

Two

Jesus' Word and Jesus' Spirit

Jesus promised that he would manifest himself to every person faithful to his word. "I will love him and reveal myself to him" (Jn 14:21). "The Father and I will make our dwelling place with him" (Jn 14:23,AB). Jesus promised to make himself known in a tangible manner. The time has come to examine this promise more closely.

If Jesus is God—as we Christians believe—what is the difference, if any, between experiencing Jesus and experiencing God in general? Is there anything distinctive in Christian experience above and beyond the general experience of God? Have Christians their own way of experiencing God?

Another range of questions concerns the actuality of this experience. In what way does Jesus reveal himself to us? What does the experience of Jesus look like in everyday terms? How can we recognize it? Is it compatible with our 20th-century existence? Can it be described in plain, everyday language?

Since we are moving into that region of existence where many things are beyond words, we cannot hope to adequately express them just by talking about them. Yet I believe that, even here, plain language is highly desirable at all times. Spiritual realities are often emasculated by the use of antiquated or woolly terms. If religious claims are confused, indefinite or simply unintelligible, how are people expected to act on them?

To make the words of Jesus meaningful to us we have to rephrase them in terms of our own experience. St. John's gospel portrays Jesus as the voice of God,

the living water and the one who leaves us his spirit. As we shall see, these three roles of Jesus help us to understand how we can experience Jesus in our lives. But before we get to the bottom of things, a real job of translation needs to be done.

The Voice of God

As we turn to St. John's gospel for enlightenment, we may begin with a fundamental question: In what way did Christ reveal God? If we are to understand Christ, we should grasp his mode of divine revelation. How did people who met Christ meet God?

We are tempted, perhaps, to rush forward with the answer. We might contend, for instance, that everything Christ said or did points to the Father. His mode of revelation was through his humanity. However attractive such a contention may look, it proves to be a fallacy. Christ's neighbors in Nazareth did not recognize God in him. There must have been something much more specific than Christ's human appearance and ordinary external actions. Being like other people in all these things, he could not through them reveal God in a special way.

Well, you might think, what about the miracles? Christ showed the power of his Father through the "works" he performed. While there is some truth here (Jn 5:36), this approach also misses the point. Christ did not appear first and foremost as a miracle worker. Christ's miraculous powers were not exercised to elicit faith; rather, they presupposed faith. Christ rebuked the official of Capernaum with the words: "None of you will ever believe unless you see miracles and wonders" (Jn 4:48). It was not through his miracles that Christ revealed his Father.

When we page through the chapters of St. John's gospel we find it stated again and again that Christ revealed his Father by *speaking*. "We speak of what

we know and report what we have seen" (Jn 3:11). "The one who sent me, however, is truthful, and I tell the world only what I have heard from him" (Jn 8:26). "I say only what the Father has instructed me to say" (Jn 8:28). "What I say, then, is what the Father has told me to say" (Jn 12:50). The fullest definition is found in these words:

The one whom God has sent
speaks God's words,
because God gives him
the fullness of his Spirit (Jn 3:34).

What does this mean? To paraphrase it: Jesus was an ordinary carpenter in appearance; he looked like his fellow Jews in every respect. But in two ways he was marked off as distinct from others: He spoke a powerful message of love; he was seen to be full of the Holy Spirit. By the combination of these two manifestations Jesus revealed God. A spiritual person could not fail to recognize the divine presence. "He who comes from God listens to God's words" (Jn 8:47). People may at first have been drawn to listen to Christ out of curiosity; at that stage of their acquaintance he was no more for them than a man reputed to be a prophet, a carpenter turned "rabbi." Then, listening to his words and sensing God's spirit vibrating in his personality, it might suddenly dawn on them: Here, God is speaking to me! Faith meant accepting Jesus' word as true (Jn 5:24), recognizing the Father in Jesus' Spirit and in his words (Jn 14:10-11).

Jesus revealed the Father by being his Father's voice. Jesus was God's message of love (1 Jn 4:7-12). When John tries to characterize Jesus in his prologue, he doesn't call him "God's face," but "the Word." It was as the Word that Christ came into the world, that he was made flesh and lived among us (Jn 1:9,14). Jesus' whole life and mission could, in fact, be summed up in terms of communication. In everything he said and did, what mattered was the expression of a

divine response to man's longings, a reassurance and promise. Christ was a Word full of power, a Word that judges (Jn 12:48), a Word that cleanses (Jn 15:3), a Word that makes man free (Jn 8:31-32); but most of all, and above all, he was a Word that revealed. "No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is the same as God and is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (Jn 1:18).

The implications of this gospel teaching are far-reaching. For the evangelist, Jesus was, first and foremost, communication. Christians are saved by accepting him as the message and by applying the touch of his saving word to their lives. Compared to this aspect of Christ, all other factual realities are insignificant. Disciples do not get closer to Jesus by having seen his physical likeness, by having touched his actual body, or by having visited the places where he stayed. Following Christ does not consist in repeating Christ's external deeds: his work as a carpenter or his miraculous healing. No, all such things are only of secondary importance. "What gives life is God's Spirit; man's power is of no use at all. The words I have spoken to you bring God's life-giving Spirit" (Jn 6:63). What counts is that Jesus is the voice of the Father, that he speaks to us through his word and his Spirit.

Jesus the Rabbi

We should never forget that throughout his public life Jesus acted as a rabbi. The function of a rabbi was well-defined in his day. The rabbi was the teacher of Jewish religion. Each rabbi gathered around him a group of disciples who received his teaching and learned it by heart. To facilitate this process, rabbis had worked out their own educational system. After explaining a point of doctrine at length, they would summarize it in short, pithy statements that could eas-

ily be memorized by the disciples. To call someone a "rabbi" in Jesus' days was as well-defined and precise as when we today say of a person that he or she is "a dentist," "a shop steward," or a "high school principal."

Jesus was acknowledged to be a rabbi even by his adversaries. Just like other rabbis, he too attracted disciples. At times his disciples are explicitly compared to those of the Pharisees. Why do your disciples act like this whereas the disciples of the Pharisees act thus? (cf. Mk 2:18). Jesus too made his disciples learn parables and short statements. When instructing his disciples he gave summaries of his doctrine just as other rabbis did.¹ Jesus consciously acted like a rabbi because that is what came closest to what he wanted to be. "You call me Teacher and Lord, and it is right that you do so, because that is what I am" (Jn 13:13).

Jesus, of course, did not fit the pattern of his colleagues in every respect. As a rabbi he deviated significantly. But when he was different, it was not by renouncing any of his status as rabbi. On the contrary, he acted as someone more "rabbi" than others, as a "super rabbi." Other teachers relied heavily on tradition; Jesus taught with authority (Mk 1:22). Jesus claimed everlasting validity for his teaching: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Mt 24:35). Everything must recede in the face of his words: care of one's relatives (Mk 3:31-35), praise of his mother (Lk 11:27-28), duties of hospitality (Lk 10:38-41). Jesus' word is the gateway into the kingdom (Mt 7:13). Whoever builds on Jesus' word will be saved at the last judgment (Mt 7:24-27); whoever rejects his word will be condemned (Mt 21:28-31). "Whoever rejects me and does not accept my message has one who will judge him. The words I have spoken will be his judge on the last day!" (Jn 12:48). Jesus was indeed a rabbi, but one who taught with extraordinary authority.

Jesus as the rabbi confirms what we have seen above about his principal role as the voice of God, the Word, the revelation of the Father's love. It is through his teaching that he revealed the Father. To his contemporaries Jesus manifested God's nearness by speaking as a rabbi. Will it also be the way in which he is manifesting his divinity to us? Yes, indeed. This is the implication of Jesus' parting words in Matthew's gospel: "Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples" (Mt 28:19). Jesus' promise, "And I will be with you always, to the end of the age," is closely related to his remaining with them through his commands which future disciples will have to learn and obey. "Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you." Jesus will be present to us as the Teacher.

Living Water

How this should happen in practice is explained through an illuminating passage in John. Jesus joined the festive crowd in the Temple on the seventh day of the Feast of Tabernacles. This was the day when according to custom a special procession marched from the fountain of Gihon to the altar of holocausts in front of the tabernacle. When the priest filled a golden pitcher with water, choirs sang: "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (Is 12:3, RSV). The pitcher was then carried triumphantly to the temple gate; the procession encircled the altar and poured out water into a silver funnel leading into the ground. This drawing of the life-giving water was probably an ancient rite derived from the fertility cult and prayers for rain that formed a part of Tabernacles from the days of old (Ps 84:6). In Jesus' day it had also acquired messianic significance; it referred to the stream of salvation that would flow from the Temple (Ez 47:1-12; Zec 13:1, 14:8).

At the end of this ceremony Jesus made a special announcement:

On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood up and cried out,

"If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me (as the Scripture says), 'from within him shall flow rivers of living water.' "

Here he was referring to the Spirit which those who came to believe in him were to receive. For there was as yet no Spirit, since Jesus had not been glorified (Jn 7:37-39).²

Jesus was speaking here as a teacher. In Jewish tradition, teaching was often compared to life-giving water. The Old Testament saying, "A person's words can be a source of wisdom, deep as the ocean, fresh as a flowing stream" (Prv 18:4) was understood mainly as describing a teacher. An ideal disciple retains the master's doctrine "as a plastered cistern which loses not a drop" (Mishna Abot 2:8). According to Rabbi Aqiba, the disciple should do more: "The disciple who is beginning is like a well who can give only the water it has received; the more advanced disciple a spring that gives living water."³ When Jesus invited people to come and drink, he called on them to become his disciples. Only he, the voice of the Father, could give them the life-giving water they were praying for. As the perfect teacher, Jesus could fill his disciples with that divine knowledge that would become in them a continuous source of life and inspiration. Just as divine wisdom, a large river brimming over with water, makes rivulets and channels of her disciples (Sir 24:23-24), so Jesus turns his followers into fountains of living water.

To get the full import of this for our present-day life, the evangelist's commentary is helpful. "Here he [Jesus] was referring to the Spirit which those who came to believe in him were to receive. For there was as yet no Spirit, since Jesus had not been glorified" (Jn

7:39,AB). John is saying: Don't restrict Jesus' words to the original occasion. Don't think they were addressed only to those crowds present in the Temple on the Feast of Tabernacles. Don't believe for a minute that Jesus was just expressing a passing invitation, limited to his immediate hearers. No, here Jesus was indicating what he would do for all his disciples, especially those who were to accept his words in the future after his death and resurrection (his glorification). Jesus referred here to the Spirit he would give to all his followers so that, by a combination of his word and his Spirit, his teaching would remain in them as a source of lasting inspiration. If you follow Christ by accepting his word, you shall know you belong to him. For from within you, shall flow rivers of living water.

John was writing for Christians in Asia Minor who had been converted to Jesus long after his death and resurrection. Like us today, they had never seen Jesus. They had not heard his voice. They had little opportunity of visiting the places where he lived and died. Yet Jesus was not for them a wise teacher who had lived long before and whose doctrine had been passed down. They knew him as living and present. They were aware of his promise to reveal himself (Jn 14:21), and to be with us always, to the end of the age (Mt 28:20).

For the early Christians, Jesus' words were not just the teaching left by a dead man. Accepting Jesus' words meant acknowledging their power. Jesus was a teacher who spoke with authority; his instruction retains its force in every generation. The whole sacramental system is based on this belief. In the Eucharist it is Jesus who says, "This is my body—this is my blood" (Mt 26:27-28). In the sacrament of reconciliation it is Jesus' word that cleanses us: "Your sins are forgiven" (Mt 9:2). It is in Jesus' name that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are called down upon a person in baptism (Mt 28:19; Acts 19:5). Through the teaching

authority in the church it is Jesus who speaks (Lk 10:16), Jesus who declares things lawful or unlawful (Mt 18:18). Where a community of Christians gathers and prays in his name, Jesus himself prays with them (Mt 18:19). Accepting Jesus' words means accepting also their sacramental reality today.

But there is also a subjective element of "feeling Christ's presence" well recognized by the early Christians. They knew Christ was there not just because it was a doctrine they had learned. They knew it because of the Spirit they had received. "And because of the Spirit that God has given us we know that God lives in union with us" (1 Jn 3:24). By this they meant something that is hard to define but very real to those who have experienced it. Jesus' words had not just remained a dead letter. It had sparked off a flame in their hearts. All of a sudden they *knew* Christ was in touch with them. While the words of Christ transformed them into happy persons, loving God in response to his love and trying to love their neighbors as well as they could, they became aware of a new reality in their lives. They felt enlightened by a light which they knew was not their own. They felt attracted to doing things far beyond their natural wishes and powers. They knew themselves guided by an invisible hand. This is what Paul refers to when he speaks of being "captured" by Jesus Christ, of what it means to know Christ and the power of his resurrection (Phil 3:10-12). It was this subjective element of being aware of Jesus' Spirit at work in themselves, of sensing his power and being guided by it, that put the believer in direct touch with Jesus.

Signs of Recognition

In our dealings with other persons we have come to rely very much on visual contact. We are inclined to think we know someone if we have seen that person

close up. We recognize people mainly by face and stature. Since we depend so much on visual images, seeing a person face to face or at least knowing what the person looks like seem natural elements in acquaintanceship. Because of this, we may consciously or unconsciously believe that Jesus would reveal himself most clearly to us if we could see him with our bodily eyes.

Some saints have been granted this privilege. St. Ignatius of Loyola sometimes saw Jesus in a vision as a white figure. During the first retreat after his conversion, at Manresa in 1522, he recorded the following impression:

For a long time I often saw in prayer, with the eyes of the Spirit, Christ's humanity. I saw a figure which made the impression on me of being a body. It was neither very large nor very small. I could not distinguish separate members of the body. I often received this vision in Manresa.⁴

Later in Rome, on February 27, 1544, he had a similar vision:

During Mass while saying the prayer "Domine Jesu Christe, Fili Dei vivi, etc.," it seemed to me in Spirit that I first saw Jesus as a white figure, that is, his humanity—while a moment later I saw him in my soul in a different manner, namely, not as before in his humanity alone but now in his totality, as God. . . ."⁵

To such visions we might add other extraordinary phenomena such as hearing Jesus address us in an audible voice, feeling the touch of his hand on our forehead, and so forth. Such external manifestations might seem exciting and convincing, the kind of thing that could be the culmination of our Christ-experience. Yet such an expectation would prove a costly mistake in our spiritual life. These external manifestations are useless in themselves and do not correspond to the way in which Jesus ordinarily wants to reveal himself.

Jesus' contemporaries saw him, heard his voice,

felt his touch. Did this mean they got to know him? Not necessarily. In fact, for many people Christ's physical closeness proved an obstacle. His neighbors at Nazareth, thinking they knew him well, refused to believe in him (Mt 13:53-58). The scribes at Jerusalem rejected him because he was so obviously a Galilean (Jn 7:52). Being allowed to observe Jesus' humanity from close by was a privilege, of course, but it was in no way decisive. What mattered at all times, whether during Jesus' public life or after his resurrection, was acceptance of his word and response to his Spirit. In this regard even his mother, Mary, who was closer to Jesus than any other human person, proved no exception. To the woman who exclaimed, "How happy is the woman who bore you and nursed you!", Jesus replied, "Rather, how happy are those who hear the word of God and obey it!" (Lk 11:27-28). One could only get to know Jesus by opening the mind and heart to his message.

The same applies to external visions and locutions. It may have been a great experience for Ignatius to see Christ as a white figure, but it can hardly have been what moved and convinced him. Rather it was the force of Jesus' word and the work of the Spirit in his heart that made him aware of Jesus' presence. Certainly visual images can be a help. But it really makes very little difference whether it is a photograph of Jesus (if we had any), a vision seen with the eyes of the mind, or an artistic representation. Indeed, an artistic picture may prove a better aid in focusing attention on essentials and diminishing the chance of self-delusion. It is, no doubt, with good reason that Jesus did not leave us a photographic image of his face!

The Spirit Who Comforts

In the above sections I have spoken about Jesus' Spirit. This could easily be understood in general

terms. When we speak of someone's spirit, we usually refer to the person's attitudes, approach to life, way of doing things, frame of mind. In this way, speaking of a community we might say, "There is a good spirit here," or of an individual, "She is a spirited person." This was no doubt part of what Jesus intended. But was it all?

In the context of his long discussion at the Last Supper as to how he was to remain present to his disciples, Christ spoke of the Holy Spirit as a new person, another agent to be reckoned with:

"I have said this to you while I am still with you.
But the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit
that the Father will send in my name,
will teach you everything
and remind you of all that I told you" (Jn 14:25-26, AB).

We are not surprised to find the two elements by which Jesus will be present in the future, namely his teaching and the Spirit. This is entirely consistent with what we have seen before. What is startling and new is Jesus' speaking of the Spirit as a person. He will be sent by the Father. He will teach and remind. Was this a metaphorical way of speaking? Did he mean it literally?

When we compare our text with the other Paraclete passages (Jn 14:15-17, 15:26-27 and 16:7-15), it is clear that Jesus is literally referring to a divine person. This person is *another* paraclete or intercessor (Jn 14:16), Jesus himself being the first paraclete (1 Jn 2:1). The new paraclete can come and go, explain, guide, speak and do everything a person can do. More remarkable still is that everything that is said about the Holy Spirit is parallel to whatever the gospel says of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit, like Jesus, comes forth from the Father, is sent by the Father and comes into the world. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life; he is the Spirit of truth, guiding the disciple along the way and giving

life. As Jesus will remain with the disciples, so will the Paraclete. As Jesus has often stressed that he had everything in common with the Father, so he now seems to stress that the Spirit has everything in common with him. The Holy Spirit is presented as the "alter ego" of Jesus, as his perfect parallel.⁶

I know that the sameness and separateness of Jesus and the Holy Spirit as described in these passages are employed by theologians to illustrate the doctrine of the Blessed Trinity. The Holy Spirit is, no doubt, a distinct divine person. But dogmatic formulation should not just now distract us from our interest in what the gospel teaches about experiencing God. The Holy Spirit is one way in which we meet God. We can only meet him in this manner after Jesus' death and resurrection.

"It is for your own good that I go away.
For if I do not go away,
the Paraclete will never come to you" (Jn 16:7,AB).

The Holy Spirit, though acting as a person in his own right, will at all times present himself as *Jesus' Spirit*. The Holy Spirit will not bring a new teaching; he will endorse and complete Jesus' word (Jn 14:26). Even if he seems to go beyond what Jesus said, he will never speak on his own, but will only say what he heard from Jesus (as Jesus himself only spoke whatever the Father had commanded him, Jn 16:13-15). Experiencing the presence of the Holy Spirit, we are in fact experiencing the presence of Jesus. Also in this way it is confirmed that Jesus remains with us by his word and his Spirit.

Summing up

Let us conclude this chapter by summarizing briefly some questions we have discussed.

What is the difference, if any, between experiencing Jesus and experiencing God in general? Is there

anything distinctive in Christian experience above and beyond the general experience of God?

Yes there is something distinctive in the Christian's experience. Christians receive a specific and clear invitation to life through Jesus' word. Whereas in the general experience of God we become aware of his presence as our Master, as the ultimate meaning for our existence, and so forth, in Jesus Christ we meet God in a more direct and outspoken fashion. Through Jesus we know that, despite all appearances to the contrary, God is love and that our own lives are made meaningful by love.

In what way does Jesus reveal himself to us? What does the experience of Jesus look like in everyday terms? Can it be described in plain, everyday language?

We experience Jesus when we accept his word. This word comes to us through his teaching as left us in the gospels, but also in the sacramental realities of the church. This acceptance becomes a *subjective experience* when we allow ourselves to be carried along by his Spirit who is guiding us interiorly. By the combination of his word and his Spirit, we get to know and love Jesus intimately. By an awareness of what is happening in us, we know that it is Jesus who is doing these things in us.

Are the experiences of God in general (as exemplified in pagan mystics) and the experience of Jesus (as witnessed to by the early Christians) two different experiences? Or are they basically stages of one and the same experience?

They are basically one and the same experience. Experience of God is an awareness of his presence. In the general experience of God, such as found with mystics of other religions, there is an initial awareness of God, the level of awareness possible to man before revelation. Through the

Experiencing Jesus

coming of Jesus, God has become more clearly known; his purpose is more definite. Our general awareness of God can, therefore, become more specific, can be focused better on account of Jesus' word. But it is not a different awareness; it is the same awareness raised to a higher level.

Is there a difference in our experience of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit? Do we experience these three Divine Persons in three distinct ways, or do we experience them all by a general awareness?

Theologians have argued about this question for centuries. Simply speaking, the three Divine Persons are only distinct by their mutual relationships, not by anything they do to creatures. Both creation and redemption are the work of all three Persons combined, of God the totality. On the other hand, we know the Blessed Trinity as a trinity precisely because of different manifestations: All beginnings, such as creation and salvation itself, are seen by scripture as springing from the Father; the incarnation is ascribed to the Son; building up the church to the Spirit. I would, therefore, tentatively put forward the opinion that within the same, overall awareness of God's presence in our life, we can be aware of the different ways in which the Persons influence us. There may be a lot of human thinking and subjective feeling in the matter, yet this approach may lead us to a fuller experience of God. We might see the Father at work in those aspects of our experience springing from an openness to existence and nature. We might feel more in contact with the Son when dealing with his word. We might feel close to the Spirit when experiencing his dynamic action in Christ's community or in our own soul. But all these are only shades of the same fundamental experience. Ultimately we know that the Spirit is Jesus' Spirit, and that he who sees Jesus, sees the Father.