


The Continuing Mystery

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Christian spirituality is not a matter of cultivating a certain part of ourselves that we call “spirit,” or of achieving a state of psychic serenity untouched by the confusion and suffering inflicted by those “others” who surround us in the world. It is instead a matter of engaging with our freedom that which is very much “other” to us: God’s Holy Spirit. It therefore also entails encountering—or better, being encountered by—the one who has become “life-giving Spirit”: our Lord Jesus Christ. Christian spirituality is gospel-centered, meaning that it is defined by the good news from God concerning what God has accomplished in Jesus and consists in a process of learning Jesus in a manner that transforms our lives according to the pattern of his own.

The argument of this book has been that this process of learning is necessarily both *continuous* and *complex*, because it requires not answering questions about a dead person in the past but relating to the mystery of a living person in the present.

The process of learning Jesus is *continuous* because Jesus, as a living person, continues to act and speak in the world through the Holy Spirit and through a variety of embodiments. (See chapters 1–3.) Having a living faith means responding at every moment to the living God: thus the process of learning Jesus involves coming to know him in the present as well as learning about him in the past.

If faith were merely learning about Jesus as a dead person in the past, there could at some point be an end to it. But since faith is a response to the living Lord who presses upon us at every moment, there is no time at which we can quit without betraying the entire process in which we have been engaged.

The process of learning Jesus is also *complex*. Earlier I suggested that philosophical traditions in the West have tended to favor simplicity and univocal presentation. In other words, truth is connected to unity, opinion to multiplicity. This perspective affects the learning of Jesus in two important ways: by suppressing the complexity of the process of learning itself and by suppressing the complexity of the images of Jesus. This dual tendency distorts the truth of personal and intersubjective learning, which is always multiple and complex.

The desire to find, declare, and propagate a simple and univocal Jesus who “matches” an individual believer (or some group of believers) perfectly—and without remainder—is in this instance idolatrous, since it exchanges the difficult and challenging truth for a counterfeit version that is more comfortable. But by “truth” I do not mean some other single image of Jesus that is better than those being proposed. I mean instead the truth of the *process* of personal and intersubjective learning. In the case of Jesus, such learning is complex because it involves both textual and nontextual sources, and because each of these sources, in turn, involves a variety of elements.

We saw in the first part of this book how each person’s learning of Jesus takes place within a communal context that itself has many dimensions. The church as the body of the risen Christ articulates its identity through the canon of Scripture, the rule of faith, and its teaching authority; thus learning Jesus within the church means learning him within the framework called “tradition.” Tradition also includes, however, the multiple embodiments of the risen Lord through which Jesus continues to call, confront, and challenge a church that otherwise might be content to rest within the security of its received self-definition.

In the practice of worship, in the lives of the saints, and in the reception of strangers, Jesus continues to encounter and challenge the church in powerful and sometimes provocative ways. The community context for learning Jesus not only serves a stabilizing function by compensating for

the excesses of private or idiosyncratic learning through dialogue and discernment within the assembly of believers; it also serves a generative function: the Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of all so that the learning of Jesus within the church is both interactive and intersubjective.

Nothing could be more obvious than that such a process of learning involves a considerable amount of ambiguity. No small part of the suffering that is intrinsic to discipleship is the stress and tension attendant upon a constant need to grow into a larger awareness without being certain of either the precedents or the consequences of such growth. Ambiguity is not the same as formlessness or arbitrariness, however. Ambiguity is the element of tentativeness, of risk, of gamble, in committing to a path of understanding and action that is definite but also open-ended. If the church is committed to learning Jesus as a living person, then it is also committed to ambiguity as an inevitable—and positive!—dimension of its existence. The effort to close this conversation is, in effect, a sin against the Holy Spirit.

In the second portion of this book, we have found an equally complex situation in the compositions of the New Testament, which present a diversity of images of Jesus. We are not surprised, for we know that the New Testament was composed out of a process of learning Jesus at least as complex as that we experience in the contemporary church, and that its writings are best appreciated as witnesses and interpretations of the same mystery with which the contemporary church finds itself involved: the mystery of God’s transformative work through the crucified and raised Messiah, Jesus. The compositions of the New Testament were written by participants in the same mystery who were distinguished by their historical and social circumstances. The respective situations and perspectives therefore help shape the witness and interpretation of Jesus found in each New Testament document. To commit ourselves to learning Jesus within the context of the tradition of the church, therefore, is to resist the temptation to select only one set of compositions as authoritative, or one image of

Jesus as exclusively authentic and normative, as well as the temptation to seek a “historical Jesus” standing apart from the witness and interpretation of these compositions of faith.

The diversity of images of Jesus in the New Testament is indeed dazzling. What multiple associations are generated by each of the separate titles given to Jesus in these writings: teacher, Messiah, king, prophet, priest, Lord, Son of man, Son of God, firstborn of the dead, amen, Savior, redeemer, servant, Righteous One, Son of David, Word, overseer, judge, advocate, witness, friend. And how much more complex those associations become when put into a variety of combinations by each composition. There are also the many metaphors and metonymies applied to Jesus—lamb, shepherd, door, vine, light, bread, water, blood, temple, spirit, anchor, stone, builder—which are also combined in intricate ways. It is impossible to select one of these titles or metaphors as more central than the others. They are all put in play by the compositions themselves for our learning of Jesus. None of them captures all of Jesus; none is without some truth concerning Jesus. We are incredibly enriched precisely by their abundance and diversity, and we would be impoverished by the loss of any of them.

We have seen as well that the image of Jesus is affected by the purpose and genre of each composition: in the epistolary literature of the New Testament (including Revelation), it is the living presence of Jesus as Lord that is most explicit, with attention to his human ministry left largely implicit; in the Gospels, Jesus’ human ministry is obviously the explicit focus, with the perspectives and concerns of the postresurrection church largely implicit. Yet each of the Gospel narratives shapes its image differently: Mark’s emphasis on Jesus as the suffering Son of man is not the same as Matthew’s emphasis on Jesus as teacher of the church or Luke’s emphasis on Jesus as the prophet like Moses or John’s emphasis on Jesus as the revealer of the Father.

This diversity of witness and interpretation is real. There truly is a

“different” Jesus in each of the New Testament writings. The Jesus of Paul and the Jesus of Revelation have distinct characteristics; the Jesus of Hebrews looks different from the Jesus of James. Mark and John do not witness to Jesus identically; the interpretations of Jesus in Matthew and John are not the same. Attempts to deny or suppress this rich diversity for the sake of a simple or univocal understanding of Jesus require that violence be done to the very compositions that bear witness to him and interpret him.

At the same time, our survey of these writings has brought to light an equally remarkable and unmistakable convergence on certain aspects of Jesus’ identity—not always, of course, in the same fashion or in the same proportion. Nowhere in the New Testament writings, for example, is Jesus simply a figure of the past who is remembered because of the things he said and did. Jesus is everywhere a figure whose past words and deeds are remembered because and in light of his present and continuing power. The present power of Jesus as risen Lord, moreover, anticipates his future role as triumphant judge of the living and the dead. In one way or another, the New Testament writings witness to Jesus as sharing in the life and power of God.

Given such a strong sense of Jesus as Lord, the attention paid to Jesus’ humanity in the New Testament is the more impressive. We find it not only in the narratives about his past but equally in letters emphasizing his present divine power. In none of these writings is Jesus’ humanity either subsumed by a process of divinization or forgotten. In all of them, his humanity stands as the measure of Christian life and identity. His words are commandments that the church not only preserves but seeks to obey. His acts anticipate and express the power that the church recognizes as still active in the community of faith. Above all, however, it is the *character* of the human person Jesus that remains normative for believers. It is not the incidentals of his unique historical existence—his Jewishness, maleness, and habits of speech—that are transferable to others, but the pattern of his life, the way in which he disposed of his freedom: this “mind of Christ” is

replicable in the freedom of other humans through the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is on this point, in fact, that we find the most consistent testimony in the writings of the New Testament—namely, that there is a necessary congruence between the character of Jesus' human life and the character of Christian discipleship.

Nowhere in the New Testament is there an image of the human Jesus that is compatible with attitudes of hubris, hedonism, envy, arrogance, acquisitiveness, self-aggrandizement, hostility, or violence. Jesus is everywhere associated with faithful obedience toward God and meek, compassionate, self-emptying service toward other people.

Jesus' character reveals him to be someone who hopes in the power of God rather than in human manipulation, who faithfully obeys God rather than his own project, and who loves with a self-giving of time and energy and presence to the needs of others in preference to his own.

That is why the cross of Jesus stands as the central symbol for his entire life: his death was in faithful obedience to God even when he wanted to live; his death was an act of love to overcome alienation between humans; his death was the ultimate expression of hope in a God who can call into being that which does not exist and can therefore give life to the dead.

Similarly, we find nowhere in the New Testament an understanding of Christian discipleship compatible with a life devoted to one's own success, pleasure, comfort, freedom from suffering, or power at the expense of others. Everywhere we find the qualities that are found in Jesus advanced as essential to the following of Jesus: the same faith, the same love, the same hope. The basic pattern of faithful obedience to God and loving service to others is the image of Christ that the Spirit replicates in the freedom of those who belong to Christ.

Although I have suggested that an openness to learning Jesus in all of life's complex situations means that the church is committed to ambiguity

as a basic dimension of its existence, there is no ambiguity to be found in this basic pattern. It is the pattern enacted in baptism and the eucharist. It is the pattern expressed by the creed. It is the pattern recognized in the lives of the saints. The imitation of Christ in his life of service and suffering—not as an act of masochism for the sake of suppressing one's own life but as an act of love for the enhancement of others' life—is not an optional version of Christian identity. It is the very *essence* of Christian identity. It is the pattern by which every other claim about the spiritual life must be measured if it is to be considered Christian. It is what is learned from Jesus. It is what learning Jesus means.

Learning by Living

In an earlier chapter I cautioned readers not to confuse my analysis of the Gospels with the sort of reading demanded by the process of learning Jesus. Likewise, reading a book about spirituality is not the same as engaging the Holy Spirit of God with one's own freedom. The same elements involved in all intersubjective learning are required for learning Jesus.

This is not a matter of having casual opinions about who Jesus might have been. It is not a matter of reaching scientifically verifiable conclusions about who Jesus must have been. It is rather a matter of learning a living person, and through that process being transformed in one's own identity.

The claim to be learning Jesus is superficial if not grounded in specific practices that embody such learning. The pattern of faithful obedience and loving service is not something to be memorized as though it were a mental image. Rather, it is a pattern that must be spelled out in the practices of living faith within a community. The pattern by which we were imprinted by baptism—the pattern of a dying and rising Lord Jesus—is etched ever more deeply in us when at the Lord's Supper we share the body of the Lord given for us and the blood of the Lord poured out for us. It is impressed on us also by those saints with whom we live and who have nourished us in

the faith by their lives of obedience and selfless love. It is reinforced for us as well by reading and meditating together in Scripture that talks of Jesus' own self-disposition in faith and love.

We need also, however, to translate this pattern into consistent habits of behavior that express the mind of Christ. We shall not be able to learn Jesus in the sick and imprisoned unless we visit those who are sick and imprisoned. We shall not find Jesus in the hungry and thirsty unless we go to those who are hungry with food and those who are thirsty with drink. We shall not meet Jesus in the stranger unless we provide the stranger with hospitality.

And we shall not have the strength or purity of heart to engage the world in this fashion if we do not in the name of Jesus spend time in silent prayer and meditation on the mysteries of his life and death and resurrection. We shall not have the courage to open our hearts and homes unless we practice the sharing of our possessions in a disciplined and discerning fashion. We shall not be able to distinguish between Jesus and the fantasies of our own ideal self-image unless we purify our hearts and clarify our perception through the practice of fasting.

All these disciplines that school us in suffering shape in us a character that is prepared for the real risks taken by faith's freedom when in the name of Jesus it engages the larger world. While the pattern of faith and love is clear, how we should live out that pattern in specific circumstances rarely is. What does it mean to live in obedient faith in this social context, within this political system, under this economic regime, faced with these distortions of human value? What does it mean to act in loving fashion when faced with structures and systems and persons who are defined by idolatry's denial of God? For that matter, what does it mean to be faithful and loving in one's own small round of daily life? It is in this process of discernment that we need all the images of Jesus that the New Testament can provide, and as many examples as it can give us of how the pattern of the Messiah can be enacted in diverse situations.

This is why we pay attention to the saints. It is from the way in which the identity of Jesus finds new and distinctive expression in their individual lives that we gain insight into how we might also translate the mind of Christ into lives that are fully engaged with the specific circumstances in which God has placed us and where the call of God comes to us.

And this is why, finally, we pray that God might shape us into saints, so that we might become living texts speaking Jesus in the world—saints from whom others also might learn Jesus.