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JESUS OF NAZARETH: PARADIGM PAR EXCELLENCE

Several decades after Jesus of Nazareth had lived in Palestine and had gathered to him a group of disciples who had followed him and had been invited to a new understanding of God and human-kind, one of his disciples wrote down the impact this person had made on him and consequently on all who were associated with him:

We write to you about the Word of life, which has existed from the beginning. We have heard it, and we have seen it with our eyes; yes, we have seen it, and our hands have touched it. When this life became visible, we saw it; so we speak of it and tell you about the eternal life which was with the Father and was made known to us. What we have seen and heard we announce to you also, so that you will join with us in the fellowship that we have with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We write this in order that our joy may be complete (1 Jn 1:1-4).

The real identity of this Jesus of Nazareth has been a topic that had been discussed over several centuries, right from the time of his appearance in Galilee. For some it was question coupled with contempt: "Isn't he the carpenter?" (Mk 6:3), whereas for others he was very different from the scribes because he was teaching with authority (Mt 7:29). While his enemies accused him of having Beelzebub in him (Mk 3:22), his disciples exclaimed with wonder: "what kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him" (Mt 8:27). According to John, the person of Jesus was widely discussed among the Jews: Some said, "This man is really the prophet," while others said, "he is the Messiah" (Jn 7:40), and there was a dispute over this among the people (Jn 7:42-44). The guards who were sent to arrest Jesus, returned saying: "Nobody has ever talked the way this man does" (Jn 7:46). Many Jews and even Herod thought that he was John the Baptist come back to life, while others said that he was Elijah or one of the prophets of long ago

(Mk 6:14-16). As his identity was a matter of confusion and conjecture to many, Jesus himself asked the disciples: "who do people say I am?" (Mk 8:27). Naturally they repeated what the people were talking about him: John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the prophets. To the question: "what about you," Peter, one of the Twelve, answered: "you are the Messiah" (Mk 8:29). The further discussion on this confession of Peter is exegetically and theologically a matter which is beyond the scope of this study, precisely because of the differences between Mark and Mathew on this episode. All the same, it is very clear that Jesus wanted his disciples to have a clear understanding about his identity, even if it meant a change in their own concept of the Messiah.

In the course of the centuries the Church has continuously witnessed the attempts made by well-meaning and sometimes by the enemies of the Church to present a realistic picture of Jesus beyond the confusions that has been created, and as a result the conflicting images of Jesus have been only multiplied. *Der Spiegel*, a left-wing German newsweek, in 1966 published a series of articles on "Jesus the revolutionist," one of them with a caption: "Christ too would have taken a machine gun!". In an anonymous letter addressed to both Catholic and Protestant Churches in West Berlin at Christmas 1969, the supporters of the Palestine Liberation Front challenged the pastors of these Churches to speak out openly in favour of this front, presenting Jesus as an example who fought against the Roman occupation power. A Christian underground news paper described the rebellious Jesus:

Wanted

Jesus Christ

Alias, *The Messiah, the Son of God,*

King of Kings, Lord of Lords.

- Notorious leader of an underground liberation movement,
- Practising medicine, wine-making and food distribution without license,
- Interfering with the business in the temple,
- Associating with known criminals, radicals, subversives, prostitutes and street people.

Beware: This man is extremely dangerous. His insidiously inflammatory message is particularly dangerous to young people who haven't been taught to ignore him yet. He changes men and claims to set them free (*Time* June 21, 1971).

In the absence of any historical certainty with regard to particulars, the name of "Jesus" has been made an empty receptacle into which every theologian and secular writer pour his own ideas about him. Then each successive epoch found its own thoughts in Jesus. That is, indeed, the only way in which it could make him live and speak to our generation. It is inevitable that men and women who seriously think about God and his action in the world seek to relate the contemporary events to the Lord they worship, and specifically to Jesus Christ, who became like anyone of us, except sin (Hb 4:15). Through this they want to make God and Christ relevant to the world of today. They want models for living and acting in today's world and the best model is God in Christ.

An Indian writer, A. Isaac, in his book *Jesus the Rebel*, has tried to present Jesus as a rebel against the traditional picture of Jesus who emptied himself taking the form of a slave, of the Babe of Bethlehem lying in the manger and inviting us to imitate him because he is meek and mild of heart (Mt 11:28). According to Isaac, Jesus' message was a veritable bombshell. To his searching mother in the temple, sharp and stabbing came the reply of the rebellious son: "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Lk 2:49). Jesus rebelled against parental claims that wanted to make him a good gentleman of the world around him. He rebelled lest the family thwart his mission. Conclusion: we are also called upon to rebel against the order in our times.

It is true that as early as the seventeenth century New Testament criticism has been busy associating Jesus with the Zealot movement and specific passages in the Gospels have been analyzed to establish such a theory. Thus the fact that Jesus was crucified between the robbers (*lestai*) (Mt 27:38, 44; Mk 15:27) is interpreted as if Jesus also was a *lestes*, meaning revolutionary. So also (Mt 10:34) where Jesus refers to his coming as bringing a sword and (Lk 22:35-38) where he asks his

disciples to sell their mantle and buy a sword were also interpreted to support this view. In spite of all these efforts to identify him, Jesus still stands above these identifications as one who does not allow himself to be put into any category.

What is significant about all these approaches is the relevance of the person of Jesus to the contemporary society. With the break down of the socialistic systems in the Communist countries it seems that the revolutionary character of Jesus as a model for a revolutionary Church will not have much of an appeal in our times. Moreover, the present trend in theological discussion is bring out the deeper dimensions of religion and thereby to revitalize and inspire the followers of religion to a more personal commitment to God and to his people. At the heart of this approach lies the mystical and contemplative dimension of religion. Seen from this perspective, the most fascinating and challenging picture of Jesus of Nazareth seems to be his contemplative personality, an aspect which invites us to a closer analysis and appreciation.

Contemplation and Mysticism

Contemplation has been very often understood as the privilege of a few saintly persons living in the holy premises of religious houses, these holy places understood as the *templum*, which made it possible for them to experience God in this world. But today contemplation has a wider and secular meaning in so far as it is understood as the awareness of God's presence and activity in creation and in history. Mysticism is the assimilating and personalizing dimension of this awareness. Both contemplation and mysticism raise the person to the realm of the spirit, the supreme aspect of a human person and the divine dimension in him. It is at this stage of the spirit that many of the lofty exercises of a person take place and contemplation belongs to this sublime exercise of the awareness of God's presence and activity both in creation and in history.

Created in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27) and entrusted with the mission of being the master of the creation (Gen 1:28-31), it is only natural for man and woman to have this awareness of God's presence and activity in creation. Several Hebrew writers have articulated this awareness in various writings of the Old Testament. Thus we have Psalm 8, in which the Psalmist contemplates on the creation and the place of man in it, recognizing his lowliness and greatness at the

same time. Psalm 19:1-66 is a masterpiece of nature mysticism in which the Psalmist sees the heavens, the firmament, the day and the night, all engaged in a silent proclamation of God's glory. The sun is presented as a bridegroom and strong man controlling the day. We have a Psalm 104 which describes the planet earth as the place where God has lavished his love and care and offers his meditation to God as something pleasing to him (Ps 104:34). The author of Job presents a vivid picture of God creating and governing the universe (Job 38:2-39:30; 40:15-41:34). These descriptions bring out very clearly the contemplative minds of the authors meditating on the creation as the place where God is present and is acting.

Not only creation but also history forms the object of contemplation and meditation for the Old Testament writers. Thus we have Pss 105, 106, 135, and 136 which narrate God's action in the history of Israel. Ps. 78 is a contemplated teaching about how God cared for his people and how the people refused to remain in God's care. The Deuteronomistic theology of history (Joshua to 2 Kings) is a typical example of contemplated history written against the background of the theology of the Book of Deuteronomy. History for Israel was not a narrative; rather it was a teaching, a Torah, which came to be written through a long process of meditation, reflection and literary editing. To us moderns, trained as we are in critical and pragmatic thinking, it is very difficult to arrive at the inner beauty and compelling power of such contemplated articulations of faith.

The Basis of Jesus' Contemplation: His Abba-Experience

Since contemplation and mysticism are very much a personal reality, it is quite natural and necessary that each one has his/her own point of departure and basis for contemplation. For Teilhard de Chardin, the priest-scientist-theologian, it was his awareness of God's presence in every particle of matter, so much so that looking at a piece of stone, he would exclaim: "O, sacred matter!" According to him, there is nothing profane for those who know how to see. The basis for this awareness has to be nurtured as a very personal reality and it is in association with this reality that the entire personal growth of a man and a woman is taking place.

For Jesus of Nazareth, the source and basis of his contemplation was his *abba experience*, namely, his constant and all-permeating experience of God as his *abba*, which became the source of his preaching,

teaching, and acting, as also his very life. He addressed God *abba*, the Aramaic word used by children to address their natural father. It is in the theophany at his baptism (Mt 3:17) that Jesus is designated as God's Son and later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus proposes God as the Father of his disciples and of all those who came to hear him (Mt 5:16).

That Jesus used the Aramaic expression *abba* in addressing God is clearly found only in Mk 14:36. But it is the opinion of New Testament scholars that he always used it in speaking about God. Even the prayer of the disciples taught by Jesus, through which he wanted his disciples to relate themselves to God, begins with *abba* (Lk 11:2). The fascination of this new approach to God transmitted by Jesus through the title *abba* was such that even in Greek speaking communities of Rome and Galatia the Christians continued to address God as *abba* (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:16). It may be further observed that in both the above passages the believers are said to be "crying" (*krazein*) *abba*. The real meaning of this expression seems to be related to the original Aramaic verb "qara" which means to "announce," "to proclaim." The meaning of "crying *abba*" seems to be following: Jesus experienced God as his *abba* and he announced it to his disciples and the disciples in their turn also experienced God as their *abba* in prayer (Lk 11:2-4) in such a way that they began to proclaim it to all (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6) so that all were invited to experience this holy name of God (Mt 6:9) as something entirely different from the unutterable name of Yahweh.

Dimensions of Jesus' Abba-Experience

The contemplative personality of Jesus encountering God as *abba* was only the starting point of his further awareness of God's presence and activity in the human history. The first and foremost awareness Jesus derived from his *abba* experience was his approach to the entire humankind as the community of the children of God, as a community of brothers and sisters beyond the limitations and barriers of caste, colour and creed. Whereas his parent religion, Judaism, forced him to create and maintain boundaries and barriers to his understanding of religious commitment, he himself transcended all such limiting factors and accepted all as his own brothers and sisters. The stories of the centurion (Mt 8:5-13) and the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mt 15:22-28) belong to this category of universality. Jesus instructing his disciples

and the crowd about the love of enemies shows that for him every other was a brother and a sister, whom we have to love, pray for and do good to (Lk 6:27-28). Consequently, for Jesus it is a Samaritan who reveals the true nature of this universal brotherhood rather than the Jewish priest and Levite (Lk 10:30-37). Jesus could freely associate himself with the sinners and the tax-collectors, for which he was criticized by the Pharisees and the scribes (Lk 15:1-2). On his way to Galilee he not only violated the conventions of Judaism regarding the journey through the territory of Samaria, rather he stopped to converse with a Samaritan woman and through her to reach out to the Samaritan town people, who were fascinated by Jesus' teaching and concluded to his being the saviour of the world (Jn 4:3-42).

A closely related dimension of Jesus' *abba* experience was his ability to get himself involved in the world, to which he was committed through his incarnation. Jesus was not an ascetic and other worldly saint fleeing the world and denying it. As the Word become flesh in order to make the total material creation share in the divine, Jesus was always affirming the positive meaning of this material creation making it to come into contact with the divine realm. He was different from John the Baptist, because while John lead an ascetic life, Jesus came "eating and drinking" (Mt 11:18-19). So he could be present at a wedding feast at Cana and see to the needs of the host when he ran short of wine (Jn 2:1-11). As invited by a Pharisee, he went to his house to dine with him (Lk 7:36). But he was not happy about the official manner in which he was treated without water for his feet and a friendly kiss as he entered the Pharisee's house, as the Palestinian custom was (Lk 7:44-45). Consequently he was all the more appreciating the affectionate and human expression of love shown by the woman of the city.

For Jesus the nature was vibrating with the Father's care and providence and consequently his message was very often based on the realities of the nature. The lilies of the field, the birds of the air, the shepherds going before the sheep, the cloud rising in the west bringing a shower, the five sparrows sold for two pennies, were all realities for Jesus which could evoke in him spiritual thoughts. The seven parables of the Kingdom (Mt 13:1-50; Mk 1-32) also have their illustrations drawn from the nature. While teaching his disciples to trust in the providence of the Father, Jesus was giving the reasons taken from his observation of the nature around him (Mt 6:25-33).

According to Jesus these secular realities were the most compelling things for the disciples to trust in God, the Father, in so far as they are equally taken care of by God. and so, for added reasons, the children will be taken care of (Mt 6:25-34). There is nothing that is outside of the concern of the Father; "Even the hairs of your head have all been counted. So do not be afraid; you are worth much more than many sparrows (Lk 12:6-7). Hence Jesus could rightly criticize the rich fool who tried pile up riches for himself with being rich in God's sight (Lk 12:16-21).

This involvement dimension of contemplation was equally matched by a transcendent dimension of Jesus. It is through this transcendence that Jesus remained united with his Father, from whom he always derived the power to be totally involved. When the news about Jesus performing miracles spread far and wide, and crowds of people were coming to hear him and be healed from their diseases, Jesus went away to lonely places and prayed (Lk 5:15-16). After the multiplication of the loaves the crowds became enthusiastic and they wanted to make him by force. But Jesus escaped and went to the hills by himself (Jn 6:14-15). Already in the Infancy Narrative Jesus is presented as being in the Father's house, busy with the Father's affairs (Lk 2:49). For Jesus biological relationship was secondary, because it has been transcended into theological relationship. Consequently, the greatness of his mother consists not in her being his biological mother but in her capacity to hear the word of God and obey it (Lk 11:28). When his mother and brothers arrived to meet Jesus and speak with him, Jesus once again revealed his understanding of human relationship as something transcending the physical and biological (Mt 12:46-50). Though Jesus was a friend of the sinners and the tax-collectors and could freely associate himself with them, he was fully aware of his transcendence from the world of sin and so he could challenge his opponents; "which of you convicts me of sin?" (Jn 8:46). As the lamb of God who took away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29), Jesus was one with the humankind in every respect, except sin (Hb 4:15). It is this transcendence and consequent union with the Father that reveals the full meaning of the contemplative personality of Jesus.

The Contemplative Jesus at Prayer: Lucan Perspective

Luke is probably the only Gentile writer of the New Testament, and thanks to his all-embracing and universal understanding of salvation

history, we have the most dynamic and comprehensive presentation of salvation history in his writings. His aim it was to see the relevance of Jesus' ministry not only for Judaism and Palestine, but also for the entire Roman empire, the *oikoumene* of the first century. Hence he presents Jesus as a liberator of poor and the oppressed, wherever they were (Lk 4: 18-19). It is from this universal perspective that we have to understand the two missions of the disciples, one to the 12 tribes of Israel (Lk 9:1-6) and the other to the whole of the Roman empire (Lk 10:1-12), symbolized by the number 70, which was the total number of nations, according to Jewish speculation (Gen 10:1-32).

The Jesus of the Third Gospel is also characterized by his commitment to the cause which he had received as part of his mission, especially in terms of making the benefits of the Good News enjoyed by the poor and the marginalized. Consequently he criticized the rich (Lk 6:24-26) and appreciated the generosity of a converted tax-collector (Lk 19:1-10). It is with this sense of commitment that he undertook his journey to Jerusalem, setting his face to go there (Lk 9:51) and confront the devil who had left him at his temptation until an opportune time (Lk 4:13; 22:3), reminding his followers that his was a journey characterized by hardships (Lk 9:57-62), denials and challenges (Lk 14:25-33).

This dynamic and active Jesus of Luke is at the same time a man of prayer and it is in this perspective of prayer that Luke presents some of the sublime characteristics of Jesus. The baptism of Jesus, narrated by all the evangelists, has a specific aspect in Luke in so far as Jesus is presented as praying while the heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him and the voice came from heaven: "Thou are my beloved Son; with thee I am well-pleased" (Lk 3:21-22). When Jesus' fame increased and people gathered to hear him, he withdrew to the wilderness and prayed (Lk 5:15-16). The call of the Twelve, an event which had far-reaching consequences for the ministry of Jesus and of the Church, was preceded by Jesus praying the whole night on a hill (Lk 6:12). In course of time Jesus wanted to know what the people and his own disciples thought about him and it was after praying that he asked the disciples: "who do the people say that I am?" (Lk 9:18). For Jesus it was not a question arising from his curiosity; rather it was related to his determination to his true identity as the suffering Son of Man (Lk 9:22).

As part of his educating his followers the demands of discipleship, Jesus wanted his disciples to understand the importance of prayer for a meaningful life. As he sent out his disciples to their wider mission, he told them: "The harvest is plentiful, the labourers are few; pray therefore to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (Lk 10:2). In the garden of Gethesemane Jesus prayed and exhorted his disciples also to pray (Lk 22:40, 46). Realizing how difficult it would be for the disciples to face challenges and temptations in their life, Jesus prayed for Peter so that his faith may not fail, because it was his task to strengthen his brethren (Lk 22:31-32). For Jesus prayer was not always a pleasant experience; it was struggle and consequently it meant sometimes praying before a silent God, as when he prayed on the cross: "My God, my God, why did you abandon me?" (Mk 15:34). There was no answer given to this question. Recalling this the author of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote: "During his life on earth Jesus made his prayers and requests with loud cries and tears to God, who could save him from death" (Hb 5:7).

The Climax of a Contemplative Life: Body Broken for You

Experience, involvement, transcendence, prayer are the four dimensions of contemplation as we see it in the earthly life of Jesus. His *abba* experience made him aware of God's fatherly care of the entire universe and, in particular, of the humankind. This awareness enabled him to be totally committed to the world, as it was a world which God loved (Jn 3:16). But this very involvement as part of this *abba* experience invited him to transcend the world, because it was a world which did not recognize and accept him (Jn 1:10). Hence it was a question of overcoming the world (Jn 16:33), of being lifted up from the earth (Jn 12:32). This double task of involvement and transcendence reveals the dynamic personality of Jesus. Through his prayer which characterized his whole earthly ministry, Jesus could be in constant communion with his Father and be always available to the humankind. It is this authentic personality that stands out as the most important characteristic of Jesus of Nazareth, whom D. Bonhoeffer calls "the Man for the others."

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews, while contrasting the priesthood and the sacrifice of the Old and the New Testament, draws a beautiful picture of Jesus speaking to God at the moment of his incarnation:

You did not want sacrifices and offerings,
but you have prepared a *body* for me.

You are not pleased with animals burnt whole on the altar
or with sacrifices to take away sins.

Then I said, Here I am, to do your will, O God, just as it was
written of me in the roll of the book (Hb 10:5-7).

The contrast is between the animal sacrifices and the sacrifice which Jesus was going to offer in his own body, namely, in his total visible reality. The body is the medium through which Jesus made himself available to God and to his people, spending and sacrificing day and night for others. His body was always under the guidance of the Spirit and consequently he allowed the Spirit to control his entire life and actions. Whereas for the average humans the body serves to establish and exercise their individuality and consequent egoism and selfishness, for Jesus his body was always at the service of his personality. Whereas all of us tend to have an individualized personality, the emphasis being on the individual, for Jesus it was more a personalized individuality, with its accent on the person. A person wants to be related to others, while the individual tries to remain closed in oneself. It is the experience of God and of our relationship to others that enable us to come out of our introvertedness and relate ourselves to others and thereby exercise our personality.

The last part of all Gospels present the climax of Jesus making his body totally available to his disciples in the story of the Last Supper. Taking bread and the cup in his hands, Jesus gave a new meaning to food and drink, that they symbolize something more than an exercise of one's biological need. It is something which can be basis of our altruism and availability. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was the supreme expression of this availability and altruism and Luke concludes this self-offering dimension of Jesus' personality: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit" (Lk 23:46). Jesus' body and spirit, as well as his whole personality were for others and through this self-offering during his earthly ministry and its climax reaching on on the cross He manifested the true meaning human life and its mission.

As we try to understand the true identity of Jesus of Nazareth, it is this picture of Jesus that should be held high and it is from this model that we have derive inspiration for our own life. Jesus

as a contemplative is precisely a man of profound experience and action, of involvement and transcendence. The meaning and mystery of this paradigm transcends the limitations not only of time, space and culture, but also the barriers and boundaries of religions.