

## CHAPTER TEN: JESUS DIED AS HE LIVED

### Jesus' final meal with his disciples

From the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the religious leaders had been looking for an opportunity to have him arrested and killed (see Mark 3:6). Matters came to a head when pilgrims were gathering in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. Jesus and his followers were among them. Jesus caused a stir in the temple court when 'he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves; and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple' (Mark 11:15-16). Jesus demanded that the temple should not be used for commercial transactions, but should be a 'house of prayer', and 'for all the nations' (Mark 11:17). For the religious leaders this was the last straw. They dared not run the risk of a disturbance on the Passover, which that year coincided with the Sabbath, so they resolved to capture Jesus and have the Roman authority crucify him before the festival. They were successful, for they persuaded the Roman governor that Jesus was a dangerous rebel, and Jesus was crucified the Friday about noon (John 19:14), just as the lambs for the Passover were being killed.

### The Beloved Disciple's account of the Last Supper

A letter written from within the community of the Beloved Disciple opens with the following words: 'We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life. This life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us. We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete' (1 John 1:1-4).

The Beloved Disciple's account of the Last Supper is a good example of something that he is sharing with us so that our 'joy may be complete'. The Beloved Disciple was reclining next to Jesus at the Supper, so close that he could lean back against Jesus' breast and converse intimately with him (John 13:23-26). As we reflect on chapters 13 to 17 of his Gospel, we are invited to be the Beloved Disciple, for in Jesus' eyes that is what we are. Let us accept this invitation and take our place next to Jesus to celebrate with him his final meal.

The Beloved Disciple begins his account of the meal with the words: 'Jesus had always loved those who were his in the world, but now he showed how perfect his love was' (John 13:1). On Mount Sinai the people under the leadership of Moses undertook to enter into a covenant with God. God would be their God and they would be God's people. God pledged love to them, and they pledged themselves to welcome that love and to respond in love. Jesus' final meal is to celebrate a new and more intimate covenant. Our commitment is also more intimate. It is to love one another the way Jesus loves us, or rather, it is to allow the love he gives us to transform our hearts so that we will love others with his respect, intimacy and gentleness. Jesus is showing his love for us right through to the end. He pleads with us to do the same for

others, for his heart reaches out to the world and he knows that if he is to carry out his Father's mission, he will have to continue it through us.

The Beloved Disciple begins by focusing on the loving way Jesus washed his disciples' feet, an act that typified his affection for them. In laying aside his outer garments and taking them up again Jesus is making a symbolic gesture, for he wants us to know that he is willing to lay aside his life for us and take it up again so that he can continue to pour the Spirit of his love into our hearts as we carry on his life and his mission: 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13:34-35). The love he wants us to experience is the love he shares with God: 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (John 14:11). He assures us that God will give us a share in the Spirit that binds him to God: 'The Spirit abides with you; the Spirit will be in you' (John 14:17). 'You will know that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you' (John 14:20). 'My Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home with you' (John 14:23).

Reflecting on the Last Supper and preparing his readers for Jesus' crucifixion and death, the Beloved Disciple has Jesus say to his disciples (and so to us): 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me' (John 14:1). We can share in Jesus' communion with God, for we experience Jesus' own Spirit in our hearts, the Spirit who is the love binding Jesus and his Abba. Jesus promises to pray in us. Experiencing his prayer, we will experience his intimate communion with God (John 14:16-23). John records Jesus reminding his disciples that he is the vine and we are the branches. If we cling to him, we will bear the fruit of love (see John 15:5). 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love' (John 15:9).

Jesus knew that his disciples were not yet strong enough to continue believing in God after his death: 'The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone' (John 16:32). To sustain them, he went on immediately to remind them of his intimate communion with God: 'Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me'. It was this love that would enable him to go through the crucifixion, and it would be the same love that would sustain them.

The whole of John 17 is a prayer expressing Jesus' longing for us to enjoy his communion with God. However deep our longing it cannot compare with the longing of Jesus' heart that 'the love with which you, Father, have loved me may be in them, and I in them' (John 17:26). Jesus thanks God for his mission to give eternal life 'to all you have given me' (John 17:2). 'Father, the words that you gave to me I have given to them and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me' (John 17:8). Jesus wanted only one thing: to share with people what he had come to know about God. His beautiful humanity was such that he drew people to him, but only so that he could get them in touch with God who was gracing them to 'live to the full' (John 10:20). He wanted people to know that he was on a mission from God. He wanted to share with everyone his divinity: 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us' (John 17:21). 'You have loved them even as you have loved me' (John 17:23). Jesus prays to his Father: 'that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them' (John 17:26).

## The Synoptic account of the Last Supper

Because the meal was on the occasion of the festival of Passover, the Synoptic Gospels portray it as a Passover meal. There was no lamb, because the lambs were not available till the afternoon of the following day. There was no need for a lamb, since Jesus was there: 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world' (John 1:29).

Jesus wants to reassure the disciples that his death does not mean that he would not continue to be present among them, nurturing them with his love. He knows that they will always need his presence and the comfort and strength of his Spirit to motivate them to keep on loving. So, when he breaks the bread this night, he offers it to them, to us, promising that whenever we come together to break bread in this way, he would be with us, nourishing us with his love, with his prayer and with his Spirit. He gives himself to us: he gives us his body. To eat this bread is to open our hearts and minds and bodies to receive him into the very centre of our lives where he will continue to nourish us and to transform us by this intimate communion.

He then offers us the cup of blood-red wine. His heart will be pierced, torn apart not just by the soldier's lance but by the callous indifference of so many to the truth, and by our rejection not only of Jesus but of God's love which filled Jesus' heart. He offers the cup to us his disciples so that when we drink in the future from this cup it is his lifeblood which we will be drinking, his life poured out for us, his Spirit which he is offering us to nourish our love.

## Jesus' Agony in Gethsemane

We repeat here Mark's account of Jesus' agony in Gethsemane: 'They went to a place called Gethsemane; and Jesus said to his disciples: Sit here while I pray. He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And said to them: I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake. And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said: Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, let your will not mine be done' (Mark 14:32-36).

Clearly Jesus does not want to die. He said once: 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!' (Luke 12:49). He had been faithful to love, but to what effect? The religious leaders stubbornly resisted his message. The crowd was as fickle as ever. There was no apparent change in the Roman occupation and the resistance to it. Jesus' disciples weren't ready to carry on his mission. Whatever grief Jesus was experiencing and whatever was agitating him, he came, through his prayer, to a place of peace: 'let your will not mine be done'. He determined to carry out his mission, to do his Father's will, come what may! Whatever the religious and civil powers would do; Jesus knew what he would do. He would continue to carry out the mission given to him by God. He would continue to embrace sinners. He would continue to reveal God as a God of love. He would continue to challenge those who stubbornly resisted God's love for themselves and for others. He would continue to believe in the God whose love he experienced at his baptism and throughout his ministry.

What is God's will? Is Jesus saying that he doesn't want to die, but, since his Father wants him to die, he will obey? Peter does not support this distorted understanding: 'God has glorified his servant Jesus, whom *you* handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But *you* rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and *you* killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses' (Acts 3:13-15). God's role is seen in the resurrection. Jesus' death was brought about by the Jewish leaders, the Roman prefect and the fickle crowd!

Stephen's message is the same: 'You stiff-necked people, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit, just as your ancestors used to do. Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers' (Acts 7:51-52).

Likewise Paul: 'You became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God' (1 Thessalonians 2:14-15).

Listen to Jesus' parable: 'The owner of the vineyard sent slaves to collect the produce ... Some they beat, others they killed. He had still one other, a beloved son. Finally, he sent him to them, saying: Surely, they will respect my son. But those tenants said to one another: This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours. So they seized him, killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard' (Mark 12:6-8).

The mission given to Jesus was to reveal God's love, not to die on a cross. Jesus confronts his enemies: 'You are looking for an opportunity to kill me.' This is not because it is part of God's plan. On the contrary, it is 'because there is no place in you for my word' (John 8:37). Crucifying Jesus was a terrible injustice, and, as the psalmist knows: 'You are not a God who delights in sin' (Psalm 5:4).

Earlier in the book we emphasized Jesus' obedience. He emerged from the agony determined to continue to carry out his Father's will. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes: 'In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered' (Hebrews 5:7-9).

In the agony he struggled. Perhaps he felt he had failed to carry out the mission given him by God. Did he wonder whether he should have refrained from emptying the temple? Was he too hard on the priests? We are not invited into the details of his struggle. What we do know is that he emerged from the agony resolved to continue the mission given him by God. His Father's will has nothing to do with a crucifixion. That was a terrible miscarriage of justice, and so, by definition, against God's will. God's will is that Jesus continue to reveal God as love. He rose from his prayer resolved to keep eating with sinners, to keep hugging lepers, to keep on loving people out of their despair and the sin that so easily paralyzes, to keep challenging those who try to confine God within the limits of their traditions. He was determined to do this, come

what may! The tragedy is that the Jewish Council refused to listen, the Roman governor was too weak to reject the demands of the Jewish leaders, and the crowd was too frightened not to follow the instructions of their leaders. But all this was offset by the amazing love that Jesus displayed throughout the so-called 'trials' and on the cross.

#### Jesus' dying on the cross

Let us meditate now on the meaning of Jesus' dying. We are asking who he is: his final moments are a perfect statement of the answer. There, on the cross, we see his love, we see his communion with God, we see his faith and trust and obedience in perfect clarity. His manner of dying is his last word, his final statement about what it is to be a man; and his final revelation of God.

#### The Beloved Disciple's account of Jesus' dying

Before reading this section, it would be good to read slowly through the account of Jesus' passion and death as recorded in John chapters 18 and 19. Then, while keeping before our eyes the image of Jesus on the cross, we might go back and meditate on chapters 13 to 17. These chapters are intended by the Beloved Disciple to be reflections on the meaning of the cross, and it is helpful to imagine some of these words as being spoken by Jesus while he is offering up his life.

If we look only superficially at what is happening on the hill of Calvary, we might turn away with despair in our eyes. For the cross is a symbol of all that is ugly in the human condition. We see the abuse of religious and civil power, and the pride and petty pretensions of people who are frightened of the truth. We see an innocent man being murdered. All the pain of a broken, hurt, frustrated, lost world breaks over us. Questions about the meaning of life become acute. Does the life of the man dying there have any meaning? What was the good of all his words, and his love, and his dreams? And what value is there in the lives of those responsible for his death? When we look at Jesus on the cross, we can be forgiven for wondering if there is any hope for anyone. All our most cherished hopes are called into question.

Yet the Beloved Disciple saw something else. His eyes were fixed on the figure around whom everything was happening, and his main impression was of love: 'The hour had come for Jesus to pass from this world to the Father. He had always loved those who were his in the world, but now he showed how perfect his love was' (John 13:1).

In spite of the ugliness, the violence, and the stupidity of it all, this scene is about love; and the Beloved Disciple knows it. Jesus has given of himself, day in and day out. Now he is hanging there, a free man, innocent of evil amid injustice. Whatever others were doing to him and about him, he kept believing: believing in people, believing in the world, believing in himself. He kept believing in God, and the Beloved Disciple could hear Jesus still praying to this God as 'Abba'. He had given everything; now he was giving his life. The two thieves were there to remind everyone that Jesus belongs to his world; he belongs to us. But belonging to us, he shows finally and conclusively that sin is not the inevitable consequence of being human that we all thought it was. From the cross Jesus shows anyone who cares to stand there and contemplate him, that you don't have to despair. Physical death cannot take away life. Life is a gift from God the life-giver.

Jesus was rooted in love and built on love, and he remained in love on the cross. That is what the Beloved Disciple remembered. In the reality of the pain, suffering, failure, rejection, accusations, injustice, and all the apparently meaningless absurdity of the crucifixion, Jesus was in peace. He felt for those who were lost in it all, he spoke words of forgiveness and reconciliation; he kept striving to piece together the broken fragments of people's lives, right to the end.

The Beloved Disciple was desolate. The one who had given meaning to his life was being violently taken from him. But there was something about the way Jesus looked at him that said: 'Do not let your heart be troubled. Trust in God still, and trust in me' (John 14:1). 'Peace I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace the world cannot give, this is my gift to you. Do not let your heart be troubled or afraid' (John 14:27). 'You are sad now, but I shall see you again, and your heart will be full of joy, and that joy no one shall take from you' (John 16:22). 'Be brave: I have conquered the world' (John 16:33)

The Beloved Disciple as he stood at the foot of the cross realized something he had heard often enough, but that had never before really penetrated his heart: I am worth dying for! The world is worth loving and loving unto death! God was being revealed there on Calvary. Here were our ultimate questions being answered. His heart was breaking, and so was that of Jesus. But what he saw there and heard there remained in his memory as the ultimate revelation of God, the ultimate experience of meaning.

The Beloved Disciple had scattered with the rest, in fear. But then he met Jesus' mother, and her need as well as his need for her made him brave the crowd. Together they walked with Jesus through the city gate and out to the quarry and graveyard where Jesus was to die. He would never forget Jesus' final gift: 'Seeing his mother and the disciple he loved standing near her, Jesus said to his mother: Woman, this is your son. Then to the disciple he said: This is your mother' (John 19:26). A simple gesture, a love-gift from the heart, a sacred trust. And in it was the answer to his deepest quest. The one who had given him so much love needed him, wanted him, expected of him. The Beloved Disciple's life must have meaning. Jesus gave it meaning: 'And from that moment the disciple made a place for her in his home' (John 19:27). It was as though John had no choice now but to do what Jesus had often told him to do: 'Love just as I have loved you' (John 13:34 and 15:12).

Then Jesus died. How the Beloved Disciple loved him then! Jesus had said once: 'If you love me you will be loved by my Father, and I will love you and show myself to you' (John 14:21). Now, as he stood there, holding and being held by Jesus' mother, something happened that burst upon him and lifted him up. Seeing Jesus, he saw the Father revealed.

'One of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a lance; and immediately there came out blood and water' (John 19:34). Zechariah the prophet had dreamed of the ultimate gift of peace that God would pour out on his people. He described the darkness and the battle of evil against good. Even God's anointed would be killed. But God's word would stand forever: 'I will pour out a spirit of kindness and prayer. They will look on the one whom they have pierced; they will mourn for him as for an only son, and weep for him as people weep for a first-born child.'

When that day comes there will be great mourning. When that day comes, a fountain will be opened up for sin' (Zechariah 12:10-11, 13:1).

The heart of Jesus is the heart of God. When all that people could do to pierce the heart of God had been done, from the living heart of the glorified Jesus, his life-blood and the spring of living water poured out over the Beloved Disciple and Mary and over the world, to cleanse, to nurture, and to give life. This was the Spirit that Jesus had promised: 'If anyone is thirsty, come to me! Come and drink, you who believe in me! As Scripture says 'From his breast will flow fountains of living water' (John 7:37-38). From the disciple's breast, yes. But only because it first comes from the breast of Jesus.

Jesus had said: 'I live and you will live' (John 14:19). The Beloved Disciple knew it that day. The one whom his heart had loved was alive, in the embrace of God, in the bosom of his Father. From the cross Jesus drew the Beloved Disciple into that same embrace. And from that hill, he had no choice but to go out to everyone and draw them into the same mystery. He had seen God. He knew that 'God is love' and that eternal life, life without limit, was given to him from the cross, and was offered to anyone who believed. 'We saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made God known' (John 1:14, 18).

Truth (Greek: *aletheia*) is revealed when what is real is not forgotten because it is not hidden behind deceptive appearances. Glory (Greek: *doxa*) is a manifestation of truth that is so radiant and so beautiful that it arouses wonder and praise. Jesus had revealed the truth about God from the time that his disciples first met him (John 2:11), but never more radiantly, never more convincingly, and never more gloriously, than in the way he gave his life from the cross. This was Jesus' hour of glory (John 11:4, 13:31-32, 17:1), for his dying revealed the extent and quality of his relationship with his Father, and it revealed the truth about the God in whom Jesus placed his trust. In the words of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, Jesus, giving his love and his life from the cross, is 'the radiant light of God's glory' (Hebrews 1:3). There we see 'the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. God's glory, the glory on the face of Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:4, 6).

To say that Jesus on the cross is revealed as the only begotten Son of God, is to say that he is revealed there as the living, and life-giving image of his Father. Jesus did not spare his life, and so we come to know God as one who does not spare God's own life but pours it out for us even to giving us his own Beloved Son, taking the risk that we might hurt him, but giving him to us to love us all the same. As Paul says: 'God did not spare God's own Son but gave him up to benefit us all' (Romans 8:32).

Paul speaks for the Beloved Disciple, and for everyone who looks upon the crucified Jesus, when he writes: 'Now I can live for God. I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in this body I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and sacrificing himself for my sake. I cannot bring myself to give up God's gift' (Galatians 2:19-21).

The Synoptics' account of Jesus' dying

In the Synoptics there is no mention of Jesus' mother or the Beloved Disciple being by the cross. Luke does say that 'his friends stood at a distance' (Luke 23:49). Some women are mentioned as being there, mourning his death, but the overall impression is of Jesus dying utterly alone and forsaken.

Mark and Matthew refer their readers to Psalm 22, the cry of the poor man. The reader may wish to pray through the psalm (see pages 44-45), listening to the words as coming from the heart of Jesus on the cross. It captures the agony and the ecstasy, the abandonment and the joyful recognition of God's abiding presence.

The Synoptics all speak of the tearing of the temple veil. As we contemplate Jesus on the cross, the veil stopping us from seeing God is torn. We can now see God revealed and revealed as unconditional Love. The only thing that can stop us experiencing the intimacy of communion with God that Jesus experiences is our stubborn refusal to open our hearts to the love that never stops being offered to us. The veil that hid the face of God has now been removed. Gazing on the face of Jesus giving his life on the cross, anyone who wants can now see the face of God and live. Who God is has now been revealed for all to see.

They also observe that it is the Roman centurion, the non-believer, who recognizes the presence of God in Jesus. There is hope for us all!

Jesus is remembered as being faithful to the end. He kept believing in God; he continued to care for people; he kept trusting and praying and hoping and loving. He showed us that not even death can separate us from the love of God, and in doing so he gave us the final and convincing proof of the truth of all that he had ever said or done.

It was not Jesus' death that revealed God, it was 'the way he died' (Mark 15:39). It was the way he gave his life that powerfully symbolized the way he had given his life day in and day out to redeem people from 'sin' and draw them into the saving embrace of God, an embrace into which he yielded his own life from the cross.

May we be able to pray with Paul: 'it is no longer I who live. It is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

### Conclusion

To attempt to answer the question 'Who is Jesus', we must begin with his prayer, his communion with God, the Spirit of love that he shared with his Father, his divinity. His disciples came to see that the source of Jesus' life, his words and actions, was his fidelity to the mystical experiences that he believed flowed from his communion with God. He saw that if we are to be free from whatever is holding us back from living a full and productive life we must stay in touch with our heart and believe that we are loved. This is key to all the gospel portraits of Jesus, and he was faithful to his mission till he could say from the cross: 'It is accomplished' (John 19:30).

### Note



If Jesus' life ended with his death on the cross we would be asking 'Who *was* Jesus?' However, as the following chapter will demonstrate, Jesus' disciples had experiences after Jesus' death that convinced them that Jesus was, mysteriously but truly, alive and active in their lives. For the past two thousand years people have had similar experiences. So, as we explore the way Jesus' disciples portrayed him in the New Testament, we are asking 'Who *is* Jesus?' Let us turn now to the accounts of these post-crucifixion experiences found in the New Testament.