

## You Do Not Think Yourself Worthy

When Jesus was condemned for the religious charge of blasphemy, what value did his judges think they were preserving? The Law says you must worship the one God, and serve him alone; if a human being demands divine honours for himself, the honour due to God is being diverted from him, hi-jacked by a usurper. To condemn such a man defines him as a liar, a charlatan; and those who vote for such a verdict are preserving the name of God from being defiled.

### “I Am!”

There is little doubt that Jesus set off all the alarm bells in the Jewish mind. When Luke tells us of his visit to Nazareth, he describes Jesus standing up to read Isaiah’s prophecy of the coming of the Messiah. Then he preached - a single line: *This is happening, here and now, as you listen to Me*. There it is: a huge, breathtaking claim in a little country synagogue, as if Fr Frank Gavin suddenly announced he was the Archangel Gabriel. Look at the Gospel of John: the rabbi who should be talking in hushed tones of the holiness of God is actually preaching about himself: *I am the good Shepherd...no-one can come to the Father except through Me...the Father and I are One!*

### It’s Unnerving

It certainly put people on the spot. What could they make of it? The fact is, the laws of blasphemy actually surrounded God with a kind of protective barricade, so that the unholy influence of mere mortals would not drag down his name into the dust of earth. It’s a paradox: we want to understand an incomprehensible mystery. We want to speak to an unnameable God. We want to relate to a Being who is beyond our reach. Yet, when a man comes to us and says, *I understand Him. I converse with Him in perfect intimacy. I relate to Him as an equal, and I offer you the same relationship*, we say: *You deserve to die. You are only a man, and you have claimed to be equal to God*. It’s almost as if God were vulnerable, in need of our protection; and what need has God of anything we have to offer him? Surely we are revealing more about ourselves in all this, than about God. We are showing that, despite our constant claim to be seeking God, wanting to belong to God, wanting to know God, we do not expect to relate to him or

draw near to him or (in the end) to share his life. But that is exactly what God wants of us. God actually wants to break down the protective barrier we set up between us and him. That is why he sends us his Son *to be what we are*. Blasphemous behaviour, bringing God down into the dust of earth, *the fury and the mire of human veins*, as Yeats put it. The “blasphemy” isn’t ours, but God’s. He does it, and Jesus is obedient to a divine plan which is so radical, so unheard-of, that it seems like a crime to the Sanhedrin of his chosen people.

### I Must Drink It

That’s why he is bound to accept the verdict and go to the Cross for it. He is not dying for anything he has done, as the criminal crucified with him bears witness. Even Pilate says, *Why? What harm has he done?* It’s worse than that. He doesn’t die for *committing* a blasphemy, but for *being* a blasphemy. There is something in the verdict that directly judges those who pass it: they do not believe they are worthy to be loved by God, they do not believe it conceivable that God should do what this man is claiming, *they do not*, in Paul’s words, *think they are worthy of eternal life*. In accepting our sentence of death, Jesus takes the punishment of all that unbelief, all that self-contempt. He makes himself a sign of our distance from God, because he *is* God, and we consign him to hell, we curse him for bringing us the ultimate good news. It would have been so easy to withdraw, to say: *come on, chaps, you’ve got it all wrong; let’s not do anything dangerous*; he could have “slipped through their ranks” and got away; Peter would have caused a diversion while he hopped over the garden wall. Instead, he stayed, and took all the disbelief and fear into himself, drinking the whole cup to the end. The spear in the heart delivers the last of his blood, and he is sacrificed on the altar of our distance from God. Yet this was the very moment when God finally came all the way into the human world - *In the grave they laid him, Love whom men had slain* - into the tomb, the last bastion of unredeemed humanity! *There, they said, take your Gospel and preach it there: and here’s a big stone to make sure we can’t hear you any more*. Now there’s the sort of challenge that reveals a true champion.

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