

o8. The Gift of Self



I. Holiness

Holiness is something that is predicated only of God

- God transcends ('remains beyond') everything we experience.

It is this that we speak of when we say of God:

'You alone are holy' (Revelation 15:4).

The word 'holy' speaks of God's transcendence. The people are told that they may not approach the mountain where God has chosen to reveal himself (Exodus 24:2). For the same reason the tent of meeting is to be pitched outside the camp (Exodus 33:7-11). The inner sanctuary in the temple, the 'holy of holies', is out of bounds for all but the high priest, and even his entry is severely restricted (Leviticus 16:2).

‘The Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness’ (Isaiah 5:16).

‘Thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite’ (Isaiah 57:15).

‘I will display my greatness and my holiness and make myself known in the eyes of many nations. Then they shall know that I am GOD’ (Ezekiel 38:23).

‘I am God, the Holy One in your midst’ (Hosea 11:9).

‘Holy and awesome is God’s name’ (Psalm 111:9).

‘Through those who are near me I will show myself holy, and before all the people I will be glorified’ (Leviticus 10:3).

All this changed when 'the Word was made flesh and pitched his tent among us' (John 1:14). In Jesus we see that God wanted us to draw close. Jesus is 'the holy one of God' (Mark 1:24, John 6:69). He is the tent of meeting (John 2:21).

People had always recognised the immanence of God in creation and in history, but those who experienced Jesus came to see that we are drawn into communion with the Holy One not by withdrawal from the body, from the mind, from thoughts and feelings, but by allowing the Holy One to draw us into the heart of the created world where God will transform us. In the light of the Incarnation, we came to the astonishing insight that, in the words of Teilhard de Chardin, God is indeed the 'heart' as well as the 'beyond' of everything.

Jesus also astonished us by showing that this is true of sinners and that we sinners are invited to enjoy God's embrace: 'All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them"' (Luke 15:1-2).

We sinners are called to be in communion with Jesus and so with the Holy One: 'For their sakes I sanctify ['make holy'] myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth' (John 17:19).

'It is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all' (Hebrews 10:10).

‘This is the will of God, your sanctification’ (I Thessalonians 4:3).

‘May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless’ (I Thessalonians 5:23).

‘God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple’ (I Corinthians 3:17).

‘I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship’ (Romans 12:1).

‘God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love’ (Ephesians 1:4).

‘As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct’ (I Peter 1:15).

We are made in God's image for God creates us to be in communion with him. God, 'the fountain of all holiness' (Second Eucharistic Prayer) is constantly pouring the Spirit of love into our hearts, drawing us into God's own life and so sharing God's holiness with us. Especially significant for this intimacy are times of prayer when our mind and heart are turned to God in loving attentiveness. It is in prayer that we say Yes to the communion which God is offering us. It is in prayer that we open our souls to receive God's offer of God's Self. It is in prayer that we grow in holiness – a holiness that is expressed in every aspect of our lives.

To be holy is to be in communion with God. It is a communion of the real self with the real God. Since God is love, it is obvious that holiness is intimately related to love.

Vatican II LG 39

‘The holiness of the Church is constantly shown forth in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful.

And so it must be.

It is expressed in many ways by those who, each in his or her own state of life, tend to the perfection of love.’

Since holiness consists in tending to the perfection of love and since prayer is this experience of being in communion with the all-holy God who is love, the link between prayer and holiness should be obvious. To understand the place of prayer in our lives it is important to understand that we are called and graced to share in Jesus' holiness, and so in the holiness of God.

When we speak of someone as being holy, or when we describe some place as a holy place (a 'sanctuary'), we are not speaking of a characteristic that is inherent in the person or place, or of something that can be acquired by endeavour or discipline. We are not the initiator of any attitude or action that can result in holiness. We are holy to the degree that God, the one who alone is holy, is dwelling in us in a communion of love which is transforming us into an ever more profound participation in the divine life. It is because God, the One who alone is holy, is present uniting us to Himself, that we are living in this divine communion. In prayer we consciously focus on this most profound dimension of our lives. In prayer we become holy.

In words spoken from her deathbed Therese of Lisieux (d.1897) tells us: 'Holiness does not consist in this or that practice. It consists in a disposition of the heart which makes us humble and little in the arms of God, well aware of our feebleness, but boldly confident in the Father's goodness.'

Jesus was speaking of holiness when he invited the Samaritan woman to drink from the well of his love: 'Drink of the water that I will give you and you will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in you a spring of water gushing up to eternal life' (John 4:14).

To grow in holiness we must cooperate with grace. Since God is love, God's gracious initiative comes to us as an offering, an invitation. Since we are created by God and created precisely for this divine communion, the invitation finds an echo in our longing. However, we are free to reject or to accept God's loving invitation. The transformation which we call holiness and which is union with God occurs only to the extent that we welcome God's grace and open our minds and hearts and wills and bodies to the transforming action of God's Spirit - the Spirit of love.

Endeavour and discipline are needed if we are to remain attentive to grace and to allow God's grace to transform us. We must be careful to be attentive to grace so that our endeavour and discipline is indeed in response to grace and not coming from our own ego. The spring of divine life (the spring of holiness) issues from the Heart of God alone. We need to allow God the vine-grower to prune away whatever is dead wood, as well as whatever is bearing fruit, that it may bear more. We need to cooperate as God the gardener clears away whatever is blocking the spring or hindering the flow of water.

We need to keep responding to grace by cooperating in keeping the channels open and clear. We need to allow the water of life to penetrate the soil of our lives. But we do not hold the shears; we do not do the pruning; we do not create the water or initiate its flow. A holy person is not a humanly perfect person. A holy person is one who has allowed him/her self to be transformed by communion in love with God – a communion initiated and sustained by God.

Herein lies the challenge of becoming holy. We have to learn that we cannot initiate holiness. No amount of control exercised by ourselves can produce or achieve holiness. God is holy. God is utterly transcendent, utterly beyond anything we can initiate. God, however, can and does directly act in our lives.

We have to allow the self-as-initiator to be 'lost'. 'If you lose your life for my sake you will find it' (Matthew 10:39). We have to let go control.

We have to become like a little child and allow to happen whatever God wants to happen as a result of His love. 'Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it' (Mark 10:15).

This self-denial is a denial or negating of the self (the ego): 'If you want to become my followers, you must deny yourself' (Mark 8:34). It is not a denial or negating by the self. It is allowing God to initiate. It is allowing grace to transform. It is accepting to be loved and to love only insofar as loving flows from the transformation. This requires attentive discipline of our natural tendency to take control. We must resist the temptation to want to 'possess' or 'achieve' holiness.

This is what it means to be ‘poor in spirit’ (Matthew 5:3). This is what it means to be detached, to be humble. This is what it means to be a child of God. This is what it means to cry out in childlike trust ‘Abba!’ – a cry that can be made only because the Spirit of Jesus has been poured into our hearts (Romans 5:5).

Saying Yes to God’s gracious offer to transform us into God’s Self through divine communion, we allow God to penetrate to the heart of our lives, and in so doing discover that God has drawn us to penetrate to the heart of God’s life. Prayer is making space for God’s transforming action in our lives. Prayer is giving ourselves, like a child, into his hands. Love will lead us along the path of holiness, for Love will take us ever more closely to God’s heart.

Jesus is the mediator who shows us how to walk this journey. Through giving us his love, the Spirit of love which he shares with the Father, he draws us to his heart and so to the heart of God. The journey of becoming holy is a journey of being transformed into Jesus: 'All are called to union with Christ, who is the light of the world, from whom we go forth, through whom we live, and towards whom our whole life is directed' (Vatican II, LG n.3).

'It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

Teresa of Avila (d.1582) insists that the path to holiness and so the journey of prayer is to be in the company of Jesus: 'It is for you to look at him. He never takes his eyes off you' (Way of Perfection 26,3). 'Mental prayer in my opinion is nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with Him who we know loves us' (Life 8.5).

Praying Psalm 99 with Jesus we reflect on the holiness of the Most Holy Trinity. Jesus addresses God as 'Holy Father' (John 17:11).

In the Book of Revelation we hear the hymn: 'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come' (Revelation 4:8).

The song of the crucified and risen Jesus, addressed to ‘God the Almighty’, includes the words: ‘You alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your judgments have been revealed’ (Revelation 15:4).

In a later hymn we hear: ‘You are just, O Holy One, who are and were, for you have judged these things’ (Revelation 16:5).

Jesus is acknowledged as holy: ‘The child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God’ (Luke 1:35).

Peter says of Jesus: ‘We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God’ (John 6:69).

The Letter to the Hebrews presents Jesus as a high priest who is ‘holy’ (Hebrews 7:26).

The Spirit of love that is the communion between Jesus and his Father is called the 'Holy Spirit' 89 times in the New Testament, and many times as the Spirit who makes holy ('sanctifies'). Peter addresses his First Letter to: 'you who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace be yours in abundance' (1 Peter 1:2).

Consequently those who are united to Jesus are drawn into this holiness and are regularly spoken of as holy ('saints'; see John 17:19; Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 3:7; Ephesians 1:1 and 2:21; Colossians 1:2,12).

To quote again from Peter. 'As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written: You shall be holy, for I am holy' (1 Peter 1:15-16).

Paul writes: 'Now that you have been freed from sin and have accepted God as your Master, the advantage you get is sanctification [being made holy]. The end is eternal life' (Romans 6:22).

2. Love

Though it is John and not Paul who uses the expression 'God is love' (1 John 4:8), from everything that Paul writes we can be confident that he could readily make this statement his own. Jesus who is the perfect revelation of God showed in the way he constantly gave himself that love in the sense of self-giving is the essence of what it is to be God. Creation itself is an expression of God's self-giving, a 'word' of love. When God revealed himself to Moses it was as a liberator who hears the cry of the poor and who is determined to redeem them (Exodus 3:7). His word was a challenge to Moses to offer himself as God's instrument in delivering the Hebrew people from slavery. The call to be an instrument of God's love is at the very centre of the law. This call has been fulfilled in the heart of Jesus, for in him, at last, love has come to its perfection. In Jesus' self-giving, especially on the cross, we see a human heart responding perfectly to God's gift of self, to God's love.

The love of the heart of Jesus for Paul is the love given to Jesus by God. It is this love that is poured into our hearts through the gift of the Spirit, and it is this love that overflows from our hearts to embrace our brothers and sisters. As Paul writes elsewhere: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5).

One of the central texts of the Torah reads: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might' (Deuteronomy 6:5). Because the word 'love' is translated in the Greek version by ἀγαπάω, inevitably Paul uses this verb to speak of our basic relationship with God.

However, it may come as a surprise to discover how seldom he does so – in fact only three times:

1. In the following quotation: ‘As it is written: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who **love** him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).
2. ‘Anyone who **loves** God is known by him’ (1 Corinthians 8:3).
3. ‘We know that all things work together for good for those who **love** God’ (Romans 8:28).

Perhaps even more surprisingly, he speaks of our loving Christ only once, in the final sentence of his Letter to the Ephesians:

‘Grace be with all who have an undying **love** for our Lord Jesus the Messiah’ (Ephesians 6:24).

Furthermore, he never uses the noun ἀγάπη with either God or Jesus as its object. In the context of human behaviour, the noun always, and the verb on every occasion other than the four noted, refer to our relationship with other people. In speaking of our response to Jesus and to God Paul prefers to speak of 'faith'.

The love we are to have for one another is not any kind of love. It is God's love flowing through us to others. Paul sees love as divine. It flows from God to Jesus, from Jesus to us, and thanks to this gift from us to each other. Jesus' disciples are to have the same universal dimension to their love that Jesus had. This universal love is nurtured within the community of love where Jew and Gentile share in the same Spirit.

In this love is fulfilled the promise made through the prophet Ezekiel:

‘A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances’ (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

In his love, Jesus is harnessing for his Father all the energies of love. It generates within us an imperative urging us to love as he loves; to love with his love. If it was only good example which we were receiving, we might admire Jesus, but we would despair of ever being able to do what we see Jesus doing. Jesus is offering us more than example. He is offering us his own Spirit, the very love which he enjoys with the Father. With this Spirit we will be able to love our brothers and sisters, for we will have Jesus' own love to offer them.

The fountain of love that has poured into the heart of Jesus from his Father and which he in turn has poured into the hearts of his disciples, is to continue to be poured out in their mutual love. This is clearly not simply a love of friendship. It is not the kind of love which we experience with people who treat us well. It is not a response to an obviously attractive quality which other people might exhibit. It is our sharing in the creative love which God has and which Jesus reveals.

As Paul writes: 'God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). This is the kind of love which Paul urges on us: 'Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us' (Ephesians 5:2).

When Paul says that ‘**the only thing that counts is faith working through love**’, he is quoting traditional Jewish wisdom. Judaism does not separate faith from obedience; it does not think of faith as an intellectual assent that leaves one’s behaviour untouched. To believe means to commit oneself to do God’s will ‘with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deuteronomy 6:5).

Does not Jesus affirm the same truth: ‘Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven’ (Matthew 7:21).

James writes: 'Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves' (James 1:22).

'Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead' (James 2:17).

James is speaking about 'works of faith', not 'works of the law'. He is insisting, like Paul, that real faith bears fruit in love. Of course it matters what we do. Of course we must obey the will of God.

Paul's comments throughout this letter concerning the law do not claim that the law does not in any way express God's will. Nor is Paul suggesting that people should set out to disobey the law. He is not claiming that the law is totally irrelevant to the lives of Christians, or that circumcision is valueless for Jews.

In a letter composed later to the Romans Paul will ask: 'What advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?. He will reply: 'Much in every way' (Romans 3:1-2).

In so far as obeying the law is an expression of faith and bears fruit in love, Paul thanks God for the law and rejoices in the gift he has as a Jew. But when observance of the law bypasses faith and is an obstacle to love, it cannot stand.

Furthermore, for Gentile converts to take on circumcision is to turn their back on the freedom offered them by Jesus. God has now revealed himself and his will in Christ. The law, or any other criterion of behaviour, must be checked against what God has revealed in Christ, not Christ reduced within the confines of the law. To abandon Christ for the law is to ‘**cut yourselves off from Christ**’. It is to ‘**fall away from grace**’ (Galatians 5:4).

Paul spoke of Christ delivering us ‘**from the present evil age**’ (Galatians 1:4), and redeeming us ‘**from the curse of the law**’ (Galatians 3:13; see 4:5). He pleads with the Galatians not to enslave themselves to anything or anyone other than Christ (see Galatians 1:10).

Note that the hope, the faith and the love to which Paul calls them are all experienced ‘**in the Messiah**’ (Galatians 5:6).



CAPTIVATE US Leah Shafer



Your face is beautiful
And Your eyes
Are like the stars
Your gentle hands
Have healing
There inside the scars
Your loving arms
They draw me near
And Your smile
It brings me peace
Draw me closer oh my Lord
Draw me closer Lord to Thee



*Captivate us, Lord Jesus
Set our eyes on You
Devastate us
With Your presence
Falling down
And rushing river,
Draw us nearer
Holy fountain consume us,
With You
Captivate us Lord Jesus,
With You*



Your voice is powerful, and Your words are radiant bright.
In Your breath and shadow, I will come close and abide.
You whisper love and life divine, and Your fellowship is free.
Draw me closer oh my Lord, draw me closer Lord to Thee.



Captivate us, Lord Jesus, set our eyes on You.

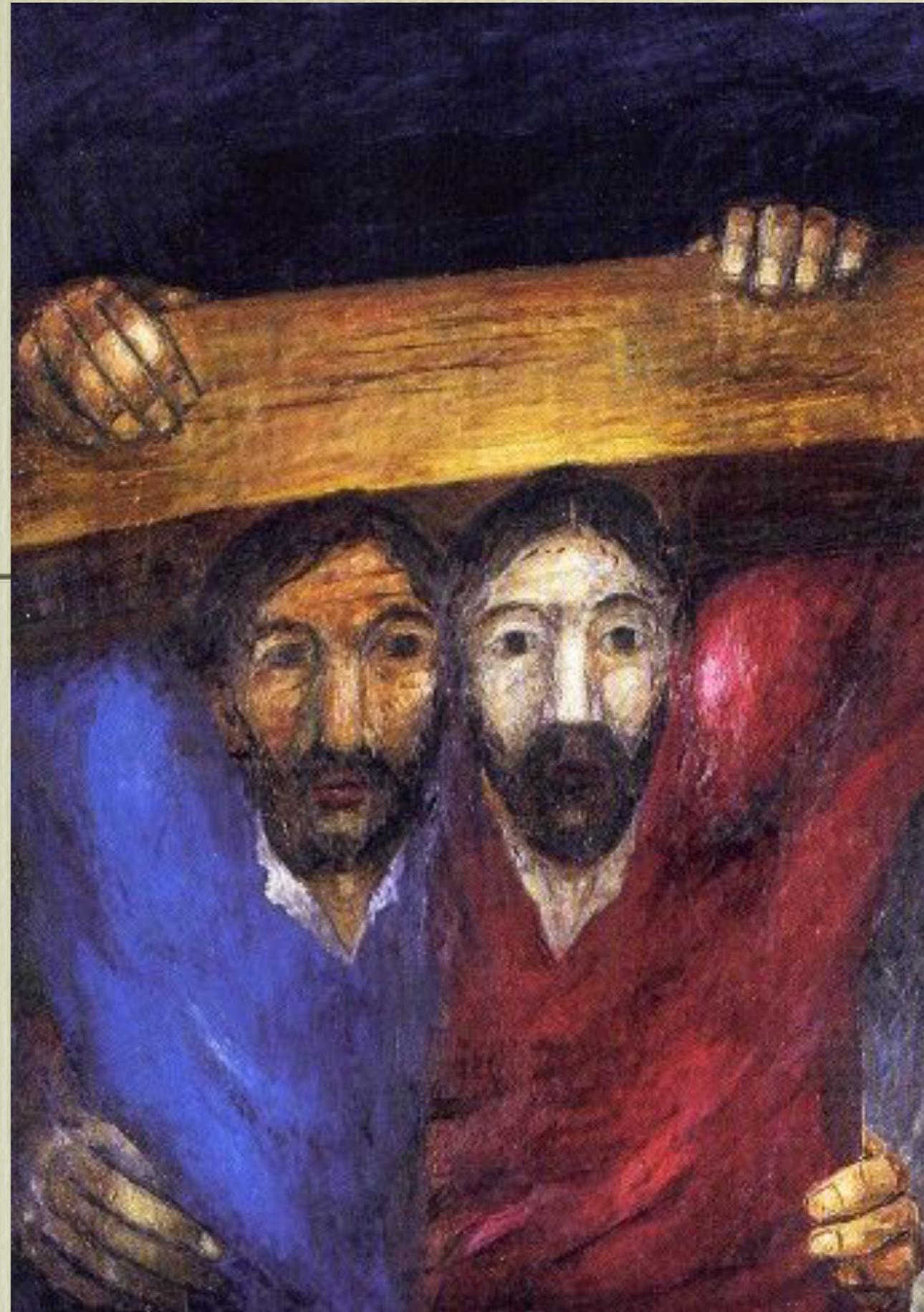
Devastate us with Your presence falling down

And rushing river, draw us nearer, Holy fountain consume us, with You

Captivate us Lord Jesus, with You



Let everything be lost in the shadows
Of the light of Your face
Let every chain be broken from me
As I'm bound in Your grace
For Your yoke is easy,
Your burden is light
You're full of wisdom,
power and might
And every eye will see You



Captivate us, Lord Jesus, set our eyes on You.

Devastate us with Your presence, falling down.

And rushing river, draw us nearer, holy fountain consume us, with You.

Captivate us Lord Jesus with You

