

## **MY FATHER AND THE HISTORICAL AUTHORITY OF JESUS**

*Ruth Agnes Evans*

**M**Y FATHER'S FAMILY was working class, from the north of England, and he imbibed a rich popular culture from his mother, aunts and uncle, his two sisters and his friends. His influences included the cinema, radio programmes, the local repertory theatre and flourishing local rugby team. As an adult, he took on the music and lyrics of Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan. Songs such as 'All along the Watch Tower' and 'Señor' were deeply in tune with his understanding of life.<sup>1</sup> These songs poetically express the plight of the human being who, exposed to many risks and sorrows, struggles through uncharted tracts of time, not defiant but bewildered. They are great songs about the burden of existential experience. At the same time they are by no means hymns to futility. The overall effect of these penetrating lyrics, combined with their poignant music, is uplifting. They hint at a mystical purpose within the struggle.

My father knew what this struggle felt like. But he also knew about the delight of experience. As a student at Durham University in the mid-1950s, he fell deeply in love with my mother. In the early years of their married life, anxious to secure their love, they resolved to search together for the Christian Church that represented the full intention of Christ when he said to Peter, 'And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church' (Matthew 16: 18). My mother had a serious

This article is dedicated to the memory of my father, William James Evans, who died on Ash Wednesday, 1 March 2017. It is indebted to both his and my mother's writings.

<sup>1</sup> Bob Dylan, 'All along the Watchtower', *John Wesley Harding* (Columbia, 1967), lyrics available at <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/bobdylan/allalongthewatchtower.html>; Bob Dylan, 'Senor', *Street-Legal*, (Columbia, 1978), lyrics available at [http://lyrics.rockmagic.net/lyrics/bob\\_dylan/street\\_legal\\_1978.html](http://lyrics.rockmagic.net/lyrics/bob_dylan/street_legal_1978.html)

intention of discovering a Christian life within a Christian fellowship. But it was my father's tireless intellect which led them into the Roman Catholic Church. The inexhaustible joy of this discovery, together with its intellectual excitement, was with him until the last hours of his life, when he continued to review his writing on the subject. He used to say of the good news of Jesus, 'It is too good not to be true'.

### ***Love and the Search for Faith***

And so my father's life was not ultimately a story about moral bewilderment. Nonetheless, he was scarred by the confusing experiences of his childhood, which were the result of his parents' unhappy marriage. Out of this, there came both an understanding of human vulnerability and a profound need for certainty and truth.

His vision of life was softened by tenderness and joy, above all, I think in his experience of falling in love with my mother. She came from a different background from his. He was working class and had discovered his passion for English literature through the resources of an excellent local grammar school which was eager to further the potential of local lads and enrich their options. (His two sisters, who were equally promising, did not receive the same encouragement to go to university. It was widely assumed

that they would leave school and work locally, which they did.)

Dad did not have the practical aptitude that would have suited him to acquire a trade. The excitement of discovering his intellectual gifts enlarged his horizons. As a result, fortunately both for my father and for the local shipyard, he left the home town he loved and went to Durham to study English literature. My mother was from a cultured middle-class family which had made the advantages of literature, the London theatre and



*My parents on their wedding day, 25 July 1959*

opera available to her from childhood. No doubt the stimulus of understanding each other and their differing perspectives was part of the attraction. Despite the disparities in their backgrounds, they formed a union which would support my father through his existential journey.

As a young, recently married man soon to have a child, my father experienced a deepening of his need to rediscover the resource of Christian faith. It was, I think, the experience of falling overwhelmingly in love which fuelled his search. His youth had exposed him to the fragility of every encounter in life, underpinned, as he knew everything to be, by human frailty and potential loss. The more precious the relationship the more deeply he felt this fear, and he wanted to secure his love with my mother on the rock of Christian faith.

The problem was that they did not know which version of Christianity to choose. My father and his siblings had been sent to the local Methodist Sunday School, chiefly to give their mother some necessary space in their cramped terraced home. This planted the seed of Dad's love for the human Jesus, but it did not satisfy him intellectually. My mother came from a background of mixed influences. Her mother was Jewish and an atheist; and her father was a lapsed Catholic. Mum's schooling inclined her to accept Christianity as presented by the Church of England, a solution which would have appeared to satisfy her religious nature without too unduly distressing her mother. Dad's suggestion that they make enquiries about the nature of Catholicism was initially so shocking for Mum that it was a while before she could accompany him. Dad's mother was, in her quiet way, not happy about it either.

Mum writes,

*I was prejudiced against the Catholic Church, partly because of my mother, who was Jewish, feeling her race had been persecuted by the Church and partly because I had imbibed a biased attitude to Catholicism at the Anglican school I attended—particularly in the history lessons about Henry VIII and Elizabeth I—so when Bill suggested looking into the Catholic faith, I wept, thinking that what I had believed would further strengthen our marriage might in fact prove to be an obstacle. But Bill, who also had inherited prejudices from his Methodist background, said, 'I do think we have to look at the largest of the Christian Churches in intellectual honesty, even if it is to discover that there are valid grounds to reject it'.*

*A little later, Bill noticed that some Jesuit priests were giving a course of lectures on the Catholic faith at Corby Hall, and we decided to attend,*

*with an open mind. I remember being surprised by how many people were there, and by the sincerity and enthusiasm of the priests giving the lectures. These were followed by discussions in which people felt free to question and dissent. The priests did not seem intolerant or fanatical, as I had imagined they might be, but listened with respect to the views expressed; then they often quoted from Jesus' words in the Gospels to support the Catholic position. I remember we read the Gospels again afterwards and felt that they overwhelmingly supported the Real Presence and the Catholic positions on the founding of the one true Church with Peter at its head and on the forgiveness of sins. Gradually, over the course of the lectures I found my perception of the Catholic Church was changing and so was Bill's.*

Meanwhile the quest took on a life of its own. Here Dad describes the atmosphere of their first Mass.

*Shortly before Christmas, 1959, we decided we would go to Mass together. We chose to go to the evening Mass at St Mary's, the church in the centre of Sunderland, thinking that there would be very few people there. We were in for a shock. The church held about six hundred people and it was jam-packed. Not only was it jam-packed, but it was full of the sort of people I'd never seen in Protestant churches. It was like the crowd at Roker Park, the local football ground . . . I felt throughout, particularly at the consecration and immediately afterwards, that there was a reverence, a depth and intensity of inward prayer there which I had never experienced before. The faith and devotion near the altar were almost tangible; you could cut it with a knife. The booklet from the Catholic Enquiry Centre had already introduced me to the idea of the Mass as a sacrifice. Here I had my first experience of it as a reality.*

My parents both felt indebted to the excellent catechetical instruction they received at Corby Hall. Mum was received into the Church not long before she had my sister Mary, on 9 February 1961. But Dad continued to read and study scrupulously. He pursued his enquiry to an extent that astounded the young parish priest, Fr Caden, who gently hinted: at a certain point, why not just give in!

The issue of the intention of Jesus when he established what he described as 'my church' was central to this search. Thus ascertaining the truth about the Church which most comprehensively represented the authority of Jesus while he acted as a man upon this earth took precedence for Dad above all issues. This did not mean that he rejected the insights that came from his Methodist past and my mother's Anglican

lessons at school. Father Caden left it to Dad to decide when he was 'ready to give himself up', as he put it humorously, but suggested that a point might come when he should yield to grace. Dad came to feel this just before my birth. His painstaking initial enquiry into the Catholic faith ended then with a joyful reception into the Church about a year and a half after Mary was born. By now it was September 1962, within two weeks of my birth on September 8 and then my baptism.

This was the beginning of a passion for Catholicism which lasted until the end of my father's life and in the course of which he attached huge importance to the teaching resources of the Church. As he grew older he felt troubled that this teaching, for which he was so personally grateful, had lost some of its clarity and thoroughness. This was not in its essence, to which his loyalty never wavered, but in the way it was being presented. One of the sources of his anguish was the state of modern scripture scholarship. My parents had turned to scripture to see if it backed up the interpretation of the Church they were discovering from the local Jesuit programme. An assumption about the essential historicity of the Gospels—that the Gospels are not fictionalised documents—was a prerequisite for this kind of analysis. In fact, without this assumption it is difficult to see how they could have taken this approach at all.

As an older man Dad became distressed by the trend in modern scholarship that seemed to question the historicity of almost every incident in the Gospels. He found it corrosive. If many of the recorded sayings of Jesus were devised by his followers for their own purposes, rather than being what he actually said, ascertaining the intentions of Jesus becomes ambiguous. The premise of Dad's original search for faith, however, was that the intentions of Jesus did and do exist and are discoverable. While recognising that the Gospels come down to us through a collection of human recollections and resources, he was distressed to see the straightforward faith of some of his fellow Catholics, many of whom did not have the advantage of his own painstaking enquiry into the grounds of belief, disturbed. Although my father had studied the faith in depth there was nothing sceptical about his own conclusions. This, together with his working-class background, gave him sympathy for the plight of the 'man in the street', who knows his or her Catholic faith without intellectual self-confidence and feels worried by the scepticism of academics.

For example, my father liked the story of the three wise men and did not understand why it, along with many other details of the infancy



*The Adoration of the Magi, by Albrecht Altdorfer, c.1530–1535*

narratives, had become the focus of so much scholarly attack. This illustrated for him an increasing and troubling divide between modern scholarship and the consolations of the believer. Rather poignantly, these disputed narratives are at the heart of many believers' traditional celebration of Christmas, and Christmas was one of the few days in my father's childhood when he could be sure of family harmony and happiness. Once, to support him, I said I thought that God becoming a human baby was a more astounding story to swallow than the one about the three wise men.

Was it really so difficult to

believe that a few men of integrity, dedicated to truth within their natural lights, should have been guided on a journey by God to the scene of the Son's nativity?

I think my father may have identified with the predicament of the Magi who, passionate for a truth they did not yet possess, had to rely upon a mysterious star, their natural acumen and the wisdom they had inherited as a guide across the desert. My father's enquiring mind and the inherited insights of his Methodism, together with an increasing awareness of Catholic practice and belief, were the resources that he used to guide him towards the Church. His motives were personal, but his tools were rational and academic; he depended on his intellect to guide him. He assumed that if God had established his truth on this earth through his Son, then that truth must be objectively available to the enquiring and sincere intelligence. He was not in sympathy with the kind of relativism that is satisfied with what 'feels like the right thing for me'.

***Family Discussions about Jesus***

Dad often said that the greatness of the figure of Jesus outstrips the literary context that portrays him, for example in the Gospel of Mark. In other words, there is nothing to suggest that anyone involved in the process of recording the gospel stories had the genius necessary to create the character of Jesus. Now I know that the Gospels are more skilled and complex as teaching narratives than they appear. But my father's point was that they would not be great literary works without the central figure they portray. If Jesus did not in fact live and breathe as described, where did the genius to describe him come from? Not from the imaginations of his disciples who underestimate and misunderstand him at every turn (Mark 4: 38, 5: 31, 6: 37, 8: 16–21, 10: 13–14; Luke 9: 54–5).

My father would speak of the apparent contradictions in the character of Jesus. What writer of fiction would have dared to let Jesus collapse at Gethsemane, overwhelmed by the very thing he has said that he must do? After all the exalted encouragement he has showered on his disciples, Jesus can barely overcome his own weakness (Mark 14: 33–34). What writer of fiction would have had the audacity to present this broken, trembling man as the Son of God? But the absence of ostensible godlikeness in episodes like this has the effect of bringing the personality of Jesus to life. He possesses the inconsistencies and vulnerabilities of actuality. The contradictions in his personality ring true, they make him cohere, not as an idea but as a human being.

I always liked the story of the woman taken in adultery, and once I asked Dad why Jesus, confronted by her accusers, had merely stooped and written in the sand (John 8: 6). It seemed to me a strange thing to do at this tense moment when the onus was on him to resolve the crisis by his teaching stature, his courage and his intellectual and moral brilliance. My father simply said that he thought Jesus was embarrassed by her situation. We can only guess, of course, at what Jesus felt as he stooped. But I have never forgotten the ease with which my father attributed to Jesus this capacity for an ordinary and natural human reaction. It moved me far more than if he had offered a lofty explanation for Jesus' behaviour. I realised that not everything Jesus did and felt had to be extraordinary. It is, of course, quite plausible that Jesus experienced stress and shame at the sight of a woman who was being humiliated and threatened in public, and that he needed to pause. Anxious at her peril and his responsibility to avert it, what could be more natural for him than to bend and stir the sand while he composed his thoughts?

It is also probable that Jesus needed a strategy to relieve the ugly excitement and was repelled by the onlookers' voyeuristic enjoyment of the woman's plight. I understood then that Jesus was a sensitive man, and the sight of a helpless and threatened woman could distress him. We may tend to attribute to Jesus the exalted reactions which seem to us consistent with the grandeur of his godhead, but there is a danger that, in so doing, we forget that his experience included the range of simple human reactions that are familiar to us. I am sure I owe the fact that I had this insight about Jesus from a young age partly to my father.

Dad knew that in Jesus he was searching to understand an unfathomably great human being and that Jesus' humanity was united to the nature of God. But he also understood that Jesus really was a human being, capable of need. Both in Sunderland and then back in his home town of Barrow-in-Furness, Dad worked as a teacher; he was gifted, but he found it stressful. He was not practical himself but he could imagine the solace and stability of the trade of an artisan who worked on wood with his hands. He spoke once of how he thought the unambitious manual trade of a carpenter was a sound basis for someone who needed to develop the resources to carry out the demanding mission of Son of God. Jesus needed balance, security, agreeable work and a manageable routine. He needed to prepare his strength and his capacities. It was better, Dad thought, that he was not over-taxed in childhood.

Dad never took the sacraments for granted. He always saw them as a tremendous gift and aid through life, lovingly bestowed by a merciful God, following his own arduous search for the truth. I have never met anyone more reverent of Jesus than my father. Often in my adult life I would feel moved by the profound reverence with which, in our sceptical age, I saw him approach the Eucharist. And again I understood that reverence for Jesus as Son of God did not exclude the effort to understand Jesus as a man.

Dad liked the story of the wedding feast of Cana. It struck a chord with him; he himself loved times of festivity, plentiful good food and wine. He would make the point that the first miracle of Jesus was about social joy and community, an act of pure generosity which affirmed our times of celebration. Dad had an extravagant streak, no doubt a response to the poverty of his childhood. He would buy in more food and wine for family gatherings than we could possibly need. When Mum challenged him on this he would say, 'Look at Jesus, a hundred and twenty gallons!' Although the story is funny, I actually think it contains an interesting



point. Jesus was abundantly generous, not only as the source of elevated spiritual gifts, but in the human encounters that he shared with us. There are stories which confirm his capacity for asceticism (Matthew 4:1–2), but there are also incidents like this one which confirm his love of merrymaking (Matthew 9:10, 11:18–19). He needed the things that we do: celebration, laughter, interaction, festive community to lift his spirit.

Dad loved Mary the Mother of Jesus and he was aware of her human predicament. One of his favourite prayers was the Rosary. He told me that the phrase that struck him most forcibly from the annunciation story was, 'And the angel left her' (Luke 1:38; NJB). After the ecstasy of the angelic announcement there was this experience of loneliness which, for her, must have felt close to abandonment. At this moment, the suffering of her unique destiny, notwithstanding its joy, could not entirely have escaped her thoughts.

Dad felt the sorrow of the passion. He understood deeply that, at the human level, it was a story about betrayal and humiliation. He would always say that it all rang so true to the way human beings behave; the cruelty, the envy, the cowardice, the betrayal of greatness. I think the heartbreak of the story was with him, although we did not speak of it a great deal.

### ***Faith, Conversion and Salvation***

My father was a traditional and loyal Catholic but this did not mean his attitudes were exclusive, and he certainly would not have had sympathy with any tendency to use the moral teaching of the Church as an excuse, say, for homophobia or a lack of respect for gay couples. He appreciated the social developments that he saw in his lifetime which gave people from minority groups a better access to the rights and opportunities of this society. He also appreciated the growth of an egalitarianism, coinciding at its height with his young adulthood and midlife, that gave people from backgrounds such as his own access to the good things of life through education and improved wages. He rejoiced in the welfare state, the great achievement of Clement Attlee's Labour government, which used to offer badly needed security to vulnerable members of our society.<sup>2</sup>

I do not know where Dad got the insight as a young man to define his search for the Church in such pure and objective terms, and with such

<sup>2</sup> In July 1945, Clement Attlee succeeded Winston Churchill as Prime Minister of Britain. His reforming government created the welfare state.

laudable deference to the intentions of Jesus. I guess that his intellectual integrity and longing for the truth were strong motivations. Also, he had an enquiring love for Jesus that he owed to his Methodist upbringing. It was his conviction about the historical truth of the revelation that comes to us in Jesus that marked Dad's Catholicism. His discovery of Catholicism, together with embarking on his happy marriage, were the defining events of his life.

Dad left behind an unfinished manuscript on his conversion and was still working on it a few hours before he died. Perhaps the grace of his conversion gave him the tranquillity necessary for this. Despite its intellectual strength, there was something childlike about the faith my father acquired. He had a tremendous confidence that, through what Jesus did for us, we have been saved. In the last year of his life, knowing how poor his prospects were, I saw him glance at a picture of the annunciation. He looked at me and said, 'Something wonderful for us was accomplished there'.

When Dad died it was not just our family and friends who were saddened. It was also local taxi-drivers, neighbours, the milkman and his companions in hospital. Former colleagues and pupils came to his packed funeral. They all appreciated my father for his kindness and generosity, and for the way he shared with them a passion for sport, in particular football, rugby and cricket. I do not think they would have recognised my father as a deeply pious man. Although Dad did attend occasional retreats, on the whole he did not seek out specialised religious environments. He drew on the local resources of the Church: the parish Mass, the sacraments, discussions, days of recollection and a prayer group provided through the parish. This illustrated his confidence in the everyday provision of the Church and his affinity with the local community where he grew up. He did not need a rarified atmosphere to believe he was on the road to salvation. He needed the parish Mass which filled his heart with awe as a young man and to which he entrusted himself and his family.

*Ruth Evans* is a writer on matters of spirituality and social justice.