

## CHAPTER FOUR

### SALVATION - IN JESUS

The theme of this work has been the notion of salvation as described above: a process leading to an ideal state of *peace* as described in the creation accounts of Genesis: i.e., a state of right relationships or oneness with self, others, the world and God. It is also a theme of this work that it is important to be able to “see” what this salvation looks like, to be able to experience salvation lest this central belief of our faith becomes marginalized and absent from the fabric of our ordinary lives.

For Christians, Jesus embodies the very meaning of salvation. Simply put, Jesus *is* salvation, i.e., God’s saving power in the flesh dwelling among us to give us new life. To accept this gift of salvation we must open ourselves to this saving power and allow our lives to be transformed.

Now if we want to “see” what salvation looks like in a concrete, historical life we need only look to Jesus. It is not that Jesus needed to be saved, but within this one life the *peace* for which we were created as depicted in Genesis was made present and evident. It is not that the life of Jesus was *peaceful* in the sense in which we use that word today. We need only to read the Gospels, especially the Gospel of Mark, to see that Jesus in his humanity lived a public life that was far from peaceful. He was constantly at odds with the religious authorities, misunderstood by his disciples and even rejected by his own family. In His final days He was abandoned by his disciples and suffered the human agony of those who face a tragic and painful death abandoned by friends and relatives.

However, in the profoundest sense, Jesus lived in a state of peace or right relationship with God, for He was God incarnate and we can speak of His life as one of perfect obedience to the Father. He was also at peace with Himself, for sin never unleashed its destructive force within Him. He was at peace with others, especially with those most needy, for His life was dedicated to healing, forgiving, teaching and loving even to the cross. Paul preached that He “emptied Himself” and became a slave for us. Finally, He was at one with the world, for as John’s Gospel proclaims:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.(Jn.1:1-3)

As so we can say that salvation was revealed to us and made present in our world in Jesus. And this salvation has been seen, heard and touched for it was “in” Jesus as witnessed to us in the Scriptures. It is now the singular mission of Christians to make this salvation, which was in Jesus, seeable and touchable in our corner of the world. It is the mission of Christians to be a sacrament of salvation to the world and thereby transform the world.

Jesus has been aptly described as “the parable of God and the paradigm of man”. A parable is a symbolic story that mediates some reality beyond it self. Symbolic stories are extremely powerful ways to communicate the deepest truths about reality. For example, the parable of the Prodigal Son is a powerful symbolic story that Jesus used to help us understand that God’s love for us is unconditional. Describing Jesus as “the parable of God” means that the entire life of Jesus supplies the “central symbol and norm for understanding God” (*Jesus Symbol of God*, Haight p 88). We believe that through Him we can, in some real way, come to “know” the Father.

When we say that Jesus is the “paradigm of man” we mean that Jesus provides a paradigm -- model or example -- of what it means to be human. He is the one whose love of self, others, the world and God was total. His central message was the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom in its fullness was a state in which all the peoples of the earth would be in total harmony with each other (at peace) and, thereby, one with the will of God. Jesus lived the Kingdom perfectly. In Him the Kingdom became a present reality to be observed for anyone to see. He was entirely at one with the creative power of God, which calls us to that *peace* described in Genesis. The Kingdom was offered as a gift, to be accepted in faith.

When we say we believe in Jesus, we are not just affirming a set of doctrinal statements about Jesus or an intellectual commitment to love Jesus, but we are committing ourselves to an imitation of His life of oneness with the creative power of God. It is in this “living act of faith”, that we find our salvation. This act of faith is lived out in a life of service to others and the world. Jesus made it clear that it is in losing ourselves in a life of service that we find our true selves. This is a fundamental exhortation of Jesus found in all four Gospel accounts: “ whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” (Mt. 10:39,16:25, Mk.8:35, Lk.9:24, Jn.12:25). Quite simply there is no salvation possible without this loving service, because, by definition, salvation happens “inside of us”, it is a transformation of our lives, a new way of being as exemplified and animated by the life of Jesus.

It is clear that we cannot save ourselves. This is exemplified in the analogy of the helpless condition of slavery in Egypt with our helpless condition in sin. And just as salvation from slavery in Egypt was seen as dependent on the powerful intervention of God, so our salvation from sin is also seen as dependent on the powerful act of God, in Jesus, to empower us to live so as to escape the deadly effects of sin in our lives.

Also the Old Testament story, or parable, of the Flood communicates a powerful message that sin has the power to infect and perhaps destroy all of humanity. In this parable total disaster is avoided only by the powerful intervention of God.

Thus, while we are called to accept in faith a new life free from sin, we are not able to make and live out this living act of faith on our own. We are enabled to do this only by the creative power of the Spirit of God and it is by this free gift (grace) that we can live this new life which heals our alienation from self, others, the world and God.

We experience this kind of enabling process in our deepest human relationships. The person who loves us the most - our mother, father, wife, husband, etc. - has the power to make our lives rich and full of life, hope and joy. Without the love of another, we cannot become truly human. When some other human being loves us, we are thus enabled to love ourselves and have the power to give this same enabling love to others. But this cannot happen unless we open ourselves to this other person. The “creative movement” of God surrounds us, we need simply to open ourselves to experience its saving power. This is what Jesus meant when He said He would send us the Holy Spirit.

We proclaim this faith as the Good News, namely that the peace which is our destiny, as depicted in Genesis, is now possible for us because of the power of God is present on our lives. What we must do is respond in a life defined by our living faith in Jesus. In His life, death and resurrection, Jesus revealed that the power of sin and death are not the final reality for human life. God is savior. New life is possible. As St. Irenaeus put it: “(Jesus) was made what we are, that he might make us completely what he is” (*Against Heresies*).

Furthermore, the Good News is that Jesus revealed that this life of peace and oneness is offered to each of us by the Father as a free gift (grace), ours for the taking. We do not have to merit or earn this gift, it is freely given, like a mother’s love. Simply put, the essence of God’s “creative movement” toward us is that we can have life, the fullness of life. Jesus said: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). Insofar as this offer of life is addressed to our human freedom (love neighbor as self) and we accept or reject it, we become co-creators of our lives, co-creators of our destinies.

And this “creative movement” not only calls us to a new life, but also enables us to become like Jesus. So we too can experience or “see” salvation in our ordinary lives. For example, we can come to love and accept ourselves more as we hear the Gospel message of the Prodigal Son that the Father’s love for us is unconditional: He is our Father and will never abandon us. We can actually feel joy and hope -- new life --surge through us as we accept this message in faith. We can see that our glass is half full, not half empty. I do not mean that we should be naively optimistic, but that we can look at ourselves and world with all its evil and suffering with hope. A hope grounded in God’s revelation that these dark powers will not have the final word. These same dark powers brought Jesus to the Cross, but they did not have the final say - Jesus rose to new life. This is our hope too.

In a similar way, by faith, we also know that when we gather in friendship with others at work, play or worship, it is the Spirit who is also with us calling and enabling us to live at peace together. This oneness or togetherness that we experience when we gather in friendship is a true experience of salvation. This is how we ought to be -- at peace with self, others and the world. And so when friendships are established or restored through forgiveness, it is the same creative Spirit calling us to this experience of salvation, this peace. These are the moments of salvation that we can see and feel as we go about our daily lives. Our faith helps us see the stuff of ordinary life “in depth”.

And finally, when we labor to beautify, protect, and enrich our planet we know that as stewards of the earth we are also at one with the creative movement of God in our world. These are moments of grace, moments of peace with God, moments of salvation. Let us repeat what we said above: God is savior. New life is possible. As St. Irenaeus put it - "(Jesus) was made what we are, that he might make us completely what he is" (*Against Heresies*).

## IN SEARCH OF JESUS

Jesus said "to know me is to know the Father", therefore, from its beginnings, the Church has tried to pass on what it knows of Jesus -- who He was, what He did, and what He taught. Much of this early message is contained in the writings of the NT. Historically, there have been several ways to approach a study of Jesus, however, it has become increasingly clear that the search for a modern historical biography of Jesus is a fruitless one, for this was not the intent of the Gospel writers. Many attempts have been made to treat the Gospel accounts as a historical "Life of Christ", but all have ultimately failed. As Bruce Vawter remarks; "The net effect of the 'lives' (of Jesus) was to construct the pseudohistory of a Jesus who never was, the Christ of faith mythicized by historicism." (*This Man Jesus* p.15)

Modern scholars are always careful to instruct us that the gospels were "written by believers for believers". They are not the stuff of polemics or evangelization, much less modern history, but perhaps can best be described as an attempt to preserve the *interpreted* memory of those who knew Jesus and of those who in turn tried to interpret and apply this memory to the circumstances, questions and needs of their own time.

The message of the Gospels is faith. This is not to say, however, that we are not dealing with a real historical person or with certain real historical events - birth, baptism, preaching, the Last Supper, suffering, death - but it is these events as seen "*in depth*" or with the "*eyes of faith*" of which the New Testament speaks.

Therefore, in approaching the person of Jesus, it is well to remember that we are attempting a theology of Jesus. The Jesus of the Gospels is the Jesus of faith. This is not meant to imply that there is a "historical Jesus" different from a "Jesus of faith" -- one real and the other simply the product of the NT writers. Quite the contrary. The historical Jesus seen "*in depth*" *is* the Jesus of faith. The only Jesus we know is the Jesus of the Gospels.

However, the portrait of Jesus in the NT does not intend to focus on much of what we might find or hope to find in a modern biography. For example the NT doesn't tell us what Jesus looked like (tall, short, thin, fat - can you imagine a short, fat Jesus?). We do not know what kind of a house He lived in, who were his friends growing up, what games He played, when His father Joseph died, whether He told jokes and what was His favorite one, what was His favorite food, whether He ever have a girlfriend. There is even some confusion in the NT as to his original home town. These kinds of historical details are

not the focus of the NT.

There were many memories of what Jesus said and did, however not everything needed to be recalled or preserved. John's Gospel ends with this observation: "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (Jn 21:25).

The majority of Jesus' youth and his personal characteristics were deemed not necessary to recall and the two stories of his birth were shaped more by the theological perspective of the author and the needs of his audience than by facts remembered. And so this memory of which we speak is not some mechanical recalling of information from the past, but a memory presented to give meaning and power to the present. Just as the celebration of the Passover was not a simple recalling of the past, but also an interpretation and celebration of the present, designed to renew the life and faith of the people, so too memories of Jesus were recited and celebrated to give meaning to the present. As Crossan says "the Good News is always Good News for somebody", somebody in a certain time, place and circumstance.

The Gospel writers certainly gave witness to the life of Jesus, but they also crafted their writings to recall and interpret His life in terms of the questions and challenges of the present. For example, for those who denied Jesus in the early persecutions, the Gospel of Mark presents the memory of Peter's failure in his denial of Jesus and but also describes Peter's subsequent role as a leader in the early Jerusalem community.

For those in his community who were Jewish, the author of Matthew went to great lengths to portray Jesus not only as Messiah but also as the new Moses, replacing or fulfilling the Old Law. And for the Gentiles, Mark presents the Gentile Roman centurion at the crucifixion as the first person in his gospel recognize Jesus as "Son of God". For Mark the apostles never got beyond the expectation that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, but his Gentile audience near the end of the first century needed to hear that from the beginning Gentiles could recognize and accept Jesus as divine.

When the NT selects and presents certain historical or non-historical "events" of His life they also do so "in depth", in order to explicate and mediate the post-resurrection, faith-understanding of the person of Jesus. Many who encountered Jesus in His lifetime did not come to know who He really was. The Jesus of faith cannot be found in the simple notation of the publicly observable historical facts of His life. It takes the gift of faith to "know" Jesus. It took the apostles a lifetime to come to "know" Jesus. It was not till after the resurrection that they really "understood", and even then their knowledge of Jesus was limited, as it remains for us to this day.

As noted above, in Mark, the earliest Gospel, the first person in the entire Gospel to speak of Jesus as the Son of God is the Roman centurion who viewed the crucifixion -- "Truly this man was a son of God" (Mk. 15:39). It was the resurrection experience that provided the religious experience that allowed the apostles to come to know Jesus "in depth" and to look back and reflect on His life and teachings with this new insight.

The thrust of the Gospel message, then, is to proclaim the inner reality of Jesus, and to do so by answering these three questions: 1) Who is Jesus? 2) What was the message of Jesus? 3) What did Jesus do for us? (This last question is the most difficult and has caused the most theological confusion.) We shall examine these questions one at a time.

*Note:* As we begin this theological journey, we need to remind ourselves that we are dealing with the greatest of mysteries and neither Scripture nor all the theologies developed by the Church or its theologians can hope to answer our questions to our full satisfaction. Beside some limited factual data, we speak in symbols, metaphors, myths, midrash, anthropomorphisms and parables for these are the symbolic language of faith through which we come to “know” Jesus in the certainty of faith. Why is this so?

Fr. Avery Dulles put it quite well in his book *Revelation and the Quest for Unity*:

If revelation were a collection of eternal and necessary truths concerning God, the soul, and immortality - as some rationalists contended - the proper style of theological speech would not differ from that of philosophy. If the stuff of revelation were common historical facts - as some positivists seemed inclined to think - theology could speak the language of ordinary history. But revelation has to do with the hidden God and the ways in which He calls man into union with Himself. Its doctrine is, therefore, sacred doctrine; its history, sacred history. At every point the subject matter of theology touches on mystery. And how can mystery be expressed? Unlike historical or abstract truth, mystery cannot be described or positively defined. It can only be evoked. Religious language must contrive to point beyond itself and to summon up, in some fashion, the gracious experience of the mystery with which it deals. (p.1)

It is also instructive that the Church accepted four distinct Gospel traditions into the Canon of Scripture. Each has a distinctive view of Jesus, e.g., Mark stresses the humanity of Jesus, while John stressed His divinity. No one view of Jesus is the “correct” view. And this is to be expected for two reasons: First, because of our complexity, it is impossible to “define” any human person, much less Jesus and second, everyone experiences a person differently. Imagine for a moment that five of your best friends were to each write a book describing you. Certainly no two books would be alike. Also in museums great works of sculpture (ex. David) are often placed in the middle of a room so that the observer can view the statue from several angles. Each angle gives a different perspective. So it is with the Gospels. Each has a different, but valid, perspective of a person who is an inexhaustible mystery.

## **1) WHO IS JESUS ?**

In all three Synoptic Gospels, Jesus asks His disciples the question: “Who do people say that I am?” There can be no complete or final answer to this question, there is only the invitation to take up the mysterious, eternal journey to search for the answer.

The ways of knowing -- So how do we set out on this “mysterious, eternal journey” to get to “know” this Jesus, who was a historical figure some 2,000 years ago? Perhaps we get to know Jesus in pretty much the same way that we get to know any other person who is no longer with us. Those who lived with that person and knew them well must search their memories and tell us the stories of their life - things they said and did that can make that person come “alive” for us.

For example, when my mother died, her old friends sat around after the funeral talking about her. They talked about Lucy and her love for golf, her unpredictable practical jokes, her deep religious faith, her suffering through a lifetime of migraine headaches, difficult childbirths and a twenty year battle with anemia and cancer. They talked about her fierce love of my father, our family and friends and her willingness to have a party or play gin rummy at the drop of a hat and so much more.

They also talked about “events” in her life, the death of my infant brother Ben and the adoption of my sister Laura, the decision to invite my grandmother to live with us, the time she took two chickens in a basket to a country club formal, or cut off the pant leg of someone at a reception for the bishop, or showing up in a mask or wig when least expected or filling the neighbor’s bathroom with Christmas wrappings when they were off skiing.

So, out of this mosaic of memories, the pieces of the mystery of who she was took shape. She could be called Golfer, Joker, Believer, Long Suffered, Lover, Friend and Hostess. She could be known for her love of children and parents, while approaching life with all its good and bad as a theater for playfulness. None of these “titles” or events of themselves told the whole story, but together they help us to come to know and remember something of the mystery of who she was and what she did for others and we use them to bring her “alive” to those who never met her.

The ways of knowing Jesus -- This is the way the NT writers tried to help us come to know Jesus they knew and make Him “alive” for us. They present Jesus in a mosaic of names and events. He is referred to as Messiah, Prophet, Son of David, High Priest, Son of Man, Risen Lord, Suffering Servant, Savior, Word of God, Healer, Good Shepherd, Vine, Logos, Teacher, Lamb of God and Son of God. They also focus on certain central “events” of His life -- Birth, Baptism, Temptation by Satan, Transfiguration, Sermon on the Mount, and especially His Passion/Death, Resurrection/ Ascension.

These pieces of the mosaic of His life are placed together so that we, in our times, can in some way come to know Him. It is true that Jesus revealed Himself to his disciples, but this revelation was mediated to them through His humanity, which hid much more than it revealed. We in turn hear of Jesus through the mediation of the disciples who each had a distinctive experience of Jesus and who tried to interpret their experience as best they could from within their own religious and cultural heritage. Furthermore, neither Paul nor any of the authors of the Gospels were eyewitnesses to the life and teachings of Jesus.

Remember, the three components of revelation: the reality, the experience, the interpretation. Jesus is the reality, his disciples had the experience of His living presence and the NT contains some of the collected interpretations of this experience by the early Church.

So even with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Jesus remains now and for all time a mystery -- but not a complete mystery. There is indeed much we can learn from the NT as it presents Jesus to us under various names or titles and within certain “events” of His life. So we shall investigate these two categories: The names and titles of Jesus and certain central events of His life.

### **NT Names and Titles for Jesus**

Most of the names and titles used in the NT to refer to Jesus were taken from the history and culture of the Jewish people and were rich with meaning. We shall very briefly examine some of the most important.

**Messiah** - The word Messiah come from a Hebrew word *masiah* that means “anointed one”, translated into Greek as *Christos* and thus the English word Christ.

To understand this fundamental description of Jesus as Messiah we need to make some careful distinctions.

**Prophet** - The days of the classical prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) were long gone by the time of Jesus. Even the profession of prophet had pretty much died out. However, there was still a tradition which spoke of *The Prophet* who was to come at the “end time”, the establishment of the Kingdom of God, when Yahweh would rule the nations. This “end time” is often referred to as the *eschaton* and this area of study is called *eschatology*. So when theologians put the adjective *eschatological* on something they are relating it to the end time, the last days of the world order as we know it or the final establishment of the Kingdom of God which is to be a kingdom of justice.

Another tradition, in the time of Jesus, looked for the return of the prophet Elijah to prepare the way for Yahweh. Therefore, the ministry of John the Baptist created quite a stir. In John 1.21, John the Baptist states he is not the Christ, but they ask him ““What then? Are you Elijah?” He said ‘I am not’. ‘Are you The Prophet?’ And he answered, ‘No’.

There is also a more generic meaning of prophet in the OT. It is based on an Accadian loan word *nabi*. In its proper sense, this word means “one who speaks for another”. The prophet is seen as one who is called and inspired by God to interpret history, speak His will and function as the conscience of the people to draw them back to the covenant.

So does the title prophet help us understand Jesus? Yes, somewhat. The notion of Jesus as *the prophet* to come at the end time generally fails to describe the work of Jesus, but



Jesus did make the idea of the Kingdom of God central to His teachings. However, He did not speak of this Kingdom simply as a final cosmic event, but one that is also within us. It begins now and grows. It is our call to become one in mind with the Father as He was.

Certainly in the more generic sense Jesus was in a unique way “one who spoke for another”. We proclaim Him as the Word of God, spoken in His flesh, so that those who hear Him, hear the Father. Yes, Jesus was rightly called prophet. He inaugurated the Kingdom of God in His own person and teachings and His words were indeed the words of God.

**High Priest** - One reason this title was conferred on Jesus was to tie Him into the role of Messiah or Christ. Since kingship was the basis of messianism and kingship had been linked to the notion of the ideal priesthood of Melchizedek in Psalm 110, the title High Priest seemed appropriate and a further justification of the title Messiah.

Most importantly, though, the central message of the Epistle to the Hebrews is that Jesus is our true High Priest. The theological insight expressed here is that Jesus is the perfect and eternal mediator between God and man. In Him the divine and the human became one. He took on a full human existence and lived this life in total obedience to the Father. He now offers Himself, becoming, in OT sacrificial terms, both the sacrifice and the sacrificer.

The purpose of OT sacrifice was not to appease an angry God and/or have sins forgiven. The main purpose of OT sacrifice was communion, the union of self with God. But it never completely succeeded. The only perfect union (i.e. sacrifice) of humanity and God took place in Jesus, thus He is called the perfect sacrifice. We now see revealed in Jesus that communion with God is possible. Through the power of the Spirit seen in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the separation from God wrought by sin and death are revealed as overcome. In Jesus we see salvation present within His humanity and therefor as possible within our personal humanity. Thus the hope for new life (salvation) is seen to have taken place in human history in Jesus.

This is good news for us in our daily life, for we see in Jesus that the Spirit of God is present in human life and human history, our individual human histories. Life for all its sinfulness can be renewed. If we believe and open ourselves to the call of God as spoken in Jesus, we too can live His life through the gift of the Spirit.

To see Jesus as High Priest is to further link Him with the notion of Messiah and indicate to us that the life which Jesus offers to the Father, is a human life like our own, but totally at one with God.

### **Major Events in the Life of Jesus**

As we have mentioned above, the Jesus of the Gospels is the Christ of faith. The events of His life are used to explicate and mediate this faith-understanding of the Person of Jesus. The thrust of the Gospels is to unlock the inner reality of Jesus. One of the ways

this inner reality is made explicit is to look at how the Gospel writers presented certain highly symbolic events in the life of Jesus to unlock their inner message.

### Birth

The first of these “events”, His birth, was written into the Gospel accounts not to satisfy our curiosity about “the facts”, but to give further “depth” to the meaning of the life and work of Jesus. Only Matthew and Luke give accounts of the birth of Jesus, accounts which differ widely in details and message. For our purposes, we shall use Matthew as our guide. Matthew’s account is an attempt to further the author’s intention of presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Covenant, to point up the rejection of Jesus by His own people, and to show that the message was offered and accepted by the Gentiles.

The opening genealogy (Matt. 1;1-17) expresses that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah in Hebrew), the fulfillment of God’s promise to send an anointed savior-king. The promise which began with Abraham and culminated in Jesus. No specific date was indicated for His birth. Scholars now seem fairly certain that He was born somewhere between 4 and 6 BC because we do know that Herod died in 4 BC. The date of December 25 was selected to celebrate His birth in order to offset the great festival of the Persian cult of the sun-god, Mithras, traditionally held on that day. This cult also included in its rites a sacred meal not unlike the Christian Eucharist.

Matthew indicates that Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophesy (Mt.1:22-23). His birth is the miraculous intervention of God in human history (Mt. 1:18-20). God had visited His people out of His gracious love and saving purpose, not due to any human cause or planning. It is God’s supreme faithfulness to His covenant promise, i.e., to be with His people and save them by His special presence in their lives.

This is the theological message of the later developed concept of the virgin birth. Roman Catholic tradition holds that Mary was a virgin throughout her lifetime. There is no compelling reason to doubt this, but Matthew and Luke lay their emphasis on the virginal conception of Jesus to indicated that Jesus is unique - the Son of God - again, the purpose of the Gospel message is theological not biological. The birth of other central figures in the history of Israel - Isaac (Gen. 17:15-21) and John the Baptist (Lk 1:5-24) - were also seen as more than human in their causes - since both couples were barren, without divine intervention they would not have been born. The message of the birth of Jesus is clear - someone special has been born, only through the power of God acting in human history,

The coming of the Magi, who represent the non-Jewish (Gentile) people ( Mt. 2:1-12) introduce a major theme of Matthew: the Jews rejected Jesus, but the Gentiles will accept Him (Mt. 8:10-12). The birth at Bethlehem, the home town of David, is a clear reference to the role of Jesus as Messiah. King Herod, the priests and scribes represent the Jewish people who do not recognize Jesus for what He is ( Mt. 2:2-6). The Gentile Magi, however, bring gifts fit for a King ( Mt. 2:11).

The focus now shifts (Mt.2:13) to emphasize that Jesus is the new Moses. For the Jews,

the Exodus was the beginning of their history and they looked forward to a new Exodus, under a new Moses, at the end of the world. Matthew is saying that Jesus is the new Moses.

In Matthew's analogy, Herod is the new Pharaoh and his attempt to kill Jesus in the slaughter of the children (Mt. 2:16-18) is reminiscent of the killing of the Hebrew children which threatened Moses ( Ex. 1:22-2:10). Just as Moses was hidden and saved, so too Jesus must flee to Egypt to be saved (Mt. 2:13-15). Later Jesus makes his "exodus" from that land ( Mt. 2:19-21) and begins His ministry in nearly the identical words spoken to Moses (Ex. 4:19).

Notice, however, the contrast created by Matthew's purpose as sketched above. In the Exodus, Pharaoh is the enemy; here it is the king and representatives of the Jewish people. In the Exodus, Moses finds safety fleeing Egypt, but it is here in Egypt, the land of the Gentiles, that Jesus finds safety. In the Exodus, Egypt and the Pharaoh are symbols of evil and enemies of God's purposes, replaced by Matthew with Jerusalem and Herod. So we have an identification of Jesus with Moses, but with an odd twist.

To understand Matthew's account of the birth and early life of Jesus in this perspective is to see the great artistry of Matthew and to understand in some small way the inspired message which he was trying to convey; a message missed if the account is understood simply as "the facts" in the sense of modern history.

### The Baptism of Jesus

The second of these "events" in the life of Jesus is His baptism by John in the Jordan (Mt. 3:11-17; Mk. 1:7-11; Lk. 3:15-18, 21-23). The fact that Jesus was baptized by John is beyond doubt. The original meaning of that act was not clear even to the Gospel writer (Mt. 3:14-15), for John's was a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Lk3:3) and Jesus is the sinless one. It is, however, portrayed as a decisive event in the life of Jesus. The Holy Spirit of God comes upon Him and the divine "voice" declares Him to be His Son with a message to be heard. Whether this was an interior experience, as hinted in Mark, or a public one as in Luke, it marked the conferring of the divine vocation on Jesus and His acceptance of it. Many scholars now believe that Jesus in His humanity grew in the understanding of Himself and His mission (Lk. 2:52) and, if this is so, His baptism marks the flowering of Jesus' consciousness of His divine vocation.

### The Temptation by Satan

The next "event", the Temptations, followed upon the baptism, as Jesus withdrew into the desert to prepare for His ministry. The number of days, forty, is surely meant to be symbolic. The number forty is used often in the OT and NT to denote a time of preparation as in the case of Noah (Gn. 8:6) where it rained forty days and forty nights, Moses when he stays forty days and forty nights on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 24:18), Elijah where he walks for forty days and forty night to Mt. Horeb (1Kings 19:8) and the forty years of preparatory wandering of the people in the desert (Num. 14:33-ff).

The desert is often believed to be the habitat of Satan, so it is here that Jesus meets and withstands the temptations to betray His calling (Mt. 4:1-11; Mk. 1:12-13; Lk.4:1-13). As the people were tempted in the desert (Deut. 6 and 8), so too, Jesus was sorely tempted, but replied to Satan in the same words spoken by God to the ancient people (Deut. 8:3; 6:16; 6:13). This narrative no doubt has some basis in fact, but is set in an imaginary form as a commentary on the temptations which certainly beset Jesus throughout His ministry.

Following Matthew, the first temptation to turn stones into bread, implies the rejection of a purely social gospel. It is rejected with a declaration that man's true needs are much deeper - freedom, spiritual healing, authentic existence - it is these needs which Jesus comes to meet.

The second temptation, the leap from the temple pinnacle is a refusal by Jesus to confront people by wonder and fear, even his miracles require prior faith to be experienced. Jesus comes to appeal to that which is deepest and most human in our lives - fear, hope, longing for true peace, etc.. Jesus comes not simply as a wonder worker but as one fully in touch with human life, pointing to the ultimate means of that life. In him all can come to know and live life to its fullest.

The third temptation is to worldly power or idolatry. For Jesus there is only one thing worthy of our ultimate concern - to do the will of God, of which His life was the perfect example. Furthermore, service rather than power was the hallmark of Jesus' life and the life he laid out for His followers.

### The Transfiguration

Another "event" of considerable significance for the understanding of Jesus was the Transfiguration (Mt. 17:1-9; Mk. 9:1-9; Lk. 9:28-36). This event describes a "depth experience" of the person of Jesus. Perhaps it was in the form of a vision as suggested in Luke 9:32. The historicity of this event is a matter of controversy, but the theological message is clear: in and through the humanity of Jesus, the divine presence is experienced - God is in Jesus. As the life history of the people of the OT revealed the working of God, so Jesus reveals most fully the purpose and presence of God in human life. Jesus is the symbol of God.

The scene is a symbolic mountain where the event of Sinai is reenacted in the life of the new Moses. The face of Jesus shines like that of Moses after his encounter with God (Ex. 34:29-35). Jesus is seen as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets as Moses (representing the Law) and Elijah (representing the prophets) appear with Him. The bright cloud is the symbol of the presence of God who speaks from it ( Ex. 19:9; 24:15-16). Jesus is seen as the beloved son of God to whom all should listen for he is the revelation of God.

### The Death of Jesus

The death of Jesus is the culmination of His life and work to which the Gospels give

detailed attention. The historicity of this event is beyond all question and its theological message is so vast that it ultimately eludes full human comprehension. The passion and death gives vivid testimony to the true humanity of Jesus, for suffering and death are the common lot of all who share a common humanity. The theological meaning of the suffering and death of Jesus has been construed in many ways and the New Testament itself explains it from diverse points of view as we shall see.

Jesus was brought to the cross as an inevitable result of His steadfast refusal to compromise with the powers of evil. He confronted mankind with their sins and they hated Him for it. Rather than returning evil for evil, Jesus accepted death, even death of a cross. Jesus was the one man who was never overcome by the power of sin. He was viewed by Paul as the new Adam - sinless and at peace with Himself, others and the world. The power of evil is destroyed when it cannot live in the human heart - it never did live in Jesus - this is victory!

This is what we mean when we speak of the death of Jesus as the perfect sacrifice. Death here is not to be taken in isolation from life, but as summing up and embodying the totality of Jesus' life. The term "sacrifice" applied to Jesus must be understood in its true meaning. By the time of Jesus, the ideas that were expressed in animal sacrifices were on their way to spiritual development. Few Jews in Jesus' day had even witnessed a sacrifice, but the Gentile world still used them extensively and this was part of the Jewish milieu.

A review of the four purposes of ancient sacrifice will enable us to see how sacrifice became *the* descriptive word for life of Jesus:

- 1) In certain Babylonian and Roman sacrifices the victim was killed in order to examine the liver in search of omens. This was designed to discern the will of the gods.
- 2) The sacrifice of the common meal was prominent in ancient Jewish history and was an ordinary occurrence among the Greeks. The meal symbolized peace (unity - right relationships) among the worshippers and with God.
- 3) The Passover sacrifice expressed complete reliance on the power of God for salvation. This power was still active in the life of the nation and for this they gave thanks in expectation that this power would continue to sustain them as a people.
- 4) The burnt offering, peculiar to Judaism, began with the laying of hands on the victim to express ritual identification, after which the animal was offered to God. In this act the worshipper expressed complete surrender to God.

In summary, these sacrifices were meant to express in ritual form the inner attitude of learning the will of God, living in peace with God and others, relying on the power of

God and total self-surrender and unity with God.

It was recognized that no one ever lived up to these four ideals of sacrifice and that the repetition of the sacrifices did not totally bring them about. In other words, no sacrifice ever achieved the ideal. Ideally the rituals of sacrifice were intended to express an inward attitude or disposition of the offerer. However, individuals and the nation as a whole did not always seek the will of God, they did not always live at peace with each other or with

God, they more often as not trusted in their own power and gave only conditional surrender to God. Where was the person whose inner attitude was the perfect fulfillment of what the sacrifices ritually expressed? Certainly it was to be found only in Jesus and so, in the metaphor of sacrifice, Jesus offers the perfect sacrifice of Himself.

In Jesus the will of God for mankind was made manifest, He was always at peace with all mankind and with the Father. He relied solely on the power of God, not human power, and finally He was obedient unto death, establishing the complete unity of God and mankind in will and heart. This is the peace established in and by Jesus. The living proof of the creative power of God offered to all the people of the earth, now actualized in human history. Salvation is *in* Jesus for He is the one man, the only man, totally at peace with self, others and God. Jesus, then, is the living sacrificial ideal and His death (symbolizing His whole life) is truly the perfect sacrifice.

It is the Good News of the Gospel that the saving power revealed and accomplished in Jesus is available to all of us, for we can become sharers in the life of Jesus or in the words of St. Paul members of the Body of Christ. How indeed does Jesus share this life with us? This is the work of the Spirit effectuated through all of human history in many ways, but, especially and most effectively, Jesus lives in us and we in Him when we pour out our lives in the service of our fellow human beings, especially the poor.

### The Resurrection/Ascension

Historically, focus of atonement has been on the death of Jesus, however, the NT makes an equally strong case for making the resurrection the locus of the work of atonement. The resurrection is the absolute defining event for the followers of Jesus. Someone has wisely said: “while the Gospels do not explain the resurrection, the resurrection explains the Gospels”. Without the resurrection there is no Good News. The resurrection is proclaimed by announcing that God has raised Jesus from the dead and that He lives. It expresses that a life given wholly to the will of God results in victory over evil and even death itself.

Since the resurrection itself was not observed by anyone, the question has arisen as to how it took place and what it looked like. To this question we must respond that we simply do not know how it looked or how it happened. Scholars point out that the resurrection does not meet the modern criteria for a historical event in the strict sense. Again, the Gospel proclamation speaks not of the “facts of history” but of the meaning of the event in understanding who Jesus was and the implications of His resurrection for us.

The Gospels simply proclaim that the tomb was empty, He is risen and has appeared to many - He lives.

We speak of “bodily” resurrection and surely this is the best expression available to us, but we do not mean “body” in the ordinary sense of the term. We are not dealing here with the resuscitation of the historical, human body of Jesus. The risen body of Jesus was continuous with the historical body, so we can speak of an empty tomb, but this was a body under entirely new conditions - a glorified body - governed now by the Spirit and not subject to ordinary laws of body, thus the appearances to the apostles who were gathered together behind closed doors. The risen Jesus is a new reality which only the language of faith can describe.

The ascension is not related as a historical event in all versions of the Gospel accounts. In some texts and versions it is mentioned as an “appendix”. For example, some texts continue Mk. 16:8 with verses 9-20 which relate the ascension and other versions also make an addition to Lk. 24:51 that He was “carried up into heaven. However, Luke also describes the ascension as a historical event in the Acts of the Apostles, taking place in the familiar forty days after the death of Jesus (Acts 1:6-11). Whether the ascension took place immediately after the resurrection or forty days later, the meaning of the event is that the risen Lord is exalted (Acts 5:31) and now shares in the sovereignty of God. This is expressed by saying that Jesus was “lifted up” into a cloud (Acts 1:9), the cloud being a symbol of the divine presence. Again the “event” has depth and meaning which human language cannot contain, but only approach through symbolic expression.

The ascension marks a new stage in the way Jesus is present to his people. Jesus now promises to send the Holy Spirit to strengthen and guide them. Jesus is to be present to them in a new even richer way (Jn 16:7). The Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus (Jn 16:13-14) and will bring about a more intimate relationship with Jesus than His human form can bring about, for we are to become members of the Body of Christ.

We have concentrated on the “events” in the life of Jesus which the gospel writers used to portray the inner most meaning of Jesus. We now turn to the teaching ministry of Jesus. What follows is only a brief sketch of this all important message.

## 2) WHAT WAS THE MESSAGE OF JESUS?

It would take us too far afield to try to elaborate the many strands of the message or teachings of Jesus. The Church is still and will forever be taking up that task. For our purposes we will attempt to shed some light on two key elements of His message: the Kingdom of God (Mk. 1:14-16) and the unconditional love of the Father.

### The Kingdom of God

The Kingdom of God is the rule or power of God over our hearts, so that all will come to live in peace. This Kingdom is an inner reality which necessarily expresses itself in the concrete form of a community of peace, welded together in faith and love. Jewish

expectations of the Kingdom were vague and mixed. some looked forward to a “new earth” in a more spiritual sense, while others expected a new Davidic kingdom to establish a national independent state.

The references in the Gospels to the Kingdom are too numerous and varied to be entertained here. It is perhaps possible to summarize the message of the Kingdom preached by Jesus as follows: The Kingdom of God is at hand, to receive it one must repent and change one’s way of life or better to change one’s mind. The Kingdom, while present now, has not yet fully arrived. Like a mustard seed, it must grow till its final fulfillment. The Kingdom embraces all of human life and history and is brought about by the gratuitous mercy of God. No matter what happens, the Kingdom will triumph.

Having heard this Good New all are invited to accept, promote and pray for the Kingdom in a spirit of joy and celebration. The fulfillment of the Kingdom at the end of time promises, to those who have accepted it, that state of unity or peace envisioned in the Paradise narrative of Genesis, precisely when and how the Kingdom will come is its fullness is not known. We must be ready at all times.

In a later section we will deal with the Church in detail, but for now a brief word about the relationship of the Church and the Kingdom. The two words are not synonymous. The Kingdom is a present, but often unrecognized, reality in human history. It is God’s saving call and power of which we have spoken. It is at the center of God’s “creative movement” toward the world and mankind and it is co-extensive with human life. Many people may respond to God’s call and enter the Kingdom without even being aware of it, as Jesus relates in the famous parable of the sheep and the goats (Mt. 25:31-46)

The Church are those who have heard of the Kingdom and through faith and baptism have committed themselves to the spreading of the Good News of the Kingdom. The New People of God (the Church) like the people of the Old Covenant are called to be a Kingdom of priests, witnesses in word and deed to the Kingdom, a light to the world. The mission of the Church is to carry on the life and work of Jesus in the world, confident of His unfailing presence.

### 3) WHAT DID JESUS DO FOR US?

Of the three questions we have posed about Jesus -- Who was He?, What did He teach? and What did He do for us? -- this last one is in one sense the easiest and in another sense the most difficult to explain, if any real explanation is, in fact, possible. The easiest response to the question about “what Jesus did for us” is just three words -- *Jesus saved us*. However, the moment we try to explain how or in what sense we can say Jesus saved us and how our answers affect the way we understand God and His relationship to us, we enter into a mystery that at the present state of scholarship has more darkness than light, more dead ends than clear expositions.

Without constructing any theories or explanations, the NT writers approached the saving activity of Jesus by attempting to relate His death and resurrection to a wide variety of



themes and concepts taken from their religious and cultural heritage. Themes like the Suffering Servant from Isaiah and concepts like sacrifice, ransom, propitiation, expiation and reconciliation from Jewish religion and culture. These are used to describe what Jesus did for us, they provide a mosaic of symbols and metaphors that provide some help as we contemplate the saving activity of Jesus for us.

For centuries, theological attempts to explain how Jesus saves us have been treated under the theological category of *Atonement*. Unlike the definitions by the Councils of the Church that Jesus is truly God and truly man -- one divine person and two natures -- the Church has made no definitive statement on the exact meaning of the term atonement.

Traditionally this question has been answered by describing and interpreting His death and resurrection. While death naturally preceded resurrection in time, the NT community was first confronted with the resurrection and only “later” or secondarily tried to understand the significance of the death of Jesus. In the literature of Christian theology, the various approaches to meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus have been combined under the concept of *Atonement*.

Atonement (at-one-ment) is an English word which refers to the work of Jesus in reconciling us to God and thereby making us one with Him. Atonement is the work of establishing *peace* - bringing about that right relationship with God which was broken by sin and which we cannot effect by our own efforts. It is the process that we have defined as *salvation*.

What is remarkable about the NT ideas and later theological theories about atonement is the variety of approaches. The attempts to explain how the life, death and resurrection of Jesus has transformed the human situation have produced a bewildering variety of models, metaphors and images - sacrifice, redemption (ransom), expiation, propitiation, vicarious suffering, revelation, victory over evil powers, reconciliation etc.. As we examine some of these models, metaphors and images, we need to be aware that the NT is actually more concerned with the fact and the nature of atonement than in explaining how it was achieved and, of course, it can never be fully explained in rational terms. The apostolic Church and the writers of the NT were not so much concerned with logical consistency in using their models, metaphors and images to describe the atonement as with communicating something of the ineffable mystery of the risen Lord. Rather than a logical explanation, we are left with a mosaic of diverse images that helps us come to “know” Jesus “in depth”. Therefore, the various models, metaphors and images must not be pressed too far lest they lead to distortion or imply that any single one represents the central NT view. There simply is no central NT view of atonement.

*New Testament images and models --* The primary experience of the early Christians was a revelation of the unconditional love of God whose acceptance of them meant forgiveness of sin and the possibilities of new life. They believed and preached that all of this was brought about entirely by the power of God as manifested in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. They were not much interested in developing unified theological theory about “exactly how this was accomplished”, but they were interested in

proclaiming the fact that they believed in this revelation and wanted to share this Good News.

In any approach to the meaning of Jesus' passion and death, we must exclude from the outset any theology which maintains that He was punished by the Father for the sins of humanity, or that He suffered and died in our place. For any such theory, like that made popular by St. Anselm, which says that death alone makes satisfaction and that salvation is constituted wholly in an act outside the plane of human existence, one between the Son and the Father, must be rejected.

At the other extreme is the notion that salvation is simply a matter of the "imitation of Christ", by which we can attain salvation. This notion too must be rejected. For in this view, the activity of God in Christ does not mean anything in itself, it only acts as a motivational example of authentic human existence which we can imitate by our own powers.

What must be maintained in any adequate theory of salvation is that salvation always demands the personal response of a living faith, thus a response to the prior activity of God who creates all things, including the possibility of redeemed human life. Salvation is totally a work of God, but its actualization in us depends on our individual response in faith.

Let it be stated that this saving or redeeming activity did not simply begin in Jesus, but that the saving action of God is a constant in human history and cannot be separated from God's creative activity. This is the "mystery hidden for ages and generations" (Col. 1:26) now revealed in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. No historical event has changed God's attitude toward us or made Him now a God of mercy, where before He was a God of wrath.

In line with the theology of salvation that we have used throughout this book, we see again the notion that salvation is a process of unity, willed by God, offered by God, made possible through God's power, but demanding a free acceptance on the part of each of us

This is supremely exemplified in the power and ministry of Jesus. Jesus is the living sacrifice of peace and unity with self, others, the world and God. He calls all to share in His life of unity and peace.