

## CHAPTER TWO: JESUS' CONTEMPORARIES AND THEIR IMAGE OF GOD

In Genesis 1:1 to 2:4, the priests responsible for the introduction to the primeval narrative (Genesis 1-11) were responding to the shock they experienced during their exile in Babylon at the primitive nature of the religion they witnessed there.

Their idols are silver and gold,  
the work of human hands.  
They have mouths, but do not speak;  
eyes, but do not see.  
They have ears, but do not hear;  
noses, but do not smell.  
They have hands, but do not feel;  
feet, but do not walk;  
they make no sound in their throats.  
Those who make them are like them;  
so are all who trust in them' (Psalm 115:4-8).

For the Israelites God was responsible for creating the universe and for sustaining everything in being. Everything exists because God wills it to be, and, because God is good, they believed that everything is fundamentally good, indeed, 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). This was especially true for human beings who are created 'in the image and likeness of God' (Genesis 1:26). This raises two questions. Firstly, what was their image of God, and secondly, in what ways are we human beings actually in God's image.

### Monotheism

The God of Israel is the God who, through Moses, led the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, formed them into a nation with its own Law (the Torah), and led them to the Promised Land. Initially it was their belief that the God of their nation was the greatest of the gods. This gave way to the conviction that their God was the only God, with the implication that other so-called gods are not gods at all.

The implications of monotheism are immense. The monotheist recognizes that it is the one God who reveals God's presence in every place, every event, and every person. Hence the many and at first glance rather confusing images of God that we find in the Hebrew Scriptures. The way God treated the first-born of the Israelites would lead one to think of God as a God of love. But what does one make of God's treatment of the Egyptians? What is God really like? God is like a mother who cares for the baby in her womb (Isaiah 49:15), yet God is thought of as blessing the person who dashes the baby of the enemy against a rock (Psalm 137:9). What is God really like? If God is at the heart of everything while remaining mysteriously beyond everything, it is difficult not to end up with an understanding of God as being infinitely and powerfully every trait that we can imagine. The net result can be utter confusion, and people can find texts from the Bible to support almost any position that they wish to or feel obliged to adopt. From a superficial glance, the God of Israel seems to be both forgiving and unforgiving, both caring and cruel, both generous and jealous.

This seems to be reflected in the very name 'Israel', which popular etymology translated as 'he who struggles with God'. Because the Israelites believed that there is only one God, who is ultimately responsible for whatever happens in this world, they were locked in an eternal struggle of mind and heart with this God, a struggle which did not allow them to opt for a simple definition of what they recognized as being beyond the limits of their comprehension. At the same time the many images of God that we discover in the Bible are not all equally important, nor are they random. The Israelite had a definite perspective and point of view.

### God is Liberator

The central and normative image of God is found in the text that describes the revelation to Moses: the scene of the burning bush (Exodus 3). Moses had been reared in the Egyptian court away from the degradation and slavery experienced by his compatriots. The first chapters of the Book of Exodus record how he came in touch with their condition, how it angered him, how he killed an Egyptian slave driver, and how he subsequently had to flee for his life. For the first time he knew what it was like to be a fugitive. More than that, he knew that he was the only one who had the capacity to help his people. He had contacts in high places in Egypt, a fact that reinforced the call to go back and try to do something about the condition of the Hebrews. He ran from this call, until finally, one day in the desert, he could run no longer. He was caught up in an encounter with God. Frequently the Bible describes such encounters in the symbolic language of the glory-cloud ('shekinah') that surrounds people, taking them into the mysterious presence, but without enabling them to 'see' God. In Moses' case the encounter occurred in the desert, and the glory-cloud appeared in a 'burning bush' (Exodus 3:2).

The opening words of God to Moses give us the central image of the God of Israel. Every other image must be consistent with this and must be understood in relation to it: 'I have seen the miserable state of my people in Egypt. I have heard their appeal to be free of their slave drivers. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. I mean to deliver them!' (Exodus 3:7). Before all else, God is redeemer. God led the Israelites out of slavery on a journey of liberation. God took them from a life of slavery to a 'Promised Land'. They were slaves; now they are free, and all because of the power of their God, their redeemer. Whatever else God is, God is the one who cannot stand oppression. Presented with this revelation of God, and the summons to liberate his people, Moses held back, but God replied: 'I will be with you' (*'ehyeh 'immak*, Exodus 3:12). Moses then asked for God's name. He wants to know in what way this God relates to him and his people. The answer gives us our most profound insight into the spirituality of Israel. It comes in two stages.

The first is a promise: *'ehyeh asher 'ehyeh*. 'This is what you must say to the sons of Israel: *'ehyeh* has sent me to you ... YHWH has sent me to you' (Exodus 3:14-15). Obviously, the author is here linking the word YHWH with *'ehyeh*. The Greek (Septuagint) translation has *ego eimi ho on* ('I am the being'). The Jerusalem Bible English translation has 'I am who I am'. We could retain the future meaning of *'ehyeh* found in Exodus 3:12 and translate 'I will be who I will be'. What we have here is not a name but a promise. God is asking for faith, telling Moses to walk and God will be with him, God will be for him. Moses will come to know God by walking with God. He will come to know who God is as he engages in the task of the Exodus. God promises Moses that he will be with him, and that he will liberate the people from slavery.

Moses wants security before he starts. God makes a covenant, a promise, and asks Moses to trust him.

To establish a basis for such a trust, God makes a second statement. It is a call to Moses and to the people to remember: 'You are to say to the sons of Israel: YHWH, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you' (Exodus 3:15). The fidelity of God can be seen if we look to our past. God was present, calling, supporting, loving. The God of our future, in whom we are asked to trust, is the God of our past whose fidelity has been established. The God of Israel, then, is primarily a Redeemer, who ransoms slaves and liberates them. The word fits perfectly the historical experience that was the beginning of the national identity of Israel.

God redeems people not only from slavery. God liberates us from anything that impedes fullness of life, in other words from 'sin'. Before proceeding let us try to establish what we mean when we speak of 'sin'.

#### The slavery of sin

Coming from God's hand creation, which reaches perfection with human beings, is 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). As the primeval narrative states, human beings live because, though formed from dust, God breathes into them God's own spirit (Genesis 2:7). We are created to live our life in a garden (Genesis 2:8), a paradise with fruit trees and fountains, where we can enjoy close communion with God (Genesis 3:8).

Yet it is not at all obvious that people are, in fact, 'very good', and we don't live in a paradise (Genesis 3:24). Brother kills brother (Genesis 4). 'The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created – people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them"' (Genesis 6:5-7). A return to chaos was held back because of the goodness of one man, Noah (Genesis 6:8). Even so 'the human heart is evil from youth' (Genesis 8:21).

We are created to live in a paradise of intimate communion with God. According to the primeval narrative this is not our experience because we want to decide for ourselves what is good for us, instead of listening to and waiting on God (Genesis 3:1-7). We think we can build our own way to heaven (Genesis 11:1-9). Cutting ourselves off from God we lose the harmony we should have with God, and so with nature, with others and with ourselves.

To grasp the meaning of 'sin' let us imagine a world in which everyone's deepest needs are being answered by a resounding 'yes'; a world, in other words, where there is no 'slavery', in which everyone is surrounded by love, a faithful love that gives unconditional care and nurturing to all. In such a world we would all learn to 'be-lieve', that is, we would all choose to 'be-in-love'. We would learn to trust, and our trust would not be betrayed. We would mature and grow in this love, and in our turn we would be able to provide a space where others could experience being loved, and where they could learn to give love. Our whole world would be a

garden and a home for people. If you can imagine that, you can imagine a world without sin, a 'Garden of Eden', a paradise.

'Sin' is a very general word for anything and everything that introduces a negative note into this picture we have painted. The word used in the Greek Bible is *hamartia*, which literally translated means 'missing the mark'. It is used of a person who is in the bush and has lost his or her way. This basic meaning is extended to include anyone who is in any way lost or alienated. The fact is that as soon as we are born we are surrounded not just with love and fidelity but also with non-love and infidelity. The fact is that we learn not only to trust, but to distrust. The fact is that we are not only told the truth and led by those who love us along the path of a maturing ability to love; we are also deceived and distracted, and we develop habits that make us withdraw from love. The fact is that we grow, not only to be able to give love to others, but also to be able to withhold love from others. It is not my intention here to blame everything on what we inherit or on our environment, though these do have a major role to play in our development. Rather it is my intention to hint at the many ways in which sin affects our lives. There is a lot that prevents us from being in love, and the journey to freedom from these barriers and distractions can be a long and arduous one. We can blame our environment, as we have seen, for a lot of the trouble, but there is also our inherited genetic make-up, and, perhaps, most influential of all, our own incomprehensible ability to say 'no' to the love we need, even when we know we need it, and are able to say 'yes'.

The word 'sin' is used here for all that distracts us from truth and from love. When we are not responsible for this we call it 'original sin', for it is part of our origins, part of the human condition into which we are born. When we are responsible we call it 'personal sin'. But whether it is our fault or not – and it is often very difficult to know in any particular instance where the 'blame' lies – we are lost in sin and need to find our way back to the track. The God of Israel, who redeemed Israel from the slavery of Egypt, is before all else the God who redeems people from 'sin', from any enslavement that inhibits fullness of life.

#### YHWH, the Saviour

Another word for this is the word 'saviour'. A saviour is one who makes us 'safe', either by preserving us from whatever might harm us, or, if we have already been harmed, by rescuing us from harm and healing us of its effects. The God of Israel, the one and only God, is the saviour of mankind: 'that people may know and believe me and understand that it is I. No God was formed before me. No God will be after me. I, I am YHWH. There is no other saviour but me' (Isaiah 43:10-11).

It was in YHWH, the faithful one, the redeemer, that the people of Israel ultimately placed their hope. God was their salvation. In God they experienced security; in God they were safe. God pitched God's tent among them, and they were at home with God. It was intimacy with God that mattered most to them. When they thought of life, they thought of union with God. God was the source of their freedom and gave meaning to their existence. These concepts are summed up in the word 'salvation'. God the redeemer is also 'saviour'.

## YHWH, the God of *hesed we 'emet*

There are two words that keep recurring in the sacred writings as expressing the essential characteristics of God. They are the Hebrew words *hesed* and *'emet*. God is often called '*hesed we 'emet*' (see, for example, Psalms 25:10; 40:12; 57:3, 10; 61:7; 85:10; 86:15; 89:14; 115:1; 138:2). '*hesed*' is that quality in a community that gives it firm cohesion. One may translate it as 'covenant love'. The commitment given in marriage is an example of '*hesed*'. In the New Testament we find the term 'grace' used in the same sense. The 'grace of God' is the love that God has for us which is our security and which binds us together as a people committed to witness to this love. '*emet*' is a quality that enables others to put their trust in a person. One may translate it 'fidelity'. The Book of Exodus tells us of Moses' prayer to see the glory of God. God promises to reveal God's glory to him and when Moses ascends the mountain, we are told that: 'YHWH passed before him and proclaimed, 'YHWH, YHWH, a God of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithfulness (*hesed we 'emet*)' (Exodus 34:6).

Moses reminds the people of this steadfast love of YHWH as he gives them his last will and testament. He calls on the people to continue the mission from God to redeem and liberate. It is a call to act justly: 'It is God who sees justice done for the orphan and the widow, who loves the stranger and gives him food and clothing. Love the stranger then, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt' (Deuteronomy 10:18). Again and again the psalms refer to God in these terms. God stands in the divine assembly as the One who dispenses justice: 'No more mockery of justice, no more favouring the wicked! Let the weak and the orphan have justice, be fair to the wretched and destitute; rescue the weak and needy, save them from the clutches of the wicked!' (Psalm 82:1-4).

The message of the prophets is the same. A powerful witness to this is given by the temple singers who are responsible for chapters 40 to 56 of the Isaiah scroll. On their return from exile they were faced with a community that was in danger of forgetting the universal call, and of narrowing their religion down to national interests such as self-defence, law, ritual and cult. Chapter 56 opens with a magnificent call to justice and to compassionate care for the oppressed among them, including foreigners. The whole of the opening passage merits close attention. It concludes with the words: 'It is the Lord YHWH who speaks, who gathers the outcasts of Israel: there are others I will gather besides those already gathered' (Isaiah 56:8).

There are other images that we should consider. They thought of God as almighty according to their understanding of power. They thought of God, therefore, as controlling everything. They thought of the darkness and chaos in the world as God's punishment for people's failure to obey God's commands. They thought of God as taking their side in conflicts, because their enemies were assumed to be God's enemies. If God did not side with them they concluded that God was punishing them for failing to abide by the covenant with God to which they had committed themselves.

Let us conclude our brief study of the God of Israel by meditating on a passage from the Isaiah scroll. Faced with a sincere religious people who were following the observances of the Law but who were not experiencing the intimate presence of God in their lives, the writers proclaimed this message from God:

‘They seek me day after day. They long to know my ways, like a nation that wants to act with integrity and not ignore the law of its God. They ask me for laws that are just, they long for God to draw near: Why should we fast if you never see it, why do penance if you never notice?’ (Isaiah 58:2-3).

Drawing on ancient tradition, the basic religious experience of Israel expressed so powerfully in the Exodus account of the burning bush, they challenged the people:

‘Fasting like yours today will never make your voice heard on high. Is that the sort of fast that pleases me, hanging your head like a reed, lying down on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call fasting, a day acceptable to Yahweh? Is not this the sort of fast that pleases me – it is the Lord YHWH who speaks – to break unjust fetters and undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke, to share your bread with the hungry, and shelter the homeless poor, to clothe the man you see to be naked and not turn from your own kin? Then will your light shine like the dawn and your wound be quickly healed. Your integrity will go before you and the glory of YHWH behind you. Cry, and YHWH will answer; call, and he will say “I am here”. If you do away with the yoke, the clenched fist, the wicked word, if you give your bread to the hungry, and relief to the oppressed, your light will rise in the darkness, and your shadows become like noon, Yahweh will always guide you, giving you relief in desert places. He will give strength to your bones and you will be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never run dry’ (Isaiah 58:4-11).

This is the God who calls the people of Israel in the depths of their life-experience. It is the breath (‘Spirit’) of this God that breathes life into their world (Genesis 2:7), and that constantly re-creates it (Psalm 104:30). The prophets, who were open to God’s call, heard God’s word and saw revealed God’s presence and will. The key revelation, the central religious insight, was that God is a redeemer. It is their God, the only God, who redeemed them from Egypt, who formed them into a people, who led them through the desert and brought them to the Promised Land. Not all the sacred writings are faithful to this insight. At times the image of God is obscured. But the vital thrust is there all the time, providing perspective and calling the people of Israel to forgo their imperfect notions and distracting religious practices and continue their journey up the mountain of God. It was this concept of God that Jesus inherited.

#### The political situation at the time of Jesus

From 37BC to 4BC Herod the Great ruled Palestine, from north of the lake of Gennesaret to south of the Dead Sea, and from the Mediterranean in the west to the east bank of the Jordan river. Shortly after the birth of Jesus, Herod died and his kingdom was divided among his sons. Galilee in the north was ruled by Herod Antipas. The principal town in Galilee was Sepphoris, just a few kilometres from Nazareth where a certain carpenter, Joseph, his wife Mary, and their son Jesus, were living. The largest portion of Herod’s kingdom, which included Judaea, Samaria and Idumea, was ruled by Herod Antipas's older brother, Archelaus.

In 6AD when Jesus was a young boy, Archelaus was removed from power by the Roman Senate, and the Roman army marched into Palestine under the command of a military prefect, Coponius. He introduced taxation, appointed a new High Priest, and brought the people under direct Roman rule. Resistance was immediate and violent. A Galilean called Judas led the revolt. It was crushed mercilessly. The Romans won the war, but the national liberation movement

was born, and all through Jesus' life resistance to the occupying army festered just below the surface. It erupted into full-scale war only a generation after Jesus' death, and culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD.

This was the violent world in which Jesus lived and taught. People's minds went back to the years recorded in the Book of Jeremiah when the Babylonians burnt their city to the ground, destroyed and desecrated the temple, and took their ancestors into captivity in Babylon. With Jeremiah, they interpreted that catastrophe as a punishment of God for their sins: 'I, YHWH, will bring disaster on this place, because the people have abandoned me, have profaned this place, filled this place with the blood of the innocent, burnt their sons there. The valley of Ben Hinnom ('*Gehenna*') will be a valley of slaughter, the city will be a desolation, a derision, a burial ground for lack of other space since they have grown so stubborn and refused to listen to my words' (Jeremiah 19). It seemed that those years were upon them again.

Yet people's minds also went back to more recent events: the successful war waged by the Maccabees against the Syrian king. On that occasion the city and temple were saved by the courageous fidelity of those who pledged themselves to total purity of religion. Could this happen again? Everywhere there was a heightened expectation that God would soon intervene in their world, and deliver them from the Romans, destroying all evil, and finally bringing about God's reign. This expectation took many forms, but there was a general mood of waiting for the coming of the last days, for the eschatological prophet, for the final judgment of God.

The prevailing expectation was that God's judgment would be a destructive one. In anger, God would destroy all evil: the Romans, of course; but could it also involve, as it had once before, the temple? Would there be another *gehenna*? What would be left when God's destroying angel had completed his task? If they were repentant, if they followed the Law, if they fought for the purity of their religion, would God spare them? Could they be a remnant, saved from the judgment? After all, they were God's chosen people, and the faithful God would honour God's promises!

It was into such a world that Jesus came and preached an ancient, but new, message: God is a redeemer, not a destroyer. God wills to save, not condemn. It is not a matter of avoiding God's judgment, but of welcoming it. We are not to hope to be saved *from* it, but saved *by* it. Jesus spoke about *gehenna* ('hell'), for he saw the way in which his contemporaries were heading. He warned them of what would happen to them if they did not recognize God's gift of peace (Luke 19:42). However his preaching was 'good news' because he taught them that all God's power was among them to save, not to destroy. Destruction, if it happened, would be self-destruction that followed on a stubborn refusal of God's salvation. This message stands out in clearer relief against the background of the message being preached by other religious groups at the time.

### Jesus and the Zealots

The Zealots were working for the violent overthrow of Roman occupation. They were confident that the Jews were the chosen race. God's imminent judgment would be realized, according to their way of thinking, through their courage, determination and self-sacrifice. They were willing to fight to the end to defend the honour of their nation, and so the honour of their God.

How different Jesus' teaching was from theirs. The critical difference was that Jesus spoke of God as the Father of *all*. Listen to his words about how we should relate to our enemies: 'You have learned how it was said: You must love your neighbour (see Leviticus 19:18) and hate your enemy. But I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you; in this way you will be sons of your Father in heaven, for he causes his sun to rise on bad people as well as good, and his rain to fall on honest and dishonest people alike. You must be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:43, 48). Jesus worked and prayed for a peace that would come through people recognizing that every person is precious in the eyes of the one Father, that every race is a chosen race. Peacemakers were especially blessed 'for they shall be called sons of God' (Matthew 5:9). Peace (*'shalom'*) was possible as a result of God's imminent reign, but it could come only if the people changed their outlook ('repented'). Jesus revealed the universal Fatherhood of God, and the consequent commandment of unconditional, universal forgiveness and love. He accepted no compromise.

It was when he realised that the Zealots, and others who shared their view, were determined to pursue their violent course that Jesus had to face the fact that in this, at least, his mission had failed. Luke records his lament over the city: 'As Jesus drew near and came in sight of the city he shed tears over it and said: "If you in your turn had only understood on this day the message of peace! But, alas, it is hidden from your eyes! Yes, a time is coming when your enemies will raise fortifications all round you, when they will encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you and the children inside your walls to the ground; they will leave not one stone standing on another within you – and all because you did not recognize your opportunity when God offered it" ' (Luke 19:41-44). But Jesus himself continued to preach and to offer peace, and he kept forgiving his enemies right to the end (Luke 23:34). He also left his followers the instruction to 'make disciples of all the nations' (Matthew 28:19) telling them all of the universal Father, whose love is revealed most powerfully in his relationship with Jesus, his Son, and whose Holy Spirit is at work in the world reconciling all people to each other and to God.

### Jesus and the Sadducees

The main opposition to Jesus seems to have come from the Sadducees, made up of the priestly aristocracy and the leading families. They saw themselves as bearing the responsibility for preserving intact the ancient and orthodox traditions of Israel. Their main concern, as one would expect, was for the exact observance of temple cult. They were pragmatists, and, unlike the Zealots, favoured accommodation with Rome. This was partly because it was they who received most benefit from the Roman occupation.

Temple worship had its place in Judaism. The prophets, however, were constantly reminding the people that the worship they offered was worship offered to God, and so could not be a substitute for doing God's will in working for the redemption of the poor and needy (Amos 5:21-25, Jeremiah 7:1-11; Isaiah 56:1-8). Jesus followed in this tradition. He cleared the temple in a powerful prophetic gesture of displeasure (John 2:13-22; Mark 11:12-33; Matthew 21:12-27; Luke 19:45 – 20:8). His reasons for doing so are given in the Synoptic Gospels by referring back to the criticism of temple worship given by Jeremiah and Isaiah. According to Jesus the temple was meant to be a 'house of prayer' (Mark 11:17 = Isaiah 56:7). and 'for all the nations' (Jeremiah 7:11). The Sadducees failed to recognize the universal Fatherhood of God; they also

failed to be instruments of God's redemptive justice reaching to the ends of the earth and to outcasts. For Jesus, worship was something that was possible for all (John 4:21-24). It was also to be an expression and celebration of religious dedication to God and to God's reign, and not an institutionalized routine that went on without regard either to genuine prayer or to justice.

### Jesus and the Pharisees

Jesus had far more interaction with another religious group, the Pharisees. They were concerned with fidelity to God's will as expressed in the written and oral Law. They were zealous nationalists, having originated in the movement that overthrew Syrian rule in the first part of the second century BC. They were determined to uphold Jewish language, Jewish customs, and above all total reverence for God and for God's will. They insisted on the need for a total purification of life in accordance with the Law. As a sect within Judaism, their influence went beyond their numbers. Many of them were scribes, learned in the Law, and because as laymen they were close to the ordinary people they exercised considerable influence through their preaching and example.

Jesus shared with them a consuming passion to do the will of God (Mark 3:35 and 14:36). However, he soon came into open conflict with them over their interpretation of that will. Besides accusing many of them of hypocrisy (Mark 7:1-13 and Matthew 23), he confronted them, because, as he saw matters, they had missed the central meaning of the Law (Matthew 9:13 and 12:7): they had failed to appreciate God's love. Their insisting on the observance of the Law was placing a burden on people, increasing people's fears and reinforcing an image of God that was at variance with what Jesus knew as the genuine tradition of Israel.

The Pharisees believed that the only hope for the people was to bear patiently and faithfully the yoke of the Law. Here it is enough to note the clear contrast between Jesus and the Pharisees in this regard. Matthew records Jesus as saying: 'Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. Yes, my yoke is easy and my burden light' (Matthew 11:28-30). This is the 'good news'. Luke gives us an impression of the contrast when he writes: 'The tax collectors and the sinners were all seeking Jesus' company to hear what he had to say, and the Pharisees and the Scribes complained: 'This man', they said, 'welcomes sinners and eats with them' (Luke 15:1-2). The Sabbath was a day of special consecration to God. Jesus by-passed petty regulations whenever compassion called for it. The Beloved Disciple tells of one occasion when Jesus healed a man in Jerusalem, and he adds the comment: 'It was because he did things like this on the Sabbath that the Jews began to persecute Jesus' (John 5:16). We get the same impression from the other Gospels (Mark 3:1-6). The 'good news' was that 'the Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath' (Mark 2:27). God is for us, and all the regulations of the Law must witness to the redeeming and saving will of God.

### Jesus and the Essenes

Another group who shared many of the convictions of the Pharisees were the Essenes. They considered the world to be so wicked and unredeemable that they fled from it and set up their

own communities in the desert. There they set up a life-style that they considered to be totally faithful to God. Jesus, on the contrary, saw the imminent reign of God as holding out the possibility of redemption especially to the outcasts and the sinners, and he moved among them as a doctor might move among the sick (Mark 2:17), encouraging, healing, liberating and challenging them to allow the love of God to break into their lives (see Luke 5:30, 15:1-2). The Beloved Disciple expresses this truth in the following words: 'God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life. For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved' (John 3:16-17).

The Good News brought by Jesus was that God was not about to destroy the world, whether by flood or by fire. God is the Redeemer and Saviour. God is the life-giver, not the life-destroyer. We can destroy ourselves by refusing to believe the good news, and by obstinately ignoring or turning our back on God's saving love. But the love is present, powerfully active in healing and liberating. And it is for the whole world. Far from fleeing the world, Jesus loved it into faith, or tried to. His being murdered is a measure of his failure. The way he died is a measure of his success. For he, at any rate, believed in a God who loved to the end, and he gave his life in that belief.

#### Jesus and John the Baptist

Finally, let us examine the preaching of the prophet John. John sensed that his world was on the verge of collapse, and that he was preaching at the end of an age. He sensed that history was repeating itself, only this time God's judgment would be final. In line with current expectations John envisaged God's judgment as a destructive one. John summoned the whole of Israel to repent and by fidelity to justice to be a remnant that would be spared God's avenging judgment: 'His winnowing-fan is in his hand; he will clear his threshing-floor and gather his wheat into the barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out' (Matthew 3:12). 'Even now the axe is laid to the roots of the trees, so that any tree which fails to produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown on the fire' (Matthew 3:10).

In many ways Jesus was very close to John. The first decision of Jesus recorded in the gospels was when 'he came from Galilee to the Jordan and was baptised by John' (Matthew 3:13). A number of Jesus' early disciples came to him from John (John 1:35), and before John's imprisonment Jesus seems to have followed John's practice of inviting people to be baptised (John 3:22-26). Matthew even uses an identical expression to summarize the preaching of John and the preaching of Jesus: 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand' (Matthew 3:2 and 4:17). Jesus recognized John as a prophet (Matthew 11:9) and clearly admired him: 'I tell you solemnly, of all the children born of women, a greater than John the Baptist has never been seen' (Matthew 11:11).

However, as we will see in the following chapter, Jesus and his good news was different even from John's.