

R C I A

Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults

Jesus Christ

We've looked very briefly at the possibility of believing in God; we've considered our problems in believing that God made us and the world we live in; we've tried to look evil in the face. In all this thinking we have tried to blow away what's superstitious and legendary, and to be faithful to our own actual experience. Now it is time to turn to the figure of Jesus, and to ask where he enters the picture.

“He whom God has sent speaks God’s own words,
for God gives him the Spirit without reserve.
The Father loves the Son,
and has entrusted everything into his hands.
Anyone who believes in the Son has eternal life.
But anyone who refuses to believe in the Son
will never see life.”
John 3:34-36

Our path to Jesus Christ in this course has lain through the human condition, through human experience. We're a mystery to ourselves: longing for peace and trustfulness, yet often shipwrecked by the facts of our life, we yearn for love, but are forced to deal with cold indifference and anonymity. Our search for meaning is fraught by happenings and facts which we can't welcome: we're frustrated in our efforts to believe in ourselves, and unsure who else deserves our faith. We feel the threat of bitterness, of cynicism, of despair.

The Gospel tells the story of so many who meet Jesus in the same state. They are sick, or their loved ones are dying; they are struggling amid the ruins of their lives, sinful, dishonoured or failed. They have resigned themselves to evil and emptiness, *they live in the tombs gashing themselves with stones and howling amid the mountains*. There are lepers and maniacs and public sinners. The people he chooses to be near to him as collaborators are not conspicuous for any achieved holiness of life: they are rather simple, of generous heart but little insight. In short, we don't find it hard to see ourselves in the Gospels.

These are the people to whom Jesus offers a sense of meaning. He assures them that their lives are precious, that they can see God. He brings to many of them the experience of healing, the sorting of their broken bits, the re-integration of people in themselves, their reconciliation to one another, to the community. He is helping all of them into life, he makes no exceptions. He is faithful to them in their grief, in their disability; his closeness to God never interferes with his drawing near to afflicted human beings. In all of this he is doing what the prophets promised: *He judges the weak with integrity, and gives fair verdict for the humblest in the land*. This “judgment” is in light of the unknown reality of God, which Jesus sees and we do not; our slanted and limited understanding of God leads us into every darkened dead end. God is much more frightening than we would have chosen; but he is also loving

beyond anything we can dream up. The Father of Jesus is both of these things too; and Jesus says: *I know the Father, and the Father knows me: the Father and I are One.*

Why do people listen to him? *Because he speaks with authority.* This authority seems to come from above, and not to be simply human magnetism. But his relationship with God is not simply that God guarantees him or authorises him to speak. Jesus will show us that his relationship to God is expressed as *obedience*; and he will show this to the end, to the Cross itself. Then, he will be at his closest to us, in all our affliction; but he will be at his most obedient to God as well. He invests his whole life in this coupled faithfulness, to God and man together. This is his greatest revelation of integrity, in giving meaning of the most ultimate kind to his experience of love, of suffering and of death.

This is why in one of the Gospels his last words are: *It is accomplished.*

To think of a man reaching utter fulfilment *by dying* - as opposed to *before dying* - is not at first comprehensible by those who seek their meaning in earthly terms. But when we turn from Calvary to contemplate the various sorts of earthly fulfilment, we immediately feel that death utterly cancels any such fulfilment; that we need to find our ultimate meaning *in death* - or not at all. In earthly terms death is everything an atheist says it is: extinction, cancellation, blowing away of all personality and value: it is what Shakespeare's Porter calls *the everlasting bonfire*. If Jesus Christ can offer a total contradiction to that judgment, then he deserves to become the Master of humanity.

He doesn't contradict it in earthly terms or even in human terms. He contradicts it by his divine life, which in eternity, to our amazement, has the same form as this apparent disaster on the hilltop. The meaning of his death is

- that the Son obediently delivers himself totally to the Father, and
- the Father receives him with responsive total love.

But these attitudes spring from the very truth of divine life, where the Father generates the Son with the whole gift of his divinity, and the Son receives this divine life from the Father with total obedience, with the Holy Spirit appearing as total Father-gift and total Son-gift; and because they give to each other all they have, the gift itself is God.

What Jesus does on Calvary is to translate this eternal drama into a human happening: not in eternity, where divine deeds happen, but at the ninth hour of the day before Passover about AD 30 - in our time, therefore - so that we can see in a human body what is at the heart of the Holy Trinity: that the Son of God bows his head in obedience, and delivers the Holy Spirit to his Father.

It is the ultimate revelation of truth. Nothing greater exists, nothing deeper can be thought, this is the uttermost vision of truth: of which Jesus says to Philip, *To have seen me is to have seen the Father.* And this truth is now a human truth, *the* human truth, and we can find our way into the heart of it only at the moment of our own death.

This means that Jesus has made our death - that terminus of everything, that total annihilation, the nexus of all our fears - into the moment of entry into the heart of God. That is why he is the Saviour of the human family. All our losses, all our laying-down of our work, our treasures, our other relationships, take on the colouring of an eternal birthday: the leaving behind of all dark puzzles and enigmas, the casting aside of all limitation and disability. The Resurrection is truly the putting-behind-us of sleep, and the dawning of the full light of day.

