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Who Do You Say That I Am?

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IT BEGAN WITH AN EXPERIENCE

Who we believe Jesus to be is shaped not only by what we are taught, but also, and perhaps primarily, by our relationships with the others to whom our lives and growth have been entrusted. It may be that we come to an experience of Christ in and through the church, our community of faith. For many, this begins with our childhood experience of the first community of faith into which we are born—our family. A vulnerable baby is born into a world of others upon whom she is utterly dependent, and—in the most fortuitous scenario[1]—her experience of love in the nurturing care of parents is her first encounter with God Incarnate. This experience is mediated through the flesh as the baby is held, fed, washed, and comforted with healing caresses and tender words. Ideally, as the child grows and develops, she will be brought to reflect on who God is through evolving human encounters in the context of faith. However, the initial experience of bodily and emotional care in life's vulnerable earthly beginning will remain a powerful touch-

[1]This felicitous example immediately evokes the many instances of its opposite, countless vulnerable infants born into scenarios of brokenness and neglect. In such cases, the condition of vulnerability remains a touchstone for encounter with God, but by contrast. In experiences of suffering, in the human resistance to "what should not be," there arises an inchoate longing for "what should be," that is, the conditions of love and justice that foster human flourishing and reflect the salvation willed by God. Throughout the theology of Edward Schillebeeckx, this is known as "negative contrast experience."

Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" leads us through the confessional language of the creeds to an experience of God in Jesus Messiah. Experiencing Jesus as teacher, healer, and proclaimer of the reign of God makes us share in God's incarnate vulnerability. Finally, we are directed to a companion question, "Who does Jesus say that we are?"

stone for her encounter with God as transcendent Other in the larger communal experience of Christian worship. Here she will come to know herself as part of a community gathered and named by the mysterious Other whose enveloping presence claims us and tells us who we are in and as the body of Christ.[2] That Other, the triune God whom we know most intimately in the humanity of Jesus Christ, cannot be accessed apart from our own humanity and that of our neighbor.

This personal and particular experience of Christ, mediated through a human community and developed through emerging questions, wonderment, doubt, and insights in the context of a faith tradition, is not unlike the experience of the early Christian communities by and for whom the Gospels were written. Believers encountered Jesus through the memory of his life, death, and resurrection, enfleshed and celebrated in the living community. They told and retold the story imparted by the first disciples and friends of Jesus of Nazareth, shaping and reshaping it in relation to their living contexts in a new generation. It all began with an experience: an experience of salvation-coming-from-God in Jesus of Nazareth.[3] This experience, as it has been reflected upon, interpreted, and handed down is what the church calls tradition. In every age, what is handed down must come to life and be rediscovered in our own experience. It is not enough merely to repeat or assent to the experience of others.

> ***it all began with an experience: an experience of salvation-coming-from-God in Jesus of Nazareth***

Christianity has been described as "the movement Jesus set-afoot."[4] The first disciples experienced something compelling in Jesus, so compelling and attractive that they dropped everything to be with him. What was it? Halfway through Mark's Gospel (Mark 8:27–30), Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" Easily enough, the disciples report what they have heard others saying: "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." But Jesus won't let them rest there. He presses, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter, for once the star student (though not for long!), replies, "You are the Messiah." Neat and pat. Instead of giving him a gold star, however, Jesus the teacher turns and warns the disciples not to tell anyone about him. And then he soberly unfolds the meaning of his identity: "He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31). At this, the overwhelmed and protest-

[2]Nathan Mitchell notes, "At liturgy, we do not invent or assert our own identity; we *receive* it." He is particularly focused on Catholic eucharistic liturgy when he describes this dynamic of naming; however, I believe its significance can be applied to the broader spectrum of Christian worship. See Nathan D. Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery: Liturgy, Worship, and Sacraments* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) 45.

[3]A central theme in the Christology of Edward Schillebeeckx. See his account of experience and revelation in *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 30–64.

[4]Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1987) 19.

ing Peter reveals himself as one of those students who has the right answer, but does not know what it means. Moreover, if this is what it means, he doesn't want to know!

Peter assigns the title Messiah to Jesus confident in its conventional Jewish meaning as the promised, anointed one who would make Israel victorious over her oppressors and rule in power. Peter, so close to Jesus, nevertheless sets the example here for what discipleship is not. It is not an alignment with power that is recognizable according to human convention, even human religious convention. Furthermore, Peter's blunder illumines why Jesus doesn't want his disciples telling others about him. Even if they spread the "right" answer, they cannot convey the truth of who Jesus is to people who are not disposed to encounter that truth in their own experience. Perhaps that is why, as ministers and proclaimers of the gospel, the most important thing we can do is prepare people to encounter Christ by cultivating an ever deeper awareness of their own being and experience of faith.

What is not there in the Creed is what salvation looked like in Jesus' earthly life among us. For this, we need the portrait of Jesus mediated to us by the Gospels.

For Us and for Our Salvation

The experience of salvation that ignited "the movement Jesus set-afoot" was the essence of the reign of God that arrived in Jesus' preaching, teaching, and healing. That experience has become the touchstone of authenticity for the faith claims we make about Jesus. At the center of the Nicene Creed, Christians profess "for us and for our salvation [Jesus] came down from heaven." From Greek philosophical statements about Jesus' being-as-God through biblical images of creation and salvation mediated by the Word, we arrive at the Word's entrance into history in human flesh through the risky assent of an obscure and vulnerable young girl. And then the Creed moves right along to the paschal mystery, ascension into glory, the promise of the second coming, and the triumphant, everlasting reign of God. It is a sweeping, majestic, cosmic epic—the dramatic highlights of the story of our faith carefully formulated four centuries into the living tradition. However, the flesh-and-blood substance of that story—the particular details, the how and the why that we always long for when we hear a story—lies in what is left out. The intention of creedal statements, after all, is to draw us into the space of mystery between the cosmic parameters and, there, allow us to encounter our own story as a story of salvation. To do that requires that we turn, at one and the same time, to our own experience and to the experience of Jesus recounted in the New Testament.

That God's taking flesh was for our salvation, and that God's human manner of bringing salvation met with rejection (suffering, crucifixion, and death), and that God brought life and victory out of this death and failure—all of that is there

in the Creed we profess. What is not there is what salvation looked like in Jesus' earthly life among us. For this, we need the portrait of Jesus mediated to us by the Gospels—a portrait indelibly imprinted with the memory of those who immediately experienced Jesus' human way of being God.

To say that Jesus mediated God's salvation—inaugurated God's reign, opened the way to eternal life, fulfilled the covenant, made creation new again—is to proclaim in varied ways that, in Jesus, God's life is made visible. Recognizing and entering into this divine life in the world is the meaning of salvation and the reality of the reign of God on earth. This immanence of divine life and love was what the first disciples found so compelling in Jesus, even though they were not yet able to understand or articulate it in this way. When the New Testament communities came to articulate it, they did so in the vibrant tones of Jesus' preaching and teaching in parables, healing and feeding people in miraculous ways, welcoming sinners and outcasts into his embrace, and eating with them at the table.

Parables, Miracles, Meals

Jesus' parables functioned to open up a new and startling world right in the midst of the present one. They disturbed complacent consciences, challenged conventional wisdom, and inverted people's expectations about whom God chooses. Parables summoned people to *metanoia*, a radical transformation of life; they still do. Jesus' parables overturn religious assumptions about where life and holiness are to be found. They are to be found, Jesus says, in the reign of God. But what is that? Jesus never defines it, but he constantly points to it, using creative images to coax people into seeing what is hidden in their ordinary lives. "The reign of God is in your midst," he says (see Luke 17:21). It is right there among you when you engage in openhearted relationships with one another and show reverence for the humblest of earth's creatures; in fact, those relationships are its substance. The reign of God is in your midst when you welcome the stranger and feed the hungry. It becomes visible when you resist and transform the conditions that render people hungry, poor, and outcast. More intimately still, Jesus declares that the reign of God is within you. God's being, the source of eternal life, dwells within you; you need only pay attention and allow God's life and love to be realized in you—and through you—in the world. This existential faith is the true miracle at the heart of Jesus' acts of healing.

Jesus' miracles of healing are performative enactments of God's reign; they might be called concentrated instances of salvation. For salvation entails the healing of the entire person, body and spirit. It is restoration to wholeness: right relationship with oneself, others, and the community of God's creation. This constitutes reconciliation and oneness with God; this is the effect of the forgiveness of sin. That is why when Jesus heals he often says, "Your sins are forgiven." That is also why he repeatedly sends people off with the words, "Go in peace; your faith has healed you," or, "your faith has saved you," or, "you are set free of your infirmity."

Healing, salvation, and freedom are all one, and faith is required to access the interior waters of divine life from which healing flows. Jesus, perfectly one with God in divine life, summons people to the faith that releases those life-giving waters. In essence, Jesus' miracles reveal and activate the hidden life (reign of God) to which we are often blind through lack of faith. Surely this is what is occurring in the feeding of the multitudes. Jesus invited the disciples to bring forth what little they had, not to doubt their own resources. In his hands, this became sufficient to feed the crowd—more than sufficient, it became an abundance that overflowed. How easy it is to hoard what we have because we think it is not enough—or, perhaps, not *good* enough. It takes trust to bring forth the little we have in the effort to feed others, especially in the effort to nourish faith.

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The reign of God that Jesus pointed to, brought forth, and enacted in his parables and miracles was consummately incarnated in his presence and nowhere more than in his presence at table. In both the Old and New Testaments, the banquet is the most pervasive image of God's reign. The saving significance of the eternal banquet is realized in Jesus' presence. Edward Schillebeeckx writes that, as "copious host," Jesus is the "eschatological messenger of God's openness toward sinners." That is, in Jesus, God has drawn near in forgiving love; the promise of redemption is fulfilled; God's future has arrived. Jesus' eating and drinking in communion with his own and with "outcasts"—tax collectors and sinners—brings freedom and salvation. Indeed, Schillebeeckx notes, "Jesus' dealings with people liberate them and make them glad."[5]

Yet, we know that not all were made glad by Jesus' prodigal hospitality. To welcome someone as a companion at table was to welcome him into relationship, to share life with her and affirm her in being. Jesus transgressed all sorts of social and religious boundaries in choosing his table companions, and this was a source of scandal to those religious authorities who stood apart in judgment. It is not too much to say that Jesus' flouting of discriminatory conventions in favor of inclusive love was what most threatened the religious and political elite. It is not too much to say that Jesus' enactment of God's reign at table was emblematic of a life and ministry that led to the cross. Nondiscriminatory, inclusive love was not popular in Jesus' day. It still isn't. This most life-giving manifestation of God in the world still leads, inevitably, to criticism, rejection, and suffering. That was the lesson Peter was resisting back in the question-and-answer session between Jesus and the disciples. That conversation took place as Jesus was resolutely making his way

[5]Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 179–218.

to Jerusalem. We return there now, remembering that Jesus asks disciples in every age the same question: "Who do you say that I am?"

The Infant in the Manger, the Crucified, the Risen One

I write this reflection on Jesus in the aftermath of the Christmas season, with an eye toward Lent and Easter. Drawn forward to the time when the church again takes up the way of the cross in the hope of resurrection, I am also drawn back to the poetic scriptures of Christmas day: "And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12 NAB). The mystery we meet here is this: the "sign" of God's saving incarnation is absolute vulnerability—vulnerability in the flesh. This vulnerability is the expression of the truth of Jesus' being, that is, the truth of Jesus' faithfulness to his being as God in the world. The vulnerability of Jesus' birth under risky circumstances is to be a hallmark of his ministry, a concentrated rendering of God's own risk in entrusting the fragile, magnificent, created world to us. "And this will be a sign unto you," the sign under which God is to be found. God will be found dwelling in hidden places, in the lives of the poor and vulnerable, the stranger and the outcast, and, yes, in our own vulnerability, so often hidden from even ourselves. The superior power of the divine vulnerability is at work in all of Jesus' healing, restoring, salvific words and deeds. In Jesus' life, we see God's way of loving the world. In Jesus' death, we see the broken world's inability to accommodate that love. In Jesus' resurrection, we see God's reversal of human rejection. In resurrection faith, we come to recognize in Jesus crucified the superior power of God's defenseless vulnerability.[6]

As popular as Christmas is, the meaning of incarnation is not; it still struggles to find a home in our world. And that is because the logical destination of walking with the vulnerable God Incarnate will always be the cross. This brings us back to Jesus' elaboration of the meaning of Peter's identification of him as Messiah. On his way to Jerusalem now, Jesus is impatient to impart the truth of his being—a truth he knows people can only encounter in and through their own being:

> He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?" (Mark 8:34–37)

Contrary to frequent Christian misperceptions, Jesus is not asking us to choose suffering here. He is not asking us to make a sacrifice for him. He is asking us to trust the invisible, divine life within us. He is asking us to make ourselves vulnerable to that divine life at the heart of reality. Mark is writing these words

[6]My paraphrase of Schillebeeckx, who develops this theme especially in *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 122, 128–131.

from within a community that, though persecuted, knows that it lives from the sure ground of the resurrection.

For them, the loss of life in the world may have been a real possibility, but one that could be sustained by trusting in the deeper ground of eternal life. For us, "losing our life" is losing our attachment to the things that obscure our deeper life in God, the things we depend upon for identity and security, the things the world tells us we need. "Losing our life" means letting go of our illusions of who we are and trusting our identity as children of God. It means trusting the deeper, unending life that is ours when we are open enough, vulnerable enough, to receive it. It means recognizing that we will be best disposed to receive that life through solidarity with those who suffer in this world. For you and for me, it means trusting that, in Jesus, we are beloved, favored, chosen daughters and sons of God—with our own mission to incarnate God in the world.

When all is said and done, Jesus' question summons us to an unfolding journey equally directed by a companion question: Who does Jesus say that we are? ⊕

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