

THE EXPERIENCE OF JESUS CHRIST

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THERE COULD be nothing more pretentious or illusory than trying to talk about the experience of Jesus Christ. The conditions of writing accurate history, the discoveries of psychology, the demands of the faith, the respect we owe to a mystery: all seem to forbid us to start on a course that is futile and leads nowhere. Christ's experience in the sense of the secret of his being; or that which goes on inside him at the deepest level, remains for us inevitably inaccessible. If we wanted to lay hands on this experience, it would mean abandoning the field of faith, and substituting the pure attachment proper to faith for the charms of mere curiosity and sentimentality.

Nevertheless, the sheer impossibility of the task tells us something fundamental about Jesus. It is not simply the evangelists' style, but rather the nature of their writings and the little direct attention they pay to Christ's experience. This seems to come from Christ himself. One would almost say that he forbids us to penetrate into his experience.

Jesus does not give the impression of wanting to protect a domain where he is at home, a mysterious region where, undisturbed by indiscretions and misunderstandings, he can pursue his own superior activity and consecrate himself to his unique task. On the contrary, he has nothing to hide; he hands himself over in each one of his deeds; it is as though personal experience, that consciousness we have of ourselves and of what we are doing, which is so important for us, were in his case secondary and even non-existent. When Jesus talks about himself he always tells us what he is doing; he hardly ever describes what he is experiencing. Self-revelation is exceptional; and this does not spring from a character that is naturally reserved or from a desire to keep his distance. In the Passion he only discloses his deep anxiety to his three closest friends. Even the numerous 'I' passages in John's gospel do not add up to self-revelation. He invariably translates revelation into action: I do, I say, I give. And when he talks about love he defines the term with reference to

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what he does: 'The Father loves me, because I give my life'.¹ 'There is no greater love than to give one's life for those we love'.² How can one describe such denuded experience? How can one dare to break into the consciousness of a man, whose presence is undeniable, but who remains simultaneously transparent and impenetrable?

There is no doubt that from the earliest times christians did dare to take this step. Starting with his death, they learned to look beyond the deeds to the interior activity, the decisions in his heart, the meaning he gave to an event. They say such things as: Christ suffered for you;³ Christ himself died for your sins;⁴ Christ paid the price to set us free;⁵ the Son of God loved me and gave himself up for me.⁶ When they celebrate the Lord's supper, they repeat: 'This is my body which is for you'.⁷ They not only state that Jesus as a man truly lived through and suffered his death; they declare that they can enter into the secret of his death; and that this experience is crucial for their faith. 'Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example'.⁸

And this is because the love of Christ overwhelms us when we reflect that if one man has died for all, then all men should be dead; and the reason he died for all was so that living men should live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised to life for them.⁹

In this way God proves his love for us: that when we were still sinners Christ died for us.¹⁰

It is therefore legitimate and even salutary for a christian to try to gain a better knowledge of Christ's experience. It is part of that 'knowledge of Christ' for which Paul was prepared to sacrifice everything,¹¹ and whose glory he wished to spread throughout the world. From the heart of this experience is born the faith for which John wrote his gospel,¹² the testimony of those who saw with their own eyes.¹³ We have to read the gospels; to read them reverently and attentively; not to picture what they do not say, but to go to the very end of what they do say; to go behind the deeds they relate and the words they transmit, and there to gather the genuine features of Christ's experience.

¹ 1 Jn 10, 17.

² Jn 15, 13.

³ 1 Pet 2, 21.

⁴ 1 Pet 3, 18.

⁵ Gal 3, 13.

⁶ Gal 2, 20.

⁷ 1 Cor 11, 24.

⁸ 1 Pet 2, 21.

⁹ 2 Cor 5, 14-15.

¹⁰ Rom 5, 6-8.

¹¹ Phil 3, 10.

¹² Jn 20, 31.

¹³ Jn 1, 14. 34. 50; 19, 38.

The experience of Nazareth

At first sight there is little enough to be learned from the sparse information provided by Matthew and Luke.

But when he learned that Archelaus had succeeded his father Herod as ruler of Judea he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he left for the region of Galilee. There he settled in a town called Nazareth.¹⁴

When they had done everything the Law of the Lord required, they went back to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.¹⁵

But how are we to know what Jesus's existence in his childhood and youth was really like; the atmosphere at home, the growth stressed by the evangelist,¹⁶ which is both too natural and too conventional to give us much enlightenment?

At the same time, if we take this brief information from the gospels about the insignificance of the years at Nazareth and put it alongside Jesus's personal style, his distinctive manner of talking and reacting, one is struck by the way in which they fit together. Jesus's language is not just concrete; it is, if we dare say so, ordinary and earthy. Like the rest of us, Jesus was surrounded by a variety of objects; he talked about the things that furnished his universe. The list of these objects is surprisingly commonplace: the house, the door, the window, the lamp and its stand, the box and the broom, the seed sown and reaped, the piece of silver which can be used at the market or paid to the tax-collector, the bread, the egg and the fish, the garment that needs to be mended, the jars to hold wine, the perfume carefully kept for special occasions, moths and worms which one cannot get rid of, yeast and the kneading-bowl, salt and flour, coats and blankets. Out of doors he also pointed to the most ordinary aspects of life: what sort of weather we are going to have, the growing harvest and the weeds, debts that have to be paid, quarrels between neighbours. Hardly any space is given to important business or powerful people.

It is reasonable to conclude that Jesus inhabited a restricted environment and looked out at a horizon which included the whole of life, but which was made up entirely of simple things, of rudimentary realities, of day-to-day preoccupations. And the gaze with which he looked at all these things was astonishingly purposive.

¹⁴ Mt 2, 22-23.

¹⁵ Lk 2, 39; cf 2, 51; 4, 16.

¹⁶ Lk 2, 40. 52.

He hardly ever described things for their own sake or dwelt on them with a questioning or contemplative eye. When Jesus looked at the shades of colour in the sky it was not to admire a wonderful sunset; it was to tell what the weather was going to be like on the next day. Jesus was not detached from the spectacle of the universe; far from it. But he lived and reacted at the level of the common folk. This child of Nazareth remained marked by his upbringing and apprenticeship; there he first experienced people and things; there he became a man; there he learnt to talk, to reflect, to meet people and to communicate with them.

Jesus needed these thirty years to grow into the man he was to become; a man of his own people, of his age, of our humanity. If he had left his village a few years earlier or later, he would not have been the same. His style would have been different; it would have been more alert or slower. His language would have altered, because he would have been expressing a different set of experiences. The experience of Nazareth was more than unforgettable; it laid the foundations of his life.

The experience of the Son

At the same time this growing child, this adolescent who became a man, carried within himself an experience that was unique: he was the Son of God, the one and only well-loved Son. The Gospel of Luke makes this clear: 'He who is to be born will be holy and called the Son of God'.¹⁷ And the first words spoken by Jesus, uttered in the Temple when he was twelve years old, introduced his parents to his Father: 'Do you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'¹⁸

But how can we talk about this experience? What sort of experience could Jesus have had at the time of his birth? And what can we conclude from words in which Luke clearly wanted to tell us more about Jesus's relationship with Mary and Joseph, but from which it is difficult to discern precisely what kind of experience he is referring to in Jesus? No doubt we have to think that at this time and before it Jesus was the Son of God and that in a certain sense he knew it. If Jesus had had to learn one day that he was the Son of God, it would have meant that up to that day he was not the Son, and that afterwards he was only the Son in an approximate sense. The son of a king can learn the secret of his birth, but this

¹⁷ Lk 1, 35.

¹⁸ Lk 2, 49.

does not really change him, because it is not the fact of being a king's son which makes him what he is, but rather the unique person he is; beneath all his disguises he always utters the same 'I'. If Jesus had the right to call himself the Son of God, he must have been the Son from the very moment of his coming into the world; otherwise he would never have been the Son of God.

But it was not necessary – indeed it was highly unlikely – that this constitutive experience should have taken the form of a definite and conscious certainty. When a child is born, well before he can talk and even before he opens his eyes, human consciousness is beginning to unfold; the child's will is taking shape and self-affirmation is already present. When Jesus was born into the world, his self-awareness did not need to be more advanced than that of any other new-born child. The impulse which gave him life and made him what he was simply had to be directed unerringly towards God; he had to receive from God the immediate assurance that he belonged to the Father. As he grew up and developed, this assurance, this love received and given back, became a clear certainty expressed in the plain words and deliberate gestures of a man. If we lack the solid information to trace the outline of this development, we can at least confirm that it is not contradicted by the evidence of the gospels.

The experience of forgiveness

Of all the experiences we can recognize behind Jesus's actions, that which happens to him when he forgives a sinner reveals most clearly the secret of his person and his condition as Son. Jesus forgives; that is why he came: to seek out and save that which was lost,¹⁹ to call sinners.²⁰ At the same time he sees forgiveness – if we can venture to say so – as the supreme activity of God, that which means most to him. Christ is extraordinarily reticent when he has to convey an idea of God's existence or say what goes on in the heart of God. He does not try to describe what God looks like nor does he even suggest to us how we might imagine him. To help us to see God he does not lift any veils; he only has to live out his life in the presence of men. Those who know how to look at Jesus discover the features and the presence of the Father in every action of the Son.

When one has noticed Jesus's reticence, one is all the more struck by the insistence with which in the three parables of mercy Jesus is

¹⁹ Lk 19, 10.

²⁰ Lk 5, 24.

concerned to stress the joy that takes hold of God whenever a sinner rediscovers his Father. The joy of the shepherd who brings back his sheep,²¹ of the woman who finds the lost coin,²² of the father who falls on his son's neck;²³ the kind of joy in which there is a mingling of the simplest reactions and the highest emotions, linked and added together to give us an impression of the mysterious joy which floods through God at the moment when he forgives. It is without question the only occasion in the gospels when Jesus allows us to look right into the mystery of God and invites us to share as best we can in God's experience.

To pass on the experience of God, and to ask us to enter into it, Jesus had to live it himself. He did not rest his case on texts or arguments; he simply proclaimed the reality of God as though he saw it for himself and as though he were part of it. This is the one subject that Jesus can only talk about from immediate experience. Forgiving sins – as his enemies saw so clearly – is a prerogative of God.²⁴ It is also a power exercised by Christ, not by delegation or after consultation, but by immediate and spontaneous reaction; it presupposes direct access to the truly divine experience.

It is equally true that this experience, though divine in its origins, has to be lived out in a human consciousness and in a threatening world. No doubt that is why Jesus's interpretation of his Father's joy remains so muted and why his words of pardon, so perfect in their fulness and clarity, do not seem to ring with joy. His hour has not yet come and his joy belongs to the distant horizon rather than the present foreground. Forgiveness is already given, but joy, such as it is experienced in heaven,²⁵ belongs to the Kingdom which has still to come and which will only come with the death of the Son of Man.

The experience of evil and death

Jesus experiences suffering. Although he has the power to drive away sickness and even death, he is the first person to be stricken by the suffering from which he sets others free. His spontaneous reaction, his deep and lasting desire, is to promote life. But as he waits to raise his friends from the dead and to dry their tears he first has to know from his own experience what suffering and death are like. For that reason, wherever he goes, he encourages suffering

²¹ Lk 15, 7.

²⁴ Mk 2, 7.

²² Lk 15, 10.

²⁵ Lk 15, 7. 10. 32.

²³ Lk 15, 32.

men to come to him; he is deeply moved by their cries and their wounds. He did not come to admire the successes and masterpieces of our world; not that he despises them, nor does a single word of his give us permission to underestimate them. But his special work is to go out to the failures, the sick and those who lead poor and wasted lives.

His experience of sin is even more agonizing. His own family say that he has lost his head;²⁶ the political and religious leaders, the pharisees and herodians, quickly agree to plan his destruction.²⁷ Wherever he goes his actions are observed, his words taken down and twisted, he is watched and spied upon. The hostility is not unanimous, but it is ceaseless; it gets worse each day and Jesus did not have to possess an exceptional gift of foresight to prophesy the Passion. The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men,²⁸ rejected by the elders, the high priests and the scribes,²⁹ handed over to the pagans.³⁰ Jesus only has to think of the scriptures to know where his mission is leading and for the prospect of his death to take on a more definite shape.

According to the gospels Jesus lived man's experience in two contradictory, but inseparable ways. On the one hand he allowed himself to be crushed and let himself go to the last gasp of helplessness. Betrayed by Judas to the high priests,³¹ handed over by the priests to Pilate,³² passed on by Pilate to the uncontrollable crowd, Jesus died with the cry that he had been abandoned.³³ He now knew what hatred, meanness, cruelty, fear, when they conspired together, could do to a town that was so proud of its highest religious traditions. He knew what men were really like.

On the other hand he gave his life for them. Out of this most crushing experience he created a new experience of love and gift. On the very night he was betrayed,³⁴ when the high priests and Judas had already made their arrangements, while he was still free to run away from them, with complete clarity and fully conscious of the death that awaited him, Jesus used his own hands and movements to take the bread and the cup from the table and to give them to his friends. This was the gift of his own body and blood; the body handed over and the blood shed; the gift of the death he was going to suffer, of the crime he was transforming into forgiveness.

²⁶ Mk 3, 21.

²⁹ Mk 8, 31.

³² Mk 15, 1.

²⁷ Mk 3, 6.

³⁰ Mk 10, 33.

³³ Mk 15, 34.

²⁸ Mk 9, 31.

³¹ Mk 14, 10. 11. 18. 21. 42. 44.

³⁴ I Cor 11, 23.

This is how Jesus proved that the worst of crimes, the execution of the Son of Man, must lead to glory in the revelation of his immense capacity for love and forgiveness. At an agonizing price, whose secret will always escape us, he experienced within himself the power to love us even in our blackest sins. He experienced in his flesh and in his heart the forgiveness of the Father, the secret of his joy. Because God loves us so much that he cannot renounce a single one of his children, the Son possessed the resources to experience our sin. That is why God raised him from the dead: to clasp all men in his forgiveness and to change all hearts in the experience of his joy.