

The Benevolence of Jesus

We're talking about a love for other people which was without defences, without the barriers we all put up to protect ourselves. This was in Jesus, not because his human nature happened to be that way inclined, but because he was filled as with a banquet by the love of God, to which also he put up no barriers.

This love of Jesus was the thing about him that people most responded to; they felt that he wanted to help them. There are people we have met, who radiate a modified kind of benevolence: they will help a little bit, according to what's laid down in the rules; they will do what they're meant to do. We also know people of whom we would not fear to ask great favours, because they radiate a generosity that will not count the cost.

Jesus' register of sympathy was not human but divine. When he was asked for help he was not drawing on a limited human resource, but on the resources of God (towards whom he had no barriers). There is no record anywhere in the Gospels of Jesus refusing a request.

Jesus cried out, filled with the Holy Spirit: *...Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. My yoke is easy, and my burden light.* (Mt 11:25-30)

Jesus welcomes sinners and tax collectors to his table, his friendship, his discipleship. *It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. I came not to call the upright, but sinners.* (Mk 2:15ff)

We hear the constant calling of suffering people on Jesus: *Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me* (Mk 10:46ff)

Luke describes Jesus' first sermon in his home town, Nazareth: *The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for the Lord has anointed me: he has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and new sight to the blind: to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of the Lord's favour.* He then rolled up the scroll, returned it to the assistant, and sat down; and every eye in the synagogue was on him. Then he began to speak. *These words*, he said, *are being fulfilled today, even while you are listening.* (Lk 4:16ff). This is a huge series of proclamations of grace; the principal one is the last, the only piece of commentary: *these words are being fulfilled today.* The principal words fulfilled today, even as you listen, is: *The Lord has anointed me.* Jesus is claiming to be the Messiah.

Jesus speaks further about his incarnating the love of God; but he also calls us to live in the same way. In the Sermon on the Plain in Luke he says: *Be compassionate, as your Father is compassionate. Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned: forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and there will be gifts for you: a full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap: because the amount you measure out will be the amount you are allotted yourself.* (Lk 6:36ff)

Luke 7:36-50: the woman who was a sinner

Luke 13:10-17: the healing of a crippled woman on the Sabbath.

Luke 19:1-10: Zacchaeus

Luke 23:39-43: The good thief

Jesus is an endlessly interested visitor of towns, gatherer of crowds, and noticer of outsiders. He is unafraid of crowds or of the mad, bad, or dangerous-to-know. But he had a special sensitivity to the people who needed him most. This was a great sign of his tenderness, which was guided by great penetration. He did not accept conventions which would have kept him apart from them, about hygiene (leprosy), political correctness (tax collectors), respectability (prostitutes) or holiness (the demonically-possessed).

This benevolence reflects the benevolence of God, rather than some human principle; it involves both the miraculous (signifying the divine guarantee Jesus enjoys) and the Crucifixion (which embodies both the human rejection of the divine, and the insistence of divine compassion as God's response: *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son*). Jesus is the incarnation of God: he "earths" and "embodies" the love of God for us. That is why his love is without limit, even at the cost of his whole human future - his willingness to die rather than withhold the gift God has sent him to deliver.

The sacraments in which we encounter Christ partake of this generosity which is accurate to our needs. The needs of our physical nature are understood and catered-for; the sacraments make real the fact of divine love towards us. It is in this way that we must come to celebrate them, so that we do not impose on the love of Christ our own limitations, and thus short-circuit the Incarnation of God.