insists upon it. There are of course many people who make the multiplicity of world religions and philosophies an excuse for their agnostic lack of commitment to anything. 'There are so many different faiths. How can God expect me to know which is the right one, even assuming that he is there at all?' Jesus will not permit that kind of evasiveness. 'I am the way,' he says. 'No man comes to the Father except through me.'

You may speculate all you wish about how God is going to judge the heathen who have never heard of Jesus. The Bible never addresses itself to that question, for a very simple



reason. Anybody who carries a Bible in their hand, by definition, does not belong to that company; and since it is not the purpose of the Bible to satisfy mere idle curiosity, it sees no point whatsoever of telling us about how God plans to judge the heathen. If you want to speculate upon that issue then you are free to do so.

What the Bible does make absolutely crystal-clear is that there will be no dissident voices in heaven. There is going to be nobody in heaven saying what a wonderful chap Mohammed is for getting him there. Nobody will be praising the Buddha. The Bible insists that heaven is united by one single chorus of praise, 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain.' If any heathen is going to be saved, he is going to be saved by Christ. For there is no other way to the Father, except through Jesus. That means, for any agnostic, that whatever religions you may think are worth looking into you cannot afford to ignore Jesus. You have to take him very, very, very seriously. His exclusive claims demand it.

But Jesus is saying something else very important to an agnostic here, namely that you must not make an *excuse of your ignorance*. 'If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well,' he claims. 'From now on you do know him and have seen him.' Thomas knew more than he knew he knew! And so do you. For though you may call yourself an agnostic, you have come face to face with Jesus.

Of course there are many unanswered questions on your mind, as there were on Thomas's. If you insist that every one of those questions receive a satisfactory answer before you are prepared to call yourself a Christian, you will never find faith. You will die as what you are now, a spiritual 'don't know'. For Jesus is not offering you answers to all your philosophical queries, he is offering himself. According to him, the ultimate truth which you seek is not a system of propositions to be proven by logic and apprehended by intelligence. It is not something for intellectuals only. The ultimate truth behind this universe is personal: it is him.

It is to be apprehended, therefore, in the only way any



person can be apprehended, by trust, by love. You may call it a gamble, but then all personal relationships are gambles. Some of you have been to a church altar and said 'I will'. If that is not a gamble, I do not know what is! Looked at through the tunnel vision of the rationalist mindset, all personal relationships are gambles, and yet without them we beggar ourselves as human beings.

Jesus invites you to take a gamble on him. He does not demand that you switch off your brain and stop worrying about your intellectual problems. He does not insist that you should immediately believe everything that Christians are supposed to believe: predestination, the inspiration of Scripture and goodness knows what else. He asks only that you believe in him, that you identify him personally as the source of those answers you seek, irrespective of whether you have clearly formulated those answers yet. He says that without him we have no chance of finding answers at all. 'I am *the way, the truth, the life.*'

That is why I say that in encountering Jesus, though we may not realize it, the defensibility of agnosticism has evaporated. From now on, he says, you do know. There may be some people in this world whose ignorance is excusable, but you are no longer among their number. To remain a 'don't know' after you have come face to face with Jesus is not an act of religious neutralism. It cannot be. As far as Jesus is concerned, it is an act of culpable folly.

### **The question of Philip—the mystic**

Philip said, 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us' (14:8).

There is a third way in which people sometimes react to bereavement, other than non-acceptance or depression. There are some people who turn to the occult. They look for some kind of direct contact with the world beyond to confirm its existence. I suspect that Philip rather leans in that direction. 'Show us the Father,' he says. He wants some tangible,



unmediated experience of God that will sweep his doubts away. Perhaps he is thinking of a theophany such as Moses received at the burning bush in the Old Testament. Or maybe he has been influenced by the Greek mystery religions and has his mind on some kind of inner ecstasy, a spiritual trip that will lift him up to new levels of consciousness.

Either way he seeks for what the medieval mystics called the *visio dei*, the vision of God. And either way, there is just a hint of Promethean arrogance in the way that he asks for it. 'Show us the Father and that will be enough for us.' I am reminded of the story of Ptolemy of Egypt, who asked Euclid to teach him all he knew about mathematics during his coffee break. 'Show us the Father and that will be enough'—enough indeed!

One could not have been surprised if Jesus had replied, 'Don't be such an idiot, Philip. You are asking for the moon. Every Jew knows that God is invisible.' There is no such thing as unmediated experience of God, whatever the mystics claim. No man has ever seen God. Yet the interesting thing is that though Jesus does in a sense scold Philip for asking such a stupid question, he does so for totally the opposite reason; not because seeing God was out of the question, but rather because it had already happened and Philip had failed to notice!

Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father?' (14:9).

Now if you have been following our course of studies carefully, you will have come across some remarkable claims on the lips of Jesus. Remember back in John chapter 5, when he claimed the same worship as God? 'He who honours me, honours the Father. He who does not honour me does not honour the Father,' he said (cf. 5:23). Or chapter 8, where he claimed the same title as God: 'Before Abraham was born, I am!' (8:58). Or how in chapter 10 he claimed the same nature as God: 'I and the Father are One,' he said (10:30). But here Jesus is surely making the most astonishing claim of all. 'He



who has seen me has seen the Father.'

C. S. Lewis has pungently expressed how unique that claim was:

If you had gone to Buddha and asked him 'Are you the son of Brahmah?' he would have said, 'My son, you are still in the vale of illusion.' If you had gone to Socrates and asked, 'Are you Zeus?' he would have laughed at you. If you had gone to Mohammed and asked, 'Are you Allah?' he would first have rent his clothes and then cut your head off. ('What are we to make of Jesus Christ?' in C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, Collins.)

But Jesus said, in a voice of calm deliberation, 'He who has seen me, has seen God.' The quest of the mystics for direct experience of God is by his coming rendered redundant. The greatest and most immediate experience of divinity is not to be found by pillars of fire on mountain tops, or spiritual ecstasies while contemplating your navel. It is to be found through him.

It is such a remarkable claim. I know people have problems with what Christians say about the incarnation—God becoming flesh. But it is no mere piece of dispensable mythology, rendered necessary by the limitations of our human understanding. It is the only way divinity can be fully expressed, not because of our human limitations but because of God's nature. The only way a personal God can reveal himself to you and me is through a Person. There is no higher way of revealing God than that. Whatever mystical visions and experiences we may be granted, none of them is higher than meeting Jesus. For they are all sub-personal experiences. Therefore they must be inadequate. The only way a personal God can reveal himself totally to us is through a Person, and Jesus says here that 'that Person is me'.

In him, Godhead and manhood intermingle inextricably. In Jesus, God speaks not just through the occasional inspired oracle but all the time. In him God's works are constantly to be seen in every action. They are indistinguishable from his own.



Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work (14:10).

Inevitably, we demand evidence for such a claim. Jesus seems to feel that if we were sufficiently in tune with God, spiritual intuition by itself would confirm his identity to us. We would hear the ring of truth in his words alone.

Believe me, when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me (14:11).

But if you must talk of proof then plenty exists. There are the signs that he performed.

At least believe on the evidence of the miracles (14:11).

If any of us objected that they are all past history now, he would point us further to the continuing signs of his authority within the church.

I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so the Son may bring glory to the Father (14:12-14).

This verse is the proof text for those who feel that Christians are not acting biblically unless there are supernatural healings and so on taking place. I am personally convinced that miracles do happen, but I am not at all sure that that is what Jesus is saying in this verse, because if you interpret it in that way then it is an embarrassment; it proves far too much. 'Greater things' than Jesus? Does anybody seriously suggest that the church has ever done greater miracles than Jesus did? Greater miracles than raising the dead and stilling the storm and feeding the five thousand? Even in the apostolic age, the miracles they experienced were far more modest than that.

Certainly no one is performing miracles on that scale today, because if they were you would not be able to get near them for the television cameras. That sort of event does not go unnoticed in our world of mass media. No, we must conclude



that when Jesus speaks of 'greater things' here, he is thinking beyond miracles in the narrow sense. He is anticipating what he is going to talk about extensively in the later verses, namely the work of the Holy Spirit who could not come until he had gone to the Father.

He had a greater work than Jesus to do in the sense that his supernatural influence would be spread throughout the world and not merely be localized in one place in Judea. The apostles may not have performed such incredible signs as Jesus did, but on the day of Pentecost, more people were converted in a single hour than were converted throughout the whole course of Jesus' public ministry. I think that if we saw things as Jesus saw them, we would realize that such conversions are far more miraculous than just healing the sick. In fact he more or less said so himself. 'Which is harder,' he asked, 'to say your sins are forgiven you or rise, take up your bed and walk?' (cf. Mk 2:1-12). A modern example is that of the alcoholic who was converted and, having gained victory over his drink problem, began to put his life back together. He got jibed at a lot at work about his faith in Christ. One day his mates were going on about miracles. 'Go on, you don't believe in miracles,' they jeered. 'What about the turning of the water into wine? You've never seen water turned into wine have you?'

'No,' he replied, 'I've never seen water turned into wine. But I have seen beer turned into furniture!'

There are similar contemporary evidences of the divine identity of Jesus all around us. You have only to ask any Christian and they will provide you with personal testimony on the point. And Jesus is performing such life-changing miracles today in the same way he's always done them, in response to personal request.

You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it (14:14).

Once again, it is tempting to interpret this as a blank cheque. 'Dear Jesus, please may I have that Rolls Royce?' . . . 'Dear Jesus, please may my premium-bond come up?' But that kind of *carte-blanche* cannot be Jesus' intention, and



he says so when he specifies 'In my name'. The prayers that he promises to answer are those that he would have asked in our place, and which are therefore consistent with his character and purpose.

Actually, it would be no blessing to be able to get anything one wanted anyway. One has only to think of the mischief that results in fairy tales when people have their three wishes granted. We are too fallible to wield omnipotence without God's veto controlling us. Why, if Jesus really promised to give us whatever we asked for unconditionally, the wise among us would never pray again. Rightly understood, 'in my name' is not a limitation but a liberation. It is a glorious incentive for the Christian church to pray without restraint, knowing that we are not working magic spells that could go wrong. We are petitioning a loving and all-wise Lord who never goes wrong.

Ask Christians and they will tell you. Christ is still at work today. Faith for them is not merely a conviction about the past, but an experience of the present. The evidence is there, Philip, if you really must have it. But do not ask for mystical experiences, do not ask that Jesus shows you the Father. If you knew who Jesus was you would be beyond that.

I wonder if someone reading this is wavering. Somebody perhaps who has been thinking about becoming a Christian for quite a long time, for many months, even years and yet never seems to get there. Perhaps you are looking for some kind of wonderful experience that will blow your mind and dispel all your doubts instantaneously. If so, maybe Jesus is saying to you just what he said to Philip. 'Don't you know me? Even after I have been with you for such a long time, do you still not know me? You don't need a mystic experience to become a Christian, for a Christian has something much better than mystical experience. A Christian has me. He who has seen me has seen the Father. Just as Peter had to learn to trust through his failure and Thomas had to learn to trust through his ignorance, so, Philip, you have to learn to trust through your doubts. It is not really so difficult, not if you really know



me.'

Yet perhaps your problem is that you do not really know Jesus. Oh, you are familiar with him. But there is a familiarity which is not knowing. A *savoir* which is not *comprendre*. If that is your situation, I advise you to stop whining for spiritual experiences so unnecessarily. My advice to you is to pick up a Bible and start reading the gospels. That is where you will meet Jesus. Their purpose is to introduce us to him. Saturate yourself in his words, in his deeds. And while you read about him, pray. Pray in his name that if he is real, he will show you the divinity in himself. He says, 'He who has seen me, has seen the Father.' There is no way of seeing God better than that.

Surely God is not playing hide-and-seek with you. If you really do want to find him, you will. It is just a matter of looking in the right place, that is all. Jesus says, 'I am the way.'



## 8

*The Helper*

John 14:15-31

No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I'm not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing . . . . There are moments, most unexpectedly, when something inside me tries to assure me that I don't really mind so much, not so very much, after all. Love is not the whole of a man's life. I was happy before I ever met H. I've plenty of what are called 'resources'. People get over these things. Come, I shan't do so badly . . . . Then comes a sudden jab of red-hot memory and all this 'commonsense' vanishes like an ant in the mouth of a furnace. On the rebound one passes into tears and pathos. (C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, Collins.)

We studied, in the last chapter, the painfulness of bereavement. I suspect few have explored that pain with greater insight, or personal sensitivity than C. S. Lewis. *A Grief Observed* is the diary he kept in the months immediately following the death of his wife. It is brutally frank and honest. Lewis was of course a Christian, and for those of us who share his faith, perhaps the most disturbing thing about his book is that he does not seem to have always gained as much comfort from his religion as we would perhaps have hoped or expected. In fact at times he is quite belligerent about the advice given to him by his well-meaning Christian friends.

It is hard to have patience with people who say 'There is no death' or 'Death doesn't matter'. There is death. And whatever is mat-



ters. And whatever happens has consequences, and it and they are irrevocable and irreversible . . . I look up at the night sky. Is anything more certain than that in all those vast times and spaces, if I were allowed to search them, I should nowhere find her face, her voice, her touch? She died. She is dead. Is the word so difficult to learn? . . . Talk to me about the truth of religion and I'll listen gladly. Talk to me about the duty of religion and I'll listen submissively. But don't come talking to me about the consolations of religion or I shall suspect that you don't understand.

Is he right? Does Christianity really have no healing balm to offer the broken-hearted? Is the emotional devastation of bereavement just as acute for the believer as for the unbeliever? Or is Lewis being too pessimistic? In the days so soon after his loss, was he perhaps missing out somehow? At the risk of sounding a little trite, I have to say that I think that our study passage strongly suggests that he was missing out a little. I do not mean to be disparaging. Tears of grief scald our eyes so agonizingly that even the finest Christian is sometimes temporarily blinded by them. Spiritual truths which are quite obvious to us in our happier moments are completely opaque to us in the moments of our sadness. Lewis isn't to be blamed for that.

I am not suggesting either that Christians never sorrow. Such a view would be absolute nonsense. Easter Sunday does not erase Good Friday from our calendar. The promises of Scripture are given to wipe our tears away. They do not make them unnecessary. We must never forget that Jesus himself wept. But, nevertheless, there is such a thing as the consolation of religion, or at least the consolation of the Christian religion; and it is Jesus' purpose in this passage in John to teach us the secret of it.

As we saw earlier, this discourse in John 14 takes place on the very eve of Jesus' death. The theme of his imminent departure keeps on echoing through it. 'I am going away,' he says. It is clear that he is well aware of the emotional impact that loss is going to have upon his friends. He even likens them to orphaned children left bereft and desolate in a hostile



world. More than anything, he wants to say something to these disciples that will sustain them through the traumatic events that are about to engulf them.

But unlike Lewis's Christian friends, perhaps, Jesus is not reduced to glib platitudes about the insignificance of death. He has got something far more helpful, far more concrete to offer than that.

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever (14:16).

Commentators used to say that the Holy Spirit was the most neglected Person of the Trinity. In these days of charismatic revival in the church, I think that could hardly be said to be true. But we could in this passage claim to be concerned with the most neglected aspect of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The Charismatic movement is taken up mainly with the work of the Holy Spirit in the church. But Jesus here is talking about the work of the Holy Spirit in the individual Christian believer; the Holy Spirit not as a source of gifts, but as a source of comfort. And when we are bereaved it is that ministry of the Spirit that we most need. I hope we shall at least have concluded by the end of this study that whilst the advice which Christians may give in times of bereavement may not always be of the most helpful kind, there is nothing platitudinous about the One who said 'Blessed are those who mourn. They shall be comforted.'

### **Who is this 'Counsellor'?**

All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things (14:25-26).

Now of course there was nothing novel about the Spirit of God as far as these disciples were concerned. They were perfectly familiar with the idea from their reading of the Old Testament. Even the title 'Holy Spirit' was not new to them. However, with only the Old Testament to go on, one could



perhaps have forgiven these disciples for thinking of the Holy Spirit as a *something* rather than a *someone*. For when you read the Old Testament that is quite often how it seems to be. The Spirit is a kind of creative energy flowing out from God, communicating his intelligence and his power to the universe and sometimes to human beings too. But he is not very clearly indicated as a person.

Indeed, up until this point in Jesus' ministry nothing he had taught the disciples would have changed that impression very dramatically. He had spoken of the Spirit as being the agent whereby devils were cast out. He had spoken of the Spirit of God as anointing him for his special mission. Perhaps the disciples already knew that Jesus' human nature had been conceived by the Spirit of God in the womb of Mary. But there would be nothing in all of those things to disturb their essentially Old Testament understanding of the Spirit. In fact the Spirit had been a very minor feature in Jesus' ministry up till now, hardly ever mentioned at all.

But as we stand at this point in the Gospel narrative we are on a momentous threshold. A great revolution is going to take place in this respect. A revolution incidentally, which to my mind is a powerful argument for the historical authenticity of this farewell discourse. Within a matter of a few days, from being a peripheral element (as we find it in the synoptic gospels) the Holy Spirit is going to become the very central focus of Christian experience (as we find him in the early chapters of the book of Acts).

According to John, this conversation in the closing hours of Jesus' life was the start of that remarkable theological development. In fact it is hard to see how that dramatic transformation in the disciples' understanding could have occurred without such last minute teaching on Jesus' part to catalyse it. On the evening of his departure, Jesus introduces the Holy Spirit to his disciples in a radically new and much more central way. No longer was he a *something*. He was a *Someone*, a distinct Person in his own right, with a most distinct role in their lives. Nothing makes that clearer than the name Jesus



coins for him, 'the Counsellor'.

The Greek word behind that title is *parakletos*, which literally means someone who is called in to assist. In the ancient world, the word was most commonly used in a legal context. If you were brought to trial your *parakletos* might be your lawyer. Or he might be a witness in your defence, or possibly just a friend who had come along to give you moral support in court. It is because of these judicial connotations that translators have sometimes rendered the word 'Advocate'. But in fact the assistance which a *parakletos* provided was not necessarily limited to a legal sphere. It could be practically any kind of service rendered. Since there doesn't seem to be any legal connotation in John's use of the word here, I suspect that it would have been better to translate it simply as 'Helper', rather than use this more formal and specific word 'Counsellor'. One thing is clear though, however you translate it. No matter how diverse the word *parakletos* may have been in its original application, a *parakletos* is always a person, never a thing.

John, in fact, goes out of his way to emphasize that fact by his conspicuous use of masculine pronouns in this text. Although it is difficult for us to see it in translation, there is a very good example in verse 26. John uses a very emphatic (and grammatically unnecessary) masculine pronoun in that verse: 'He will teach you all things.' It is as if, by his defiance of normal grammatical convention, John wants to say to us: 'Look, "Spirit" may be neuter in Greek vocabulary, but he is personal in Christian experience—A "he" not an "it".'

Hence the source of our religious consolation in times of deep sorrow and loss is not an abstract doctrine, nor even a divine influence; but a concrete Person—a Friend, a Counsellor; a Helper. It is vital we realize that. For today in spite of the huge amount of attention that is given to the Holy Spirit in some respects, I am not at all sure that our interest always treats the personality of the Holy Spirit as seriously as it ought to do.

Quite often today the central idea in people's minds when they talk about the Holy Spirit is 'power'. That is of course a



word that you certainly come across in the New Testament. But it has dangers. For 'power' suggests a kind of divine electricity, something impersonal which, perhaps, we can tap at will and make use of. The book of Acts tells the story of someone called Simon Magus who seems to have made precisely that mistake. He thought of the Holy Spirit in just that way and was rebuked for it. For the fact is that we cannot use the Holy Spirit. If we understood the personal nature of the Spirit more fully we would realize why it is impossible. My old colleague, Gottfried Osei-Mensah, once used a splendid illustration in this regard. He said, 'Suppose someone sent you an explosive bomb through the mail. You would have to decide how you were going to dispose of it. Suppose on the other hand, an African dictator were to come to visit you at your house, it's much more likely he would decide how to dispose of you!'

So God has not promised us impersonal parcels of power. He has promised us a powerful Person, the Spirit. He is not at our disposal. We are at his. We do not use him. He uses us. If we receive him, it is not because we have mastered some religious technique for tapping his power, but because Christ has interceded on our behalf with the Father.

I will ask the Father and he will give you another Counsellor (14:16).

Who is he then? He is nothing less than a divine Person, and we must constantly guard our hearts against the sub-Christian tendency to de-personalize him.

### **What does he do?**

I will ask the Father and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever . . . I will not leave you as orphans (14:16, 18).

The Spirit then compensates us for the physical absence of Jesus. One of the platitudes which C. S. Lewis found very difficult to take from his Christian friends in his bereavement was what he calls the 'pitiable cant' of those who said: 'She



will live forever in my memory.'

*Live?* That is exactly what she won't do. You might as well think like the old Egyptians that you can keep the dead by embalming them. Will nothing persuade us that they are gone? What's left? A corpse, a memory . . . . all mockeries . . . . more ways of spelling the word *dead*. It was H. I loved. As if I wanted to fall in love with my memory of her, an image in my own mind! It would be a sort of incest.

This is pungent writing. But of course he is right. Sentimental memories make it harder, not easier, to come to terms with loss. They encourage us to live in the past, or worse still to fantasize about it, when what we really need is help to face up to the reality of our new loneliness. It is the presence of the loved one we crave, not just their memory. Jesus understands that as he speaks here. Of course memories are important. In point of fact he has just instituted a feast of bread and wine which his disciples would regularly observe 'in remembrance of me'. Without such memories, the rootedness of our faith in history would be in jeopardy. Christianity would be reduced to just another kind of religious mysticism. But while memory is important, memories alone are not enough. In fact, on their own they can be just a frustration rather than a help. It is the personal presence of Christ in our lives that we need to dispel our sadness. That is precisely what he promises us here.

Do you notice that word 'another'? *Another* Counsellor. What does he mean by that? One recalls Alice at the Mad Hatter's Tea Party, who made the point that you cannot be offered more tea unless you have drunk some already. In the same way, Jesus can hardly speak of another Counsellor, unless there has been a predecessor. Who is this predecessor? Read the passage and it becomes clear: it is Jesus himself. Up till now he had been the disciples' *parakletos*—their Friend, their Supporter, their Advocate, their Helper. But now he was going to the Father, and Someone else would continue to exercise that personal role towards them.

At least, I say 'Someone else', but in fact that may be too



strong a phrase. For do you notice in the passage how subtly Jesus passes from the third person into the first person when he talks about this Counsellor?

The Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you (14:17-18).

Has Jesus made a subtle shift between verses 17 and 18? Is he talking about something new when he says 'I will come to you'—is he talking about the second coming, perhaps? Or is he saying that when the Holy Spirit comes to the disciples, in some sense he comes too? The ambiguity persists in verses 19 and 20.

Before long, the world will not see me any more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you (14:19-20).

Many commentators assume that this has to be a reference to the resurrection appearances of Jesus. But does that totally fit? Surely the whole point about the resurrection appearances is that they were not just a private experience for the disciples. They were objective manifestations in time and space. The world could see the risen Jesus. Could it not be, then, that when Jesus speaks of being seen by his disciples alone he is not talking about the resurrection at all, but rather about the way in which the Spirit would make Jesus real to their hearts? Certainly, that seems to be the point of verse 21:

Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father and I too will love him and show myself to him (14:21).

Jesus also spoke of those who loved him and kept his commandments in verses 15 and 16. But there the consequence was 'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor.' When he says here, then, that the consequence of loving him and obeying him is 'I will show myself to him,' is



he talking about an additional experience? Or is he describing the same experience in two different ways?

All things considered, it is no surprise that Judas found himself thoroughly confused at the end of all this.

Lord, why do you intend to show yourself to us and not to the world? (14:22).

I suspect that Judas had been anticipating a public revelation of Christ as Messiah and a public exposure of the kingdom of God as a visible realm. That's why he cannot quite understand why Jesus seems to be talking now in terms of such a confidential relationship between himself and just his disciples; or, indeed, how such a confidential relationship could be effected in practice.

But Jesus' reply is to re-echo his previous statement. Only this time, he makes it even more perplexing by saying that the Father as well as he would indwell the obedient disciple.

If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him (14:23).

I don't know what you make of all this. But I have to say, for myself, that I reckon you could make an excellent case for saying that the Holy Spirit in this passage is thought of simply as Jesus in another form. In his incarnate nature, Jesus could only be *with* them. But in verse 17 as the Spirit—the Counsellor—he is able to be *in* them. In his incarnate nature he could only be with them for *a little while*. But in verse 16, as the Spirit, the Counsellor, he can be with them *for ever*. In his incarnate nature, he was visible to the *world* at large. But as the Spirit, the Counsellor, he will be perceptible only to *his disciples*.

There are of course great dangers in speaking of the Spirit as Jesus in another form. Specifically, there is a danger called modalism, a heresy which confuses the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and which speaks of God as if he were an actor, who exchanges roles or wears different masks at different times. That clearly cannot be right, because the Father



and the Son and the Holy Spirit co-exist in this passage and have relationships with one another. The Spirit is distinct from Jesus. He is *another* Counsellor. And the Spirit is distinct from the Father, for Jesus must pray the Father to send him. Yet such is the mystery of the Trinity that it seems that in giving us the Spirit, God is giving us Jesus as well. That is, of course, why the Church Father Tertullian could speak of the Spirit as the Vicar (or deputy) of Christ; and that is why, when you read the rest of the New Testament, you find that the early Christians do not make any clear distinction between the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Jesus.

It is a tremendous truth we find here, then. Jesus is not going away at all. In a very real sense he is still going to be around. He will remain our companion. He offers us here something much better than memories. He even offers something better than sacraments. He offers us the indwelling presence of his own Spirit. That, of course, has dramatic implications for Christian experience, which Jesus goes on to spell out.

He says, first of all, that as Christians indwelt by the Counsellor, we have a supernatural influence on our *minds*.

All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (14:25-26).

Primarily, of course, this is a promise to the apostles that the Spirit will enhance their memories and inform their theology. What they taught whether by lip or pen would thus be a reliable expression of Jesus' own teaching. It is an important promise for our view of the New Testament.

But it would be pedantic to deny that there is a general sense in which this verse is true of all Christians. Every Christian is instructed by the Spirit, the Counsellor. That, of course, is why non-Christians sometimes find something rather inscrutable about Christians. 'How can they be so sure?' they ask. 'Why is the Bible such an exciting book to them? How come



that chap who couldn't even get "O" levels can preach with such authority?' The answer is easy. We have a supernatural Helper, who informs and illumines our minds beyond our natural capacity to either remember or to understand.

But it has implications beyond that too. Jesus says that this Counsellor provides a supernatural influence on our *hearts* too.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid (14:27).

For centuries the Jewish people had been longing for an Age of Peace. When the Messiah came, he would be the Prince of Peace. Well, Jesus is saying here that that Age had come, that Peace had arrived. But it was not for everybody. It was not for the world. In fact the world is still missing it even now.

I understand that Raquel Welch, the actress, has written a book on how to keep beautiful, a subject on which I am sure she has great expertise and authority. But there is another area of life where she has not always been so successful. Some years ago she wrote an article in a Sunday newspaper. This was her confession:

I've acquired everything I've wanted. Yet I'm totally miserable. I think it very peculiar that one can acquire wealth and fame and accomplishment in one's career, beautiful children, a life style that seems terrific, and yet be totally and miserably unhappy.

The world is not content. Nor is it at peace. One of the most over prescribed drugs today is Valium, a tranquillizer.

Take the story of the boy who came up to town to go to College. After his first term he went back to the village and the old yokels in the village said, 'Now, what did you learn up in the big city, Billy?'

He replied, 'Well—I've learned how to worry.'

Why is it that the world is so short of peace? It is because it makes a fundamental mistake. It assumes that peace is exter-



nal, simply a function of circumstances. It is nothing of the kind. Jesus tells us here that the true peace of the New Age is internal: 'My peace I give to you.' Do not forget that when Jesus said those words, he was about to suffer the appalling agony of the cross. This is not the sort of peace then that the world talks about or aspires to. This is no mere absence of war, but the presence of the Helper within.

When I was a student I lived in a hall of residence that employed a very devoted old gardener. He really loved that garden. He could think of nothing better than to be out there digging and planting. It filled his heart with satisfaction and contentment. But he suffered from rheumatism, so that when the weather turned a bit nasty, he was confined indoors. You have never seen a more irritable, grouchy old man than that gardener was when he was having one of his attacks. I used to think at first that it was the pain in his joints that was causing his frustration. But not at all—it was the exasperation of not being able to be in his garden that got at him. He was happy in his garden. His peace depended on it. When his garden was denied him, he fretted most miserably. He is a picture of so many of us.

We focus our contentment on something around us, which is why our peace is so vulnerable. If the centre of our lives is our garden, then rheumatism will steal our peace. If the centre of our lives is our career, then redundancy or retirement will steal our peace. If the centre of our lives, is a friend—yes, even our wife or husband—then if nothing else, death will steal our peace. There can be no peace for this world, no peace dependent on circumstances. But Jesus has something better to offer us. The peace of the Holy Spirit in the heart, who can be with us for ever. That peace, he says, is one that cannot be taken from us.

Maybe some of you reading this are cast down with depression, overwhelmed with worries. Christ would not have us wallow in such destructive states of mental unrest. He has sent the Helper precisely for people like you. He can provide a personal tranquillity, an inward harmony, the very peace



Jesus experienced in the shadow of the cross. He intends it for you. Wouldn't you like to have this Counsellor as your Friend, your Companion? Wouldn't you like to know the truth of this experience Jesus talks about, of having him in your heart? To know that we are not alone, not desolate, not spiritual orphans in this world?

### **To whom is he given?**

If you love me . . . the Father will give you the Counsellor (14:15-16).

He is given then to those who love Christ. Notice how many times Jesus makes that point in our passage. 'If you love me,' he says, again and again. It is important to remember that this excludes many people. The world cannot accept the Helper, says Jesus. In fact the world cannot even get to the First Base of recognizing his activity. It neither sees him nor knows him. But the root of that non-Christian ignorance of the Holy Spirit is not intellectual, but volitional. It is all tied up, says Jesus, with the fact that they do not love me.

The trouble is, of course, that the word 'love', at least in our twentieth century, has been so influenced by the Romantic movement as to be conceived almost always in sentimental terms. What do you think loving Jesus means? Getting a touch of the warm fuzzies in a prayer meeting? Feeling intense and emotional at the end of the sermon perhaps? As far as Jesus is concerned, sentimentality does not necessarily come into it at all. It is a moral response that he seeks.

Loving him means getting beyond mere *self-interest*.

If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I (14:28).

Some people of course have interpreted that phrase, 'the Father is greater than I', as a denial of Jesus' deity. But a moment's reflection will reveal that unless Jesus thought of himself as in some sense divine then the whole sentence fails to make sense. For a start, if Jesus was only a man, the phrase



'the Father is greater than I' would be a statement so obvious as to be ridiculously trivial. Only God can meaningfully compare himself to God. For a mere man to presume to do indicates megalomania, not modesty.

But more than that; there is no logic in Jesus' assertion that his disciples should be glad about his departure, unless this greatness of God that he describes here is something that he expects to share. After all, the point of the verse is simple. 'If you are really thinking about my best interests, if you loved me, rather than thinking only of your own interest, then,' he says, 'you would be happy that I am going to heaven because I shall be better off there than here.' But what does the greatness of God have to do with that state, unless Jesus is signalling that when he gets to heaven, that divine greatness will rub off onto him?

We know of course, from the rest of the gospels, that that is precisely what Jesus did believe. Soon he would be praying, 'Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began' (17:5). Jesus anticipated heaven not just as a place of personal bliss, but also as a place of personal majesty. Soon he would be exalted and given a name that is above every name. There had, of course, been real humiliation in the incarnation. He took the form of a servant. But soon those limitations imposed by his humanity would be removed, and the greatness of God would be something he would once again share. If the disciples had only understood that, they would have been less glum. The problem was that they were thinking only about themselves.

The same is true of almost all our Christian sadness. Grief is frankly a self-pitying passion. It is our loss that we mourn, rather than our loved ones' fate. No matter how sure we are that he or she is enjoying heavenly bliss, it does not alter the fact that we are missing them most dreadfully, which is why we are sad.

Lewis identifies it for us very clearly in his book.

Kind people have said to me 'She is with God.' . . . But I find



that this question, however important it may be in itself, is not after all very important in relation to grief . . . . You tell me 'she goes on'. But my heart and body are crying out, come back, come back.

Jesus tells us that to love him means getting beyond that narrow perspective of self-interest. It means seeing our lives in the broader context of God's purpose. Of course there will be unpleasant things to encounter in our discipleship, disturbances, sacrifices, bereavements, all kinds of things. But if we loved Christ we would not fret so sulkily because of them. Loving Christ means getting beyond our best interests to think about his best interest. À Kempis expresses it like this:

Jesus has now many lovers of His heavenly kingdom, but few bearers of His cross. He has many that are desirous of consolation but few of tribulation . . . . All desire to rejoice with Him, few are willing to suffer for His sake . . . . Many love Jesus so long as no adversity befalls them. Many praise and bless Him so long as they receive His consolation, but if Jesus hides Himself and leaves them but a little while, they either complain or fall into great dejection of spirit . . . . How powerful is the pure love of Jesus which contains nothing of self-interest or self-love! Do not they that are ever thinking of their own profit and advantage show themselves to be lovers of self rather than of Christ? (Thomas À Kempis, 'On the Few Lovers of the Cross of Jesus', *The Imitation of Christ*.)

That is the first thing that being a lover of Christ means; to get beyond mere selfishness. But Jesus tells us that it means getting beyond mere *superficiality* too.

If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching (14:23).

Some of us resent the idea of rules. We want to see the Christian life as unconstrained spontaneity. 'Do as you feel led' as often as not means doing as the whim takes you. Jesus is saying something quite different here. He is saying that the Christian life is ordered by imperatives, by instruction, by his commandments and his teaching. He says it is vain to talk about loving him, unless we demonstrate the kind of moral



commitment to those standards which he requires. 'If you love me,' he says, 'you will obey.' Perhaps some of you reading this need to write that on your hearts. Perhaps here is the reason some of us are not experiencing this Holy Spirit, the Counselor, as we might.

To obey means that it is not enough just *to listen*. 'Oh,' you say, 'am I going to heaven? I must be! I endure a long sermon every Sunday morning to prove it. I read my Bible every day religiously. Surely that qualifies me for heaven.'

'But,' says Jesus, 'don't you know that the man who hears my words but doesn't do them is like a man building on the sand? It is only he who hears my words and does them who builds his house on the rock. You can listen,' he says, 'and yet deceive yourself.' The test is obedience.

Furthermore, to obey means it is not enough simply *to confess*. 'Am I going to heaven? I must be. I've stood up before the church and given my testimony. I've been baptized. I've witnessed. Surely I'm all right.' But no! The apostle John says in his letter it's possible to say we have fellowship with Christ and yet to lie (cf. 1 Jn 3:7-10). 'By this we may be sure we know him if we do his commands.' We can confess and deceive ourselves. The test is obedience.

More than that; to obey means that it is not enough merely *to believe*. 'Am I going to heaven?' you say. 'Well of course I'm going to heaven. I'm an evangelical, old boy. All evangelicals go to heaven. I believe in the Westminster Confession. I believe in the inerrancy of Scripture. I believe in believer's baptism, substitutionary atonement, the gathered church and anything else you care to name. Just look at my bookshelf! I believe it all!' But no, says the apostle, the devil believes and trembles. We can believe and deceive ourselves. The test is obedience.

And again, to obey means that it is not enough *to belong*. 'Am I going to heaven? All my family are Christians. All my friends are Christians. I'm a member of the church. I'm a member of the Christian Union. I'm a member of six Christian organizations and I have all the badges to prove it.' But it



is not enough to belong. Remember Lot's wife? She belonged. Remember Esau? He belonged. Remember Judas? He belonged. Salvation is not a contagion which you catch by close contact with Christians. It is not a gene you inherit from your Christian family. You can belong and deceive yourself. The test is obedience.

One more thing. To obey means it is not enough *to experience*. 'Am I going to heaven? But I feel so passionately for spiritual things. I get so excited, so enthusiastic about Jesus. I've spoken in tongues. I've prophesied. I've preached. I've healed in the name of Jesus.' But no; the Lord himself said there would be many who stood before him on the last day and who would say, 'Lord, we have prophesied. Lord, we drove out demons in your name. Lord, we have done miracles in your name. Then I will tell them plainly I never knew you. Depart from me workers of iniquity.' You see, *the test is obedience*.

Do not misunderstand Jesus. He is not teaching us that we can be saved by our good deeds. You only have to think how Jesus treated the Pharisees to realize that he had no time for their kind of self-righteous legalism. No, he talks here about the necessity of obedience as the evidence of our salvation. It is sheer hypocrisy to say we love him and not to obey him. Evidence is important. For if it is true that there is no smoke without fire, it is also true that there is no fire without smoke. There is no love without the obeying of his commands. Jesus is not demanding the obedience of a Pharisee, but the obedience of a lover.

Jesus is leaving us a legacy in this chapter. A legacy the like of which the world can never give us, a Helper. Something much better than mere memories: his living presence dwelling in our souls. But there is a condition on the bequest. 'If you love me,' he says. Love means getting beyond self-interest, and it means getting beyond superficiality in our religion. 'Keep my commandments,' he says.

So do not go to your pastor and complain to him that you do not have any assurance of the Holy Spirit in your heart if you



are not obeying Jesus. Of course you will have no such assurance! The Bible says you have no right to expect it. You must go back to square one. You must learn again what it means to say, 'I love him'. The trouble with many of us is that we want to be known as Christians, we want to come to church, we want to be respectable, we want to count the pastor as our friend, we want him to be there to see us off when we eventually die. But when it comes to the commitment of obedience, we are not interested. 'Oh, it is all right for those keen ones. But, you know, I am just one of those ordinary church-going Christians, not one of your fanatics.'

But Jesus says that really and truly there is no such thing as an ordinary Christian. To be a Christian is by definition to be extra-ordinary. To be a Christian is to have a super-natural guest in your heart, the Counsellor. Do you?



## 9

### *The Vine*

**John 15:1–17**

We hear a lot these days about productivity. In fact, there are few industrial disputes where the word is not thrown into the arena of negotiation by one side or the other. Take the miners' strike of 1984–5. It could almost be regarded as a debate about how you should define productivity. The Coal Board wanted to define it economically, of course, and close pits which were producing coal at too high a cost. But Mr Scargill insisted that would be a criminal waste of resources. Our assessment of productivity should, he felt, take into account the amount of coal under the ground still to be mined. In many ways I think it's a pity that the politics of confrontation have prevented a rational discussion of that particular issue, because it is an interesting question. And strange to say it is, in a roundabout kind of way, a question to which our study passage here has some relevance.

Jesus was concerned about productivity too. Living as he did in an agrarian culture, he naturally chose an agricultural model rather than an industrial one for his discussion of the issue: the grape harvest to be precise.

But managing a vineyard and managing a pit seem to have certain things in common. Like Mr MacGregor, a vineyard manager believes in the importance of per-capita output (per vine output, to be more exact). He recognizes that sometimes you have to be prepared for some pretty ruthless cutbacks in non-productive elements, if that output is to be maximized.



On the other hand, like Mr Scargill, he is not prepared to confuse short-term profitability with long-term viability, because a vineyard manager knows that the situation can change. Provided that there is productive potential there in the first place, little may one day become much. Today's loss may become tomorrow's profit. Vines, like mines, do need hard pruning. But, says Jesus, a good gardener treats low-productive branches differently from non-productive branches.

So perhaps those Anglican bishops who tried to mediate during the strike between the NUM and the NCB could do a lot worse than call both sides together for a joint Bible study at ACAS on John 15! There would certainly be things for both sides to learn, not least that little phrase Jesus keeps on pushing in, about 'loving one another'.

But enough of all this political mischief-making! Jesus is not really talking in this chapter about material productivity of course, whether of mines or vines, but about spiritual productivity in Christian lives.

Some people have complained that Jesus speaks a great deal about fruit in this chapter and never tells us exactly what this fruit is. I think that is a little bit unfair, because if you look at the verses that precede this little allegory of the vine, you will see that Jesus is constantly talking about the importance of loving him and keeping his commandments. And if you look at the verses that come immediately after the allegory in verses 9 and following, once again you find precisely the same emphasis. 'If you obey my commands,' he says, 'you will remain in my love.'

So it is obvious in that context that the kind of fruit which Jesus has in mind at this point in his discourse is the loving obedience of his disciples. That is what he wants to see in us, the thing that he is most anxious to leave behind when he departs from this world. As he looks beyond the cross, he realizes that some Christians are going to be less committed to his cause than they should be, and he is concerned about it. So he tells this parable of the vine to exhort us, in order that we should not be satisfied with a superficial or a half-hearted



discipleship. Our loving obedience, he says, must be 100%. You must aim not just at fruit, but at much fruit. Spiritual productivity is to be your goal. At the end of our study we may not have found the answer to uneconomic pits, but I hope we may be some way towards finding the answer to unfruitful Christians.

### **Why is spiritual productivity important?**

The answer to that, says Jesus, is quite simple. Without spiritual productivity, you will not get to heaven.

I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit (15:1).

You will recall that Jesus is here in discussion with his disciples on the very eve of his arrest and crucifixion. At the end of chapter 14, it appears that they leave the Upper Room in Jerusalem where they have shared their last meal together. So presumably they are now on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane where we know Jesus spent his last hours of freedom in prayer. Chapter 15 then represents their continuing conversation *en route*, as they walked along the city streets.

Some suggest that maybe he saw a vine growing by the side of the road as he walked, which prompted his remarks. Or maybe they had to pass the Temple precinct, for we know that on one of the great gates of the Jerusalem Temple there was a golden vine in the metal work. Or perhaps his mind was still occupied with the cup of wine which he had shared with his disciples just a few moments before. 'I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine again,' he said, 'until the kingdom of God comes.' There are many things that could have generated the thought of a vine in Jesus' mind at this particular moment. But the most important thing for us to understand if we are to grasp the full significance of this passage, is the Old Testament background to the metaphor which he uses.

On many occasions in the Old Testament, Israel is likened to a vine, planted and tended by God himself. 'You brought a



vine out of Egypt,' says Psalm 80. 'You cleared the ground for it and it took root.' That theme is echoed repeatedly. In fact by the time of Jesus the vine was close to being a national symbol, like the thistle of Scotland or the shamrock of Ireland. It appeared on their coins and, as we have already said, on their Temple gates.

There was something uncomplimentary, however, about this particular nationalistic motif. Perhaps a few verses from Jeremiah chapter 2 will illustrate the point.

The word of the Lord came to me: Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem:

'I remember the devotion of your youth,  
how as a bride you loved me  
and followed me through the desert,  
through a land not sown.

Israel was holy to the Lord,  
the first fruits of his harvest

. . . I had planted you like a choice vine  
of sound and reliable stock.

How then did you turn against me  
into a corrupt, wild vine?' (Jer 2:1-3, 21).

It is a strange thing, but whenever you encounter this metaphor of the vine in the Old Testament prophets, it always seems to be associated with the moral and spiritual degeneracy of Israel. Instead of fruiting like a cultivated vine, says Jeremiah, she reverted to the wild variety. Instead of yielding good grapes, says Isaiah, Israel yielded sour grapes. For all her early promise, all the blessing God showered upon her, he looked in vain for that harvest of righteousness that he wanted to see. In short, says Ezekiel, she was a useless vine. Even her wood was no good for anything, but fit only to be burned.

When you realize that background in the minds of Jesus and his disciples, then I think you will realize that 'I am the true vine' is a far more impressive claim than you might have thought at first glance. In effect, Jesus is challenging here Israel's right to call herself any longer the people of God. She's forfeited that privilege, he says, because of her lack of



spiritual productivity. Just as the prophet said, she has degenerated into a mass of dead wood. God is going to cut out her sterile branches and throw them where they belonged, onto the garden bonfire. And in their place he is going to train up new canes, fresh basal shoots that will produce the fruit the old branches never yielded.

'Israel may call herself a vine,' says Jesus, 'but I am the true vine. I am the root stock of the true people of God and the ultimate reason Israel is spiritually barren is because she has rejected me.'

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned (15:5-6).

There is a very solemn warning here to all of us who are perhaps content to regard ourselves as what are sometimes called 'nominal' Christians. We come from a Christian family, maybe. We attend Christian worship. Our names may be on a church roll somewhere. But that is as far as it goes. Christianity for us is at best a hobby, or at worst, a habit. Jesus is saying something very solemn to people like that here. He says it is not enough. He expects practical evidence of our commitment to him and in the absence of such practical evidence we had better not think ourselves safe. That was Israel's mistake. She thought because she had a Temple, because she had a Bible, because she had a 'good religious background', that she was immune from judgement. Not so! The mark of the true vine, says Jesus, is fruitfulness.

He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit (15:2).

Now of course some have sought to suggest that this text proves that true Christians can fall away and perish. There is a problem with that view, and that is that it seems to fly in the face of so many other scriptures that speak about the believer's absolute security. Not least of these is the one we came across when we were studying John 10, where Jesus says 'I give [to



my sheep] eternal life, and they shall never perish; no-one can snatch them out of my hand' (10:28). Indeed, if you read John 15:16, Jesus seems to be saying there very clearly that Christian fruitfulness is not something we determine for ourselves, but something to which he appoints us by his own unilateral decision.

You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit (15:16).

So my own view is that Jesus cannot be saying that a true Christian can perish through lack of fruitfulness. That would be contrary to many strands of teaching, not just in the Bible at large but in John's gospel in particular.

Rather, what Jesus is saying here is that fruitfulness is an infallible mark of a true Christian, and that therefore, where fruitfulness is absent, so is true Christianity. That is the significance of a rather dramatic change in tense that appears in verse 6: 'if anyone is not remaining in me [present tense], then, he has been thrown away [past tense]. As a branch he has been withered.' That strange conjunction of tenses suggests that the severance of the branch and its consequent decay are not the result of its sterility, but the cause. It is because it never really belonged to the vine in the first place that it never produced fruit.

Nevertheless, though we may take that view of it, we must not, by some kind of theological sophistry, weaken the note of warning that flows out of these verses. Jesus is saying that fruitfulness is an infallible mark of a true Christian. So it is vital that every true Christian should be fruitful. Jesus speaks about 'branches in me' being cut off. That phrase can surely only apply to men and women who have superficially, at any rate, belonged to the church and been counted as Christians.

Perhaps Jesus had one particular individual in mind just at this moment in time: Judas, who had so recently departed from the number of disciples. From the first, Jesus had known he was a rotten apple. 'Haven't I chosen you,' he said, 'and one of you is a devil?' And yet how intimately was that devil



involved with the twelve, how closely identified with the Master. Jesus is warning us here that Judas is not an isolated case. 'There will be many branches in me,' he says, 'who do not really belong to me, who are not really vitally joined to me.' They may identify themselves as church members but on the Last Day they will find themselves condemned as hypocrites. 'I never knew you,' he will say. That knowledge must be a most solemn warning to every one of us, not to allow our Christian assurance to become an excuse for presumption.

There is a story told about a Presbyterian preacher who, it was rumoured, had preached against the perseverance of the saints—the calvinistic doctrine stating that Christians can never fall away. An old Presbyterian deacon, who was very strict about good doctrine, came up to cross-examine the man in question on his calvinistic orthodoxy. 'Don't you agree,' he said, 'that a Christian may fall very far and yet be saved?' To which the preacher replied, 'I think it would be a very dangerous experiment.' That was the right reply, for it maintains the tension of Scripture. What the Bible teaches about the perseverance of the saints must never be perverted into a doctrine of the perseverance of sinners. Christ expects spiritual productivity from our lives, and if we lack it, then like Israel of old we must not be surprised if the true vine disowns us as any branch of his. That is why spiritual productivity is so important. We shall not get to heaven without it.

### **How do we become spiritually productive?**

Remain in me and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me (15:4).

Here again the answer is simple. We become productive as a direct result of an intimate and personal relationship with Jesus.

In many respects the metaphor of the vine fulfils the same role in John as the metaphor of 'the body' does in Paul's writings. They are both symbols of the organic nature of the



relationship between Christ and the church. A Christian is not just a member of a fan club. A Christian is fused to Christ, like branches in a vine or limbs in a body. It is out of that living organic union that our Christian fruitfulness derives. It is very important that we see it that way, because there is such a thing as false growth, and the characteristic of that false growth in Christians is that it is very often 'inorganic' in nature.

A picture which I have always found helpful is that of a crystal. Remember how when you experimented at school dangling a crystal of alum in a concentrated solution of the same substance? The crystal grew. The trouble with that type of inorganic growth is that if you take the enlarged crystal out of the concentrated solution and put it in a dilute solution or water, the growth all dissolves away again. That is the characteristic of inorganic growth. Because it is only an accretion to the outside, it is reversible.

Some so-called Christian growth is like that. You take a young person and put him in a Christian youth group. He wants to be accepted socially there and quickly discovers the kind of 'Christian' behaviour which will enable him to be accepted. He conforms to the group image. But it is all inorganic growth, an external facade that has been copied. It is no surprise, therefore, that when you take that same young person, who seems to have grown as a Christian so wonderfully in such a short time, out of that saturated spiritual environment of the church youth club, and plunge him into the dilute solution, a situation where there is very little Christian fellowship to sustain his Christian image, it all dissolves away. It was never real growth. It was just imitation.

Jesus' model however is of organic growth. The main feature of organic growth is that it grows from the *inside*. It is not a mask we wear. Our growth, our productivity is the fruit of spiritual life within, a new nature blossoming up from the very core of our humanity. For that reason, it cannot dissolve away. Trees do not get smaller once they have grown. Neither do people. Organic growth is irreversible. It is not a matter of being a copy-cat, or of conforming to some stereotype prevail-



ing in a particular church or group. Christian growth is the by-product of a vital and intimate personal relationship with Christ.

It is so important that we get that right. 'Without me,' he says, 'you can do nothing.' The greatest mistake we can make is to think of spiritual productivity as something we achieve on our own and then offer to Jesus as some kind of tribute. It cannot be so. That is why the old Reformers used to say that all so-called good works done before we become Christians are really of no value in God's sight. No branch can bear fruit by itself. The only kind of righteousness we generate by ourselves is self-righteousness. Such self-congratulatory virtue is a stench in God's nostrils, whether it be found in the first-century Pharisee or the twentieth-century church-goer.

So the first requirement for any disciple who is going to be really spiritually productive is a deep and humble relationship with Christ—a dependency on him. As the old Anglican prayer says, 'Without thee we are not able to please thee.' If you want to be spiritually productive, get down on your knees every day and confess to Jesus that you need him. Nurture your personal relationship with him. It is not enough just to go along to the Christian meeting and behave like everybody else. There must be spiritual reality in your own soul. The fruit of our lives will begin to shrivel the moment that spiritual reality begins to die.

However, there is more to be said on this subject of how we grow in spiritual productivity. If you read verse 5 on its own, 'Without me you can do nothing,' you might be fooled into thinking that the kind of fruitfulness Jesus is looking for comes easily. But that is not necessarily so. Jesus clearly indicates that there will be effort involved in becoming more productive as a Christian: the effort of living an obedient life.

In verse 3 he says:

You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

It is Christ's word that has accomplished the initial change in a person's life which makes spiritual productivity possible.



Then in verse 7 Jesus goes on to say:

If you remain in me and my words remain in you . . .

In other words, it is through the continuous absorption of that word of Christ that this spiritual relationship we have been talking about is realized and developed in Christian living.

What is Jesus suggesting here? That his words have some kind of magical power to make us productive Christians, like the spell that produces rabbits out of the wizard's hat? No, the word of Christ only has power to cleanse our lives, transform them as we receive the word believingly, and act upon it. His words are important because they are the instrument of *effort*. And some of those words require *effort*. If you have any doubt of that, then look at verse 10:

If you obey my command, you will remain in my love.

Now of course some Christians fail to understand the importance of effort. They say things such as, 'Let go and let God.' That is the favourite expression of those who stress passive self-surrender. You must be very careful, they say, not to do anything 'in your own strength'. Hymns from the period when this particular kind of theology was current talk a lot about 'lying at Jesus' feet'. There is one famous song that has the line, 'Oh to be nothing!'

Of course there is an element of truth in this 'quietist' emphasis, as it is technically called. We do need to see ourselves, in some respects, as clay in the potter's hands. But that does not mean that self-exertion has no role in the Christian's life. On the contrary, the whole point of Jesus' repeated emphasis on 'his word' is that a productive disciple is an obedient disciple. Dependence on Christ is not just a case of sitting back twiddling our thumbs, or waiting for spiritual productivity to strike us like lightning. Dependence on Christ means reading his words, meditating on them, and then practising them. And that will involve effort on our part, discipline, and commitment.



It may involve something else too—*pain*.

He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he trims clean so that it will be even more fruitful (15:2).

There is a certain type of cheap-jack Christianity that misrepresents the gospel in a very tragic way. It could almost be prosecuted under the Trades Description Act. It says something like this. 'You've got a mental problem? Well, if you come to Jesus he'll take it away. You're worried about passing your exams? Don't worry. Become a Christian and you'll succeed. Your marriage is breaking up? Well, if you become a Christian your husband is bound to come back to you. You've got a drink problem? Become a Christian, you'll never be tempted to take another drop etc.' Etc., etc.

Jesus is presented as the great problem-solver. He is reduced to a panacea, like those bottles of medicine which quack doctors used to peddle on the streets, that could heal anything from warts to smallpox. Of course, I am not suggesting Jesus is irrelevant to these kinds of problems. Millions of people have found that Christ is able to deliver from all kinds of intractable situations that defied every other remedy. Broken marriages have been healed. Alcoholics have been delivered. Depression and anxiety have been lifted. But what is reprehensible about this presentation of Christianity is that it makes it all sound far too painless. It is as if Pilgrim's Progress was a nice downhill free-wheeling roller-coaster. No Slough of Despond, no Doubting Castle and certainly no Hill Difficulty. According to these Christians, the Christian life is a long, lazy dawdle through Beulah Land.

I suggest to you that that is a gross misrepresentation of what the Bible says. 'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom,' says the Apostle. Jesus makes the same point here in the telling little metaphor of the vine that is trimmed to make it yield more. Every gardener knows you must do that. If you are concerned about how much fruit your trees bear, you have to prune them. Jesus says there must also



be a knife in Christian experience. There must be setbacks. There must be disappointments. There must be heart-breaks. There must be humiliations. There must be failures. Painful experience of many kinds must come our way. These things are to be expected. They are even necessary if we are to grow in spiritual productivity.

Maybe some of you reading this are facing a particular problem in life, and feel bowed down by it. You feel that a Christian should not feel the way you do. You should not be enduring what you are suffering. Everything ought to be going swimmingly, but it is not. This is a verse from which you need to take encouragement. The trimming knife applied to the branch is not a condemnation of the branch, is it? On the contrary, it is a commendation. It is the branch that bears *no* fruit which is cut off completely and dispensed with, while it is the branch that does bear fruit that Jesus says is trimmed clean. It is precisely because there is something in our life worth developing and worth preserving that God deals with us in this painful way.

Think of Job. It was because he was a man who was righteous, who feared God and eschewed evil, that God allowed him to be tested in the way he was. Although he did not perceive it in that way, his trials were a commendation of his spiritual calibre. So it may be for us. We must not think, because our way is harder than that of other Christians, that we are spiritually inferior to them. The very opposite is likely to be the case.

Furthermore, Jesus says quite clearly here that this kind of pruning experience is universal. *Every* branch that bears fruit he trims clean. So if we do not find ourselves sometimes immersed in such difficulties and trials, we had better question the authenticity of our relationship to the vine. The testimonies of those who recount nothing but the blessings of their conversion and how everything has gone wonderfully ever since, but have nothing to say about struggles or conflicts that have resulted from their Christian commitment, are testimonies that disturb me deeply. The normal Christian life is



one that knows the knife.

The most important thing to realize about this pruning, however, is that its purpose is not retributive, but corrective. He trims it clean that it may bear more fruit.

I can remember once having to counsel a woman who felt that the troubles that she was enduring at that particular point in her life were a judgement on her because of some sin she had committed. She was riddled with guilt and anxiety because she interpreted the things that were happening to her as retribution. I had to say to her that I thought her self-reproach was quite unnecessary. She was a Christian and for a Christian there is no possibility of judgement. 'There is no condemnation,' says Paul, 'for those who are in Christ.' If we have believed in Christ, we have passed beyond retribution. God frowns at those who are outside Christ. He is angry with them. They are in danger of judgement. But once we are in Christ, he smiles at us. It was not the anger of God the Judge that this woman was experiencing, but the pruning knife of God the Father. Our personalities will not produce the kind of fruitfulness he is looking for by Bible study alone. It would be nice if I could tell you they would. But Jesus is more realistic. Some things can only be learned in the crucible of bitter experience. God's purpose in those bitter experiences is not to discourage us, but to improve our yield.

Think of the analogy of a human family. Who cares most for the child? The mother who pampers him, tying him to her apron strings; solves all his problems for him; panders to all his desires; does all his homework for him; fills his pocket with unearned money; shields him from the big bad world outside from fear he should be damaged by it; and never speaks a cross word to him. Or the disciplinarian father, who pushes the boy out into situations that stretch him; who rebukes him and punishes him when he does wrong; who forces him to stand on his own feet and take responsibility for his life. Who cares most for that child, would you say?

Surely we know enough to realize that love demands discipline and without that measure of hardness in our experience,



we can never grow up. The Bible teaches us that God too disciplines us. If we are wise we will accept his discipline gladly and without resentment. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it: 'Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best' (Heb 12:10). Some of us perhaps had pretty bad fathers who did not discipline us well. But God disciplines us, 'that we may share in his holiness'. That is his purpose. 'No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it' (Heb 12:11). God is easy to please. The tiniest yield of fruit from our lives rejoices his heart. But he is very hard to satisfy. He will never give up on us until our output is 100% of what he knows can be achieved in us. But it will not be achieved without pain.

How then do we produce this fruit? First and foremost we do so not by being a Christian copy-cat, but by nurturing a deep dependency on our personal relationship with Christ. That will mean effort; Bible study and Bible obedience. It may also mean pain; a patient acceptance of his disciplinary pruning.

Maybe someone is saying, 'Well, is it really worth the effort? Is it really worth the pain?' Would not a wise man be satisfied with a less demanding kind of Christianity? I mean, we cannot all get spiritual 'degrees', can we? Some of us would be quite happy to get to the gates of heaven with the equivalent of a spiritual CSE. What are the rewards conferred by spiritual productivity, which will make it so worthwhile? Jesus' answer to that can be summed up in just one word: 'effectiveness'.

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you (15:7).

Have you ever wondered why some men and women of God seem to be so much more powerful in prayer than others? Think of Elijah, a man who could bring fire down from heaven, or rain, as the case may be. Think of Moses, whose intercessions could win battles. Queen Mary reckoned that the prayers of John Knox were a greater threat to her than an



army of 20,000 men. Why do we know so little of that kind of prayer power? Perhaps it is because we know too little spiritual productivity in our lives.

Jesus says here that there is a clear link between the two. Prayer is not magic. Prayer does not manipulate supernatural powers to do its bidding. Prayer is the way God chooses to involve us in his cosmic purposes. It is his appointed method of obtaining the blessings that he is already willing to give. That being so, effective prayer must be prayer that derives from an intimate relationship with Jesus. Only men and women who are saturated in the word of Christ and deeply instructed by the Spirit of Christ are going to experience the degree of insight into God's will that will add certainty to their prayers.

Our prayers are weak and feeble because we constantly ask amiss. That is why we often get the answer 'no'. We have asked wrongly because we do not know Jesus well enough. Our requests are still shaped by selfishness, and ignorance. If we want to experience more answered prayer, then we must make it our ambition to know more spiritual productivity. As our lives are shaped by the will of Christ, so our prayers will be more informed by his mind and hence more effective.

But there is more than that, says Jesus. Our progress in spiritual productivity carries a second reward, and that is effectiveness not just in our praying, but also in our *discipleship*.

This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples (15:8).

What do you think that the aim of a Christian really ought to be? I suspect that if you asked a lot of people, they might very well give you the answer 'to evangelize the world'. In fact there are many people with that kind of mindset, who when they read John 15 immediately jump to the conclusion that the fruit Jesus is describing here is soul-winning, that 'much fruit' means leading a lot of people to Christ. They are not totally wrong, of course, because there is a sense of mission underlying Jesus' words in this chapter. That is why he says in verse



16 'I chose you to *go* and bear fruit.' Yet this view constitutes a sad distortion of the passage, by limiting the fruit which Jesus is talking about to such narrow terms.

For the chief aim of the Christian is not to evangelize the world at all. That is only a tiny little segment of a Christian's vocation. The Christian's chief aim is to glorify God. That, says Jesus, is something we measure not merely by the number of souls we win, but by the quality of discipleship we display.

Have you noticed that some Christian saints seem to radiate God's presence from their lives? Their whole life seems to be an act of worship, and everyone seems to notice it. There is something special about them. What makes them different? Is it that they are the masters of some evangelistic technique? No, it is much bigger than that. There is a spiritual productivity flowing from their lives, which glorifies God. Well did A. W. Tozer write 'Our first task is not to spread the gospel but to be spiritually worthy of spreading it.'

Would you not like to be an effective Christian? Effective in your praying, effective in the service you offer to God? Would you not like God to look down from heaven and be pleased to identify you as a disciple of Jesus? I am afraid that the trouble with many of us is that we are far too complacent. The spirit of Laodicea has infected us. We think we are more spiritually prosperous than we really are. We are neither hot nor cold and we offend God by the tepidity of our spirituality. The answer is here: spiritual productivity.

There is a story I rather like about an old saint who had been serving Christ all her life. She was giving her testimony on the platform at a church meeting. A young Christian sitting in the congregation and a bit awestruck by all this holiness exuding from such an elderly person, whispered to his neighbour in a rather loud tone. 'Cor! I'd give everything to have a testimony like that!' and the old lady, whose hearing was still acute, overheard him and replied, 'Young man, everything is what it cost me!'



## IO

### *The World*

John 15:18 – 16:4

What is the most expensive thing about marriage? The licence? However modest your nuptial celebrations, you will have to pay for that. Or the ring, perhaps? That can set you back a bit too, even if it is only nine carat. Then there is the reception, of course, which really dents the bank balance, especially if you have champagne! And what about the honeymoon? Be it a five-star hotel on the Riviera or a self-catering chalet at Clacton, it is going to cost you something. Then there is the photographer to think about, and the bride's dress and the bridesmaids' dresses, the flowers, the hire of the white Rolls-Royce. Lastly, of course, there is the minister's fee—not that that causes much trouble to anybody!

There is no getting away from it, marriage is an expensive business. In fact it is just as well that in our western culture we no longer demand dowries and bride prices. If parents did, one suspects that elopement would be an economic necessity for many young couples. Yet with all their financial implications, I do not believe that any of the things I have mentioned so far are really the most expensive thing about marriage. The biggest cost of all is the promises. 'For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.'

Such words almost defy valuation, because there is no limit to what such an undertaking might cost us should circumstances so determine. Who knows what future disaster may



await? What illness? What destitution? What tragedy? What loss? And yet when we take marital vows, we are binding ourselves unconditionally and irrevocably to the fortunes of somebody else. Whatever fate befalls them befalls us too. And for all that we may hope that this union is going to bring us inestimable joint blessing, if we are realistic we have to face the fact that it may also bring us immeasurable joint suffering. 'For better for worse,' says the wise old Prayer Book. And that ambiguity of consequence is not only true of the marriage of a man and woman, but also of the marriage of Christ and the Christian.

We have been examining the nature of the relationship between Christ and the church as Jesus depicts it in the striking metaphor of the vine and the branches. It is an extraordinary picture, because of course a vine is its branches and the branches are the vine. In a sense you cannot distinguish between the two. Jesus in using that metaphor is affirming a spiritual bond with his disciples so close, so interpenetrating, that it almost amounts to a complete fusion of identity. 'Remain in me,' he says, 'and I shall remain in you.'

Bearing that in mind, it is little wonder that when Paul the Apostle wanted to speak about the same truth, he felt it was quite appropriate to use the analogy of marriage to communicate it. We are members of his body.

'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church (Eph 5:31–32).

As we saw in the last chapter, there is an organic union that fuses the Christian to his Master. Just as a couple who marry must accept the fact that by virtue of their union to one another their destinies are locked in tandem for good or ill, for better for worse; so the Christian must accept that by virtue of his union with Christ he must expect to go through whatever Christ went through. If the vine prospers so do its branches. If the vine suffers so do its branches.



In this second half of John 15, Jesus is spelling out the implication of that for his disciples. He stresses repeatedly the parallel between his experience and theirs. Again and again you find the same logic. 'If such and such a thing is true of me,' he says, 'then precisely the same thing is going to be true of you. There is a mutuality about our relationship. You're joined to me, for better, for worse.' So if it is an expensive thing to get married, you had better believe me when I say that it is also an expensive thing to become a Christian, not because of any money involved, but because of the commitment involved. That is why Jesus so solemnly warns all would-be disciples to count the cost. 'I carry a cross,' he says, 'and those that are joined to me can expect no better than to carry one also.'

So we must look at this demanding correlation that links the experience of the Christian and Christ as Jesus outlines it for us in this passage. We are going to look first of all at the positive side, the benefits that come to us from being married to Jesus, if you like. But then we have to look—because Jesus insists upon it—at the negative side too; namely, the demands that are upon us by virtue of being joined to Jesus in this way. At the end of our study I do hope we shall feel that discipleship, like marriage, is well worthwhile. But I also hope we shall realize how important it is, as the old Prayer Book says, not to enter into that contract with Jesus 'unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly', but rather 'reverently, soberly . . . and in the fear of God'.

Let us start then with the positives, the benefits that flow out of our union with Jesus. They are two-fold, says Jesus.

### **The Christian is a recipient of a great love**

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you (15:9).

One of the saddest things about this modern world is that scientific advance is killing the poetry in our lives. More and more we see ourselves as machines, no more than bundles of atoms and molecules reacting according to physical laws. The



thoughts of our minds are just electric currents in the brain. The feelings of our hearts become merely chemical secretions from our glands. It was bad enough when the scientists used to tell us that we were just sophisticated animals. Now they go even further and tell us we are just sophisticated computers.

The more we engage in spare-part surgery and test-tube fertilization and the like, the easier it is going to be to surrender to that conclusion. And the harder it is going to be to write poetry as a result. For poets are notoriously romantic; they want to talk about love, but twentieth-century mechanistic biology kills the vocabulary of love. When Romeo in the 1980s tells his Juliet that he loves her, he must understand that what he really means by that statement is that the young lady in question excites his cerebral neurones in a particular way, or stimulates his sex hormone perhaps. Love in our materialist philosophy is just a sentimental label we place on certain behavioural responses, all of which have a mechanical origin in body chemistry. In other words there is no essential difference between falling in love and the knee-jerk reaction when somebody hits your leg with a hammer. It is very hard to wax poetic about knee-jerks.

Thank God the Bible tells us something else! It teaches us that, contrary to all this scientific reductionism, love is real, because love is a quality inherent in the ultimate truth behind the universe. Before the world was made, there, within the mysterious interpersonal structure of divinity, love burned. 'The Father loved me,' says Jesus. An eternal, unquenchable, divine love between God the Father and God the Son. What nonsense, then, to say love is merely a phenomenon of body metabolism. You might as well say Shakespeare is just paper with printing. Has our scientific tunnel vision so blinkered us that we can only believe in things that we measure in laboratories?

If so, then for all our scientific developments, ancient civilizations were infinitely more advanced than ours today. The primitive barbarisms of the past which we scorn are nothing compared to the technocratic barbarisms of the future which



we are going to create. No, human love is enormously significant because it is a reflection of a divine attribute. Love is a most important and noble and dignified thing, for God is love. That is the first reason that the lot of the Christian disciple is so enviable. The divine love, of which all human loves are but pale echoes, has been bestowed upon him. 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.'

In this mutuality that comes from being joined to Christ, we, like him, become the recipients of the divine love. Can you imagine that? All that divine energy of love that flows between the Persons of the Trinity focused, re-channelled through Christ, like rays of the sun through a lens, on to us.

Maybe some of you reading this feel emotionally deprived. Perhaps your childhood was not a happy one and the shadow of that unhappiness still haunts you even now years later. Maybe you are single and you see no prospect of finding a partner. Perhaps you are childless and you look with envy at all those happy couples bouncing infants on their knees. Maybe you are divorced or widowed, and there is a great aching vacuum of loneliness and loss inside you as a result. There are thousands of people today walking our streets consumed with inner misery because they feel unloved.

But no Christian really needs to be numbered among them. Even though the world feels like a desert around about us, Jesus says to us, 'I have loved you. As the Father loved me I have loved you.' If you have not found the consolation of that love yet, I urge you to seek it, because there is no love of parent or husband or child or friend that can compare with it. His love is not fragile and fickle, as human affection so often proves to be. It is unchanging. It is utterly dependable, for it is the character of God. So here is the first benefit of being joined to Jesus, in this marriage of the vine and the branches. We are the recipients of a great love.

### **The Christian is the recipient of a great privilege**

I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his



master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you (15:15).

Friendship, of course, is something that is poorly understood today. Often it is mistaken for mere acquaintance. 'Let me introduce you to a friend of mine,' we say. When what we really mean is 'I have come across this chap before, so let me tell you his name before I forget it.' But, of course, real friendship is much deeper than that for two reasons.

*Firstly, true friendship is always something we elect to engage in voluntarily.* As someone puts it, God gives us relatives; thank God we can choose our friends! That may sound a bit cynical, but it is true. An element of voluntary selection is vital to friendship. As C. S. Lewis puts it in his book, *The Four Loves*, there is 'an exquisite arbitrariness' about it. 'I have no duty to be anyone's friend and no one in the world has a duty to be mine.' That surely is why Christ goes on to make his powerful statement in verse 16:

You did not choose me, but I chose you.

This friendship lies in his initiative. He does not owe us his friendship. He gives it to us as an act of free and generous grace. It is a privilege.

*Secondly, friendship involves a sharing of confidences.* There can be no real friendship without an unveiling of mind and heart. Our thoughts, our plans, our feelings, our ambitions, may not be worn on our sleeve to declare to all and sundry; but we have to be willing to express them to our friends. There can be no secrets between real friends.

Jesus experienced just such an intimacy with the Father. As he told us back in chapter 5, 'The Father loves the Son and shows him all he does' (5:20). There were no secrets between them and that is why he can speak here in verse 15 of 'everything I learned from my Father'. But here is the remarkable thing. That same intimacy which Christ has with the Father is once again funnelled through Christ to the Christian.



I no longer call you servants . . . have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you (15:15).

Is not that extraordinary? Just as Christ experienced unlimited enjoyment of God's love and passes that on to those who are joined to him, so Christ experienced unfettered access to God's mind and passes that on to those who are joined to him too. So he says, 'You are not in the position of a slave, who must mindlessly carry out instructions. I have given you insight into the divine purpose. It is your role not just to be a spectator of God's plans, still less a pawn in them. You are a participant. You are a collaborator. You are a friend.'

Out of that friendship two great assurances emerge. First of all we enjoy the assurance of *effectiveness in Christian mission*.

I chose you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last (15:16).

There is a subtlety in the text that is missed in translation, because one of the words Jesus uses there for 'choose' is the same word he used back in verse 13 for 'laying down' his life. The Greek word has the additional meaning of 'to ordain or decree'. (Just as we might talk of laying down the law.) Also, the word that he uses for 'go' in verse 16, is precisely the same word he uses repeatedly in this whole discourse for 'going' to the Father. It is a rather unexpected choice of vocabulary on John's part, and it is a subtle way of re-emphasizing the way in which the mission of the Christian is just an echo of the mission of Christ.

Just as he was involved in the purposes of God, so are we. That is why we are going to be effective, and why the fruit will last. For we are not engaged in spiritual guess-work, any more than Jesus was. He went to the cross voluntarily, understanding its significance. In the same way, he calls us to co-operate intelligently and effectively with God's eternal purpose.

But more than that we also enjoy *effectiveness in Christian prayer*.

Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name (15:16).



As we said earlier when we discovered a similar promise back in verse 7, to interpret Jesus here as giving us *carte blanche* to pray for anything we like, in the confidence we will certainly get it, is lunatic. The whole point of Christian prayer is that it revolves around that central clause of the Lord's Prayer: 'Thy will be done, thy kingdom come.'

Properly understood, Christian prayer is never an exercise in manipulating God to fulfil our purposes. Christian prayer is an exercise in fellowship with God to fulfil his purposes: 'Thy will be done.' That being so, of course the secret of effective praying is knowing God's will. It is precisely the privilege of being a Christian, says Jesus, that as a friend of his we do indeed have insight in this matter. Though our prayers may often be foolish and ill-informed, they do not have to be. God does not want them to be. He wants us as his friends to understand what he is up to, and to pray accordingly, so that whatever we ask, he may give to us.

There is a classic example of this in the Old Testament. It occurs in Genesis 18, when God was about to destroy Sodom. We read that Abraham stood before God and prayed for Sodom. It is rather amusing in some ways, rather like a Dutch auction. He starts off by saying, 'If there are fifty righteous people in Sodom, will you let it off?' And when God says 'yes' to that, he knocks God down successively from fifty to ten righteous people in Sodom. In that long debate, we cannot really imagine that the end was ever in doubt. God knew precisely how many righteous people there were in Sodom and he had already determined that judgement would fall.

So what is the explanation of this extraordinary negotiation with Abraham over the matter? The clue lies in the words God speaks before he begins his discussion with Abraham: 'I will not hide from Abraham what I am going to do,' he says. Do you see the significance of that? God acted this way because Abraham was his friend. Indeed, that was Abraham's special title: 'the friend of God'. This act of intercession on his part deepened their mutual understanding. It demonstrated the gracious way in which God wanted to involve Abraham in



his purposes. Rather than go and destroy Sodom without saying a word about it to Abraham, he shares his thoughts with his friend. In prayer they work it through together. That's what prayer is all about.

Maybe as you read this, you feel that life is a bit pointless. Perhaps you have failed an exam or a job interview, and now your career ambitions seem denied you. Or perhaps, if you are honest, you recognize that you have never really succeeded much at anything. Inferiority feelings nag perpetually at your self-confidence. Perhaps you have even gone as far as toying with the thought of suicide because you sometimes feel so useless. There are many people I have met, who are so utterly tormented with such a low sense of self-worth that they are in a state of permanent depression about it.

But there can be no grounds for such thoughts in a Christian. Jesus wants to encourage us out of such negative attitudes. 'If you are a Christian disciple,' he says, 'you must understand what a privileged person you are.' You are a personal friend of the Son of God. He has chosen to have that relationship with you, and in accordance with the nature of friendship he has opened up his mind to you. Things hidden from angels since the foundation of the world, says the Apostle, have been made known to you!

Of course we do not know all the details. Jesus is not suggesting that Christians are omniscient. But we know enough of God's plan to work and pray intelligently and effectively for its accomplishment. That's what we are here for. That is why he sends us into the world. The apostle Paul could even call himself a 'fellow-worker with God'. Think of the condescension of that; that the Creator of the universe should call us—not slaves, not even apprentices—but partners; confidants; friends.

Have you ever seen someone you know on the television, and felt a surge of pride at being able to say, 'Oh look, he is a friend of mine'? Well, go out and look at the stars, and reflect that you are a personal friend of the One who made them. That's a privilege.



A great love and a great privilege; and if that was all that was involved in being joined to Christ, then our choice to follow him would be an easy and an inexpensive one. But unfortunately it is not so. For our union with Jesus is not only for the better, it may be for the worse, and Jesus is honest enough to confront us with that realism. He does not want us joining him under false pretences, bribed by the good things we have been talking about and closing our eyes to the small print in the contract. There is a cost involved in being joined to Jesus too and now we must think about that.

That cost also is two-fold. *The Christian disciple is called to sacrificial obedience.*

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no-one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends (15:12-13).

There is a debate today about whether brides should promise to 'obey'. The idea offends our modern minds a little. Love surely should be a totally symmetric relationship in which neither party claims authority over the other. I am certainly not going to express an opinion about that. But whether it is contrary to the egalitarian spirit of our age or not, as far as our marriage with Jesus is concerned, the 'obey' stays in. Reckon on that. He insists that without an attitude of obedience, our love for him cannot survive. If we want to maintain that intimacy of which we have been speaking, then we must submit to his rule. And submitting to his rule means submitting to his rules.

If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love (15:10).

Now of course there are some Christians who fail to grasp this, and they get themselves into all kinds of tangles as a result. They conceive of loving Jesus in frankly rather sentimental terms. It has to do with how intense they feel devotionally when they are praying or worshipping. The whole idea of a code of behaviour that Jesus expects us to follow is foreign to their understanding of Christianity. Christ calls us



to spontaneity, they say, not legalism. It is much more spiritual to 'do as you feel led' than to think in terms of obeying rules. There is, they claim, nothing more spiritually deadening than a list of 'thou shalts' and 'thou shalt nots'. Augustine was right, they affirm, when he said 'Love God and do as you please.'

Well, Jesus does not agree. At least, not unless we understand 'loving God' as Augustine did, with a very strong component of Bible-centred moral obligation within it. Undoubtedly there is an obsession with do's and don'ts which is alien to Christian freedom. I am not denying that. But it is a total mistake to think that because Jesus was not a Pharisee, he therefore found no place for moral imperatives generally. On the contrary, his teaching is full of commands; and he commends obedience to us here because he had personally proved the importance of it.

If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love (15:10).

There is that parallel again, that mutuality. The Father loves Christ and Christ's response was surrender to the Father's commands. So Christ loves us and our response must be surrender to his commands. It is all a consequence of being tied up, like a branch in the vine, with the experience of our Master.

Therefore, we cannot opt out of obedience unless we care to opt out of him. Indeed if we had any sense we would not want to. For obedience to his commands, far from being a recipe for woodenness and frigidity in our spiritual life, is in fact the pathway to true happiness and satisfaction.

I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete (15:11).

Jesus himself had proved that allowing his life to be moulded and shaped by the commands of God his Father had brought him joy. He was convinced that this was the way for



those who were joined to him to experience the same joy.

There is a story of a mother who heard an ominous silence from the nursery one day and shouted to her husband, 'George! Find out what those children are doing, and make them stop.' That is the image, alas, that many people have of God, as a kind of heavenly spoil-sport who is for ever finding out what we are doing and saying no. He ruins our fun and destroys our freedom like a censorious parent.

That is simply not true. He is concerned for our joy. But joy for us human beings comes through obedience. There is no joy for sinners. The unhappiest person in this world is a rebellious Christian. Obedience is what we were made for. Christ was the most fulfilled human being that has ever walked this earth; and fulfilment for him, he says, came through submission to the Father's commandments. He gives us his commandments to obey, precisely because he wants that same joy to be ours.

Perhaps you became a Christian some time ago, and you are conscious of some decline in your sense of Christ's nearness. Like William Cowper, you ask 'Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord?' Is that the question that lurks in your mind?

There are of course several possible reasons for that kind of spiritual barrenness in our lives and not all of them are necessarily our own fault. It is important to realize that! Sometimes such feelings of desertion are part of God's discipline, the pruning of the vine which we discussed earlier. Nevertheless, when we go through times like that, it is important that we ask ourselves very seriously whether there is disobedience in our lives, because if we are flouting the commands of Christ we have no right to expect a sense of his presence in our lives. 'If you obey my commands you will remain in my love.' That is what he says, and that of course is why many who embrace this rather sentimental notion of what it means to love Christ to the neglect of moral issues often have great difficulty in sustaining any sense of Christian assurance.

Christ said that anger was as culpable as murder. He said



that lust was as sordid as adultery. He said we must speak the truth, that we must eschew revenge, that we must love our enemies. He told us that we must lay up treasure in heaven and not set our hearts on material wealth. He told us that we must beware of criticizing people, be humble in our attitudes, avoid exhibitionist piety. He said we were to be generous with our money, compassionate to the poor, persistent in prayer, zealous in evangelism.

These are his commands. And if we are not doing them, then it ought not to surprise us that we do not feel his joy or his love in our lives as we would like.

Let us be quite frank about it, such obedience can be very costly.

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you (15:12).

Have you ever come across the sort of married or engaged couple who are so obsessed with one another there is no room in their lives for anyone else? In some ways, unfortunately, the privatized world of the twentieth century rather encourages that kind of social introversion.

There was a song that the Seekers used to sing. Some of you may remember it. 'We'll build a world of our own that no one else can share,' it began. I fear that precisely matches the ambition of many couples today; not so much the 'nuclear family' as the 'insular family'.

Well, that is not Jesus' vision for Christian society. 'Love each other,' he says. 'You must find room in your life for people. That is the central command out of which all other commands of mine derive.'

Just think for a moment, when you are next in a church, of someone who is sitting near you. Do not look at them as that will embarrass them. But think of them. How much do you really love them? How much would you give up for their sake? If they were redundant and needed £10 to pay the rent, would you give it to them? If they were homeless and needed a place to sleep, would you give it them? If they were deeply depressed and needed somebody to talk to into the long hours



of the night, would you give them that time? Suppose they were seriously ill and needed a kidney to heal them, *your* kidney—would you donate it? Suppose they were in desperate danger and needed someone to put their own lives at risk to rescue them. Would you do it?

Greater love has no-one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends (15:13).

So Jesus here is not just calling us to obedience. He calls us to *sacrificial* obedience: obedience that hurts, obedience that costs, obedience for better or for worse. Love for his friends cost him a cross. And each of us if we are to take our relationship with him seriously must face up to the fact that similar sacrifice may be required of us one day. 'Jesus Christ laid down his life for us,' says the Apostle, 'And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers' (1 Jn 3:16). That is why I say religious sentimentality is not enough.

Being joined to Jesus involves us in a sacrificial obedience. Are you ready for that?

Nor is that the end. Jesus says there is another aspect of this cost of being joined to him. We are called also to *courageous witness*.

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first (15:18).

Now of course some Christians are persecuted simply because they ask for it. They are objectionable. They are tactless, they are rude, they are arrogant; and when people give them the cold shoulder they fume with indignation and tell us they are being persecuted for righteousness' sake. Well of course they are not. They need to be told that it is their awkwardness, not their righteousness, that causes their suffering. Nevertheless Jesus warns here that persecution is natural to a Christian, even the most gracious and most inoffensive Christian, even the most Christlike Christian. Nine times out of ten we do not have to invite it. It will just happen. Notice the four things that Jesus says give rise to this opposition from a hostile world.



First of all, he says, it happens *because Christians are different*.

If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you (15:19).

H. G. Wells tells a story called *The Country of the Blind* about an isolated tribe of congenitally blind people in which by some strange circumstance a single young man arrives with normal sight. The story tells how he was regarded as completely mad by the blind population. Eventually they prescribed the surgical removal of his eyes in order to restore his sanity. It is a brilliant parody of the way a sick society fails to recognize health even when it stares it in the face.

The world hates Christians fundamentally because they are different. They do not belong. In that, there is a challenge for us, for if we do not find ourselves experiencing much of this the world's opposition, could it perhaps be because we are not different enough? As someone said, 'If tomorrow it were made illegal to be a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us?'

Secondly, says Jesus, they must expect it because *men are incorrigibly wicked*.

They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin . . . If I had not done among them what no-one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father (15:21-22, 24).

It is a solemn thought that the coming of Christ tragically operated so as to increase rather than decrease the guilt of some. They might have claimed ignorance before his advent; but now his words and his deeds have fully declared the character of God. Now they know the God before whom each one of us must one day stand, there can be no more excuse. There is no longer a shadow of pretence of ignorance. It is a



simple case now of contempt of court. The evil of their hearts is totally exposed in all its inveterate viciousness. We must not be utopian about this world. Men are incorrigibly wicked, and that is the second reason the Christian must expect hostility.

The third reason he gives is that *false religion blinds men to the truth*.

They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God (16:2).

You see the irony there? It is the *synagogue* that they are excommunicated from, it is the *service of God* that martyrs them. The implication is that the church must expect her fiercest opposition not from the profanity of the pagans, but from the fanaticism of the faithful. It is religion that persecutes, not irreligion. For irreligion is a blindness of nature; not so much antagonism as indifference. But religion's blindness is a blindness of choice; not mere apathy, but antipathy.

That is why unpopularity is to be expected, not only from the world, but also from the ecclesiastical establishment. And is that not the way in which it has worked? Jesus' words have been proved true repeatedly. It is only a short step from zealous orthodoxy to the blind and ruthless intolerance of the Inquisition. Never forget that they preached a sermon at the burning of Cranmer. It is not only out of synagogues that Christians have been put, but out of churches. It is not only in the name of Allah or even of Jehovah that Christians have been killed, but in the name of Jesus. That is the appalling irony of persecution.

But the fourth reason that we must expect persecution Jesus says is quite simply *because they persecuted him*.

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first . . . 'No servant is greater than his master' (15:18, 20).

Ultimately it comes down once again to that parallelism which we have noticed so often. We are caught up in union with One who was despised and rejected of men, and that is



why we can expect no better treatment. Paul, when he was on the Damascus road, was challenged by Christ. 'Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?' It seemed a crazy question, because Saul was persecuting Christians. But in Jesus' mind, persecuting the church and persecuting him were the same thing. Unpopularity is to be expected, for Christ was unpopular. When we experience it, our duty is plain.

You also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning (15:27).

He speaks of course particularly of those eleven who were in a special sense the eyewitnesses of his ministry. But surely by extension he is speaking to us too. We are called not just to sacrificial obedience within the context of a loving church. We are called to courageous witness in the context of a hostile world.

We will not be on our own in that task. The Spirit of truth will be there, endorsing our testimony in the hearts of those to whom we speak. Some among them will listen to us, just as some listened to Jesus. But there will be others who will revile us and ostracize us. They will persecute and execute us. Down through history these words have been confirmed over and over again.

The old Moravian brethren had a badge which depicted an ox, with a plough on one side and an altar on the other. The motto in Latin underneath said, 'Ready for either'. The plough or the altar; service or martyrdom. It is to our loss that in this tolerant twentieth century we no longer feel that disturbing second alternative. We talk so smugly about loving Jesus. But what does it really mean to us? A warm cosy glow while we sing jolly choruses, most likely. But for the eleven to whom Jesus is speaking, to love Christ meant loss of security, loss of wealth, loss of reputation, loss of freedom, loss even of their very lives. On my count only about two of them died peacefully in their beds. Do we love Christ like that? I know we do a lot of work for the church. But what about when they put us in solitary confinement? Is it Christ we love—or Chris-



tian fellowship? I know we spend a lot of time reading the Bible. But what about when they take our Bibles away from us, and indeed every other Christian book? Is it really Christ we love, or Christian theology? I know our devotional times are sweet. But what about when they torture our minds and emotions so much we can hardly think straight, let alone pray? Will it be Christ we love, or just religious sentimentality? I know we are willing to knock on a few doors and invite our neighbours to the guest service. But what about when the noose is hanging over our head and the blindfold is going over our eyes. Is it Christ we love, or life?

We have done something in the western church which those disciples, to whom Jesus was speaking, would hardly have believed possible. We have made Christianity safe! And in making it safe we have made it cheap. But real Christianity is neither. Real Christianity is an invitation to the most costly and dangerous adventure the world can offer. Here is a Christ who demands we hazard everything we have and are for his sake. Here is a religion for heroes not hypocrites, for martyrs not moderates, for soldiers not sentimentalists.

Here is the challenge of Jesus to us today. 'Ready for either.' Service or martyrdom. For better for worse. Are we prepared for a marriage like that? Weigh the cost carefully, before you take the hand of Jesus and say, 'I will.'



## II

### *The Bequest*

John 16:5-15

'Tis better to have loved and lost, than never to have lost at all.' No, that was not quite the way that Tennyson wrote those famous lines! It is an intentional mis-quote by the satirist Samuel Butler, designed to make the worldly-wise amongst us smile.

But do you think it could ever be true? Do you think that losing someone we loved could ever seriously be regarded as preferable to not losing them? It is hard to believe so. There are few sadnesses more profound than a lovers' farewell, and the more permanent the farewell the more intense the sadness. Parting is only a sweet sorrow when, like Romeo and Juliet, you anticipate meeting again the following day. When the parting admits of no such early reunion, then it's hard to discover any sweetness in it at all.

We may smile at Samuel Butler's cynical wit. But the truth is that any love that considers itself fortunate to have lost rather than to have kept its beloved cannot be real love at all. As far as real love is concerned, anything is preferable to separation. That is why the vow has to be 'Till death us do part'. That is why bereavement, of all the experiences of life, is so disturbing to our emotions, plunging even the sanest of us into depths of depression. For those who know what love is all about, there is surely nothing at all positive about having loved and lost.

Yet Jesus in John 16 insists that there is; at least, as far as



he is concerned.

I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away (16:7).

We must remember that Jesus speaks these words on the very threshold of his own arrest and execution. He is walking with his disciples towards the Garden of Gethsemane, a stroll all too familiar to them, but which he was taking on this occasion for the very last time. And he knows it. Again and again he talks about his departure. 'I'm going away. I'll only be with you a little longer. You will not see me again.' The more he has spoken like this, the more morbid and melancholy his disciples have become. When their conversation began, back in the Upper Room, they were full of questions, even objections.

But as the evening has worn on, this note of imminent departure has continually threatened the conversation, and their despondency has grown deeper and deeper. They have had less and less to say. The discourse has taken on more and more the nature of a monologue, so much so that even Jesus himself confesses that he is finding their gloomy silence depressing.

Now I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me 'Where are you going?' Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief (16:5-6).

Now his opportunity to speak to them is almost at an end. There is much more he would like to say but their faces betray their inability to cope with it at the moment. So Jesus must bring his long farewell to a conclusion. Before he does so, however, he tries to get them to look on the positive side of what is about to happen. 'I want you to realize,' he explains, 'that losing me is not the disaster that you think it is. On the contrary, rightly understood it constitutes a blessing. If you only understood a little more, you would realize that it is better to have loved me and lost me than never to have lost me at all.'

Of course, self-pity often blinds us to the hidden purposes



of God in our sad and tragic experiences. But of no-one was that more true than these disciples. Their melancholy was particularly inappropriate.

Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you (16:7).

You will by now be familiar with this figure of the Counsellor. It is Jesus' name for the Holy Spirit, as we recall from our study in the latter half of chapter 14 where Jesus first mentioned him. 'I will ask the Father,' he said. 'And he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever—the Spirit of truth.' Jesus returns to this theme here, but this time he has much more to say about it. 'The Holy Spirit,' he explains, 'is my bequest to you. He is the compensation for losing me. Indeed, he is more than that. He will be a positive improvement on my physical presence among you. One of the major reasons I am leaving is precisely so that he may come to you.'

An obvious question we want to ask Jesus is why we cannot have our cake and eat it: 'Why can't we have the Holy Spirit and you simultaneously?' Jesus does not answer that question here. John commented on it back in chapter 7, throwing a little light. 'The Spirit up to that time had not been given,' he wrote, 'because Jesus had not been glorified.' All we can say with certainty is that what Jesus was about to achieve by his dying on the cross, rising from the dead and ascending to glory was a vital preliminary to the Spirit's release. In the diary of God's eternal plan, Easter had to be over before the Day of Pentecost could arrive.

Some people have suggested that Jesus' death on the cross was no more than a mere martyrdom. Clearly in his own mind it was far more than that. It was an event of cosmic significance which marked the threshold of a whole new era in God's relationship with men. The age of the Spirit was about to dawn and only the presence of the risen and glorified Jesus in heaven could secure its commencement. 'If I go, I will send him to you.'

I want to look at just two vital areas of the Holy Spirit's



work which Jesus describes in this passage and which he says are so immensely valuable to us that they render his departure, not a tragedy at all, but an advantage to us.

### **The Holy Spirit's work in the world**

When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned (16:8–11).

If we are honest, we have to admit that there are elements in this paragraph which are cryptic, even a little mysterious. They have led to a fair amount of debate in the commentaries but I do not want to get engaged in too much of that, because the general thrust of the verses is clear. Jesus is saying that it is the distinctive work of the Holy Spirit to awaken a sense of moral shame and spiritual concern in human hearts. Why is it that a man who has lived a whole lifetime of careless indifference to God can suddenly be arrested by a sense of sin, and discover an urgent need to find personal salvation?

Jesus says it is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is he who 'convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgement'. That word 'convict' is a technical word in Greek legal language, meaning the cross-examination of a hostile witness. It is a very appropriate choice of vocabulary, because you may remember that the Counsellor (or *parakletos*) was originally a friend in a law court who gave you personal support when you were on trial. What Jesus is saying in these verses, then, is that the Holy Spirit not only fulfils that role, speaking words of encouragement and consolation to the hearts of Christian believers when they are on trial by the world, but he also goes on the offensive. He also challenges the consciences of unbelievers. He is not just a defence lawyer. He is the public prosecutor who convicts the world of its guilt.

But somebody may ask, is that really *new*? Haven't people



always been convicted of their sins, before Jesus as much as after? Surely the Holy Spirit has always been doing that, rebuking men's evil and holding that evil in check? Of course he has. But if you look carefully at Jesus' words, you will see that, with this new release of the Spirit that will result from his departure, a radical change in the nature of that convicting work of the Spirit takes place.

First of all, Jesus says there will be *a new focus for the definition of sin*. He will convict men of sin, not merely because they break the Ten Commandments, but 'because they do not believe in me'. From now on it is the rejection of Jesus which ultimately damns the world. Contempt for God's law can be forgiven. Contempt for his Son cannot. It is the Holy Spirit's work to expose to men and women the moral and spiritual rebellion that hides behind the mask of their unbelief.

Secondly, there will be *a new certainty about the vindication of righteousness*. He will convict the world in regard to righteousness, but not merely because God's standards are eternal. Now he has something else to wield, 'because I am going to the Father'. It is the exaltation of Jesus which from now on guarantees the triumph of goodness in the world. There is no doubt any longer about the kind of life-style that is going to last, and which will be honoured in eternity. It is the life-style of Jesus, the risen Lord. It is the Holy Spirit's work to convince men and women that there is something absolute and inescapable about the moral claim which Jesus makes upon us.

Thirdly, according to Jesus, there will be *a new urgency about the imminence of the end of the world*. He will convict the world of judgement, but not merely because sometime in the indefinite future God is going to call the universe to account. The Old Testament Prophets could have said that. But now there is something new: 'the prince of this world stands condemned'. That is a perfect tense not a future. We are no longer talking about some far off Day of the Lord, but about *now*. The devil's attempt to usurp the throne of the universe is already confounded. With the exaltation of Christ,



the kingdom of God has arrived. The messianic reign the Prophets spoke about is here. Judgement is no longer a distant threat, but an imminent crisis. Each of us must take sides now, for this victorious Jesus or for his defeated enemy. It's the Holy Spirit's distinctive work to inject that imperative call for decision into our consciousness.

Do you see what I mean when I say that in every way the convicting work of the Holy Spirit is enhanced, improved and rendered more compelling by the departure of Jesus? Before Jesus went away, vast multitudes of the human race successfully ignored God's claim upon their lives. Yet on the day of Pentecost alone, three thousand men were cut to the heart by the Apostle's words. Why? Because the Holy Spirit had come, convicting the world. And so it has gone on; the influence of Jesus is one million times greater today, two thousand years after his death, than it was during his own lifetime. For the Holy Spirit, the Counsellor, has convicted the world of its guilt.

So there is immense encouragement in these words if we grasp them and really think about them. Firstly, there is encouragement to those Christians who are particularly concerned about *social justice and moral standards in the world*, for there is nothing in these verses which specifically says that the Holy Spirit performs this work of conviction only in those who are about to be converted.

Many people have limited it to that application, but the text does not actually warrant such restriction. The world he convicts is *still* in its state of unbelief and hostility. The implication is that, just as there was a general influence for good upon the consciences of men and women in Israel as the result of the propagation of the Ten Commandments through Moses, so we may anticipate that the world at large will be permeated by a new moral dynamic as a result of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. We may expect to see men persuaded of the rightness of Christian values and the dignity of Jesus Christ, even though they do not always personally embrace him as their Saviour.



To put it another way, we do not have to give up on secular society and just concentrate on the church. The Holy Spirit is active *in the world*, convicting it of sin and righteousness and judgement. The prince of the world is judged. Christ is exalted as Lord over the world. So the world must be the orbit of Christian action, not just the church.

Secondly, there is immense encouragement in these verses to those who are involved in *the development of Christian apologetics* (the study of how to convince people). As far as Christianity is concerned, people need convincing of two things. They need convincing negatively, of the futility of non-Christian ideas; and positively, of the correctness of Christian ideas.

There is a superb example of apologetics in Paul's famous sermon to the Athenians. But I am afraid apologetics is a pursuit which quite a few people nevertheless disparage. Right-wing fundamentalists tend to do so because they claim it is too philosophical. 'You cannot convince anybody by debate or by reason,' they argue. And it is disliked by the more liberal wing of the church because they feel it is contentious. 'We ought to be concentrating on what great religions have in common, not making a fuss about our differences.'

Suffice it to say, that the Holy Spirit is on the side of apologetics. The word 'convict', which Jesus uses, clearly has the meaning of persuading people by argument that their ideas are wrong and that they need to be changed. If the Holy Spirit is engaged in such apologetic activity on behalf of Jesus in the world, surely we should be too. Indeed it is only because he is so active that we dare to try.

Thirdly, I find great encouragement in these verses personally. It can be quite a disheartening thing to be a preacher. 'How can I persuade these people that they need to change?' you ask yourself. One feels so helpless and inadequate. After all, the Marxist terrorist can pick up a machine gun and hijack an aeroplane to get his message spread around the world on prime-time television, but all the preacher can do is preach. It seems rather ineffectual in the 1980s. Often a voice whispers



in the ear, 'You're just wasting your breath, you know.' But I know that just is not true. I know that the conscience of everyone who hears preaching is on the preacher's side. An invisible advocate is at work confirming the authority of the message of Jesus to their hearts. Indeed there is not one of you who will finish reading this book as an unbeliever without consciously suppressing or subconsciously repressing the challenge of his inner voice. Not one of you. Your conscience is on my side too!

I hope that is an encouragement to some of you. Maybe you have sensed that inner prompting that I am describing. You have felt an intuitive conviction about your own moral state and about the significance of Jesus, and the urgent need for decision in his favour. But perhaps you have been inclined to be suspicious of those feelings. You are tempted to put it all down to your overreligious upbringing, or even to the emotional impact of the writer's eloquence! You have told yourself not to take all this stuff too seriously. 'It's all imagination,' you say to yourself.

Well, I am the last person to encourage you to be gullible or naive in this matter, but I do want you to know that there is another possible explanation for the inward pressure which you feel towards Christian commitment. It could be nothing to do with your religious upbringing at all. After all, that has not bothered you much before has it? It could be nothing to do with the writer's eloquence. It could be that the Holy Spirit himself is challenging you, calling you to repentance and faith. If it is, then you should be grateful, because Jesus is telling us here that even if you had Jesus himself, in his physical presence before your eyes, he would not communicate so great a persuasion of truth as the invisible presence of his Spirit is doing right now in your heart.

### **The Holy Spirit's work in the church**

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all



truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you (16:12–15).

I suspect that Jesus never spoke any more important or potentially dangerous words. They are important, of course, because they explain why Jesus never wrote anything down. Most of the Prophets considered their message important enough to get it down on paper for the benefit of subsequent generations. Some of them were even told by God to do it. But Jesus never seems to have bothered, in spite of the fact that he clearly believed his authority was supreme. He never picked up a pen, because he anticipated the ministry of the Holy Spirit within his followers. It would be his Spirit's distinctive task to perpetuate the special revelation he had brought after his departure.

It is precisely here that the danger lies. For many would seize on these verses as proof of a continuing gift of inspiration in the church, in consequence of which we may rightly expect new revelations of the Holy Spirit even today.

As popular as such interpretations of Jesus' words are—in certain quarters anyway—they are not really substantiated by the rest of the New Testament. I want to suggest to you that we must observe a vital distinction between the application of these words to Christian believers generally, and their application to those to whom Jesus spoke them in the first place.

It is important to remember that when Jesus uses the second person plural 'you' throughout this discourse, he is not speaking directly to you and me but to the eleven disciples, who were accompanying him on his journey towards Gethsemane. Of course, it is perfectly true that the vast majority of what he says is also relevant to us because those eleven disciples were the embryo of the church. What was true for them as first generation Christians is, 90% of the time, true also for us their twentieth-century successors. But we must not jump to the conclusion that *everything* Jesus says to them he also



intends to say to us. There are points in this conversation which are not transferable in that way.

Let me illustrate that by reference to chapter 14.

The Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (14:26).

Now the Holy Spirit cannot remind *us* of what Jesus said in the same way that he could remind the Apostles, for the simple reason we never heard Jesus speak in the flesh in the way they did. That verse clearly meant something for them which it cannot mean for us.

The same applies to 15:26-27:

When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me; but you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.

Once again, the Holy Spirit cannot accompany our testimony to Christ in quite the same way he could accompany that of the Apostles, for the simple reason that we were not eyewitnesses of Christ as they were. We were not with him 'from the beginning'; that was their special privilege. Once more, that verse clearly meant something for them which it cannot mean for us.

It is important to realize then that throughout this sermon Jesus' primary reference is the eleven, and only by extension is what he is saying applicable to us.

That is vital when you read this promise of the revelation of new truth after Jesus' death; truth which he had not been able personally to teach in his lifetime because of the disciples' limited spiritual capacity at that time.

This new truth will have two characteristics, he tells us. Firstly, it will be truth regarding *the future*: 'He will tell you what is yet to come.' Almost certainly, that is not to be understood in the very narrow sense of predictive prophecy, for the New Testament sees the coming of Jesus as the birth of the New Age. 'Things to come' have arrived in Jesus. That is



probably what he is referring to here. He is saying that the Spirit would guide them into the full significance of the New Age which was dawning with his cross and resurrection and ascension.

Secondly it will be truth regarding *Jesus himself*: 'He will bring glory to me by taking what is mine and making it known to you.' In other words the whole theological understanding of the church would be deepened as a result of the Holy Spirit's clarification of the person and the work of Jesus. Every aspect of our knowledge of God would be developed and reshaped by the christological perspective. Jesus promises a major reconstruction of our religious understanding after he leaves the world.

But it is simply not true that such new truth is still being discovered today by the church. The promise of inspiration, which Jesus is making here, is exclusively directed to the Apostles, not to us. In fact if you read Jesus' words carefully that is implicit in them: 'He will guide you into *all* the truth,' he says, not *some* of it, but *all* of it. It is not a case of first generation Christians being given a bit of the truth, and then subsequent generations of the church filling in more and more of the picture. Jesus' promise is that the Holy Spirit would give a *total* revelation to the Apostles themselves. And that is certainly the way in which they themselves understood it.

You do not find the Apostles at the end of the first century telling the church to look for more inspired apostles and prophets who will continue to expound new truth. Instead you find them warning in the severest tones about the danger of false prophets, and urging the church to transmit faithfully that body of gospel teaching which they, the Apostles, had once and for all delivered to the saints. In the Book of Revelation you even find the church likened to the City of Jerusalem with its walls built on the twelve Apostles. The apostolic company is the foundation of the church. There first-generation Christians have a quite unique place in the development of Christian doctrine. Jesus here is not promising us all access to new revelation through the Spirit, but teaching us rather



about the special character of apostolic authority. Those whom he is here appointing to that special office would be channels of new revelation through the Spirit.

They had been with him from the beginning. They would be reminded of what he had said, so that they would not only write reliable accounts of his life and ministry, but would be inspired by the Spirit to understand far more about Jesus' significance than he had ever been able to share personally with them during the days of his flesh. Jesus is, in other words, anticipating in this verse the birth of the New Testament.

Are we then to say that these verses have no relevance to us? Are we to read them solely with the Apostles in mind? Should we think of the Spirit as guiding *them* into all the truth, revealing Jesus to *them*, bringing glory to Christ through what he showed *them*? Certainly, that is the primary reference, but it would not be true to say that there is not some application by extension. For though there was a unique ministry of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, it does not mean, of course, that there is no ministry of the Holy Spirit to our understanding of God's truth as well.

It is quite clear from the rest of the New Testament that he does indeed *illumine* the minds of Christians generally as they read the Apostles' writings. Paul even goes so far as to say that without the help of the Holy Spirit we just cannot get to grips with New Testament revelation. According to him, men without the Spirit are unable to accept the things that come from the Spirit of God. They are foolishness to them. They cannot understand them. So, in that more limited sense, Jesus' words are applicable to all Christian believers, including us.

But in the days in which we live it cannot be stressed enough that this *illumination* by the Spirit is very different from *inspiration*. Inspiration is the gift of understanding new truth. Illumination is the gift of understanding old truth. That is why the Apostles' sermons go into the Bible and mine had better come out of it. Here, then, is the second great advantage the Holy Spirit brings. He works not only in the world to convict it of sin. He works also in the church to bring us instruction.



And in both cases, he works far beyond anything we could have had before Jesus' departure.

It is crucially important that we grasp this last point, because it explodes all kinds of fallacies. It exposes the futility of the 'quest for the historical Jesus'. There are some liberal scholars, although not as many as earlier in the century, who think they are doing us a service by paring away the gospel narratives in order to get rid of all the bits which the disciples added, so that we can just get down to the 'original Jesus'. Of course this is pure nonsense. There is no Jesus except the Jesus to whom the Spirit and the Apostles testify. The hard truth is that the Apostles understood Jesus a thousand times better after he had gone than they did while he was still here. This was not because they had the leisure then to invent a new theology, but because they then had the Holy Spirit to impart new truth about him.

You find a similar kind of fallacy among some evangelical Christians. Have you ever come across a red-letter New Testament? You do not see them so much these days, but they used to be popular. Everything Jesus said in direct speech was printed in red, as if to suggest that those words that came direct from his lips, had more authority and importance than other words in the New Testament text. You still find some Christians confused on that point. But again it is nonsense. The words which the Holy Spirit speaks through the Apostles are every bit as authoritative as those of Jesus. Jesus himself said so. Indeed, such is the manner in which Jesus has chosen to inspire the gospels, that there is often no certain way of distinguishing the original words of Jesus from the later words of the Holy Spirit through the evangelist. Nor is there any point in trying to distinguish them.

But perhaps the commonest fallacy that Jesus dismisses here is what I would call the fallacy of Christian nostalgia. I am sure that you have come across those Christians who are for ever going on about their visit to Palestine. 'It brought it all to life,' they say. 'It was so wonderful to just sit there on the Mount of Olives, and in the Garden Tomb!' I am sure that



kind of visit can indeed be an encounter with the Lord. But we do not need the nostalgia of such pilgrimages. If the truth were known, even if we could have sat with the disciples on the hillside and heard the words of the Sermon on the Mount from the mouth of Jesus, we would not be more blessed than we are when we sit with the inspired record of that Sermon before our eyes and the Holy Spirit in our hearts to interpret it to us.

There is no greater blessing than the blessing of the Holy Spirit. Even if we could travel in Doctor Who's time machine back to first-century Palestine, and see the Baby in the manger or the Man on the cross, we would not be spiritually better off than we are now when we hold a New Testament in our hands. We must understand that. 'It is to your advantage I go away,' says Jesus, 'for the Holy Spirit will come.'

So now we see Jesus' reason for telling us that as far as he is concerned, it is better to have loved and to have lost him.

If I am honest, I have to say that it is possible to make too much of the Holy Spirit. There are churches where one hears an awful lot about the Holy Spirit and very little about the Bible. I hope that what I have written here has exposed the fallacy in that. Similarly, there are some churches where you hear an awful lot about the Holy Spirit and very little about Jesus. But these verses make very clear the mistake in such an emphasis. According to Jesus, the Holy Spirit is the most modest and self-effacing of all the Persons of the Trinity. 'He will bring glory to me,' says Jesus. The Holy Spirit has no interest in talking about himself. He is only interested in talking about Christ. So find a church that makes much of Jesus and you may hope to find a church full of the Holy Spirit. Find a church that makes much of the Spirit to the neglect of Jesus and you are very likely to have found a church that is full of little more than hot air.

But I must also make clear that it is far more lethal an error to make too little of the Spirit than it is to make too much. Show me a church centred around the sacraments, with no real awareness of the Holy Spirit, and I will show you a dead



church. Show me a church obsessed with theology and with no real awareness of the Spirit, and I will show you an equally dead church. It is the Holy Spirit who brings the church to life. For it is he who turns Jesus from being a mere hero of the past, commemorated in our books and in our rituals, into our living contemporary.

If it is a choice between standing amongst those crowds who saw him in first-century Palestine, and standing in the congregation of a twentieth-century church, the wise among us will choose the latter. We have no need for nostalgia.

He is the one Person in the world whom it is better to have loved and lost. For if the truth were known, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, we have not lost him at all.



## I 2

### *The Best Is Yet To Be*

**John 16:16-33**

An optimist, says the philosopher Leibnitz, is a person who believes that we live in the best of all possible worlds. A cynic has replied that a pessimist is a person who fears this is true.

Whenever we care to contemplate the future, we find that we are either confident Mr Micawber, looking on the bright side of things or morbid Eeyore waiting for the crack of doom. Of course, according to the caricature that many people entertain, a Christian should definitely fall into the latter category. 'The end of the world is nigh' is the classic text of the sandwich-board evangelist and one has to admit that the Bible is not short of such premonitions of apocalyptic disaster. One prophet of the Old Testament—Jeremiah—was so full of them he has almost become the patron saint of pessimists.

But our study passage teaches us that there is another emphasis counterbalancing this note of prophetic melancholy. True, a Christian must be realistic enough to expect the worst, but he must also be sanguine enough to hope for the best. It is that tension between optimism and pessimism which Jesus tries to get across to his disciples in this concluding section of the farewell discourse. He puts it in a nutshell in verse 33.

In this world you will have trouble [the pessimism]. But take heart! I have overcome the world [the optimism] (16:33).

Within the hour he would be betrayed and arrested. Within twenty-four hours he would be crucified, dead and buried. They stand on the very threshold of these dramatic events.



Jesus has been trying to prepare his disciples for the tragedy that is about to engulf them. And at last the penny seems to have dropped. Initial indignation has been replaced by resignation. Animated protests have given way to a mood of sullen, dejected silence. They have no more questions to ask. Jesus' meaning is painfully clear to them.

I am going to him who sent me, yet none of you asks me, 'where are you going?' Because I have said these things, you are filled with grief (16:5-6).

Yet it is precisely at this point, when at long last the disciples are pessimistic enough to expect the worst, that Jesus begins to encourage them on the opposite tack. He encourages them to hope for the best.

In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me (16:16).

It is hardly surprising that those cryptic words threw the disciples once more into confusion. We must sympathize with their perplexity. All evening Jesus has been doing his best to make them feel sad, by constantly harping on the imminence of his departure. Now that at last they are grief-stricken, he suddenly starts hinting at the fact that maybe his separation from them would only be a temporary thing. 'What does he mean?' they ask themselves. 'We cannot understand what he is getting at.' They resemble children who fail to understand the lesson, but are too embarrassed to put up their hand and admit their muddle-headedness to the teacher. So they start muttering under their breath to one another, but no one dares to act as spokesman of their incomprehension.

Indeed, the controversy about what Jesus really meant by that phrase 'a little while' has never really stopped. Scholars are almost as confused today about what Jesus signified by it as the eleven were when they first heard it from his lips. Let me outline three possible lines of interpretation:

Some people believe that Jesus is referring to his *resurrection* which, in many respects, is the most obvious interpret-



ation. It enables the two little-while's of which he speaks to be of comparable length. 'In a little while you'll see me no more': in other words, in twenty-four hours I'll be dead. Then 'After another little while you will see me': in other words, 'Forty-eight hours after my death I shall rise again.' But unfortunately, it is not quite as straightforward as that, especially when you see this verse in the context of all that Jesus has been saying in this chapter.

In chapter 8 we discussed Jesus' words in the fourteenth chapter of John.

Before long, the world will not see me any more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live (14:19).

Many have interpreted this as a reference to the resurrection appearances too but as we pointed out in chapter 8, there are reasons for questioning that simple line.

For a start, if you read through the entire paragraph in John 14, you will see that Jesus seems to be talking about a private revelation of himself to his disciples which the world cannot share. But the resurrection was not a private, but a public event; the world could see the risen Jesus if it wanted to. That was the whole point.

Furthermore, those words in John 14:19 flow straight out of a discussion of the work of the Holy Spirit, of whom Jesus says in 14:17,

The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me any more, but you will see me.

There is a strong case for believing that when Jesus says 'the world will not see me, but you will see me,' he is still talking about the work of the Holy Spirit, rather than his bodily resurrection. He portrays the Holy Spirit as nothing less than himself, come back to the disciples in a different form. And if that is the right way to take the phrase 'You will see me again' in 14:19, there is a strong



presumption in favour of saying that that is what Jesus is talking about again in 16:16 when he says something similar.

This is supported by the observation that once again these statements 'In a little while you will not see me' and 'In a little while you will see me,' flow straight out of a discussion of the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus states in verse 15 that the Spirit will 'take from what is mine and make it known to you'. Some scholars, in fact, point out that Jesus uses two different verbs for 'to see' in verse 16, and suggest that he is talking about two different kinds of seeing; physical vision in the first case, and spiritual vision in the second. 'In a little while you will see me [physically] no more, and then after a little while [the Holy Spirit will come and make my presence real to you, so] you will see Me again [spiritually].' So what is it that Jesus means? His resurrection—or *the coming of the Spirit*?

The debate would be difficult enough if that were all it involved, but unfortunately there is yet a third line of interpretation which complicates the issue. Many notable scholars have pursued it, including the great theologian Augustine and the expositor Bishop Ryle. They base their views on Jesus' subsequent words in chapter 16.

Jesus saw they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, 'Are you asking one another what I meant when I said "In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me?" I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice' (16:19–22).

It is possible to understand those words either as referring to the disciples' joy on Easter Sunday at the resurrection of Jesus, or to their joy on the Day of Pentecost when they were filled with the Spirit. Huge jubilation is associated with both those occasions. But many scholars feel that a complete fulfilment of what Jesus says here about the total banishment of



grief from Christian experience cannot be predicated of either of those two events. Christian joy will only come to full expression, they argue, when Christ returns at the end of the age; and that must therefore be the central meaning of these cryptic words of Jesus about our seeing him again. It must be a reference to the *second coming*. Once more, several things can be cited in support of this third interpretation.

The writer to the Hebrews speaks of Christ coming back 'in a little while', using the very word John uses here. John himself speaks of the return of Christ in his epistle as a time when we shall 'see Jesus as he is'. But the most compelling argument of all is the metaphor of the pregnant woman that Jesus uses in verse 21. Such a picture in the Old Testament and in Jewish literature generally was often used to describe the troubles that would engulf the world, and the people of God in particular, immediately before the arrival of God's Messiah and the dawn of the Messianic Age. Jews even called the in-between time, that separated the present age from the age-to-come, 'The birth pangs of the Messiah'. So, it is not surprising that early Christians too took up this imagery and applied it to the tribulation which they expected to characterize the period leading up to Jesus' return in glory.

Thus the book of Revelation portrays the church as a pregnant woman crying out in pain, about to give birth to the Christ child, the One who will rule the nations with an iron sceptre. Surely, it is argued, with imagery like that so familiar to John's original audience, the early Christians would certainly have applied these words about pain that gives way to happiness neither to Jesus' resurrection nor to the gift of the Holy Spirit. They would have applied them to the return of Jesus for which they were so eagerly waiting, particularly in their situation of persecution and suffering.

Which, then, is the correct view of this 'little while'? Did he mean the forty-eight hours that separate Good Friday from Easter? Did he mean the fifty days that separate Good Friday from Pentecost? Or could he have meant the nineteen-plus centuries that separate Good Friday from the end of the



world? A substantial case can be made for all those three lines of interpretation. I wonder if you would think it cowardly of me if I were to suggest to you that in fact they may all be correct?

It does make a difference which one you believe of course. If you believe this to be a reference to Easter or to Pentecost, then the promises that Jesus is about to give us in the subsequent verses are promises that we may rightly claim in their entirety now. But if it is a reference to the end of the world, then the promises he makes are promises which we cannot know in their entirety until he comes. This makes a very big difference to how we practically apply the rest of the passage.

Nevertheless, I suggest to you that maybe we are making unnecessary problems for ourselves by trying to choose between these alternatives. John is, after all, the master of double meaning, or even treble meaning. The whole gospel is littered with examples of it. He loves to express things in ways that reverberate with all kinds of overtones in his hearer's ears. That being so, it is surely possible that he was fully aware of the ambiguity these cryptic words of Jesus would generate in our minds and fully intended that ambiguity.

I suggest to you that Jesus is not making a statement in these verses about *just* Easter, or *just* Pentecost or *just* the Second Coming. He is making a statement about all three, because in the economy of God those three great events all have something very important in common. They each mark the beginning of the New Age. According to John, indeed according to all the writers of the New Testament, there is a real sense in which as far as the Christian is concerned, the Day of the Lord has dawned already. In the Resurrection of Jesus and in the gift of the Holy Spirit, the power of the New Age—the Messianic Age—has been unleashed. The kingdom of Christ has been set up. 'All authority in heaven and earth is given to me,' says Jesus.

Yet there is also a sense in which that expected Day of the Lord is still to come. For the resurrection of Christ is only 'the first fruits of them that sleep' and the gift of the Holy Spirit is



only 'the earnest' (or first instalment) of our redemption blessings. So John himself writes in his first letter that though we are God's children *now*, what we are going to be has *not yet* been made known. Not until Christ appears, he says, and we see him as he is, shall the full nature of the salvation blessing be manifested in us. Paul makes the same point in Romans chapter 8:

We . . . who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies . . . . 'Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently' (Rom 8:23-25).

So there is a tension between 'now' and 'not yet' in Christian experience, and it is that tension which lies at the root of the delicate balance between optimism and pessimism which we began by speaking about.

In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me (16:16).

This promise then has to be regarded in two distinct ways. In one respect, it has been fulfilled for those of us who stand on this side of Easter and Pentecost. The time of separation is over. Jesus is accessible to us again through his risen presence and through the gift of his Holy Spirit. In that sense we may rightly regard the blessings he goes on to talk about as part of our contemporary Christian experience.

Yet, in another respect, this promise of reunion that Jesus makes is every bit as unfulfilled for us as it was for those disciples who first heard it. For until Christ returns, we like them must walk by faith not by sight. And in that sense the blessings he goes on to talk about are still in the future. They are part of the 'not yet'. If we are not going to misunderstand what Jesus is saying it is vital that we get these two aspects of application in proper balance. The blessings available to us in Christ now are real, but they are nothing compared to the blessings that shall be available to us in future. To use Browning's words, 'The best is yet to be.'



Our passage illuminates how this works out in two particular areas of Christian experience. First,

### **The joy of the Christian life**

I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy . . . Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no-one will take away your joy (16:20, 22).

Up to a point, this is already true. If we live in the light of the resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit, we do not sorrow like people who have no hope. We are entitled to expect a measure of the bliss of heaven right here and now as part of our Christian inheritance. Peter calls it 'joy unspeakable and full of glory'. Yet it would not be true to say that *all* our grief and sadness has been thus eliminated. Easter has indeed come for us. We have been given new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and in that we rejoice greatly. Pentecost has come and the Holy Spirit has filled our lives generating his distinctive fruit of love and joy and peace. But there is still death, there is still pain, there is still evil in the world. Our experience of the risen Jesus and of the Holy Spirit does not immunize us against these things. On the contrary, in many ways it makes us more sensitive to them. We know a little perhaps of what Paul means when he talks about the fellowship of Christ's suffering.

Are we spiritual failures then, because we are still victims of sorrow, even though Christ is risen and the Spirit is given and Jesus says 'You will rejoice'? Will Jesus censure us for the tears that sometimes fill our eyes? Is he disappointed in us because the smile sometimes dies from our lips? Does he expect us to wear a plastic grin twenty-four hours a day? Is that what it means to be a normal Christian? Sheer nonsense! There may be some 'super-spiritual' types who would have us think so. But I tell you no! Those who suggest that the Christian life should be one of unalloyed joy are confusing the 'now' with the 'not yet'. They are losing the balance between



optimism and pessimism that must be our portion, while we are still part of a fallen world.

'I tell you the truth,' says Jesus, 'you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy.' That was true for those who were broken-hearted by the cross. They had to wait for Easter. It was true for those who were disappointed by Christ's ascension into glory. They had to wait for Pentecost. It was true for those among John's readership who were haunted by persecution and had to wait for the second advent. It remains true for us too today.

There is grief in our lives. There must be. 'You will weep and mourn,' he said. The last days will be terrible times, evil men will go from bad to worse, says the apostle, but our comfort is the same which Jesus gave to the eleven—that such grief is temporary. It will only last 'a little while'. Our troubles are 'light and momentary'. You may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trial, says Peter, but it is only 'for a short time'.

We never have to pretend that there is no element of sadness or disappointment or pain in our lives. We know that this present world is an evil place, so we have got to be pessimistic enough to expect the worst. But we know too what a good place the next world shall be. Indeed, we have already tasted it through the risen Jesus and his Spirit. So we must also be optimistic enough to hope for the best. Whatever measure of joy we have known in Christ up till now, it is only a sip of the overflowing rapture which will be ours one day. Just as it is the same baby that generates the mother's pain, which also generates her later mirth, so Jesus says, our grief will be turned into joy. It is not a case of joy being substituted for grief; the very cross we presently bear for Christ's sake will one day enhance eternity for us.

If we are honest, our joy is more precarious than it ought to be maybe. We are too vulnerable to external circumstances; we remain wedded to our material comforts, and over-dependent on the presence of loved ones. There are dozens of things that can rob us of our joy right now. But one day all those things that disturb and threaten our joy will do so no



longer. We will become heirs of a joy which nothing on earth can take away from us, an indestructible joy. Isn't that worth waiting for?

Second,

### **Our relationship with God**

In that day you will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God (16:26-27).

In a very real sense, this was also true of the disciples after Easter and Pentecost. Their experience of God was revolutionized through those events. Faith in Christ placed their relationship with God on an altogether new footing, and, as Jesus promised, there was a new effectiveness in their praying to him.

Up until this point, their prayers had been typically Jewish ones, based on their obedience to the law and the promises of God to the patriarchs. Now for the first time, they would begin to pray 'in the name of Jesus'. Such prayers, as Jesus pointed out, carried weight, especially when they were offered by those who knew the power of the Holy Spirit informing and motivating them.

There would also be a new clarity in their understanding of God:

Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father (16:25).

The Old Testament saints, for all the divine revelation they received, lived in a time of symbol and shadow. To some extent Jesus' earthly ministry perpetuated that mistiness by his frequent use of parables and the cryptic nature of much of his teaching. But when we enter the world of Acts and of the New Testament Epistles, an altogether less opaque presentation of the truth appears. There is a sureness of touch and a



precision of language unprecedented in the Old Testament or even in the gospels. The figurative disappears, and the Apostles are put in direct touch with spiritual realities. Jesus' prediction was proved true once more.

Jesus foretold too that there would be a new intimacy in their fellowship with God.

The Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God (16:27).

In the Old Testament men relied totally on the priesthood to make contact with God safely. Unmediated access to the divine presence was out of the question. During the earthly ministry of Jesus, he had been the go-between in the disciples' spiritual experience. Though he had sought to teach them to think of God as close to them and concerned about them, they had never really enjoyed such an assurance. But once again, with the arrival of Easter and Pentecost, a whole new dynamic in their relationship with God is seen. The Spirit of Jesus begins to witness in their hearts that they are indeed the children of God. They start talking about the confidence they can have in approaching God direct, with nobody in between. They even begin to use Jesus' own pet name for God: 'Abba' ('Father'). Believers in Christ found assurance that God loves them for their own sake and needs no persuasion to treat them as his sons and daughters.

All these promises then in a sense were fulfilled. Prayer and understanding and fellowship with God, the new dimensions of Christian experience that Jesus speaks of in these verses, are all clearly evident in the blessings that followed Easter and Pentecost. It is vital that we take note of that and do not under-estimate it, because some of us are inclined to be complacent in our Christian lives. We are too pessimistic. We are satisfied with far too little in our relationship with God, much less than we either need to be or ought to be satisfied with.

I would suggest that if we fail to experience a vital prayer life, or a clear understanding of God and a strong assurance of



God's personal love for us, then we are living as if Easter and Pentecost had never happened. We are living as if we were still on the other side of the cross. We are existing like spiritual paupers, when the riches of heaven have been placed at our disposal in the New Age that has already dawned. We must be optimistic about what God can do for us. We must never be satisfied with too little.

Yet although it is important we are not too pessimistic about the blessings God can shower upon us now, it is also essential that we do not exaggerate the degree of blessing that is available to us. We can and ought to expect a very real fulfilment of all these aspects of our relationship with God. Yet, again, if we are honest, we have to admit that things are not perfect, not yet. And it would be a mistake to expect that they should be perfect. Granted, we pray in Christ's name, but do you pray infallibly, knowing that whatever you ask you will be given? No, we sometimes ask amiss. Sometimes we do not know how to pray as we ought. Admittedly, as New Testament saints, we possess a far greater understanding of God's nature than did our Old Testament forebears. But even the Apostle Paul says that at present we see through a glass darkly. Our knowledge, he says, is 'in part'. It is true that we enjoy an intimacy of relationship with God as Father to son, unprecedented before the coming of the Holy Spirit. But which of us does not sometimes cry in frustration with the Apostle, 'who will deliver me from this wartorn body of sin and death?' Of course, over-pessimism is a danger to us, but so is a fanatical over-optimism. Not everything that God has for us is already ours. '*Now* is your time of grief. I will see you again and *then* you will rejoice and no one will take away your joy.'

Beware then, of thinking that you have arrived. The Christian's ambition is of necessity unfulfilled in this life. It has to be so. That is what heaven is all about. No matter how effective our prayer life is now, I assure you that one day it will be better. One day every communication that leaves our lips Godward will be immediately received and granted, for it will



be a perfect prayer. No matter how erudite our theological understanding may be now, one day it will be better. One day we shall know God fully, even as we are fully known. It will be perfect knowledge. No matter how close our walk with God is now, one day it will be closer. One day our relationship with him will be so intimate that it will be hard to distinguish it from the very relationship Jesus has with his Father. It will be a perfect relationship. In the case of our fellowship with God, just as in that of our Christian joy, the best is still yet to be.

Throughout history there have been those who have fallen into the trap of over-optimism. In their impatience, they assume there is no need for any not-yet in their lives, the fullness of the blessing of God is available now. They are wrong. Jesus goes on to spell out quite clearly why this is so.

[The disciples] said, 'Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. Now we can see that you know all things and that you do not even need to have anyone ask you questions. This makes us believe that you came from God (16:29–30).

It was well meant, of course—but so naive and self-deceived. The sarcasm in Jesus' voice is almost painful.

*'You believe at last!'*—'You've really arrived. You've got there, have you?'

But a time is coming, and has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me (16:32).

You see, we are not perfect. We only invite disillusionment if we dare to pretend we are. Indeed not only are we imperfect, but the world is not perfect either.

I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world (16:33).

So we come full circle. In the world, expect the worst. There is no way in which we can re-create the Garden of Eden as the world is. Not yet, anyway. Utopian dreams of heaven



on earth, no matter how attractive, must be dismissed for the idealistic nonsense they really are.

Yet in spite of that necessary pessimism about the world, Jesus insists simultaneously that we must be courageous enough to hope for the best. 'Take heart . . . I have overcome the world.' Jesus does not tell us that the best is yet to be simply in order to torment us with unrealized expectations. He does not do so just to motivate us to greater levels of commitment by the carrot of heavenly rewards. He tells us here that the best is yet to be in order to reassure us, 'so that in me you may have peace'. Not the peace of the complacent who expects too little—that is a false peace which invites judgement. Nor the peace of the perfectionist who expects too much, because that kind of peace is equally false and invites disillusionment. No, he speaks this way to us so that we may have Christian peace. The peace of a man who is pessimistic enough to expect the worst and optimistic enough to hope for the best. The peace of a man who knows that though he is abundantly blessed in Christ now, still the best is yet to be.



## I3

### *The Word Made Flesh*

John 1:1-18

We human beings possess a very persistent intuition that beyond the visible and the material, there is a largely unexplored domain which is not accessible to our eyes but is nevertheless very real. It does not matter to which quarter of human society you turn, whether developed or undeveloped, capitalist or socialist, ancient or modern, you will find the word 'god' is there in the vocabulary. Atheism is not unknown, of course, but you only have to travel a little bit and read a few history books to realize what a very short-lived and ephemeral superstition it really is. The vast majority of the human race have always been agreed that a transcendent realm exists, and it is one of the most passionate preoccupations of human beings to penetrate it and unlock its secrets.

Where men disagree, of course, is on the correct means of fulfilling that quest. How do you find out about God? In the West we have been dominated by a philosophy called *rationalism*. It began as early as the Greek period back in the classical age, in the fourth century B.C. Rationalism claims that the way to find the ultimate truth, or 'god', is through using your mind, by thinking it out. Its greatest exponent in the ancient world was a man called Plato. For him the philosopher was the high priest, who could pierce the cloud of mystery that separates the invisible eternal world from us down here.

In the East, however, *mysticism* has ruled men's religious life. Mysticism believes that man penetrates the spiritual



energy or force behind our universe not by using his mind, nor by analytical reasoning, but by abandoning all such efforts in favour of religious experience. All the techniques of yoga and meditation that we have become more familiar with these days are aimed at leading the seeking soul to such a condition of 'god-consciousness'.

In John 1, however, we are presented with a third option. John insists that human beings must come to know God not by the use of their unaided reason, nor by mystical experience, but through faith.

It would be a great mistake to think of faith as something either irrational or anti-mystical, because faith has an intellectual dimension to it and it has an experiential dimension too. In that sense, it blends the insights of West and East. Perhaps it is significant that Christianity was born in the Middle East on the land bridge that joins Greece and India.

But it would be very wrong also to think of biblical religion as if it were some kind of compromise measure to draw the philosopher and the guru together. It is far from that, for in spite of their differences, rationalism and mysticism are in fact both species of the same religious genus. They are both ladders set up by man to reach to heaven. They are both religions of achievement, teaching that God is 'out there' and you and I must somehow break through to him, whether by using our minds or by exploiting our religious emotions. It remains up to us to find him.

But the religion of faith about which the Bible teaches us is the very opposite of such religions of achievement. It is concerned not with man's search for God, but with God's search for man. It tells of a ladder let down from heaven to us. It is a religion not of human discovery, but of divine initiative; not of human attainment, but of divine condescension; not of human research, but of divine revelation. To use the Bible's language, it is a religion not of works but of grace. According to the Bible, God is not some heavenly equation that we must struggle to solve by our reasoning, nor is he some ocean of spiritual energy that we must try to experience by the pathway of



mystical discipline. No, God is a Person to be heard. That, you see, is the unique thing about the God of the Bible. He speaks. He is a communicating God, and faith is fundamentally our appropriate response to that Word of self-revelation which God speaks.

Nobody understood this better than the Apostle John, for he was in a sense familiar with both the West and the East. He knew all about rationalism, because the philosophical heirs of Plato were still a very dominant force in the Greek-speaking world of the first century, of which he was a part. But John also knew a great deal about mysticism, because in the hundred or two hundred years before Christ, mystery religions from the East had swept into the Roman Empire. These were precisely the kind of attempts to unite human beings to God through mystical ecstasy that we mentioned earlier. So John knew about both.

So in normal circumstances we might have expected John to be rather confused, exposed as he was to these conflicting currents of religious opinion in his day. But he was not, because something had happened in John's life time that was so utterly unique and so tremendously important that it rendered all the religious debate going on in his world obsolete and redundant, as far as he was concerned. The heavenly logic that Plato had talked about, the spiritual enlightenment that the mystery religions taught—John had found them both. To be more accurate, they had found John. For God, who had spoken his word to Moses centuries before, to John's ancestors, had spoken again in a new and a revolutionary way.

He had taken a new initiative of self-revelation. A ladder had been let down, all human beings were being called to a new response of faith.

To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (1:12).

## **The Word**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and



the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning (1:1-2).

These are altogether remarkable words. You have to remember that they are written by a representative of one of the most fanatically monotheistic peoples on earth. The Jews confessed one God, and John was a Jew. Yet there is no getting round the fact that here in these verses John is affirming that within the Godhead, there is a structure of relationships between Persons.

Notice first of all what he says about the pre-existence of this Word. John does not say that 'at the beginning, the Word came into existence'. If he had wanted to say that, he would have used the past tense of the verb 'to become' (which he uses in verse 3, when he describes the universe being made and coming into existence). But he does not employ that tense. He uses instead the imperfect tense of the verb 'to be'. It is a tense that implies continuous existence: 'In the beginning the Word was existing.' Here is something eternal. At the point when all things came into existence, the Word was *already* there, according to John.

Notice secondly the emphasis on the relationship between this Word and God. 'The Word was with God,' he says. Once again it is a rather interesting and unusual construction in the original language. John does not use the normal preposition denoting 'with'. Instead he uses a word which, strictly speaking, means motion towards somebody. The Word was 'towards God', which is a strange way of putting it. I am sure that you must have seen those film-clips, where the long-separated lovers see one another at opposite sides of a deserted beach. They run in long, loping slow motion with arms outstretched, so as to meet one another while romantic strings sing in the background. That illustration may be a little bit dramatic perhaps, but it gives an idea of this preposition. The Word was 'face-to-face and moving towards God'. That is the impression the word gives. It is an enigmatic expression of fellowship and harmony. And John spells out what he means even more clearly in verse 18 when he speaks of 'God the only



Son, who is at the Father's side'.

But thirdly—and supremely—notice the very emphatic way in which John speaks here about the divinity of the Word. 'The Word was God,' he writes. Now if John had merely intended to say the Word was divine, there is a perfectly good adjective in Greek which he could have used. There is no way you can twist this statement in the mouth of a Jew with any degree of credibility and avoid its awkward implication. John knew what he was writing. In spite of his monotheistic background, he was confessing that the Word was God.

God is love and he has never lacked an object for his love. There has always been another Person, a perfect reflection of his own divine personality, an eternally begotten Son for him to love. That is why as Christians we can believe that love is an essential part of God's personality, in a way, perhaps, that the Muslim cannot. An isolated unitary God cannot be love. He has nothing to love in all eternity. But a trinitarian God can be love. Before ever there was a sin for God to hate, he always had a Son to love. That is the truth of the God who lies behind this world. The capacity and ability to love is built into him, and it flows constantly within him in a never-ceasing dynamic of interpersonal relationship.

In these opening words of John's gospel, then, we have the elements which the early church took and re-expressed into what we call the doctrine of the Trinity. Of course there is no strictly logical way by which John's mysterious statement here can be reconciled with the uncompromising monotheism of the Bible. But then Christians do not know God rationalistically. We know God by faith. We know God by responding believingly to what he reveals of himself. No doubt these ideas left John's own intellect straining, as they do ours. But it is no good saying, 'I cannot understand this, so I will not believe it.' When it comes to God we must believe in order to understand. Faith never calls us to abandon our reason, but it may call us to acknowledge truths that lie beyond it. How else could God be God?



*The Word in creation*

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood [or overcome] it (1:3-5).

In a sense, these words would not be totally foreign either to the Greeks or the Jews of John's own day. The Greek philosophers were very familiar with the idea of the divine Word or 'logos'. This was the Word which imposed order on the material world, and made it cohere as we would say 'logically'. The Jews would similarly be familiar with the idea because it would call to mind Genesis 1. It sounds very odd, on reflection, that in the beginning God made the world by saying things. God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light. He created by means of his Word; John is just reaffirming that here. But for him, you see, the Word has a personal identity of its own. *He* was in the beginning with God. All things were made through *him*.

It is important that the Word of God is bound up with creation, because it is thus, that Christians derive their endorsement of science and art, and their positive attitude towards material things generally. The creation was for God an act of self-expression. He did it through his Word. Of course the universe is not to be identified with God. That would be pantheism and John is not defending that. But it was made through the Word. So we are most definitely to look for God's signature upon the world.

In St Paul's Cathedral you can find the tomb of Sir Christopher Wren, the architect. Written upon it in Latin, you can find the inscription: 'Reader: if you seek his monument, look around you.' Wren had expressed himself in those mighty walls and the dome of St Paul's. He needed no other epitaph.

In the same way, Paul tells us the invisible things of God are clearly seen in what has been made; and John is saying something similar here. The universe was made through the Word. So when the scientist finds logical patterns and order in



natural phenomena, he should not be surprised. Indeed, if he is a Christian, he expects it, for all things were made through the Word of God. The scientist has the great dignity, as Kepler put it, of thinking God's thoughts after him. Similarly the artist, who seeks to make something that encapsulates his own emotional response to the world around him, has no need to fear that his artistic values are purely subjective—not if he is a Christian. For there is such a thing as absolute beauty. God defined it when he looked at his own artistic creation and pronounced it 'good'. The artist has the great dignity of reflecting the creative genius that made the world in the first place. All material things are made through the Word, which is why we can appreciate them positively whether we be scientists or artists. They gain their meaning and significance for us because they were made through him.

But John adds,

Without him nothing was made that has been made (1:3).

There is a very persistent idea, particularly common in John's day (but still around even among Christians today) called dualism. Dualism is a very convenient way of explaining evil. It blames all the good things that happen on God and all the bad things that happen on the devil. It tells us that good and evil are equal and opposite powers locked in unresolvable conflict. John rejects such a view. The Darkness certainly exists: strange, mysterious, unmistakably hostile to the Light; and no explanation of its origin is given. But John emphasizes that the Light and the Darkness are not equal and opposite powers. Darkness is not eternal in the same way as the Light, for without him who is the source of all Light, nothing was made. Without him not even the Darkness could exist. That is why the darkness is not invincible. The Darkness cannot overcome the Light, because the Darkness itself is part of the created order.

But finally John also points out the unique place of man within this work of creation in which the Word is so intimately involved.



In him was life, and that life was the light of men (1:4).

So there is something that we human beings and the divine Word have in common: *life*. John does not mean animal life, otherwise there would be a different word in the Greek original. No, John uses the word here which speaks of the life principle—*spiritual* life. Life that lifts man above the level of brute beasts, and according to John, illumines him like a beacon, beckoning him to find some finer destiny.

There is a root of spiritual dissatisfaction and restlessness in our souls that marks us out from the animal world. Man is not content to survive, nor just to enjoy a high standard of living. He is looking for something else. He does not live by bread alone. It is that divine Word, through which the worlds were made, that we human beings are longing for with such an insatiable appetite. Notice that John says (verse 9) it illumines every man without exception. It is part of our common human heritage to long for participation in the life that derives from the Word who is God. This is the root of all our religious searching. Man is by nature a religious animal, because the life is the light of men.

Look at the stars. Maybe you get some sense of wonder and awe when you do so. You say to yourself, 'Surely there is a meaning in this universe?' Look inside yourself. A human being is a strange, perplexing creature. Perhaps you tell yourself, 'Surely there is a meaning to human existence?' When you ask questions like that you are sensing the life which is the light of men. Like a candle inside you, it calls forth a response from your humanity. If you were a computer, you would not come to such conclusions. No computer looks at the world and says, 'Surely there is a meaning to it all.' No computer examines its circuitry and says, 'Oh! I must be here for a purpose.' But you do, because you are human; and the life is the light of *men*.

### *The Word and the prophets*

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that



through him all men might believe (1:6-7).

I can never understand why some scholars seem to feel that this paragraph is out of place in John's prologue. It fits in completely if you think about John's purpose, which is to explain to us how the eternal Word becomes known by human beings. This is the second way: through the Bible, through inspired men whose words expound, or testify to, the light. John mentions three examples of this.

There is *the law* that was given to Moses. There were *the prophets*, of whom John is the supreme example, the last and greatest of their line. Thirdly, he refers to *the apostles*. They are indicated simply by that transition in verse 14 to the first person plural: 'We have seen his glory.' That is, 'we' the apostles, who were the eyewitnesses of Jesus.

All these are the mediators of the divine Word to man as he sits in darkness. 'Your Word is a lamp to my feet,' writes the Psalmist. The purpose for which such inspired human witnesses are sent is 'that all men might believe'. No doubt if sin had never entered the world, the general revelation of creation would have been enough. Just like Adam, we would have spontaneously known God. We would have seen his signature on the universe, and this would have been more than enough for us to respond to him. But since sin came into the world, man has a vested interest in not finding God. So God sends messengers to alert us to the light.

Notice what they do. They witness. 'He came as a witness to testify concerning that light.' So John the Baptist and others like him were not philosophers. They were not great thinkers with some great new theory. Nor were they mystics offering some new religious experience. They were witnesses. As in a court of law, they were sent to give evidence of what had happened to them. Once again the emphasis is on God's initiative. John was a man sent from God not to speculate but to testify. 'I saw the Spirit descend upon him,' he would say. 'We beheld his glory,' said the apostle. 'What we have seen with our eyes and touched with our hands and heard with our ears



of the Word of life. This we declared to you.'

That is why these men, the prophets and apostles who lie behind the Bible, are of such authority. If they were philosophers or mystics, then we could demand that they exposed their work to the criticism of others. There have been countless philosophers and mystics. But that is not how the prophets and apostles saw themselves. They are witnesses. We may call them liars, if we will, but not fools. They claim they saw something, be it the law of God carved by God's finger on stone, the Spirit of God descending like a dove on Jesus of Nazareth, or a crucified man, risen and glorified.

The Bible is not like the Koran, a mere dictation of what God has said verbally. History is vital to the Bible, because God has entered history. Revelatory events have happened, and the people who wrote the Bible were primarily people who had seen those things and were inspired to explain them to us. Faith, then, is not just a mystical elevation of our spirit. Faith looks back. It remembers. The function of law and prophets and apostles is to bear witness to the space-time invasion of the Word of God. They tell us what they saw and heard, so that our faith may be kindled. We are delivered from vague, uncertain strivings of human reason or experience, by a sure word of prophecy that can give us solid and reliable ground for our knowledge of God. That is why the Bible is so important.

Notice too, however, the way in which John makes it plain that these human witnesses to the divine Word are in a very important sense inferior to Christ himself. John the Baptist was not the Light. He came only as a witness to the Light. He was the moon, not the sun.

This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me' (1:15).

Christ brings a revelation of that Word, which itself is superior and more complete than anything any prophet could produce.

The law was given through Moses: grace and truth came through



Jesus Christ (1:17).

It is so essential to grasp that, because it is not unknown for Christians to be accused of bibliolatry, of worshipping a book. But that cannot be. For though the Bible is vital, and its reliability and authority are essential—because it is the book that gives us access to the Word—it is the Person to whom this book witnesses who is the object of our worship.

In that sense again, we differ from the Muslim. For a Muslim too believes in an eternal word; but his 'word' is, at its highest, a verbal communication in Arabic to Mohammed. That of course is why he pays such exaggerated respect to the text of the Koran. Some Muslims do not even agree to its translation for fear that the word might be distorted.

For us however the fullest expression of the eternal Word of God is not a divine book, but a divine Person. Only a person could reflect the character of God, for God himself is personal. Even though the greatest literary genii of the world were to conspire together for a hundred years, they could never produce a fully accurate verbal transcription of a human personality let alone the personality of God. It had to be a person.

No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known (1:18).

How could you explain the grandeur of King's College Chapel in Cambridge, to someone who had never seen it? I suppose you could give them a guide book. That would describe it, and perhaps it would have a photograph in it. A guide book would be a very important way of introducing them to just how wonderful King's College Chapel is; but it would not be quite the same as a personal visit, would it?

So too, for us, the supreme revelation of God is the Son who bears the exact family likeness. Law on its own is inadequate. A verbal revelation, through Moses on a mountain top, will lend us to a very high and lofty sense of God. But there are certain things we will not discover that way. Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.



*The Word and Christ*

The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us (1:14).

So John drops his greatest bombshell. The ultimate place where we may encounter this divine Word is not just in creation or Scripture, but in Jesus Christ. He is the historical incarnation of the Word.

The created world was made by him. The inspired prophetic Word testifies to him. But in Jesus Christ, God himself has taken up material existence and become flesh. He did not just adopt a human body as a ghost might live in a machine. No, John speaks of an actual becoming. The Word *became* flesh.

'Lived among us' is literally 'tabernacled'. John is intentionally calling to mind the wandering of the Jews in the wilderness, when God indicated his presence among his people by a mobile sanctuary which he commanded Moses to build. In that 'tabernacle', we read, he manifested himself in a shining cloud which the Jews often called 'the glory'. God was journeying with them. They knew that. The glory was the sign of it. He was no aloof, unsympathetic Deity, interested only in his own heavenly affairs. He was there with his people in their hardships and the hazards of their wilderness experience. That tabernacle containing the glory was very precious to them. But how much more precious is the tabernacle which was the flesh of Jesus Christ! Here is a God who is not just present by sign but in person.

Do we complain that we live in a suffering world? Here is the Word made flesh, suffering with us. Do we complain that we live in an evil world? Here is the Word made flesh, tempted like us. Do we complain that we live in a dying world? Here is the Word made flesh, dying for us. Immanuel, God with us. 'We beheld his glory,' says John. 'We apostles saw it. We have the evidence of it.'

It was of course concealed to superficial gaze, just as the glory was hidden by a veil from the eyes of the Jews most of the time in the wilderness. 'But some of us,' says John, 'saw



that glory, as Moses saw it. We saw it in his miracles. He manifested his glory to us in them. We discerned who he was and believed in him. We heard it in his words. "Never man spoke like this," said the people. "Surely this is the Christ, the Son of the living God," we said. Then there was that day he took a few of us, Peter and James and me, John, on to the mountain; and there for a moment the veil was taken away, and that glory that dwelt within him somehow burst out through his flesh as he was transfigured before us. "Let us build a tabernacle to capture the glory," said Peter. Poor old Peter, he always did open his mouth and put his foot in it! For the days of fabric tents were gone. Jesus had no need for a tabernacle. His body already was one. No one has ever seen God, but the Son, he revealed him to us. We have seen his glory, glory such as could only belong to the only Son of the Father.

'Yes, and more than that,' says John. 'We have experienced the power of that glory in our own lives. For of his fullness we have all received. That is our testimony; grace on top of grace. The goodness of God poured out on to us in unparalleled measure and it has come to us through this Man Jesus. We are not speculating. We testify. This is our witness. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'

Yet there is a strange irony about that momentous event.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him (1:10-11).

He did not fit. He was different. For he was the prototype, the original blue-print, the image of God from which we fallen human beings had once been modelled. Indeed if man was not already in some very profound sense god-like, the incarnation would have been an impossibility. So when we met him, we came face to face with humanity as it was meant to be. And thus, we came face to face with our failure, like a crooked line being revealed by the straight edge of a ruler. We disliked the humiliation of that exposure so we rejected it and him. His



own did not receive him. It was his world. The Jews were his people, and yet he was rejected. The light shone in the darkness and the darkness put forth all its malice in one final bid to extinguish its flame. And you might have thought it had succeeded if you had been there on that first Good Friday when they crucified the Incarnate Word.

Yet there is something about God's dealings with this world that kindles hope even in the depths of man's self-created gloom.

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (1:12).

That is what it was all leading up to, what this whole remarkable exercise in divine self-revelation is all about. That is why the Word was spoken in creation and in Scripture, and then finally in Jesus. It was about planting the family of God here in the midst of the domain of darkness. It was about the creation of a new humanity, a new people, who have recognized the glory of God in the face of Jesus, and whose lives have been revolutionized by the discovery.

God, we are told, calls them his children. Not of course in the sense that Christ was his Son, because Christ was the only-begotten. Christ's Sonship is one of origin. But these new members of God's family are sons by adoption.

Yet there is something very remarkable about the way God adopts his sons. When we adopt a child it involves only a legal formality. We bestow the rights of inheritance, but we cannot communicate the genes of new parenthood. The child will always bear the likeness of the original father, not of the adopted family. But God, we read here, is subject to no such limitations. He not only gives these children the right to be called children. He gives them his genes too.

Children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or of a husband's will, but born of God (1:13).

So this initiative of God ends not just in revelation but in regeneration. In a new kind of humanity. A new breed of



human being of whom it is true to say they are 'born of God'.

I wonder if some of you reading this book on John have felt challenged in coming face-to-face with this Jesus. John has shown us again and again what a remarkable Person he is, as he has introduced him to us. Maybe for some of us there has been in our hearts the thought, 'I would like to be a Christian. I would like to be able to call this Jesus my Lord. But I don't really feel worthy of it. I don't really feel good enough.' Don't you see what the answer to that is? 'To *all* who received him, to those who believed in his name.' God is not looking for philosophers, or for mystics. He is not even looking for morally perfect people. He is looking for *believers*.

Faith is the Christian way of coming to know God. Unbelief looks at the universe and just sees nature. Faith looks at the universe and sees creation. Unbelief looks at the Bible and just sees a book. Faith looks at the Bible and sees the Word of God. Unbelief looks at Jesus and sees just a Man. Faith looks at him and sees incarnate Deity.

What are you seeing when you look at those things? Look at that Baby in the manger. Are you perhaps saying to yourself, 'He was born for me?' Look at that Man on the cross. Are you perhaps saying to yourself, 'He died for me?' Look at that divine Lord on the Throne of heaven. Are you perhaps saying to yourself, 'He rose for me?' If you are saying that to yourself, you are a Christian.



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