

“TRACES OF THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE”

2. The Encounter with Christ

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THE EVENT

What we have described as human experience is the prerogative of all men and women.

The only genius who grasped all the different human factors, brought them to light, and revealed their definitive meaning by giving them value in an unimaginable and unexpected way was Jesus Christ. The historical encounter with this man constitutes an encounter with the resolving and clarifying point of view of human experience.

It is precisely this encounter that we wish to attain once again. Hence let us examine the initial moments in which it emerged. Here is the first historical record of the fact: “On the following day as John stood again with two of his disciples, Jesus passed, and John stared hard at Him and said, ‘Look, there is the lamb of God.’ Hearing this, the two disciples followed Jesus. Jesus turned around, saw them following and said, ‘What do you want?’ They answered, ‘Rabbi (which means Teacher), where do you live?’ ‘Come and see,’ He replied; and so they went and saw where He lived, and stayed with Him the rest of the day. It was about the tenth hour.”⁸

One of the two is the historian narrating the fact and, now, as a centenarian, he remembers the moment in detail, for it marked the beginning of a new life for him.

The story proceeds with the encounters of Philip and Nathanael. The latter was the “old fellow” in the company, a shrewd individual, always on his guard not to be cheated by anyone. “Come and see,” they say to him. This is always the most persuasive argument. Jesus sees Nathanael arriving and He says to him: “Here comes a true Israelite incapable of deceit.” “How do you know me?” replies Nathanael, almost as if he does not want to be flattered. “Before Philip called you I saw you under the fig tree.” And Nathanael yields immediately: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God.”⁹

At this moment this man’s reputation began to emerge among the people. After their initial astonishment, the disciples are so struck by what He says and the way He looks at them, that they accept Him immediately; that is, they place their trust in Him. The following chapter of the Gospel tells about the miracle at the wedding of Cana and ends with these words: “Jesus performed the first miracle. And his disciples believed in him.”¹⁰ This shows that the event developed over time.

If those disciples had not seen Him again they would have forgotten that strange encounter, even though they had acknowledged Him as the Messiah since the first meeting. Instead, to »

⁸ John 1:35-9.

⁹ See John 1:45-9.

¹⁰ John 2:11.

* Source: “Traces of the Christian Experience” in *The Journey to Truth Is an Experience*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2006, pp. 59-68.

» reencounter Him was like deepening an original impression. They reinforced their belief in this continuous convergence of impressions and feelings. Not that previously they had been insincere or non-believing; rather, they followed the guiding principle of human awareness that implies this development.

Thus, even at other times, after the wedding of Cana, the Gospel notes: "and His disciples believed in Him." A depth is achieved that brings one to that degree of confidence and conviction where one is finally persuaded: *one is certain*.

Let us now single out those *aspects of Christ's personality* that were and are exceptional to their eyes and ours.

AN EXTRAORDINARY PRESENCE

Above all Christ shows authoritativeness and superiority on every occasion.

Let us try to imagine those people who for weeks had seen Him return to the seashore, and then for three successive years continuously witnessed extraordinary episodes... until some abandoned everything to follow Him always and everywhere.

They were used to troublemakers, especially in those years when everyone awaited the Messiah, and surely troublemakers arouse alarm. But Jesus lies outside the usual scheme of things. He does not incite the people to take up arms against the Roman Empire. The leaders will be most preoccupied with stalking Him to catch Him out and trip him up, thus unwittingly bearing witness.

It is midday, and Christ retires to a small house to eat, but the people crowd the entrance. He continues to speak. The Pharisees are in the first row. They bring Jesus a man who has been paralysed for twenty years. Not being able to get him through the doorway, they let him in through the roof just behind Jesus. Jesus turns and says: "Be confident, son, your sins are forgiven." Immediately the Pharisees think: "This man is blasphemous; who can forgive sins except God?" Turning from the poor ill man to the people Jesus says: "Now which of these is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven' or 'Get up and walk?' But to prove to you that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins, I say to you: 'Get up, pick up your bed and go home.'" And the man gets up and makes his way amid the understandably loud cries of the crowd.¹¹ And such events occur daily: "He arrived in the evening tired of healing" is a refrain in the Gospel.¹²

THE RULER OF NATURE

Those who follow Him witness His exceptional command over nature.

"Then He got into a boat, followed by His disciples. Without warning a storm broke over the lake, so violent that the waves were breaking right over the boat. But He was asleep. So they went to Him and woke Him saying: 'Save us, Lord, we are going down!' And He said to them: 'Why are you so frightened, you men of little faith?' And with that, He stood up and rebuked the winds and the sea; and all was calm again. The men were astounded and said: 'Whatever kind of man is this? Even the winds and the sea obey him.'¹³ »

¹¹ See Matthew 9:11-8.

¹² Mark 5:32ff.

¹³ Matthew 8:23-7.

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HE KNOWS AND UNDERSTANDS US

But the most persuasive power, which made Nathanael yield and which takes hold of each of us is this mastery over our minds and hearts: His understanding. It is normal for Him to read one's past, to discern one's intentions so that everyone feels that even the secret parts of their human personalities belong to Him.

He feels tired and sits near a well and a woman comes to draw water. "Give me some water," Jesus asks her, and she begins to tease Him in a rough, tactless manner. "If you knew who is asking you: 'Give me some water,' you would ask Him for some. The well is deep and you haven't got a bucket, how can you give me water? ... Go and call your husband." "But I have no husband." "You are right to say 'I have no husband'; for although you have had five, the one you have now is not your husband."¹⁴ And she relents.

When people met prostitutes or tax collectors they had to keep their distance so as not to be contaminated by them; this was a rather clever way to make moral law penetrate thick heads. But He behaved in a completely different way. He even ate with these people.

He entered Jericho and was making his way through the town when a man, whose name was Zacchaeus, one of the senior tax collectors and a wealthy man, made his appearance. He was eager to see the kind of man Jesus was, but being so short, he could not see Jesus for the crowd. So he ran on ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus, who was to pass that way. When Jesus reached the spot He looked up and spoke: "Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry, because I must stay at your house today." And Zacchaeus hurried down and welcomed Him joyfully. Everyone complained when they saw what was happening. "He has gone to stay at a sinner's house," they said. But Zacchaeus stood his ground and said to the Lord, "Look, sir, I am going to give half my property to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody I will pay him back four times the amount."¹⁵

Before Him there is no barrier. He easily penetrates the complicated tangle of the human heart, by surprise or intuition. It is as if what I own is also His. Nothing disarms us or makes us yield with a sense of total abandonment as much as being discovered and understood.

LORD OF THE WORD

He had an irresistible, intelligent way of discussing matters. The Pharisees and the Scribes were renowned for their dialectic; however, before Him they were powerless.

Then the Pharisees went away to devise a way to trap Him in what He said. And they sent their disciples to Him, together with the Herodians, to say, "Master, we know that you are an honest man and teach the way of God in an honest way, and that you are not afraid of anyone, because a man's rank means nothing to you. Tell us your opinion, then. Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" But Jesus was aware of their malice and replied, "You hypocrites! Why do you set this trap for me? Let me see the money you pay the tax with." They handed him a denarius, and he said, "Whose head is this? Whose name?" "Caesar's," they replied. He then said to them, "Very well, give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar—and to God what belongs to God." This reply took them by surprise, and they left Him alone and went away.¹⁶

"At daybreak He appeared in the temple again; and as all the people came to Him, He sat down and began to teach them. »

¹⁴ See John 4:7-30.

¹⁵ Luke 19:1-18.

¹⁶ Matthew 22:15-22.

» The Scribes and Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught committing adultery; and making her stand there in full view of everybody, they said to Jesus, 'Master, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery, and Moses has ordered us in the Law to condemn women like this to death by stoning. What have you to say?' They asked Him this as a test, looking for something to use against Him. But Jesus bent down and started writing on the ground with His finger. As they persisted with their question, He looked up and said, 'If there is one of you who has not sinned, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.' Then He bent down and wrote on the ground again. When they heard this they went away one by one, beginning with the eldest."¹⁷

The trap is sprung and it challenges their hypocrisy.

The Master's word is so compelling and so difficult not to take seriously that it is overwhelming and even paralyzing: "The police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees who said to them, 'Why haven't you brought Him?' The police replied, 'No one has ever spoken like Him.'"¹⁸

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

But another characteristic distinguishes Him. Those powerful people who can fathom our psyche, who speak from their chairs of learning, are seldom very good. He, instead, "took a little child and set him by his side."¹⁹ And again, "Now soon afterward He went to a town called Nain, accompanied by His disciples and a great number of people. When He was near the gate of the town it happened that a dead man was being carried out for burial, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a considerable number of the townspeople were with her. When the Lord saw her He felt sorry for her. 'Do not cry,' He said. Then He went up and put His hand on the bier and the bearers stood still, and He said, 'Young man, I tell you to get up,' and the dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him to his mother."²⁰

The experience of goodness is the encounter with an attitude that values and enhances us and gives us hope for what we shall become; it is "peace on earth," for God is good. And God is good because He saves us. Redemption is the announcement of the positive in life.

Before those who see Him there so tall and powerful, He inclines himself over a flower in the field and describes its "garb"; He always speaks kindly and sensitively of the sun and rain. Not: "How dreary, it's raining today," or "the sun is really bothering me." And His attention towards man is full of infinite understanding, unreservedly friendly and affectionate: even all the hairs of your head are counted.

He has compassion for those in grief and is unable to dine without first having healed. He cries over Lazarus and weeps over the city.

And He was human not only because of His fondness for nature or even the most insignificant details of an individual, or because He was so affectionate but also because He could share in human joy. It is particularly meaningful that He should attribute a special value to sharing a meal. The greatest act of His religion is identified with a meal. The kingdom is often compared to a banquet and the final glory is described as sitting at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.²¹ »

¹⁷ John 8:2-9.

¹⁸ John 7:45-6.

¹⁹ Luke 9:47; see Mark 9:36, 10:16.

²⁰ Luke 7:11-15.

²¹ See Karl Adam, *Christ Our Brother*. New York: Collier Books 1931, chapter 1.

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WHO IS THAT MAN?

It was only natural that the people who followed Him, particularly those who were with such an outstanding personality all the time, should have asked themselves: "Who is this man?"

Nicodemus, a learned and cultured man who lived the human experience intensely, immediately recognized that that man could only come from God.

But even the uncouth and illiterate people who left everything to follow Him did not behave differently. Romano Guardini observes: "They approach Him, listen to Him, come back and ultimately are impressed by a personality without compare. This impression gradually becomes a conviction: Jesus is superior to any other being."²²

There is something inexplicable about Him, something we cannot quite grasp.

By sharing their lives with Christ it became obvious that it was only too natural, too right to trust Him. To oppose this evidence would be tantamount to going against oneself. Thus they were unable not to believe in Him simply because He may have made a statement that they did not understand: "in order to be coherent with what we have seen, to be coherent with ourselves, we have to accept even that which you say and yet we cannot understand. Only in you do we find our meaning." We could use these words to translate Peter's reasonable attitude in the episode described in chapter 6 of Saint John's Gospel.²³

What is the difference between the excited crowd a few days before this episode and this small group of faithful followers, who are also enthusiastic but in a different way? The crowd sought Him for their own reasons and that is why, when He began to explain why He had come—an explanation that went beyond anyone's expectations—they left Him. They were more attached to their own limits than to the truth.

But the group of the faithful did not leave even though they did not understand. When they asked Him "Who are you?" and He answered mysteriously: "My Father and I are one," they accepted these words, even though they did not understand them.²⁴

They would understand only on the day of the Pentecost, when they would be given a supernatural intelligence. As we have already observed, a few hours before He ascended into Heaven, they asked Him: "Master, when will you establish this Kingdom of Israel?"²⁵

They understood very little even after His death and resurrection. But they preserved the mysterious answer because "He had spoken it."

THE ENCOUNTER TODAY

The very human disposition of the early faithful is still the same inevitable starting point today.

Christ is walking with the apostles and He happens upon a rock on the road: "Who do people say I am? ... And you, who do you say I am?" ... "You are Christ, Son of the living God." Peter pronounced words without understanding their true deep meaning. "You are fortunate because God and not your spirit suggested this to you. You are Peter and on this rock I shall build my Church."²⁶

Even today Christianity is built on such a response. "Who do people say I am? Books, professors, film directors, freelance writers, party leaders, your father, your mother, your friends, who do they say I am? ... The first socialist, the first communist, the first liberal, »

²² *Essenza del cristianesimo*. Brescia: Morcelliana 1993.

²³ See John 6:67-9.

²⁴ John 10:30.

²⁵ See Acts 1:6.

²⁶ Matthew 16:13, 15, 16, 17ff.

» the greatest religious genius, a visionary, a sorcerer, a lucky upstart.”

“And you, who do you say I am?”

“And you, who do you say I am?” Our adult faith begins as a personal response to this question.

As long as the world exists, a human voice will confront the consciences of others and repeat the question, which is a proposal: “And you, who do you say I am?” And the answer: “You are God!” will spring in all times from the same disposition, from the same reasons, as did Peter’s response.

It is extremely important to show how this fundamental dialogue, this decisive interlocutory choice, has a double component. First, there is the fact of an encounter—the encounter with the reality of Christ—an inevitable occasion, an indelible event in the life of the person who has this experience. Second, there is the attention paid to that fact, our “remaining” in that encounter, our commitment to it. This is not inevitable. This is our free choice.

COMMITMENT

But what does a commitment to an encounter regarding our existence mean, if we do not invest in it the powers of our sensitivity and awareness, that is, our very humanity?

Thus, the discovery of Christ as a definitive reality to whom we must cling is a consequence of *sharing our lives (convivenza)*. So the more we are aware of our own humanity, take seriously our experience, and live our existence intensely, the more our sharing our life with the historical reality of Christ will reveal the value of the encounter.

Christ proposes Himself with a question, but our response coincides with acknowledging Him as the only possible answer to our human pathway. A commitment to this path is still a condition for perceiving and understanding the gift of the encounter with Christ. The simpler the person, the more he or she lives that commitment, perhaps even unawares: thus it was with the apostles and the first disciples.

For us, reality is clouded and our eyes search for the light that gives it meaning. The voice of one Man in history reaches us: “I am that light ... He who follows me will not walk in darkness.”²⁷ From the ocean of history, a Word suddenly emerges that permeates all things and gives them form and coherence: “Dawn breaks and the morning star rises in your hearts.”²⁸ But only by listening and by opening oneself to the world and to that light, by becoming sensitive to the former and receptive to the latter, can one understand that that Light is true.

The great adventure of human life is to reiterate that Man’s proposal and to verify it. This is the great adventure that makes life and history pregnant with meaning, rather than a series of events. This is the great adventure that frees us from the feeling of futility and builds on the power of hope.

A passage from the Gospels captures the drama of this dialogue between human awareness and the presence of Christ magnificently: “When they drew near the village to which they were going, He made as if to go on; but they pressed Him to stay with them. ‘It is nearly evening,’ they said, ‘and the day is almost over.’ So He went to stay with them. Now while He was with them at table, He took the bread and said the blessing, then He broke it and handed it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized Him; but He had vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, ‘Did not our hearts burn within us as He talked to »

²⁷ John 8:12.

²⁸ 2 Peter 1:19.

» us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?"²⁹

Sharing that gesture, that is, the breaking of bread, became for them an enlightening idea that explained their journey with that unexpected foot traveller. By the light of that gesture they "verified" the entire experience of that encounter.

We can only ask ourselves one question now: why did that idea not dawn on them earlier? That the idea should emerge is a *gift*. It is *Grace*.

We remind you that it is possible to send questions and witnesses to the website <http://eventi.comunioneliberazione.org/gscontributi/>

²⁹ Luke 24:28-32.