

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

JESUS'S CONCEPT OF HIS OWN DEATH

FOR A LONG time both academic theology and popular piety found little difficulty in crediting Jesus of Nazareth with having anticipated – right from the outset of his human existence – all the historical details and the full redemptive force of his crucifixion. Then the rise of biblical criticism led some scholars to minimize drastically Jesus's expectations about his coming death. At times they even declared this death to be something which simply overtook him without being accepted and interpreted in advance. Finally, in recent years a consensus appears to be growing that recognizes how Jesus viewed his execution 'as a representative and saving service to many'.¹

In this article I plan to examine first the maximizing and minimizing views and then describe the moderate consensus which is taking over.

The maximal view

Until fairly recently many academic theologians and popular writers regularly attributed to the earthly Jesus more or less unlimited knowledge. From the first moment of his conception he was alleged to have enjoyed the beatific vision and so-called 'infused' knowledge: as if the beatific vision needed to be supplemented! This meant not only a clear consciousness of his own identity as the Word of God incarnate, but also precise information about everything that was to happen, including his violent death and all its consequences.

In *Meditations for Every Day*, P. J. Sontag invited his readers to reflect on the circumcision as the time when the week-old 'Jesus pledged his fidelity in his blood. He would be our JESUS, our SAVIOUR'.² Preachers and retreat directors portrayed the boy Jesus as being from time to time reminded of his coming crucifixion when Joseph gave him wood to shape. Jesus saw the cross casting its shadow over the workshop at Nazareth. Ferdinand Prat felt sure that 'Jesus knew in advance, to the smallest detail, all the atrocious vicissitudes of his own death'.³

On the eve of the crucifixion, part of the suffering in Gethsemani was supposed to have stemmed from an exact foreknowledge of the ways in which this death would fail to have the desired results. Thus Prat wrote of 'the frightful spectacle' which assailed Jesus's imagination:

He sees heaping up in the course of centuries the iniquities of men, those men for whom he is about to shed all his blood. How many souls, through negligence or malice, in every case through their own

¹ Kasper, W.: *Jesus the Christ* (London, 1976), p 120.

² Vol I (Milwaukee, 1951), p 93.

³ *Jesus Christ*, I (Milwaukee), p 318.

fault, will still hold aloof from the fruits of his redeeming death! Even in the Church, how many schisms, how many heresies, what scandals and apostasies and sacrileges!⁴

Repeatedly, the major cause for Jesus's agony was alleged to have been the clear presence to his consciousness of all the sins committed by human beings in the whole sweep of history. This Prat called 'the most fearful trial' which Jesus suffered: 'He feels all the sins of man weighing down upon him. . . Under the blows of divine malediction which he accepts, he experiences what we ourselves ought to experience when confronted by sin'.⁵

If popular writers turned the agony of the garden into the scene for a universal vision of sin, they frequently represented Jesus on the cross as dying quite consciously for every single human being in particular. Thus Sontag reflected:

But to the comprehending mind of the God-Man, the world's vast multitudes did not float before him as a huge, indistinguishable mass, simply labelled humanity. To Jesus, each and every one of us was there individually, as a distinct, clearly recognized, personally loved person.⁶

St Paul had remarked with gratitude: 'He loved me and delivered himself up for me' (Gal 2, 20). The Sontags of this world did two things with Paul's classic text. They shifted it from the level of fact to the level of fully conscious knowledge: from, 'Jesus's death expressed the depths of his love, and I believe this lovingly accepted death benefits me supremely', to, 'The dying Jesus saw me before his eyes and gave himself up for me'. Writers like Sontag also universalized Paul's text: 'Jesus died quite consciously for me [Paul], and every other human being can say the same thing'.

But we should not be too hard on Sontag and Prat. They were only two among many writers and preachers who attributed to Jesus such an utterly full knowledge of his death and its saving significance. They would all have expanded the fourth Eucharistic acclamation as follows:

Lord, by your cross (which right from the beginning of your human existence you precisely foresaw in all its atrocious detail) and resurrection you have set us free, free from all those individual sins which

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 319.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 320. Matthew, Mark and Luke provide no support for such speculation and fantasy. What we do find mirrored in these gospels, however, are the various concerns of the evangelists. In Mark's version of the agony in the garden, while Jesus's followers sleep, their master suffers in solitude but is sustained by faith in his Father's power. Matthew highlights Jesus's lonely prayer as he struggles to obey his Father's will. Luke presents Jesus as the model for later Christians who must pray in the face of severe trials. The three evangelists all agree over Jesus's fearful distress over his approaching passion and death. I wish here to acknowledge a debt to Eugene Costa and his unpublished thesis on 'The Prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane'.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp 429ff.

in Gethsemani you quite explicitly saw and as victim took upon yourself to expiate. You are the Saviour of the world, and on the cross there passed before your gaze every single human being ever born into this world.

One motive that seemed to have lurked behind such a maximal view was the fear that, unless the earthly Jesus himself explicitly intended such an interpretation of his death, we would not be entitled to hold it for ourselves. Hence the maximizing writers credited Jesus in his adulthood or even in his babyhood with a comprehensive knowledge of his redemptive death. A prop of these writers, I observed in *The Calvary Christ*:

There could be more meaning in Jesus's death than he fully and clearly realizes when he accepts that death. . . . In some sense – perhaps a highly obscure sense – Jesus believes that the Father calls him to accept death for the sake of sinful men and women. Jesus says 'yes' to that vocation of victimhood.⁷

But more than this needs to be said.

A straight line led from maximal views about the earthly Jesus's knowledge of his identity to maximal views about his foreknowledge of his atoning death. Logically a clear perception of his divine personhood was understood to entail an equally clear perception of his saving work. At both levels, however, theologians have pulled back from such extreme positions.

As regards Jesus's personal identity nobody should be expected to answer 'yes' to the question, 'Did he know himself to be Son of God?', unless the questioner is willing to recognize the complex nature of human knowledge. Such knowledge forms a many-layered structure, whether we deal with knowing things, knowing other persons or knowing ourselves. Knowing that some tropical fruit is edible because we have identified it in a tourist guide differs from knowing this after we have eaten a piece of the fruit. Through experience we can know some people intuitively and instinctively without ever having made full acts of understanding and judgment about them. It may be only the tip of the iceberg that shows up clearly in the total structure of what we call our 'knowledge' of them. Anyone's awareness of his or her personal identity at the age of six will differ greatly from that awareness at the age of thirteen or thirty. What has it been like for Prince Charles at different stages since his infancy to 'know' that he stands first in succession to the British throne?

To come back then to the question, 'What did Jesus know about himself?' Contemporary theology will answer in terms like this. He knew that he stood in a unique relationship to the Father. But this awareness did not mean

⁷ London, 1977, p 39.

observing the presence of God, as if he were facing an object 'out there'. It was rather a self-consciousness and self-presence in which he was intuitively aware of his divine identity.⁸

With regard to Jesus's direct knowledge both of his Father and of his own divine identity, Karl Rahner and others have not only given up talk of 'infused' knowledge, but they also prefer to speak of an immediate vision (*visio immediata*) rather than a beatific one. There is no compelling reason to believe that such a direct contact with God need always be beatific. In any case, if the earthly Jesus did enjoy a vision that was beatific, that would have required a constant miracle to stop the vision having its proper effect. Otherwise such a vision would have excluded genuine human experiences like fear and physical suffering.

It is not too much to speak of a copernican revolution having taken place in the general approach to Jesus's knowledge: and that for two reasons. First, the classic formulations of early Christianity have kept tugging at theologians' coat-sleeves. It is after all orthodox faith to believe that Jesus Christ was (and is) true God and true man. Being limited in knowledge is precisely part of being human and not an ugly imperfection from which Jesus must be miraculously freed. Among other things, some limitation in knowledge makes it possible for human beings to be free. Genuinely free acts mean entrusting oneself to situations and a future which are to one degree or another objectively unknown. Hence in the name of Jesus's true humanity and genuine liberty theologians have come to accept real limitations in his knowledge.

Secondly, instead of arguing about what 'must have been the case', theologians have turned to the evidence which the gospels – or at least Matthew, Mark and Luke – offer about the character of Jesus's knowledge. Let me explain. Since the Middle Ages, theological teaching about Christ has often been spoiled by a willingness to take general principles, and then derive – by some logical specific – facts about matters like the extent and nature of Jesus's knowledge. For instance, it was argued as follows:

Knowing clearly and comprehensively one's eternal identity and definitive function is more perfect than not knowing this identity and function;

Now Jesus enjoyed all perfections;

Therefore, he knew clearly and comprehensively his divine identity and his function as Saviour of all human kind.

Such a 'deduction' of particular 'facts' from a general principle, however, has come to be rejected as a dubious procedure, or at least dubious if we start with such a deduction. If we switch the principle, we can finish up with quite the opposite facts. In the example given we could argue as follows:

⁸ On Jesus's self-knowledge, see J. Ashton, 'The Consciousness of Christ', in *The Way*, vol 10 (1970), pp 59–71, 147–57, 250–59.

Knowing clearly and comprehensively one's eternal identity and definitive function does not belong to a human life;
 Now Jesus was truly human;
 Therefore, he did not know clearly and comprehensively his identity and function.

Nevertheless, instead of engaging in such 'deductions', theologians wish now to begin with the gospel evidence.

Admittedly, even Matthew, Mark and Luke are not biographies in the modern sense. They are testimonials of faith which reflect the interests of the evangelists and their communities. Nevertheless, they are reasonably reliable in recalling the things that Jesus said, did and suffered. Through their records, we can glimpse who Jesus thought he was and what he understood his function to be in life and death.⁹

For reasons of principle, the maximalists overstated their case for the earthly Jesus's knowledge both as regards his personal identity (Christology) and his saving 'work' (Soteriology). However, as we shall see in the third part of this article, contemporary scholarship provides a solid basis for sighting not only an implicit Christology¹⁰ but also an implicit Soteriology in the ministry of Jesus. His preaching and activity are a genuine starting-point for the developed theologies of the redeeming crucifixion offered by St Paul and later Christians. But before we put together the evidence for Jesus's attitude towards his coming death, let us sample the writings of those who have minimalized both his acceptance and his interpretation of Calvary.

The minimal view

Rudolf Bultmann has been quoted a thousand times as a classic spokesman for those who minimize the redemptive value which Jesus attached to his coming death. But to quote him once again will do no harm. Bultmann flatly maintains that 'we cannot know how Jesus understood his end, his death'. He dismisses the predictions of the passion (Mk 8, 31ff) as simply prophecies after the event – later christian formulations placed on the lips of Jesus. Bultmann also rejects as 'an improbable psychological construction' the widely-held thesis that 'Jesus, after learning of the Baptist's death, had to reckon with his own equally violent death'. Bultmann's reason? 'Jesus clearly conceived his life in an *entirely* [italics mine] different fashion than did the Baptist from whom he distinguished himself'. Bultmann refuses to recognize the crucifixion 'as an inherent and necessary consequence' of Jesus's religious activity. 'Rather it took place because his activity was misconstrued as *political* [italics mine] activity. In that case it would have been – historically speaking – a meaningless fate. We cannot tell whether or

⁹ See R. Butterworth, 'Questions to Hans Küng', in *The Heythrop Journal*, vol 18 (October, 1977), pp 436–46: at p 437.

¹⁰ See R. Brown, *Crises Facing the Church* (London, 1975), pp 33ff.

how Jesus found meaning in it. We may not veil from ourselves the possibility that he suffered collapse'.¹¹

There is much to be challenged here. For instance, Jesus invoked the violent death of prophets as illuminating his own threatening death: 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!' (Lk 13, 34). He saw his mission, at least partially, as standing in continuity with the prophets, right down to John, his prophetic precursor, who had baptized him. Even if, for the sake of argument, Jesus had 'clearly conceived his life in an *entirely* different fashion than did the Baptist', the violent death of this man who was so close to Jesus threateningly exemplified how dangerous was a religious ministry, prophetic or otherwise, in the Palestine of that time. It is no 'improbable psychological construction' to hold that Jesus saw the point. Anybody would have been extraordinarily naive not to have done so. Hans Küng rightly calls the execution of John the Baptist 'an extremely serious warning to Jesus'.¹² A marxist writer, Milan Machovec, recognizes in the fate of John 'a constant reminder to Jesus' of the possibility of violent death.¹³

Secondly, Bultmann slips over in silence the Last Supper and the agony in the garden. As we will argue, those two events say something about the way Jesus understood his imminent death. Thirdly, in Bultmann's thesis we bump up against an unjustified separation of politics and religion. A *purely* political mistake on the part of the Romans is alleged to have led to Jesus's execution. And from a religious point of view such a political death can only be 'meaningless'. Such a thesis fits snugly into the sharp (and quite unacceptable) separation between the world and religion which characterized Bultmann's theology.¹⁴

This last point reminds us that we should not debate Bultmann's minimizing view of Good Friday on merely historical grounds. In the very essay from which we have quoted he himself emphasizes just that. After raising his historical objections, he remarks: 'However much we may glean from a historical-critical evaluation of the "features" of Jesus: and even if the traditional interpretation of his path to suffering and death should be correct, what is to be gained by it?'¹⁵ Ultimately it is not historical scepticism but theological conviction which generates Bultmann's position. No matter what our historical findings might prove to be about Jesus's intentions in the face of death, for Bultmann they would always remain theologically insignificant. In Bultmann's view, only the sheer existence (the 'that') of the earthly Jesus matters for theology and faith. Everything else which scholarship might

¹¹ 'The Primitive Christian Kerygma and the Historical Jesus', in *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ*, ed. C. E. Braaten and R. A. Harrisville (New York, 1964), p 23.

¹² *On being a Christian* (London, 1977), p 321.

¹³ *A Marxist looks at Jesus* (London, 1976), p 137.

¹⁴ See my *Man and his new Hopes* (New York, 1969), pp 31ff, 58ff, and *The Calvary Christ* (London, 1977), pp 41-43.

¹⁵ *Loc. cit.*, 24.

or might not critically establish about the history of Jesus is decreed to be irrelevant for the believer and the theologian.

Squads of scholars have rejected this severe division between faith and history. Günther Bornkamm, Ernst Käsemann and other notable students of his have parted company with Bultmann precisely over this issue. Bultmann has intolerably trivialized the earthly existence of Jesus. His approach devalues the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. More than John they are concerned to transmit historical material about the ministry of Jesus. These gospels strikingly witness to an essential aspect of christian faith. From the outset it knew itself to be tied to the story of Jesus's life, and not just to the joyful message of a resurrection after crucifixion.

In short, any debate with Bultmann over Jesus's understanding of his death sweeps us off to a larger theme, the whole significance for christian faith of Jesus's historical existence.

In the last two decades, Wolfhart Pannenberg has proved perhaps the most damaging critic of Bultmann's separation of history and faith. He argues that the ascertainable events of past history can and should yield objective grounds for faith. However, when it comes to the earthly Jesus's expectations and intentions about his coming death, Pannenberg lapses back into a relatively minimal view. He plays down the voluntary obedience of Jesus. His classic *Jesus – God and Man* remains silent about the agony in the garden. The way Pannenberg explains matters, Jesus was so seized by his mission that he was hardly left with any genuinely human choice about accepting or refusing his fate on Calvary.¹⁶ Pannenberg fails to scrutinize carefully Jesus's possible interpretation of his coming death. Where *Jesus-God and Man* discusses the Last Supper, it is only to examine whether the first Christians understood the crucifixion as a covenant sacrifice, and not to investigate how the earthly Jesus might have viewed and defined his death in advance.¹⁷

Pannenberg broke new ground in Christology when he first published *Jesus, God and Man* back in 1964. But scholarship has moved on since then. The lines of a fairly well-defined consensus about Jesus's interpretation of his approaching death seem to be emerging among writers like Leonardo Boff, Walter Kasper, Küng, Machovec, Edward Schillebeeckx and Heinz Schürmann.

If both the maximalizing and the minimizing views prove unsatisfactory, we move now to endorse the moderate consensus, and answer positively the two key questions: Did Jesus anticipate and accept his execution? What value did he attach to it?

¹⁶ *Jesus – God and Man* (London, 1968), p 350. In an unpublished thesis ('The Death of Christ according to Wolfhart Pannenberg') defended at the Gregorian University, Rome, in December 1976, Francis Virgulak credits Pannenberg with a fuller version of Jesus's knowledge and freedom on his way to death.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 248–49.

The growing consensus

First of all, did the Jesus we know from the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke expect that he would suffer and lose his life violently? Did he – at least from some point in his public ministry – begin to move consciously towards such a death? Küng persuasively marshals some of the evidence for an affirmative answer. First the ministry:

Would he [Jesus] have been so naive as not to have had any presentiment of what finally happened to him. . . No supernatural knowledge was required to recognize the *danger of a violent end*, only a sober view of reality. His radical message raised doubts about the pious self-reliance of individuals and of society and about the traditional religious system as a whole, and created opposition from the very beginning. Consequently Jesus was bound to expect serious conflicts and violent reactions on the part of the religious and perhaps also the political authorities, particularly at the centre of power. Accusations of infringing the Sabbath, contempt for the law and blasphemy had to be taken seriously.

Then the move of Jesus and his disciples to Jerusalem for the Passover inevitably brought confrontation with the forces opposing him:

The move of the heretical 'prophet' from the province to the capital, confusing and upsetting the credulous people, in any case meant a challenge to the ruling circles. . . Anyone who was suspected of working miracles by demonic power, of being a false prophet or a blasphemer, had to reckon with the possibility of the death penalty. . . Jesus's sensational entry into Jerusalem could only increase the danger. And the prophetic act of cleansing the temple – which certainly has a core of historical truth – likewise put his life in danger, since it was an act of arrogance in the sanctuary itself.¹⁸

The evidence that – sooner or later in his ministry – Jesus came to foresee his violent death is cumulative and persuasive. At some point he recalled the murder of prophets as prefiguring his own fate: 'Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers killed. . . The Wisdom of God said, I will send them prophets and apostles some of whom they will kill and persecute, that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation' (Lk 11, 47ff). Jesus named Jerusalem as the setting for his end: 'It cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!' (Lk 13, 33ff). At least some of his audience knew that his parable of the wicked vine-growers who murder the vineyard-owner's messengers was directed at them. Just as the final killing of the son

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 320ff.

provoked the owner's intervention against the tenants, so the killing of Jesus would provoke a divine intervention (Mk 12, 1-12).

In the light of this and further material from the gospels, Küng can reasonably conclude that Jesus both anticipated and accepted his coming death in obedience to his Father:

Whatever attitude we adopt to the authenticity of any particular saying, we may take it as certain that Jesus... must have reckoned with a violent end... And he accepted death freely, with that freedom which united fidelity to himself and fidelity to his mandate, responsibility and obedience, since he recognized in it the will of God.¹⁹

On the eve of his death, the agony in the garden strikingly exemplified this free obedience towards the Father's will. There are, of course, difficulties in settling the details of that episode. Here, as elsewhere, the gospels do not provide uniform evidence. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to accept an historical basis for the story of that agony.

All in all, unless we revert to a relentless but unjustified scepticism about our sources, it should be easy to agree that death was much more than something which simply overtook Jesus out of the judaeen blue. It was a fate to which he went knowingly and willingly. Yet what did he hope to achieve through his martyrdom? The early Christians quickly spoke of a death 'for us' which expiated the sins of 'many' (I Cor 11, 24; 15, 3-5). But was that appreciation of Calvary entirely a post-resurrection interpretation to which the earthly Jesus had contributed nothing at all? Should we agree with Willi Marxsen that the historian 'can say with a high degree of confidence that Jesus did not see his death as a saving event'?²⁰

Before tackling this question, let us pause to examine one prominent item in the gospel presentation of Jesus's road to death, the three predictions of the passion which punctuate the text of Mark and then find their place in the later gospels, Matthew and Luke:

The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again (8, 31).

The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise (9, 31).

The Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles, and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise (10, 33-34).

We noted above how Bultmann flatly dismissed these predictions as prophecies after the event. Kasper and others pick their language more carefully.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p 322.

²⁰ *Der Exeget als Theologe* (Gütersloh, 1968), p 165.

All these show Jesus as having foreknowledge of his death and stress the voluntary character of his acceptance of his fate. In addition, they treat Jesus's passion as a divinely ordained necessity. . . . *In their present form* at least [*italics mine*] these prophecies are prophecies after the event. They are post-Easter interpretations of Jesus's death and not authentic sayings. That applies particularly to the third prophecy, which gives very precise details of the actual course of the passion.²¹

Here Kasper allows for a distinction between the *content* of the predictions and their *formulation*. This means that, even if they were formulated by later Christians, they are not necessarily nothing more than statements retrospectively attributed to Jesus during his ministry. Some of the content could well derive from the earthly Jesus.

In fact Kasper will argue that 'the second of the three announcements of the passion definitely has a historical core'.²² Küng agrees: 'Even if we maintain a critical reserve, we cannot deny a historical core to what is perhaps the shortest, most vague and linguistically the oldest variant of the prophecies of the passion: that Jesus will be delivered up to men'.²³

Two further items call for attention here. If the predictions are 'post-Easter interpretations' of Jesus's death and resurrection, one early and pervasive piece of interpretation is missing in these predictions as such. It is *not* stated that 'the Son of man must suffer and be killed *for us and for our sins*, and then rise again'. That standard reflection from the very early Church which Paul endorses repeatedly does not turn up in the three passion predictions. Further, the third prediction may give some 'details of the actual course of the passion', but these are hardly 'very precise', if they omit one enormously important detail, the killing by *crucifixion*. What hangs upon these two omissions? Just this. The omissions should encourage the view that the passion predictions are by no means totally free inventions which simply incorporate both the actual course of the historical events and later theology. The gospel writers knew their limits in attributing material retrospectively to the earthly Jesus.

Let us turn now to examine the values which Jesus perceived in his coming death. Five words gather up much of what can be said: martyr, prophet, servant, kingdom and covenant.

Second Maccabees, the non-canonical Fourth Maccabees and other sources document abundantly an idea which was in the air during Jesus's time. The suffering and violent death of a just person could expiate the sins of others. The martyrdom of even one man could representatively atone for the guilt of a group. Once the threat of violent death loomed up, it would seem almost unaccountably odd if Jesus had never applied to himself that

²¹ *Jesus the Christ*, pp 114-15.

²² *Ibid.*, p 120ff.

²³ *On being a Christian*, p 321.

religious conviction of his contemporaries. In his martyrdom he could vicariously set right a moral order disturbed by sin.

Secondly, we should not ignore the *prophetic* message conveyed by an episode shortly before Jesus's death: the cleansing of the Temple. Beyond question, it is difficult to settle all the details of his action. Likewise the different versions of his saying about the destruction of the Temple (Mt 26, 60ff; Mk 14, 57ff; Jn 2, 19-21; Acts 6, 13ff) make it hard to state with precise certainty what he originally said. Nevertheless, it seems that the point of both his symbolic action and temple-saying was to call for a radical break with the past. As his death drew near, he announced that a new age was dawning. At the very heart of religious life he would refashion God's people. His mission in life and death was to replace the temple and its cult with something better ('not made by hands').

Thirdly, through life and into death Jesus consistently adopted the posture of a *servant*. On the one hand, he reached out to heal and care for others. By his words and actions he brought divine pardon to those who felt they were beyond redemption. On the other hand, he never drove away the lepers, children, sinful women, taxation agents and all those anonymous crowds who clamoured for his love and attention. As someone put it to me recently, 'he always let others invade his space'.

Now it would be strange to imagine that the approach of the passion abruptly destroyed Jesus's resolution to show himself the servant of others. Rather, a straight line led from his serving ministry to his suffering death. There *was* a basis in his life for the saying, 'The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mk 10, 45). He who had shown himself the servant of all was ready to become the suffering servant for all. And – as Kasper, Küng and many others have insisted – that service was offered especially to the outcasts and the religious pariahs. Jesus's ministry led to his death, at least partly because he faithfully served the lost, the godless and the alienated of his society. The physician who came to call and cure the unrighteous eventually died as their representative. His serving ministry to the reprobate ended when he obediently accepted a shameful death between two reprobates.

Fourthly, it would take a sceptic with nerves of steel to deny the centrality of the *kingdom* in Jesus's preaching. From the outset he announced the divine rule to be at hand. It would be false to separate sharply his proclamation of the kingdom from his victimhood. Kasper and others have endorsed Albert Schweitzer's original insight: Jesus saw suffering and persecution as characterizing the coming of that kingdom which he insistently preached. The message of the Kingdom led more or less straight to the mystery of the passion. That message tailed and culminated in the experience of suffering. The crucifixion dramatized the thing which totally engaged Jesus, the coming rule of God.

At the Last Supper Jesus linked his imminent death with the divine kingdom: 'Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine

until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God' (Mk 14, 25). It is widely agreed that this text has not been shaped by the eucharistic liturgy of the early Church but comes right from Jesus himself and his last meal with his friends. The argument is this. If Jesus connected his death with the coming Kingdom, he must have seen that death as a *saving* event. For he knew the kingdom to be, as Kasper recalls, essentially a matter of salvation.²⁴

Finally, Küng among others would encourage us to acknowledge the earthly Jesus's intention to establish a new *covenant* through his death.

In the face of his imminent death he interpreted bread and wine – so to speak – as prophetic signs of his death and thus of all that he was, did and willed: of the sacrifice, the surrender of his life. Like this bread, so would his body be broken; like this red wine, so would his blood be poured out. . . . And as the head of the family gives a share in the blessing of the meal. . . , so Jesus gives to his followers a share in his body given up in death. . . and [a share] in his blood shed for 'many' . . . The disciples are thus taken up into Jesus's destiny. The meal becomes a sign of a new, permanent communion of Jesus with his followers: a *new covenant* is established.²⁵

Küng's argument pushes us towards some strong conclusions. Jesus anticipated and defined his death as a sacrifice initiating a new and enduring covenant.

To conclude. We face two problems when dealing with Jesus's concept of his own death. The first is the historical problem. Can we really sort out what the earthly Jesus said and did about his coming death from the way the gospel writers and their sources interpret, adjust, explain and add to the story? The challenge should not, however, be exaggerated. A moderate consensus is emerging. A good number of sound historical conclusions are available about Jesus's road to death. Our second problem is much greater. In fact, it is more than a problem which might one day be solved to everyone's satisfaction. It is the mystery of Jesus, true God and true man. Whether it is his concept of his approaching death or anything else, which of us feels wise or holy enough to brandish our certitudes and claim that we truly know his mind?

Recently a friend of mine remarked a little sadly rather than flippantly: 'There's no Jesus like show Jesus. He's really made it now on the screen and on the stage'. This friend's remark made me wonder whether *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Godspell*, Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* and other films and musicals have done for many of this generation what Fouard, Goodier, Prat, Ricciotti and others who wrote 'lives of Christ' did for an earlier generation. It is all for the good, provided we insist on one thing. We should never let a Zeffirelli or any other contemporary director, or – for that matter – any scholar, lull us into feeling that we have settled for ourselves once and for all who Jesus of Nazareth was and what he thought he was about, both in his life and death.

Gerald O'Collins S.J.

²⁴ *Jesus the Christ*, p 116.

²⁵ *On being a Christian*, pp 324ff.