

Shortly before her death on September 7, 2007, Sr. Lydia Champagne shared with me a CD with this booklet on it. I asked if she would like me to publish it for her on my web site to make it available to others, and she was happy to have me do so.

There is no fee for individual download; publication and circulation must be requested, however.

Philip St. Romain. [phil@shalomplace.com](mailto:phil@shalomplace.com)

*The Humanness of Jesus*  
*Who was he anyway?*

*by*

*Sister Lydia Champagne, C.S.J.*

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## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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# THE HUMANNESS OF JESUS

## FOREWORD

My fascination with Jesus began, I think, in my early childhood. In my very earliest memory of it, I was sitting with my mother in the first pew at Sacred Heart Church during Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. My feet didn't quite reach the end of the pew. I was mesmerized by a young man in a long red dress with a lacy white blouse hanging over it. He was swinging a large golden thing and smoke was coming out of it. It smelled good, like God.

I don't remember any words. But I remember God.

Later, I would often climb up next to my mother who was sitting on her bed with a prayer book in her hand. Her lips moved a lot, so I moved mine, too. We were talking to Jesus. Her faith was mine until I started school. Then I borrowed Sister Hilda's, Sister Thecla's, and Sister Elizabeth's.

There came a day in my senior year of high school, when I had to make a decision about my future. I felt a strong underground tug toward religious life and at the same time an equally strong resistance. In a life-defining moment of grace, the call of Jesus became crystal-clear and irresistible. In a small notebook I kept for retreats, I wrote only this: "O.K., Jesus, you win." I've never doubted that decision.

Until I was almost 40, my understanding of and faith in Jesus had been heavily influenced by those who taught me. But after Vatican Council II, when religious were urged to return to their sources\_ Scripture and the founders of our Congregation\_ we had to face the question for our selves.

From then on my borrowed faith was no longer adequate. Questions about Jesus arose, and I couldn't answer them to my own satisfaction. I had stepped out of the boat and could not walk on the rough sea. Drowning felt real. The only alternative was to face the questions: Who was Jesus? Who is he? Who is he for me? What does "Son of God" mean? I didn't begin the search alone. I had gone back to school to study theology and was teaching adults on the side. Some of them had the same questions I did. So we began together an exciting faith journey. Now I want to share the experience with others.

This book is not for scholars. Far from it. It's intended for those whose knowledge of Scripture is minimal, those who don't know their way around in the Bible but would

like to. It's for beginners and or those to whom Jesus is important, even if they don't know why.

Many of us grew up firmly impressed with faith in Jesus as Son of God and were not encouraged to ask or wonder what that meant. Our teachers said so and that was enough. That he was also fully human was not a part of our early instruction, and for many of us, there was no later instruction on that subject available.

This book does not pretend to be a definitive work on the subject, but only an introduction to the Jesus that we who began with the questions rather than the answers discovered in the process.

I offer it now with some excitement. It's as though I must share it. It's like fire in a paper cup.

## **Chapter 1: HOW THE GOSPELS CAME TO BE.**

The first step in our journey toward Jesus was to take a new look at the Gospels, to understand where they came from and what kind of documents they were.

There were a number of good books on this subject available at the time, so we took a careful look at them. There is a mountain of material on the topic of when and how the gospels came to be in written form. Here, I will give only a general idea of the questions, the evidence and the issues. This is not the last word on the topic; new discoveries by archeologists, historians and linguists may give more complete understanding in the future.

One of the first things we realized was that no one was actually sitting down taking notes on what Jesus was saying or doing during his lifetime. To date, we have no copy of any Gospel before the year 70 A.D. Jesus died in the year 33 or thereabouts, so people who hadn't known him began to hear of him from those who had. On the first Pentecost after his death, it finally became clear to his disciples that he was indeed the promised Messiah, the Christ, and their fear of being apprehended by his enemies disappeared. They openly proclaimed him as the Messiah and accused the Jews of calling for the death of this innocent man who had come to save them from their sins.

Peter's first sermon was powerful enough (in all languages) to persuade 3,000 to ask for baptism. These first converts were in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost and afterwards returned to their various countries, bringing their new faith with them. Thus, the Gospel was spread primarily by word of mouth for almost 40 years, and Christian communities began to spring up wherever the story was told.

Also, when the apostles began to do in Jerusalem the things Jesus had done and to preach in his name, those who had called for the execution of Jesus began to persecute his followers, causing a number of them to go to other places, bringing the word of Jesus with them. This was the second phase in the development of the Gospels. First, the actual events happened. Then the witnesses to these events spread the news and kept the story alive. It seems that the first Gospel to appear was the Gospel of Mark, possibly written in Rome for Romans. The word gospel was not a new one in the Roman Empire. Any message of victory was called a gospel, a piece of 'good news'. The first line of Mark's Gospel reads, "Here begins the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God."

Matthew and Luke, apparently relying heavily on Mark's gospel, independently produced gospels of their own for their different audiences. Matthew's gospel addressed Jews in Palestine and Luke's Gentiles in Asia Minor. They both used almost all of the material in the Gospel of Mark, and possibly other sources, written or oral. Both are much longer than Mark's Gospel. When lined up in parallel columns, all the similarities in all three of them can be seen at a glance. For this reason they are referred to as the synoptic gospels. All were in circulation by the mid 70's. This date is generally accepted because all of these gospels record Jesus predicting the destruction of Jerusalem, which occurred in 70 A.D.

The fourth Gospel is very different from the first three. It was in use by the 90's, but may have been written down up to thirty years earlier. John would have been eighty or ninety years old in the 90's. The gospel may have been first used by the community John taught, somewhere near Ephesus.

There are very few similarities between this gospel and the synoptics. It is noticeable that there are few parables in John and few sermons addressed to a general audience. John's gospel is characterized by contrasting themes: light and darkness, life and death, and belief and unbelief. This is the only gospel that does not mention the changes Jesus made during the Passover meal, which are the foundations of the Eucharist. Instead, John tells the story of washing the disciples' feet; then, he devotes four full chapters to Jesus' most intimate discourse with them.

The four gospels are actually four different perspectives or points of view on Jesus, which, taken together, give a rich picture of this incredible man.

Mark was not one of the inner circle of apostles, although he may have been an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry. Since he was with Peter in Rome, some think that Peter was one of his principal sources. Others identify the young man who ran naked from the Garden of Gethsemani on the night of Jesus' arrest as the author of this gospel.

Mark's gospel is a vivid narrative, full of action and drama, climaxing at the cross. This gospel is the most sparse in terms of long teaching sections. For Mark, Jesus is on a

collision course with the establishment, which, by the third chapter, is plotting his death. As mentioned earlier, this gospel is written for Gentiles and so does not have the allusions to Jewish attitudes and culture found in Matthew. It is also the shortest of the four.

Matthew's Jesus is the promised one spoken of by Moses and the one who fulfills the Jewish prophecies. There are a number of symbolic references connecting Jesus with the Jewish people he had come to redeem. For example, twelve apostles symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel, 40 days in the desert symbolize the 40 years Moses and his reluctant followers spent wandering in the desert. In a number of passages, Matthew says, "Jesus did this so that the prophecy might be fulfilled which said..." It was Matthew's intent to convince the Jews that accepting Jesus as the promised Messiah made sense.

Since Luke was a Gentile and was not one of those who had known Jesus personally and so had not witnessed the things he was writing about, he directed his gospel to those who, like himself, were not part of the inner circle and not even Jews.

Unlike Matthew, Luke traces the ancestry of Jesus not just to Abraham, but to Adam and so to God, emphasizing the universal nature of salvation. Luke shows Jesus' affinity for the poor, the sinners, the outcasts, the women\_ all who tended to be somehow marginalized by the society. His Jesus is the most compassionate, most eager to set people free from whatever held them bound.

John's Jesus seems to be a rabbi, skilled in the rabbinic style of raising questions and entering into serious debate. John records many public arguments between Jesus and the Pharisees. In whole chapters dominated by his conversation with one other person, like the Samaritan woman, his compassion and tenderness mark him as a man apart. His prayer at the Last Supper shows the depths of his love for those he called his own. His word to his mother as she stood at the foot of his cross shows him as son of Mary as well as dutiful Son of God.

Although the New Testament as we know it was not canonically established until the fifth century, the Gospels were in circulation long before that time. There are more and better copies of New Testament documents than there are for any other first century writings. Whatever questions may arise because of "scribal errors" in copying the documents over the centuries, in the Gospels we have a reliable record of who Jesus is.



## CHAPTER 2: JESUS, THE JEWISH BOY.

When you want to know who Jesus is and what made him tick, you have to begin with a few assumptions. We have no access to certitude about any of this, but we can make some educated guesses. These are mine.

The Gospels don't tell us very much about Jesus' childhood or adolescence. They give us four different perspectives on his public ministry, his death and resurrection. But we want to know how he got to that point. How did he grow up and where? Since we have no historical evidence, aside from the Gospels, here's what we need to assume: that being a Jewish boy, Jesus grew up in much the same way as other first-century Jewish boys did. He lived among them without a halo or with any other external indications that he was in any way different from them.

Like them, he would have gone to the yeshiva, the school where Jewish boys were taught the Scriptures\_ the Law and the prophets and the other sacred writings which had shaped their long tradition. According to Moses, it was Yahweh who had led them out of Egypt, out of slavery and oppression, through years in the desert, and finally to the promised land and freedom. It was Yahweh who had selected them and made them a people apart, his own people, his chosen ones. They learned this as children and were schooled in gratefulness.

Judaism in Jesus' day was primarily a domestic religion, practiced not so much in the temple as in the home, where the Sabbath was a weekly joy, beginning every Friday evening with a sacred, ritual meal. The following day brought all male Jews to the synagogue where they listened to the learned and eventually knew enough to join in the debate. This sharpened their knowledge of the Scriptures and sent them into a new week with a new thirst for a deeper understanding of the holy books.

We can assume that Jesus did it this way. According to recent scholarship, it is safe to assume that Mary and Joseph were fervent Jews who reared Jesus as they had been reared, according to the shema: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is Lord alone. And You shall love the Lord our God with your whole heart, your whole soul, your whole strength." (Deut. 6:)

It is also safe to assume that they did not know what "Son of God" meant in his case, that they did not know him to be divine. During the incident in the temple, which occurred when he was twelve, they suffered the same anxiety that other normal parents would have suffered. Mary scolded him in the way that Jewish mothers have made famous. She did not pull her punches because she thought he was Son of God. Good Jews had been taught that all were children of God.

According to Luke's narrative, Jesus returned to Nazareth and "was subject to them." It seems he was somewhat chastened, as a normal boy would have been. Luke adds that "He grew in wisdom, age, and grace. That "he grew in wisdom" indicates that he had not come packaged with omniscience. He had to learn, just as the rest of us do.

All of this lets us in on a rather well-kept secret: Jesus was human, just as we are. That makes it much easier to relate to him and to love him as a friend, as a brother. He becomes more accessible to us, and following him becomes a little more difficult. We can no longer let ourselves off the hook by saying, "Oh, but he was God."

He had no access to all the divine prerogatives until his resurrection. His suffering was real. He was not just acting out a role. Agony for him was agony, just as it is for us. He entered into it first of all because he had learned from his teachers and from the Torah of God's incredible love for him and for each of us. Probably the best way he could help us to understand the depths of his love for his Father and for us was to give his own testimony. Otherwise, we could not begin to understand a God who could love us in the way that Jesus described. We are the prodigal sons and daughters. God is that Father in the parable whose incredible love erases the memory of our sins and welcomes us with a mighty embrace, who assures us that everything he has is ours.

According to the Gospels, Jesus grew up fully human, in the mountain-top village of Nazareth in Galilee, about five miles from the rather large city of Sepphoris. He was a country boy who probably spent most of his time in school and in his father's shop, learning not only his father's trade but also his spirituality. Another reasonable assumption is that his own spirituality was shaped by his parents. They taught him to pray their Jewish prayers and he learned them the way we did, from our parents. No one knows how many years he spent in Nazareth. We can wonder about his mission in life and why it took him so long to get started. Perhaps he was waiting for his younger siblings to grow up. Another reason that makes sense to me is that, as always, he was already about his Father's business and that God had not yet called him out of Nazareth into the public forum.

Perhaps this underscores the importance of realizing that contemplation should precede action and not the other way around. It also emphasizes the value of listening to the inner voice of God, of discerning what it is that God asks of us now.

This is not to say that God has our whole future all figured out. After all, each of us has a free will which we exercise all the time. I picture God rejoicing when we make good choices and wincing when they're not so good. Part of God's job must be to weave our mistakes into the whole fabric of our lives in such a way that they don't even show. With a good conductor, a few sour notes won't spoil the whole symphony. God somehow works them into

the whole. Always we have the example of Jesus, in words and actions, to lead us in the direction of good choices.

When it seemed right to Jesus, he left his family, his shop, his village, and showed up at the Jordan river, ready for whatever came next. The probability is that he didn't have a clue.

We can follow him now into his public ministry. Picture a young Jew, about thirty years old, quiet at first and very observant, as he decides what to do next. God is with him as he makes his choices, just as God is with us. But always, the choice is his, and now ours. God reverences the freedom he has given to each of us.

### CHAPTER 3: THE WORLD OF JESUS

Although no one knows exactly where Jesus went when he left home, He did eventually show up in Jerusalem, apparently more than once, to celebrate the Jewish festivals: Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashana, the Feast of Tabernacles, Chanukah, and the greatest of all, the Feast of Passover.

Probably, as many Jews did, he frequented the Temple, where he would have encountered the priests and the Levites ( the Temple sacristans) as well as those who came to offer sacrifice. Certain types of sacrifices were required by the Law on certain occasions. For instance, after the birth of the first-born son, who belonged to God, an offering was required to purify the mother and to buy back the son, as Mary and Joseph did 40 days after the birth of Jesus.

Those who sold birds and animals to be sacrificed occupied one section. For the purchase of animals, pilgrims needed money changers, who apparently were doing a booming business. Pharisees would also have been there along with rabbis. Both would have used the opportunity to teach the Law and the Prophets to those milling around. Picture among them the quiet, observant Jesus.

There and elsewhere, Jesus would have encountered a cross-section of the Jewish populace, the merchants, the tax collectors, the urban poor, the sick, sinners of all kinds, and ordinary good people doing their best to live good lives. Since the Jews were a captive people who were subjects of the Roman Empire, a Roman governor ruled Judea in the South. This governor and his forces were *Gentiles*, whose company was ordinarily forbidden for Jews. So the Jews' conviction on how to deal with Rome and how to keep The Torah divided them into four somewhat distinct factions. There were some overlaps, but they each had distinguishing characteristics.

One group, the Pharisees and Scribes, specialized in knowing and keeping the Torah, which they interpreted quite literally. Not all Pharisees were Scribes, and not all scribe were Pharisees, but they all interpreted the Law quite literally. God meant what he said and said what he meant. Moses had written it all down, and who could dispute Moses? They apparently took pleasure in a public display of nit-picking interpretation and compliance with the letter of the law. In fact their written interpretations became 504 additional laws which they expected everyone else to keep. They were professionals at "straining out gnats and swallowing camels." It was hardly a pleasure for anyone else to deal with them, including Jesus.

A second group, the Sadducees or priests, were born to priesthood and to

privilege. Although not all Sadducees were priests and not all priests were Sadducees, they all held the Torah sacred, but unlike the Pharisees, they did not believe in an after life. They lived rather comfortably and presided at Temple services, which the Romans allowed to continue as long as they did not disturb the peace. Pleased with the status quo, the Sadducees thought that keeping the peace with Rome was paramount. This entailed compromise, of course, and compromise they did. This meant that, for them, the Law was flexible. Better to preserve the peace than cause a stir. A stir could upset the Romans, and that could get them into real trouble. Their motto was "peace at any price."

A third and very different faction, the Zealots, had little patience with either the priests.

They were not afraid of Rome. On the contrary, they bitterly resented domination by outsiders and intended to end it as soon as possible. Did not the God of The Torah say to Moses, "Let my people go?" Did he not will their freedom and foster it at every turn? They were rebels with a mighty cause, which they pursued with unrelenting zeal.

Then, there was a fourth group, the Essenes. They had no faith in the other three parties, or in any human being, for that matter. In their way of thinking, other people were so full of sin that contact with them could only mean defilement. So they took to the desert, there to await the promised Messiah, who must surely come from their number. We had not even heard of this group until 1947, when a shepherd boy accidentally discovered the now-famous Dead Sea Scrolls.

A large mass of people, unidentified with any of these four groups, were the poor, the prostitutes, sinners, tax collectors, the sick, the blind, the lame, and ordinary folks who were simply trying to live good lives. Jesus saw all this, but identified with none of the above. Instead he invited the majority of the population, the obviously sinful poor, to join him in serving God and one another. It was not his intent simply to increase their number by one. The situation needed changing, and so far, there was only one voice, that of John the Baptizer, crying out in the wilderness for radical change, for reform. His message was a stern one and his language powerful. Repent, be baptized as a symbol of your willingness to reform your lives.

Since John and Jesus were cousins, they surely knew each other long before Jesus stood in the line for John's baptism. When Mary, newly pregnant, visited John's mother, her cousin, Elizabeth sang out, "The moment your greeting sounded in my ears, the baby in my womb (John) leapt for joy." (Lk. 1:44).

The Gospel of Luke mentioned that Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Jerusalem to attend temple services and to celebrate the "high holy days". Since Elizabeth lived in Hebron, a short distance from Jerusalem, there is some likelihood that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph

might have stayed at Elizabeth's house on some of these occasions. John was only six months older than Jesus, so it's possible that the two boys grew up as playmates and close friends.

There is no indication in Scripture that Jesus foresaw the dramatic change that the waters of the Jordan rolling down his face would make in his life. Like us he was still growing in wisdom. Possibly, he was as profoundly stunned as anyone else at the sudden revelation of God. As the dove hovered above him, a voice resounded deep within his being: "You are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased."

This was for him not only a soul-shaking religious experience. It was a life-changing event. What did it mean to have God call him son? God is Father of all. So all are sons and daughters. But beloved? Are not all equally beloved? If so, they didn't seem to know it. Chosen, yes. But only Jews considered themselves chosen. What about all the others? Could they not be God's beloved also? Jesus couldn't figure all this out while standing in the river. It would take more time. He needed a desert for this one, a place where he could be alone with his thoughts. As an ambivalent symbol, desert could be both peaceful and dangerous. So we follow him now into that experience.

## CHAPTER 4: THE DESERT

All three synoptic gospels recount the story of Jesus' desert experience, so it was familiar wherever these gospels were preached. The common elements are that he was there 40 days, symbolic of the 40 years Moses and his disgruntled followers wandered in the desert lands of Egypt; that he fasted from food and drink; and that he was tempted by the devil. It's important for us to realize that being fully human, Jesus was subject to temptations, just as we are. The story is not part of a script Jesus had known ahead of time. The temptations hit him where he lived.

Like most of our temptations, these were aimed at the core of his identity. In the first attack, the tempter said, "If you are the son of God, command these stones to turn into bread." It was a timely temptation, since forty days with no food or drink had left Jesus terribly hungry. It seems so small a thing to provide food for himself. We know now that he did it later for thousands of people. But the truth is that a true son of God, especially the first-born, would not attempt to escape the natural consequences of his own actions, even to satisfy an intense hunger. In answer, Jesus quoted Deuteronomy : "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God." (Deut. 8:3)

This one frequently comes to us also. Ever find yourself wanting to change what weighs heavily on you into something light? Or something cold into something warm? Or something life-draining into something life-giving? The truth is that we can live even by the stones in our lives and be the better for it. The lie is that as children of God, we should not have to suffer or feel pain of any kind.

But we have all lived long enough to know that God does not take away pain, that pain is inescapable, no matter how hard we pray. God does not send it, but he promises to be with us in it. Even his name is a promise. One translation of the name he gave to Moses, YAHWEH, is "I will be there as who I AM." (EX.3:12 & 14)  
In fulfilling that promise, God has given us not only the strength to bear it. In Jesus, he has shown us how to make it holy.

The second lie was that a son of God should test God to see if he really meant what he said through the psalmist. Taking Jesus to the top of a high mountain, the tempter said, "Cast yourself down, for it is written (in Ps.91) 'He will command his angels to guard you in all your ways...lest you strike your foot against a stone.' "

The truth is that a true child of God would not attempt to force his hand. The true son would trust his Father completely. His faith could not easily be threatened. It would make no sense to him to attempt to guide God's power, since that power always does the bidding of God's enormous love.

That temptation is ours, too, when we cannot believe that God's love for each of us is unlimited. Maybe he has an unlimited love for everyone else, but that can't include me. I'm too big a sinner. I don't fulfill the conditions. That's a lie. At the other extreme, I'm aware that others may be tempted, but I am so sure of my own goodness that God is bound to love me.

Between the two extremes, I ask for a sign. I believe, of course, but a sign would surely help.

The truth is that there are no conditions, that God is crazy about each of us, with no exceptions. Through Isaiah he has said to each of us, including me, "You are precious in my eyes and glorious ... and I love you." (Is. 43:12)

In the tempter's third effort to make Jesus sin, he took Jesus to the top of Solomon's splendid temple. From that height, he gave Jesus a panoramic view of all the lands below and said, "All these will I give you, if you will bow down and worship me." The lie? You can have absolute security, if you buy it. The truth? You have it already. In your insecurity, God will provide. Your security is in him.

Before his desert experience, Jesus had stood with John. Afterwards he had a different focus. His message was not one of impending doom. It was and still is good news, great news: God is in charge. God calls each one of us son or daughter. We must live as though we believed that. We must let God, not the tempter reign in us.

After John was arrested, it was time for Jesus to replace him. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' first recorded words are: "The reign of God is at hand. Reform your lives and believe in the gospel (the good news). (Mk.1:15)

Reforming is hard work, yet until we do it, believing good news is even harder. But the power of God is here. Jesus' first miracle, <sup>16</sup>casting the demons out of the man in the



synagogue, is a demonstration of that. At the stern command of Jesus, all the demons in the man fled. To the witnesses, this said, "The finger of God is here." We cannot reform or believe by our own power, but we do not have to. What Jesus did for that man he is ready to do for each of us. God's power is at work in us. Our task is to consent. God respects our freedom, even when it's such a risk to do so. Faith always leaves enough room for doubt. Otherwise, it isn't faith. It's certitude. That's much easier to live with.

## CHAPTER 5: JESUS IN MINISTRY

In announcing the reign of *God* as already here, Jesus wanted to share with his contemporaries and eventually with all of us, his own experience of what *God* is like and what it means to be loved by this fatherly and motherly *God*. There were a number of ways to do this. For instance, he could move among them as one who loved them just as they were, as he did with the woman taken in the act of adultery. He defended her from all except those without sin. And who are they? His instruction to the grateful woman was simply, "Sin no More."

Secondly, He could meet them in their own situations and be the life of their parties: the poor and the wealthy, the Pharisees and the sinners, the prostitutes and the tax collectors. Remember Zachaeus? The sycamore tree in which he was hiding was no protection against the love of Jesus. "Make haste and come down," Jesus said. "This day I will abide in your house." In his ecstatic joy, the little tax collector became immediately detached from his illegal riches. He would give half of all he owned to the poor! He would make restitution to all those he had wronged. Imagine the celebration that followed! And guess who was the life of that party!

Thirdly, Jesus could heal them. Remember the bleeding woman who reached out in a crowd just to touch Jesus' cloak? Apparently she touched the heart of Jesus also. He not only healed her from her lengthy affliction, but praised her before the whole crowd. "Daughter," he said, "It is Your faith that has cured you. Go in peace and be free of this illness." (Mk.6:34)

Another way in which Jesus could show the Jews what it meant to be loved by his *God* was to feed them. Once when he and his disciples crossed the lake, he found a vast crowd waiting for him "like sheep without a shepherd". He began teaching them at great length until it was getting late. His disciples saw a problem looming. They suggested that Jesus dismiss the crowd so that they could go to the nearby village to get something to eat. Jesus had another solution. "You give them something to eat. They were looking at thousands of hungry people. Imagine the looks on their faces! "You can't be serious, Lord!" the facial expressions said. At his direction, they found in the whole crowd five loaves and two fish. Jesus told them to have the people sit on the ground in groups of hundreds or fifties. He asked for the loaves and fish, lifted his eyes to heaven, pronounced a blessing, broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to distribute. Note the looks on their faces when they begin. Then watch them as they discover that the baskets seem to have no bottoms.

Some people wonder if Jesus had a sense of humor or if he ever laughed. Do you think he kept a straight face as he watched his skeptical helpers, especially when they gathered up the fragments?

Sharing food with people seems to have been one of his favorite things. He practically ate his way across Palestine! He spoke of heaven as a banquet and in fact, he even chose to be remembered by a meal.

Jesus was also extremely interested in peoples' happiness. For those who were willing to receive his love, it was usually impossible to be sad in his presence. Being a very happy man himself, he must have brought joy wherever he went.

In his effort to communicate what God is really like, Jesus didn't just give sermons. Instead, he showed this by loving people the way God does. Eventually he could say to Philip, "Those who have seen me have seen the Father also." (Jn.14) He embodied that love himself in the way he treated everyone, especially the ones considered outcasts.

In the space of three years or less, he did all of these things. In addition to that, he usually told stories. Parables were a popular form of discourse in Jesus' day. They always involved images familiar to the people and conveyed the heart of his message. Those who wished to dodge the point could do so, at their own peril. For all the rest, including us, the parables, while looking simple, are difficult to exhaust. The ones Jesus told described either the incredibly loving God or what the kingdom of God is like.

One of the more familiar parables is "The Prodigal Son," long considered the best description of God's unconditional love for all of us. It would be difficult to out-sin this young man, who crassly demanded his inheritance and spent it all as a profligate would. The young ingrate indulged himself and his companions until the cash ran out. At the same time, so did the "friends".

When he finally had to support himself or starve, the only job he could get was feeding someone else's swine. As a Jew, he would have been taught to avoid pork in all its forms. But at this point, his own food supply was so meager that he envied the pigs their victuals. That means he had hit rock bottom.

When he came to his senses, he realized that even the hirelings in his father's house ate better than he did. It was then that he said to himself, "How many hired hands at my father's house have more than enough to eat, while here I am starving! I will break away and return to my father, and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Treat me like one of your hired hands." (Lk. 15:17)

What do you think the father of this young scoundrel did? You already know, of course, since you've heard the story. Long before the culprit saw the front door of his father's house, the father saw him, because he had never ceased scanning the road, hoping for the return of his delinquent son. When he caught sight of him, the old man instead of waiting for the prodigal to approach tossed dignity aside. Followed by his servants, he ran to meet his son. With no thought of the boy's wickedness, he was overcome with joy and called for the finest robe, a ring for his finger and shoes for his feet, all symbols of sonship. He ordered the fattest calf to be killed, for music and dancing and rich, red wine, "For this son of mine who was dead, has come back to life. He was lost and is found." (Lk. 15:23)

Why did Jesus tell this story? How else could he have made clear to us the inexhaustible love of Abba? Is there a chance that our sinfulness exceeds that of the prodigal? Even so, we can expect the same embrace, forgiveness, and uninterrupted love. Who would not love such a God for loving us so much?

That's only half the story. The father had another son, totally different from his brother. When the celebration began, he was out in the fields where he belonged, doing his duty as always. He heard all the commotion and wondered what was going on. A servant told him the reason for the celebration. Was he happy about his brother's return? Not exactly. Instead, he made the mistake of comparing his own behavior to his brother's. When the father sent for him to join the celebration, he was locked in his pout. He would not come in. When the father came out to him, He reminded the father of his spotless record, having "“" for him all these years and having never disobeyed one of his orders. He referred to his brother as "This son of yours". He refused to join in the celebration. There was no party in his soul.

When we get the point of a parable, it usually pinches. For instance, who is this prodigal son? Well, who is not? Or, who is the elder brother? Again, who is not? Most of us probably identify more with one than with the other. The truth of the matter is that there is in us a bit of both. Jesus deliberately presented his listeners with extreme opposites so that no one, no matter how profligate or no matter how righteous, could feel beyond the reach of the father's love. It's that way for us, too. How can we not love such a God?

## CHAPTER 6. JESUS THE TEACHER

Early in his ministry, Luke says Jesus returned ( from the desert) in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and his reputation spread throughout the region. He was teaching in their synagogues, and all were loud in his praise."

Among his more significant sermons is the one he preached in Nazareth, his home town in which he announced his mission. The setting was the synagogue, where he had spent many a Sabbath in his early years. It was on a Sabbath day when he took the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah and read from chapter 61:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me;  
Therefore, he has anointed me.  
He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor,  
Recovery of sight to the blind  
And release to prisoners,  
To announce a year of favor from the Lord.

Then he gave the scroll to the assistant and sat down, as it was customary for the teacher to do. After a pause long enough for all eyes to be fixed on him, he said, "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." This was only the beginning; we don't know what else was said, but the people were impressed. They marveled at the appealing discourse which came from his lips. After all, they had known him since his childhood. "Is this not Joseph's son, whose brothers and sisters we know?" they asked.

Isn't it strange that we never expect the extraordinary from the people we know best? We're proud to know them, of course, and often do some bragging about it, but jealousy is a widespread weakness, and there it was, in Nazareth.

But the most important aspects of this event are what they reveal to us about Jesus and the God he was trying to make known. That the Spirit of God was upon him was something Jesus must have been very glad about. What Jew would not have been? This meant that in his brief ministry, he would be guided by God's own Spirit, that whatever he felt led to do "The Spirit of God was upon him. "

Many would choose to reject him on the basis of his proclaiming liberty to captives, but the constant, visible presence of their Roman captors should have made that proclamation a welcome one.

"Glad tidings to the poor" would cause many hearts to rejoice, since there were more poor than any of the other classes. That would have given Jesus particular joy, just as it does us to help those who really need it.

"Recovery of sight to the blind" ,besides making it possible to rejoice with those thought to be enduring punishment for their sins when that was not the case at all, increased the population of Jews who could be taught to read and so could learn the Torah and become observant Jews.

"To proclaim a year of favor from the Lord." Well, who wouldn't welcome that?

Since his whole ministry was good news, no wonder people loved him everywhere he went. Because of his personal attractiveness and that of his mission, Jesus quickly gathered a following. Some he called by name; others were just drawn by the magnetism of his personality.

He seemed to realize that he didn't have much time. So as soon as John had left the scene, he felt he should move in to take his place. What had happened to John made that no easy task. Speaking the truth in certain circumstances can have dire consequences and Jesus was fearless about the truth.

In the synagogue at Nazareth, he had spoken fearlessly about his mission. On other occasions, he offered guidelines for disciples, who were willing to leave everything to follow him. They were demanding then, and they still are. The well known "Sermon on the Mount" which begins in ch.5 of Matthew's Gospel was not for sissies then and it's still isn't. It begins with The Beatitudes: "Blessed are those" and summarized mean "who know their need" : the single-hearted, the peacemakers, those who thirst for justice, those who mourn, the meek, those who are persecuted for my sake and the Gospel" for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,"

Many of Jesus' instructions for disciples came not only in the well known sermons already mentioned, but in brief statements which kept the longer sermons alive. For instance, 'turning the other cheek" was a preposterous idea, before Jesus made it even thinkable, much less desirable and even doable. That, combined with the mandate to forgive , not just seven times, but even seventy times seven. Is a large order, but how else is one to be a peacemaker, to thirst for justice?

One of his brief sayings which is a hallmark of discipleship, is this one: "If your brother sins against you seven times a day, and seven times a day turns back to you saying 'I am sorry,' forgive him." Even seventy times and seven times seventy. That's asking a lot, but Jesus didn't hesitate to do that. He still doesn't. And again, he had already said, "Blessed

are the peacemakers." Are not those who forgive and do not hold grudges truly peacemakers?

Jesus didn't limit his teaching to verbal statements. On one occasion, when an unknown leper cried out to him for a cure, Jesus not only approached the leper. He also touched him. In approaching the leper and in touching him, Jesus took two great risks: first, he could have contracted the disease himself, but his strong tendency toward mercy apparently made him oblivious of that danger.

Secondly, it was against the law, as interpreted by the Pharisees. According to the Pharisaic Law, lepers were unclean, and anyone who came within a certain distance of any leper became unclean. It was unthinkable to touch him. The Pharisees took notice. This man is dangerous, they said; he has no respect for the Torah.

Nothing could have been further from the truth, of course. If anyone loved the Torah, Jesus did. But he knew that the spirit of the Law was far more important than the Pharisees' hair-splitting interpretations of it. Those interpretations eventually became about five-hundred-and-four new laws, not of God, but of the Pharisees. Jesus shows his hunger and thirst for righteousness regardless of the consequences.

When he openly violated their law, they realized that this man Jesus was dangerous. He could not only rock the boat. He could sink the ship.

Those whose power was established realized this. But what they did not know was that Jesus was not out to sink the ship, but only to change its course. There is no scriptural evidence that Jesus wanted to abolish Judaism or to start a new church.

He loved Judaism. He did not want to abolish it or supplant it. He simply wanted to reform it and restore it to its Mosaic purity. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets," he said. "I have come not to abolish but to fulfill them." (Mt. 5:17) He was aware that not all would believe that the reign of God was the reign of one whose unlimited love sought only to gladden their hearts. It was the powerful presence of one who loved us without our deserving it. Of ourselves, we are not worthy, but the message of Jesus was that we do not have to earn God's love. We cannot merit it. It is God's gift, given freely.

Perhaps Jesus discovered this as a result of his desert experience. This is what it meant when God called him "my beloved." He realized that the word was not meant for him alone, but for every human being. Each of us is God's beloved. This was a revelation for Jesus,

giving him a new vision of God and of himself. It is this vision that he attempted to communicate to everyone else, both Jews and eventually Gentiles.

Jesus wanted only to proclaim in every way possible the reign of this God whom they did not know. But it was not a message that they found easy to accept. Surely there must be some prerequisites? We, too, have been caught in that trap. We do all sorts of things, just in case. How many safeguards have we used in the 2,000 years since the birth of Jesus? Our churches have made some of the same mistakes the Pharisees made. How many "good works" have we been taught to stack up to insure our salvation? How many fool-proof novenas? How many indulgences, plenary at that?

The one thing necessary, to open our hearts to God's incredible love, is to let it reign in our lives. But that is the hardest thing to do. Surely I have to pay for my sins? The Catholic Church devised the system of granting "indulgences" with chronological values attached as a means of shortening our "time" in purgatory, where there is no time, a "place" of purification from the scars left by sin.

The habit of sinning does, of course, leave us with a weakness in attempting to resist our natural inclination to gratify ourselves instead of trusting God to do it. But what is the "price" that God exacts from us? Ask the Prodigal Son. Ask his older brother. (Lk. 15) Better yet, ask the good thief.

Still it is very difficult to trust that Jesus' image of how God loves each of us really is what God is like. If we have no human reference points for that kind of love, it strains belief. So Jesus himself became that reference point. With his many stories or parables drawn from things familiar to them, from experiences that they had already had, he attempted to reveal that God's love is all-inclusive, that it is unconditional, that it is compassionate, forgiving, and freeing. Some could believe that the love of Jesus for them was like that, so he embodied for them what the love of Abba is like.

When they did act as though they believed, he got excited. "Father, I give you thanks that what you have not revealed to the rich and powerful you have revealed to little ones." (Lk.10:21) The "little ones" were usually the cloutless ones, the powerless, the poor, the sick, whose condition, according to the pharisees, surely indicated that they were being punished for their sins.

It was not yet a part of their understanding of the Torah that sometimes bad things happen to good people or that good things happen to bad people. The Book of Job had introduced that question about seven centuries before Jesus lived, but somehow they had lost sight of it. To correct this misinterpretation of the Law, Jesus associated with them as freely as with any other class of society.<sup>24</sup> He excluded no one. When he ate his way across Palestine, he was with the poor as well as with the affluent.



So Jesus moved among them as a compassionate healer. He was not the first experience the Jewish people had had of healers. Others before him had showed similar power. But Jesus clearly acknowledged that the power came from God and from their faith.

Among the first of the miracles reported by the synoptics, the expulsion of the devil from a man in the synagogue proclaimed that the power of God was here. It was far greater than the power of all the demons put together and its effect was radically different. It healed, it restored health and wholeness, it set the man free. It was an experience of unsought, unmerited love. It was visible evidence that such love operated among them.

This was what Jesus meant by the reign of God. In the first chapter of Mark, Jesus announced,(v.15) "The reign of God is at hand! Reform your lives and believe in the gospel." Another word for gospel is "good news".

God's love for us, as Jesus demonstrated it, has a correlative. When we experience this love, we are inclined to love God back. We can do this in two ways: we can accept the two great commandments of the law. First, we can love God with our whole heart, whole soul, whole mind, whole strength. (Deut. 6:4) Doing that entails doing what we think is God's will for us. That always involves the second great commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Lev.19:18) Jesus joined these two commandments when asked by a Pharisee: "What is the greatest commandment of the Law?" Jesus' joining of these two widely separated precepts is phenomenal. It captures the essence of the Shema and the whole of the Torah and the Prophets. Since God is love and the source of all genuine love, we can do this only by the freely shared power of God, God's grace or gratuitous gift. It is logical that love begets love.

Once loved, we can love. Once forgiven, we can forgive. Once set free, we can set others free. We not only can do these things but we're more likely to want to. This becomes the redemptive cycle which perpetuates the message and the experience of our earliest ancestors in the Christian faith.

It's up to us now. Through twenty centuries, the flame that Jesus lit in the hearts of believers has been passed down to us by each succeeding generation. We are now the ones charged with the responsibility of keeping the redemptive cycle going. More often than not, we encounter the cycle of sin, which needs to be broken.

Random acts of kindness toward those who don't seem to deserve them can do that. The willingness to forgive or not to take offense can do it. Once broken, the cycle of sin can be replaced with the kind of love that is redemptive, the kind that Jesus demonstrated. Done

often enough, it can change the face of the earth. Small wonder that the Christian calendar begins with the birth of Jesus. Small wonder that celebrating a millennium is celebrating all the love that Jesus let loose upon the world and his giving us the power to keep it going.

Perhaps the *Gospel* mandates not to judge and not to condemn are among the most difficult to obey. Forgiving 70 times 70 times has never been easy. It's difficult to allow God to reserve vengeance for himself. God never uses it, of course, but forgives even before we realize we have sinned. Vengeance is destructive for everyone concerned.

Every time we allow our government to kill a murderer because we want "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," we ignore the original purpose of that statement, which was to limit the amount of retribution, not to mandate it. We also ignore the *Gospel* in which Jesus says, "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth', but what I say to you is: offer no resistance to injury. When a person strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other." (Mt.6:38)

Since Jesus breathed forth his Spirit, that same Spirit has animated his disciples. That means that we have the power to love our enemies, and to forgive those who hurt us. One of Jesus' last prayers was, " Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Now, it's up to us to make that prayer our own.

## CHAPTER 7: THE FIRST APOSTLES

At this point, we may be feeling rather dismal about the quality of our own discipleship. If so, it may help to look at a list of the apostles chosen by Jesus. It is very difficult to understand what he had in mind for them and even more difficult to explain why he chose the ones he did. Talk about a motley crew!

What sort of folks were they? The brothers Peter and Andrew; the sons of Zebedee James and John; Thomas the twin; Matthew the tax collector; James, son of Alphaeus; Philip; Bartholomew; Simon, the Zealot Party member; Jude Thaddeus; and Judas Iscariot..

Out of all the people he might have chosen, the first twelve he selected were men who could not possibly have made it together. The built-in opposition among them must have been downright explosive at times, so much so that it's a marvel they didn't kill each other.

For example, there are two Zealots in the group, Simon and Judas. How could they possibly have lived in peace with Matthew the tax collector who had sold out to the Romans and, therefore, was a mortal enemy of the rebel Zealots. The Zebedee brothers were fishermen whom Jesus once called Sons of Thunder. These fellows had an eye for business as well as for fish. Were they interested in power? Bet on it. They had no objection when their mother appealed to Jesus to seat her sons on his left and right hand when he came into his kingdom.

On one occasion, when Jesus surprised The Twelve with the question, "What did you speak of on the way?" They had not simply conversed peacefully. They had argued about who would be the greatest. That was when Jesus put a little child on his lap and warned them that unless they became like little children, they would not enter the kingdom of heaven. "Of such is the kingdom," he said.

So why didn't he choose childlike people as his messengers to the world? Or why not people with less competitive urges? When the chips were down, how could Jesus expect them to be reliable? Thomas at one time suggested that they go with him to die with him, and shortly thereafter, set an ultimatum for his belief in the resurrection. "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." (Jn. 20:25)

Certainly, these were complex people. They had their good moments as well as their bad. It does make us feel a little bit better to know that they were not always "saintly". They struggled with their commitment to Jesus.

When all was said and done, more was said than done. Despite their promises of fidelity, in his moment of greatest need, they all deserted him. John and Peter did, at least, return for a while. John had an in with the high priest, so he got himself into the court room, while Peter stayed in the yard outside. But that was a dangerous place; his Galilean accent was recognized. Three times a serving girl asked about his relationship to the prisoner inside and three times Peter denied that he even knew "the man". That was not Peter's finest hour. But, inside the courtroom, was not John's silence as strong an infidelity to Jesus as Peter's overt denial? Jesus had warned Peter during the supper that he would do this, but Peter thought he knew better.

Peter's quick movements from one extreme to another was, by the way, a characteristic that showed up in him from the very beginning of his association with Jesus. "Let down your net for a catch," Jesus said. Peter answered skeptically, "We have labored all night and taken nothing." Jesus said to do it anyway. When a whole school of fish piled in, Peter's fervent response was, "Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man."

Later, when Jesus put the all-important question to The Twelve, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered with assurance, "You are the Christ," Jesus pronounced him blessed, because God had revealed this to him. But in the next sentence, when Jesus predicted his suffering and death, Peter would have none of it. He "took Jesus aside," Mark says, "and began to remonstrate with him," just as we do when bad news follows good news.

As disciple of Yahweh, Jesus saw no incongruity in suffering being demanded of the Son of God. Not so with us. As disciples of Jesus, we don't, usually, expect to take up the cross daily and follow him. Otherwise, as Jesus could say, "Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things," we too could say, as these disciples said later, "What an honor to be asked to suffer something for him. We continue to be surprised by the suffering instead of by the joy.

Peter's spectrum had no middle, even at the last supper. When Jesus began to wash their feet, Peter objected strenuously. "You shall never wash my feet." (Jn.13:8) "If I do not wash you," Jesus answered, "you will have no share in my heritage." Peter, as usual, moved from one extreme to the other. "Lord," Peter answered, "then not only my feet, but my hands and my head as well." (Jn.13:8ff). Going off half-cocked was one of Peter's trademarks, and perhaps for that reason it's hard to resist him. His frailty was always on display. That's good for us to know, since it's often that way with us, too.

One of Peter's finer moments was recorded in Jn.:6 where Jesus spoke of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. The Pharisees walked away in disgust and many followed them. Jesus turned to the rest and said: "Will you also go away?"

Peter answered for all of them, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

We need to be aware that Peter had no monopoly on frailty. The way the Apostles dealt with one another frequently manifested their individual weaknesses and the friction that obviously existed among them.

Perhaps one of the most astounding prayers Jesus ever uttered was the one at the Last Supper. He asked then, "May they all be one, as you are in me and I am in you. May they all be one in us." This he asked "that the world may believe that you have sent me." (Jn.17) Unity in that group would be rather convincing evidence that Jesus had indeed been sent by God.

During Jesus' entire ministry, the tension among them persisted. They each loved Jesus, to a certain extent, but they were selective about their unity with each other. Relationships among some of them were naturally closer for a number of reasons. The fishermen may well have been friends from their youth, before Jesus showed up among them. Peter and Andrew were brothers, as were James and John. The zealots were united in the same political cause and others, like Philip and Nathaniel, were apparently friends, but that's about it as far as any kind of natural unity among them went.

However, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, a definite change occurred in their relationships with each other. When Jesus was executed as a criminal between criminals, they feared for their own lives. In the Upper Room they huddled together in their grief and fear, and stayed that way until rumors of resurrection began to circulate. But because the rumors came from the women, they were skeptical about accepting them.

But Peter and John decided to check them out and ran to the tomb. When they reported that the tomb was indeed empty, the rest were profoundly puzzled. Finally, on Sunday evening, when the Risen Jesus stood in their midst and ate among them, (one of his trademarks!) they were united in belief and joy.

The one other "official" apostle not numbered among The Twelve, besides Matthias who was elected to fill the vacancy left by Judas, is the hot-headed Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus. Saul was present at the stoning of Stephen, the first of the Christian martyrs. He assisted the executioners by guarding their cloaks, and then obtained a warrant to search out other followers of Jesus (who were not yet called Christians). The story of his dramatic conversion is told three times in The Acts of the Apostles, (chs. 9,22,26).

Because he had been such an avid opponent of the earliest followers of Jesus, they were skeptical about the genuineness of his conversion and very hesitant to accept him as a true follower of Jesus. But after he had spent time with the original apostles in Jerusalem, they began to realize that it was really the Risen Lord who had spoken to him on his way to Damascus.

Paul, as he was then called, had no misgivings about his own status as a chosen apostle. After he had met the original group in Jerusalem, he quickly took his place among them as an equal. It was difficult for anyone to out-argue Paul on most subjects, but especially on prerequisites for Gentiles to become Christians. Paul insisted that they should not have to become Jews first or abide by the laws of circumcision or dietary laws.

This issue occasioned the Council of Jerusalem, the church's very first. Paul was God's instrument in broadening the narrow mind set of the others on the issue of circumcision and consented to a compromise on the dietary matters. Peter admitted that he had been wrong to cave in to the old legalistic position.

Paul had a most significant role in the early church as Apostle to the Gentiles. His letters to the various Christian communities he founded are among the earliest known writings in the new Testament. When Paul finally reached Rome, he and his companions had, indeed, spread the Gospel to "the ends of the earth," since the Mediterranean circle ended there. He and Peter died there in the year 67A.D., both victims of Nero's persecution.

The first twelve were chosen by Jesus of Nazareth. Paul was seized by The Risen Christ. But all were chosen, nonetheless, not for any merit of their own. But Jesus the Christ wants us all, frailty to the contrary notwithstanding. The marvel is that through the original twelve, the original seventy-two and Paul and his Gentile converts, through twenty centuries, the message has reached us. Because Christ has died and risen, we have access to the same Jesus Christ.



## CHAPTER 8: JESUS AND WOMEN

The way in which Jesus interacted with women needs special attention today, when the hierarchy seems to have lost sight of this aspect of his the gospel. Women were a prominent part of his life and among his most faithful disciples. Every gospel includes stories of his encounters with them.

When the Community was still very young, women received from the apostles the same kind of treatment Jesus had given them. A number of them ministered

alongside the men. Paul in particular names a number of women who were leaders in Gentile communities he had founded. His letters were circulated during the fifties, when memories of Jesus of Nazareth were still rather fresh.

Mark's gospel, the earliest of the four, appeared only in the seventies, about forty years after the resurrection. That allows ample time for the original witnesses to have died or moved to other places and for a second or third generation of disciples to have taken charge. Since they had not had direct experience of Jesus of Nazareth, the memory of his concern for women had probably dimmed a bit. The gospels of Matthew and Luke, written in the eighties and John's in the nineties, were even further removed from the events they recorded. Perhaps this is why, for the most part, all but Luke gave women a rather short shrift.

In general, all four gospels treat women in a favorable light. Examples in Mark are two incidents in which Jesus praises the woman's faith. The woman whose bleeding for twelve years, had exhausted her and her savings, reached out to touch his clothing, hoping for a cure. She attempted to go unnoticed, but Jesus, who was being jostled and elbowed on all sides by the crowd, suddenly stopped. Someone had touched him, deeply, and he knew that power had gone out from him. When he asked who had done so, she came forward. Jesus said, "Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace." (Mk.6: 21-34)

In the second incident, we find the Gentile woman who wouldn't take "no" for an answer. This Canaanite woman whose little girl was in the clutches of a demon, insisted, but the apostles didn't want their getaway day spoiled. Jesus complied with their wishes and gave her a rather insulting answer: "It is not right to take the food of the children and give it to the dogs." She threw it right back. "Please, Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the family's leavings." (Mk.7: 24) Apparently, her swift response delighted him. He allowed her to broaden his horizons to include Gentiles. She made him "grow in wisdom". "For such a reply," he said, "be off now!" The demon has already left your daughter."



Luke mentions women so many times that his gospel is often called "The Gospel of Women." "The Twelve accompanied him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and maladies; Mary called the Magdalene, from whom seven devils had gone out; Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chusa; Susanna; and many others who were assisting them out of their means." (Lk.8:1-3)

The apostles never did give these women very much attention until the death of Jesus. Since they were not included among The Twelve, perhaps they were among The Seventy-two. At any rate, the fact that they were not mentioned does not mean that they were not there.

The most prominent woman among his disciples was, of course, Mary of Magdala, a small village near Capernaum. Luke introduced at the beginning of chapter eight with the words "out of whom Jesus had cast seven devils." Perhaps that line has caused history to paint her as an outstanding sinner. The facts are that it was she whom Jesus chose to visit first on the morning of his resurrection. She was the leader of the little group of women who were going to finish anointing his body when the Sabbath was over. Most significantly, it was she to whom Jesus gave the honor of announcing the event which gave meaning to his whole life and death: "He is risen." This means that Jesus made her the apostle to the apostles. Legend has it that she ministered in southern France and died in a small village outside Marseilles. Her memory is preserved there in the ruins of a second-century church, St. Braune's.

In Mark's account of the anointing at Bethany, an uninvited woman entered the dining room of Simon the leper where Jesus was one of the guests. She broke open an alabaster jar of expensive perfume and began to pour it on Jesus' head. The others were furious and murmured something about extravagance and waste. In her defense, Jesus said, "Why do you criticize her? She has done me a kindness...By perfuming my body she is anticipating its preparation for burial. I assure you, wherever the good news is proclaimed throughout the world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." (Mk.14:3-9). And it still is!

In another well known incident in Bethany, Jesus visited Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus. Much too busy preparing the supper, Martha was anxious, frustrated, and angry because Mary was doing nothing but sitting at Jesus' feet and listening to him. Many of us are inclined to side with Martha, so it comes as a shock when we read that Jesus did not. He said to Martha, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things. Only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part, and it shall not be taken away from her." (Lk. 10:38-41) So much for the conflict between action and contemplation.

The compassion of Jesus toward the poor and the oppressed focused especially women, who were always the poorest and the most oppressed of all. Among the women, the most

abandoned were widows who were usually penniless. They are among the Anawim referred to in the Hebrew scriptures as "the little ones." Note the unsought favor of Jesus directed to the nameless widow of Naim. Her only son was her only source of livelihood. When Jesus saw her son being carried to his grave, the woman's grief touched him deeply. Giving her back her son was an option he couldn't resist.

According to John another such widow happened to visit the Temple when Jesus and The Twelve were watching. Many Jews walked in and deposited donations which put no strain on their standard of living. When the widow dropped in her two pennies, Jesus pointed out to them that she had given more than all the rest.

Luke has a story in chapter 13 about another nameless woman, probably a widow, who for 18 years had not been able to look anyone in the eye. She was bent. What she saw of life was the ground, the floor. When she entered the synagogue on a Sabbath day, Jesus saw her. Again his heart was moved with pity. Calling her to himself, he said to her, "Woman, you are free of you infirmity." He laid his hand on her and immediately stood up straight and began thanking God.

Because it was the Sabbath, the chief of the synagogue was furious. Obviously he followed the laws of the Pharisees and not the spirit of the Law which Jesus was teaching. He scolded the woman, saying, "There are six other days for working. Come on those days to be cured." This made Jesus furious. He called the leader and others who thought healing was work that was forbidden on the Sabbath "You hypocrites!" and said "Should not this daughter of Abraham here who has been in the bondage of Satan for eighteen years have been released from her shackles on the Sabbath? At these words, his opponents were covered with confusion; meanwhile everyone else rejoiced at the marvels Jesus was accomplishing." (Lk.13: 10-17). This is an example of acting as though we were made for the Sabbath instead of the Sabbath being made for us.

Since this passage does not show up in the lectionary, many people have never heard of it. It's the only time in both testaments when a woman is given that title, "Daughter of Abraham". It underscores Jesus' concern for women, especially the lowly ones.

The presence of the women was inescapable when it counted most, at the death and burial of Jesus and especially at the resurrection. It was the women who took the risk of following him openly to calvary, stood with him and his mother as he breathed his last, and came back before dawn when the Sabbath was over.

They were the ones, therefore, who were the first to know the tomb was empty, and Mary Magdalene, the first to bear witness to his resurrection. She it was whom Jesus sent to

proclaim the good news that gave meaning to his life and mission: "He is risen." In sending her, he made her the apostle to the apostles, in other words, the first apostle.

## CHAPTER 9. MARY OF NAZARETH

For too many years, Mary of Nazareth has been a woman we have known only on pedestals. She has been the subject of paintings by some of history's greatest painters, of music by some of our greatest composers, of poetry by some of our greatest poets. Wordsworth's tribute to her as "Our tainted nature's solitary boast" is one of the more memorable ones, but there are many others. We have known her theoretically as a woman like other women, but we haven't known her practically with her two feet flat on the ground just like ours. In her own day, no one bowed or prayed to this woman. This is the woman we desperately need to know, the one like the rest of us.

Her contemporaries saw her as one of themselves, doing the same things they did, without expecting anything in return. She had children just as they did and, recent scholars say that as far as she and Joseph knew, and Jesus, too, for that matter, they did not know that there was anything different about him.

This goes against what we have been taught and believed for many years. But when you take into account the fact that the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke are not to be taken literally because they are in a different literary genre from the rest of the Gospel, it makes sense. They're in the category of myth, which does not mean that they're not true at all. They're not true on the outside but they are on the inside. The stories are told to convey messages, but the stories themselves are not true. They didn't happen. The messages they convey had many similarities in the Hebrew scriptures, which we grew up calling the Old Testament. There are many stories there which simply mean "Watch this one. God will do great things with him."

A good example of this is the story of Moses escaping death decreed for all male Hebrews delivered by the Hebrew midwives. His rescue by Pharaoh's daughter attended by the mother of Moses stretches belief. It's a great story, but don't take it literally. It means, "Watch this man. God will do great things with him." God did, but the "holy ground" where the bush burned was in the Midian desert out of which God called a reluctant Moses. That he was reared by his own mother as a royal son in the court of the king stretches belief a bit.

This and other stories like it help us to understand that "The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary" does not mean what we thought it did. It means "Watch this one," but neither Mary nor Joseph knew that. Neither did Jesus, until his resurrection. Then he was called The Christ, but not before. Getting to know this Mary is difficult these days because we don't have easy access to her. Once again we have to rely on assumptions and educated guesses. These are mine.

First of all, she was not a blue-eyed blonde. She was a Jewess and looked like it. That means she was dark-skinned and had dark hair. Secondly, she was never wearing a flowing white gown covered by a long blue veil. Those materials would have been hard to come by in her situation. And certainly she was never holding a rosary, much less saying one. There are so many statues around that show her like that, and my question always is, "To whom is she praying?"

The rosary was a mnemonic device St. Dominic used in the fifteenth century to teach the illiterate the important events in the lives of Jesus and Mary. The fifteen decades do not mention the actual ministry of Jesus.

And thirdly, she was not obviously praying all the time. From *Fiddler on the Roof*, I picture the wife of Tevya and the mother of three daughters. Because of Tradition there were expectations of the Jewish mother. These would have applied to Mary, too.

Because Judaism was really a domestic church, the Sabbath was observed at home and the Sabbath prayer was led by the mother. Mary would have done that. She had sons as well as daughters and one of them, of course, was Jesus.

Because Scripture is written backwards or through the rearview mirror, the events recorded had already happened and were written in retrospect. The writers used the information as though the events were happening as they wrote, "The mother of Jesus was there" occurs several times in a way that indicates a tremendous respect for her because they already knew that Jesus had risen and was known to be the Christ, the Son of God. Because they already knew this, Mary was practically divinized in the Gospels. Hence, the pedestals.

But that's not the way it was. About forty years elapsed between the resurrection and the appearance of the first Gospel. By that time few remembered the lovable Mary of Nazareth. Because we could relate to her as one of us who did the usual chores that first-century Jewish women did without a second thought, we could learn a lot from her and even be her friends.

If it's important to us to know Jesus, and it is, there's no one who knew him better. This ordinary Jewish woman, who, according to the Gospels, had sons and daughters, suffered more than anyone else when she saw him suffer and was as surprised as anyone when God raised him up and made him Lord.



## CHAPTER 10. JESUS IN CONFLICT

If you have read all the previous chapters, it will come as no surprise to you that Jesus was not popular with everyone. You know about the Pharisees, who usually considered him trouble and even dangerous.

Early in his ministry, he incurred their wrath by apparently ignoring their Law. What he ignored was only their interpretation of the Law, and that was enough to put him on their black list, and he pretty well stayed there.

Among Jesus' infringements of the law of the Pharisees was his habit of associating with the wrong crowd, tax collectors and other sinners, who were considered to be ritually unclean. He even ate with them. When they reproached him for this behavior, his reply showed no remorse at all: "People who are healthy do not need a physician; sick people do." I have come to call sinners, not the self-righteous." (Mk.2:17)

Since the Pharisaic interpretation of the Law was that illness of any kind was a punishment from God for sin, on the occasion when friends of a paralytic brought him to the feet of Jesus, seeing their faith Jesus said to the man, " My son, your sins are forgiven." Jesus noticed the displeasure of the Pharisees, so he said to them, "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up, pick up your mat and walk again?'

That you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' he said to the paralyzed man, "I command you: Stand up! Pick up your mat and go home." The other witnesses were awestruck, but not so the pharisees. In their eyes, this was blasphemy, since, they said, "No one can forgive sins but God." They were right, of course, but didn't know it !

What probably angered them even more was Jesus' "habit" of breaking the Sabbath law. All work was forbidden on the Sabbath. What no one seemed to understand was that the Sabbath was made for us, not us for the Sabbath. It was meant to be a day of joy, a day of rest from ordinary occupations, a day for praising God. Think of the joy of the man with the withered hand who saw his hand become normal again at Jesus' touch (Mk.3:5). This made the Pharisees angry enough to join the Herodians, who were no friends of theirs, in plotting Jesus' death.

Imagine the joy of the bent woman, who for eighteen years had been unable to stand erect. It happened to be a Sabbath day when she and Jesus stood toe to toe in the synagogue. Jesus said, "Woman you are free of your infirmity." " He laid his hand on her, Luke says, and immediately she stood up straight and began thanking God." (Lk.:13:10ff.)

This was what the Sabbath was for, but the chief of the synagogue was indignant. "There are six days for working. Come on those days to be cured, not on the Sabbath." Then Jesus, too, was indignant. "Should not this daughter of Abraham ... have been released from her shackles on the Sabbath?"

Luke continues, "At these words his opponents were covered with confusion. Meanwhile everyone else rejoiced..."

Jesus broke the Sabbath rules, as the local authorities interpreted them, in other ways besides healing. Allowing his disciples to satisfy their hunger by plucking grain on the Sabbath was another way in which he fell afoul of the Sabbath rules.

There were a number of other things Jesus did that angered the Jewish establishment. The crowds that followed him made him a dangerous threat to their authority. He could lead the people astray. Besides that, he could arouse the suspicions of the Roman authorities and weaken their tolerance of the religion of the Jews. Having to pay taxes to Caesar was bad enough, but curtailing their form of worship would be intolerable. There would be no point at all in allowing one man to cause that. Far better for that one to die for the sake of the people.

The collision course between Jesus and the Pharisees was often apparent in their open debates with each other. From his boyhood, Jesus had become skillful in the rabbinic style of argument, so there was never a question as to who came out on top. This only increased their fury.

No matter how hard they tried to set traps for him in an either/or hypothesis, they could never catch him in an erroneous response. On one occasion which they thought offered him no way out, they presented him with a Roman coin and asked, "Is it lawful to pay tribute to Caesar or not? If he answered "Yes," he would be condoning the Roman occupation of Israel. If he said "No," he would be vulnerable to the charge of treason.

Holding the coin, Jesus asked, "Whose image is this?" They answered, "Caesar's." Then Jesus said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, to God the things that are God's." (Lk.20:20) The important thing for him was not WHO we are but WHOSE we are.

They found another opportunity to embarrass him the day they caught a woman in the act of adultery. They brought her to him and said, "Moses said that we should stone such a one, but what do you say?" If he said, "Do it," then where is the mercy he so often preached? If he said, "Don't do it," then he would be going against Moses. What Jesus did shocked all of them. He said nothing at first,<sup>40</sup> but began to scribble in the dust. Then he



said, "Let the one without sin cast the first stone." There were no stones hurled, but John says, " They departed one by one, beginning with the elders." (Jn.8:2-9)

In addition to all these strikes against him, Jesus often derided the Pharisees with public condemnations of their hypocrisy. He accused them of flaunting their "piety" in public places to appear to be holy, when in reality they were offering God only lip service. They claimed seats of honor at table and in synagogues, while Jesus promised that in the kingdom of heaven the first would be last and the last would be first. Those who exalted themselves would be humbled and those who humbled themselves would be exalted.

When it came to finding fault with others, the Pharisees were experts, but they overlooked their own sins. Jesus called it finding the speck in another's eye and missing the plank in their own, or straining out gnats and swallowing camels. On another occasion a Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner, and Jesus went to the table without washing his hands. The host reproached him for violating the laws of purification. At this, Jesus lost his cool and launched a series of scathing condemnations of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. (Cf. Lk. 11:37)

Jesus and the Pharisees were at odds with each other on all these counts, as well as on everything else that Jesus taught. Small wonder, then, that they wanted him dead. The day finally came when they approached Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Israel, and called for the execution of Jesus.

Until then, the Romans themselves had no problem with Jesus. He had been willing to go out of his way to answer the request of a Roman centurion for the healing of his son. The centurion stated his belief that Jesus had as much authority over illnesses as the centurion had over his subordinates. It was this Roman who gave us the words, "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof. Say but the word and my son [soul] shall be healed."

## CHAPTER 11. JESUS IN AGONY

There are several schools of thought on what Jesus knew and when. Some scholars are of the opinion that he was aware at his birth that he was Son of God the Second Person of the Trinity. Others of equal competence hold that he knew nothing of his divinity until his resurrection. My thinking follows the second, perhaps because I think it enables us to concentrate better on his full humanness, his likeness to us in all things, except sin. This view helps us to relate to him more easily as a fully human being. Also, when discipleship gets painful, it prevents us from letting ourselves off the hook by saying, "Yes, but he was Son of God."

As you may recall, the gospels in their present form were the third step in a lengthy process and were not in circulation before 70 A.D., almost forty years after the resurrection. So, I believe that it was a very human Jesus who entered into his agony not knowing ahead of time what the outcome would be. Like many other prophetic figures who were at odds with the establishment, he could read the signs of the times. He could see "the handwriting on the wall." He didn't have to be divine to know that there was a price on his head. He had, of course, read and understood the Hebrew prophets who wrote about the Messiah who was to come. What he did not know, according to this school of thought, was that these prophecies referred to him.

Having followed his story thus far, we can reasonably assume that Jesus realized that he had options. He wasn't dead yet, though Judas had already pocketed his "thirty pieces of silver." Surely The Liar was still around, and this was an even riper moment to strike at the core of his identity than the hunger in the desert had given him. But even without The Liar's interference, Jesus must have realized that he had options. Choosing among them must have been an agonizing process. And what were his options?

They were sinners like the rest of us, and sin, of course, takes its toll. It takes a lifetime to overcome its ravages. Among them are the lost opportunities to growing in unselfish love and a strong inclination to repeat the sin. We can choose to be separated from God, and that choice can be eternal. But there is no question that the full forgiveness of God is ours for the asking.

Faced with certain death, which he would have preferred to avoid, he could have recanted what he had taught and promised to stop teaching. But how could he have done that and remained true to himself? All that he had said about God and the reign of God was true, and Jesus was a sworn enemy of the lie. "For this was I born" he said to Pilate, "to give testimony to the truth." (Jn.18)

Secondly, since Israel had rejected him, he could have decided to shake the dust from his feet and gone elsewhere to teach other people who might have believed, but his failure in his own country offered little hope for success elsewhere.

As a third alternative, possibly he could have just settled down somewhere and lived out his life as a normal human being. Why not save his life rather than risk death so soon?

That's the important question. Answering it could have been an agonizing experience. For centuries, there has been a near consensus on the belief that Jesus died because God willed his death in reparation for the sin of Adam. Since it offended an infinite God, it was an infinite offense, and as such, it demanded an infinite reparation. St. Anselm said in the 14<sup>th</sup> century that unless Jesus himself paid the price with his blood, we could not be saved.

If we needed a savior, did we need his execution as a criminal? What kind of God would demand the bloody death of his only begotten son to redeem the rest of us? Does this indicate the extent of God's love for us? .

According to Abraham's experience, God is dead set against human sacrifice. God tested to the absolute limit Abraham's faith and obedience, stopped the knife in downswing, and rescinded his command. Instead, he accepted the ram in the bushes.

In Jesus' case, there was no ram in the bushes. But actually, any loving action on the part of Jesus had infinite value. We have, in fact, been redeemed by Jesus' death, but did God really will it? There's no proof otherwise, but at least it's a valid question.

But if God did not will his death, then why did Jesus die? Well, first of all, because he was born. Every birth ends in death. But why did he choose to die the way he did?

For one thing, the Jewish people had no authority to execute anyone. To kill him, they had to go to the Roman governor of Judea. It was well known throughout the Roman empire that crucifixion was the usual form of Roman executions. Perhaps many have thought for centuries that the substance of Jesus' agony was his clear realization of the pain involved in such a death.

His was not to be the first crucifixion in Israel or in the whole Roman empire, for that matter. It was common knowledge that not too many years before the birth of Jesus the Romans had crucified a large number of Jews in Palestine. On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus himself could have witnessed any number of crucifixions.

Knowing the grisly details of the process was enough to strike terror into even the stoutest hearts, so it may seem logical to assume that it was this that caused Jesus' sweat to become as drops of blood.

But perhaps that was not what was uppermost in Jesus' mind. Under the circumstances, with his own people calling for his execution, if he had chosen another alternative during his agonizing decision-making, who would have had any reason to believe all that he had taught, all that his life had been about? He had said earlier, "No one takes away my life. I lay it down of my own accord." (Jn.10:19) So it was worth it to him to lay down his life freely for us.

When he had besought God for the last time to "let this chalice pass," he added, "nevertheless, not my will but thine be done." So it was the will of God that Jesus take the consequences of opposing the powerful, that he lay down his life freely for us, and in so doing give "the last full measure" of love.

This moment of complete surrender freed us from the bonds of sin and was his own moment of complete inner freedom. He walked toward his captors a free man and allowed himself to be bound by those whose own chains held their hearts in bondage. No one took away his life. He laid it down of his own accord.

His is the freedom to which we are called. This is what it means to love God with our whole hearts, our whole minds, and our whole strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. This is the vocation of the disciple.

He had come, Jesus said, "to serve, not to be served." Any act of unselfish love, any random act of kindness has a redemptive effect on the whole universe. It breaks momentarily the cycle of sin and helps to keep the redemptive cycle going.

This is our calling, helping to keep the redemptive cycle going by picking up our own crosses daily and in so doing, to give our lives for the ransom of many.

Still fully human, Jesus had not seen the last of heart-rending agony. In one of his last utterances on the cross, he cried out in the words of the Psalmist, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt.27:47)

On occasion, we know that feeling, too. Feeling abandoned by God plunges us into "the dark night of the soul." It's an experience of hell. At that moment we are faced with a choice to abandon God also, and that choice could be eternal. Jesus died as he did so that we would not make that choice. His final words on the cross were, "Father, into your hands I

commend my spirit." That's the final surrender. That's how Jesus saved us. What greater love than this is there?

## CHAPTER 12. THE MAN WHO WOULDN'T STAY DEAD

So far, I have spoken of Jesus only as a very human being and made no mention of his divinity. Like the rest of us, Jesus was born of a human mother who knew nothing about giving birth to a divine baby. Nothing about his appearance was divine. His brothers and sisters saw no difference between him and themselves.

When he grew up and left home, there was nothing unusual about him, except, perhaps, his enthusiasm for the things of God. But when he started preaching like a rabbi and said some things about God that sounded rather strange to his family, they thought he had :gone off his rocker."

Take a look, for instance, at Mark's Chapter 3. "He returned to the house with his disciples and again the crowd assembled, making it impossible for them to get any food whatever. When his family heard of this, they came to take charge of him, saying, 'He is out of his mind.' " (Mk.3:20+21)

As he was teaching, "His mother and his brothers arrived, and as they stood outside, they sent word to him to come out. The crowd seated around him told him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside asking for you. He said in reply, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And gazing around him at those seated in the circle, he continued, 'These are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is brother and sister and mother to me.' " Strange language. Who could make sense of that?

He was fully human. All right. He was born, he grew up, and he died.

But at his death, something happened. He didn't stay dead! On the first day of the week, rumors about an empty tomb began to circulate and were soon confirmed, even by Peter. Then others saw him, First, Mary Magdalen and the other women who had followed him and ministered to him, (cf. Luke 3) and finally all of The Twelve.

The death of Jesus had a dramatic effect on his disciples. Something of Jesus had rubbed off on them. They were never the same again. Their shared grief, their shared perplexity, and on Easter Sunday, their shared joy brought them together. Those who had thought he was crazy now realized that all that he had said made sense, that all that he had done was approved by God. Their hearts had a lot of pondering to do.

When Jesus breathed forth his spirit, it was let loose upon the world and Jesus entered into his kingdom. No one knows what Jesus was doing when his body lay in the tomb. Where was the rest of him? Some scholars think that his resurrection was simultaneous with his death. On the third day, when he showed himself to his disciples, his body was

similar to what it had been, but it was also different. In their shock, the disciples thought him to be a ghost. He had entered the closed and locked room with opening the door. But they could still touch him, as Mary Magdalen and Thomas did and, of course, he could still eat.

Yet they had some difficulty recognizing him, like the two with whom he had walked to Emmaus. They recognized him only at table, "in the breaking of the bread". When the group had gone fishing with Peter, they saw a stranger on the seashore. When he inquired about their catch, they didn't recognize his voice. When they joined him for breakfast, no one dared ask him who he was. They knew it was the Lord, the same one who had told them where to lower the net, the same one who, on an earlier occasion, had fed them and thousands of others, rather than send them home hungry. He was really Jesus, but not quite the same.

His orders as he disappeared from their sight were to remain in Jerusalem and await the coming of the Holy Spirit. Instead of going to their own homes, they waited together in the Upper Room where they had last dined with him.

Probably during their waiting, they spoke of him as we speak of those we love when they have died. We share the stories, our experiences of the loved one.

As they did so, I suspect that the meaning of his life and death began to dawn on them, gradually at first, then all of a sudden the pieces came together. It all made sense, then it set their hearts on fire. Once terrified and bolted inside, they threw open the doors and exploded in ecstatic joy. A large crowd of Jews from all over the Roman Empire, in Jerusalem to celebrate The Feast of Weeks, had gathered outside. Peter then proclaimed: "... let the whole house of Israel know beyond any doubt that God has made both Lord and Messiah this Jesus whom you crucified."

They not only heard the proclamation in their own languages, but saw the boundless joy of these fearless witnesses to the resurrection. "What are we to do, brothers," they asked. Peter answered, "You must reform your lives and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, that your sins may be forgiven. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." That day, 3,000 asked for baptism. The Community of Believers increased and multiplied.

Not only that. They had come to Jerusalem from all parts of the Roman Empire. That means that when these 3,000 new Christians returned home, they brought with them the seed of faith in Jesus the Christ, which then began to take root throughout the Roman Empire, throughout the Middle East, and even<sup>47</sup> into South Asia.

Twenty centuries later, we are still celebrating these events. Every Sunday, in fact, has become Easter for us, when we celebrate the resurrection by remembering Jesus in the way that he asked to be remembered, at table, of course, by sharing the bread and the cup, and in so doing, making Christ present again among us. "Where two or more are gathered in my name," he said, "there am I in the midst of them."

So in the assembly Christ is present. In the word of God Christ is present. In the presider Christ is present. And in the sharing of bread and cup, Christ is present.

Another point: the Risen Christ is no longer limited by time and space. He is all the time everywhere. He no longer has a human body, except all of us. "We are the body of Christ," Paul insists. So, the locus of the Holy Spirit is no longer the body of Jesus of Nazareth. It's all of us. I take that to mean that we are to see in one another the face of Christ. He has no other face but ours, no other hands, no other body.

From now on, people will have access to Christ only through us. We may be the only Gospel some will ever read. This is our calling, our incredible vocation as disciples. Once in a while, like the two despondent disciples Jesus joined on the way to Emmaus, we, too, may feel our hearts burning within us, when we begin to grasp the mystery of being so greatly loved. It's like fire in a paper cup, We must share it. Our task now, as the locus of the same Spirit that animated Jesus during his life on earth, is to follow the promptings of that Spirit in the way that Jesus did.

We, too, can decide to love people just as they are, but at the same time, try to get them to reform, if they need reforming. To the woman caught in adultery, Jesus said, "Go. And sin no more." We can't walk on water, but we can do this.

Most of us cannot heal physical ailments, but our willingness to do the loving thing is a powerful healer of hearts. Also, we can do what Jesus did for the multitudes. If all of us would allow the Holy Spirit to do in us what she did in Jesus, to share what we have, we could banish hunger from the face of the earth.

When Jesus wanted people to know how much God loves each one of us, he didn't just tell them. He showed them by the way he treated them. We can do that.

Because the Holy Spirit which animated Jesus now animates us, we can do all these things.

So it's up to us now, the spirit of God is now upon us. The food will go around, no one will be naked, and the poor will hear good news, only if they see it in us.



We now have the same calling Jesus did when he read from the scroll in the synagogue at Nazareth. *Glad tidings, indeed.*

**Sr. Lydia Champagne, CSJ**

Holds Masters Degrees, both in English and Theology from the University of Notre Dame. In addition to many workshops in Scripture in various places, she has taught Scripture for many years, to adults.

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