

# GOD SENT HIS SON

By MATTHEW O'CONNELL

**I**F we read the four gospels for the image they present of Christ, if we try to discern the self-consciousness of Christ manifested in the words attributed to him by the evangelists, one broad differentiation stands out rather strongly. In the synoptics we are shown a Christ at home in this world, conscious of his being a part of the visible universe and of the society of his time. He is indeed more than a man, but he is a man, with a keen sense of the natural world's pageantry, with a discerning eye for the everyday life of his people, for their problems and hopes and fears. He moves among his contemporaries as their fellow, a teacher in parables and a wonder worker who presents his message as the answer to the age old religious yearnings of the chosen people.

In the fourth gospel the perspective is quite different. St John shows us a Christ come from beyond the world, conscious of his apartness. He is indeed a man, but a man who is in a unique position, mediating between the Father and his fellow-men, a man with a keen sense of mission, with an ever-present consciousness that in his person the Father is revealed to men, that in his words and deeds the Father is 'glorified'. He does not act primarily as a teacher in parables nor speak of the fulfilment, in his message, of prophecy and religious desire, but centres the attention of men on his own person as the sole way to the Father.

## *The mission of the Son*

At the moment when the definitive passage of Christ to the Father begins,<sup>1</sup> when he is entering upon the final and decisive phase of his redemptive work, St John sums up the interior experience of Christ thus: 'He knew that it was from God He came and to God He was going'.<sup>2</sup> Between origin and end there is a mission, and the discourses of the Book of Signs manifest, from varying viewpoints and in varying images, Christ's sense of mission and mediatorship, which finds its sharpest expression in the discourses of the night before he suffered.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 13, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 13, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 13-17.

Christ speaks of himself always as the one sent by the Father to men in order to reveal him to them and to bring them to him. The key texts in the discourses are filled with this sense of mission: what Christ does,<sup>1</sup> or teaches,<sup>2</sup> is what the Father has sent him to do and teach. He is burdened with a feeling of isolation because he alone knows and can tell of the Father,<sup>3</sup> yet men either reject him or are unable, even with good will, to understand him in a more than superficial way (the disciples before the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit). At the same time, while isolated from men even though among them, he is 'not alone, for the Father is with me',<sup>4</sup> and the gospel is saturated with the atmosphere of Christ's intimate oneness and familiarity with the Father.

Christ's mission is to be the spokesman of the Father, a prophet. It is instructive, for gaining some insight into Christ's inner experience of mission, to compare this experience, in so far as the fourth gospel allows us to glimpse it, with that of the great Old Testament prophets.

There is in Christ no sense of sinfulness and of the need to be cleansed, such as Isaiah experienced when he was called by God.<sup>5</sup> There is no sense of inadequacy such as welled up in Jeremiah;<sup>6</sup> none of his insecurity, his fear of betrayal by God, his rebellion;<sup>7</sup> no thought of being duped by God and outcast from among men, no resistance to divine inspiration or need to learn by inner violence done him that if he tried to keep the divine word unspoken lest his preaching bring more sorrow upon him, the word would become a burning fire within him, affecting even his body, breaking down his resistance and forcing him to speak, come what might.<sup>8</sup>

Christ moves in a totally different atmosphere. The descent of the Spirit upon him at the Jordan is not the revelation to Christ of his mission, but a notification to others of what Christ is.<sup>9</sup> In Christ himself there is rather the sense of continuity between the eternity out of which he came and the earthly life wherein he is the one sent by the Father.<sup>10</sup> He comes as one who sees the Father and therefore speaks.<sup>11</sup> What he hears, he hears not as a simple man drawn into a dark and alien situation filled with fear and trembling, but as one who is at home with the Father.<sup>12</sup> Christ moves in an atmosphere

<sup>1</sup> Jn 5, 30.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 16, 32; cf 8, 16, 29.

<sup>7</sup> Jer 15, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Cf 8, 58.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 7, 6; 8, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Isai 6, 1-13.

<sup>8</sup> Jer 20, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Jn 1, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 1, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Jer 1, 4-10.

<sup>9</sup> Jn 1, 32-34.

<sup>12</sup> Jn 3, 31-32.

of uniquely profound intimacy with the Father,<sup>1</sup> of vital community of life that stretches back to eternity and will be manifested to the full again after his return to the Father.<sup>2</sup> Yet this intimacy does not weaken Christ's sense of mission, of being an agent of the Father's loving redemptive purpose;<sup>3</sup> even in prayer he expresses his very intimacy itself as that of 'one sent'.<sup>4</sup>

*The revelation of the Father: Christ, the 'Word' incarnate*

The Son who came into the world, sent by the Father, is the 'Word' of God. He is the Word spoken from eternity to eternity, spoken before all beginnings, and all times, the Word in which the Father speaks himself to himself and in which he contemplates his own eternal beauty. When he sent his Son into the world, he spoke his divine Word into the reality of flesh and blood, of human existence and human spirit and human experience. As the human spirit forms for itself a body and thereby expresses itself in the dimension of the material, so the Father sends his Word forth, united to the reality of a concrete human being, and thereby expresses himself in the dimension of the human. The whole hierarchically structured reality of Christ – spirit and matter, with body as incarnation and expression of spirit – is God's Word as spoken into time and space, given visibility and tangibility. The eternal Word of God, in which the total living reality of the godhead is expressed and mirrored, becomes thus accessible to men in the words and actions and whole humanity of Christ. What an extraordinary oneness of eternity and time, of the divine and the human! Upon it the human mind and human language break, evoking St John's confused and breathless outcry:

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our own eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have touched of the Word of Life – and the Life was revealed, and we saw it, and we bear witness to it and preach to you eternal Life which was with the Father and has been revealed to us – what we have seen and heard, that we preach to you, that you too may have fellowship with us, our fellowship that is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jn 3, 35; 5, 19–20; cf 8, 16, 29; 16, 32.

<sup>3</sup> Cf 3, 16–17.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 11, 42; 17, 3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 17, 5; cf 10, 38.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Jn 1, 1–3.

Christ is indeed the Word of Life, the life-giving Word. To grasp such a juxtaposition of 'life-giving' and 'word' we need not look to the fairy-tale with its secret words of power, or even to the word God spoke that was creative of the universe<sup>1</sup> and now sustains it.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the fairy-tale and the scriptural account are themselves understandable only by analogy with the words of men. In an age when the word has been betrayed and debased as rarely before, we have, in self-defence, grown used to thinking of it simply as a counter for the transmission of factual information, with the mathematical symbol as the ideal of accuracy, and the computer as the model 'speaker', and as far inferior to music or the other arts for anything resembling a 'life-giving communication'. Yet the human word, certainly in privileged situations and potentially in every situation, possesses characteristics that allow us to see how the Son of God, become incarnate, can be understood as the life-giving Word of God spoken into our world and to us.<sup>3</sup>

*The revelation of the Father: the human word*

The human word creates community between men. Whatever be the subject of which men speak, words can (and ideally, should) bring them near to each other, establish relationships between them. Such efficacy is not automatic. Any exchange of words is, as far as communication in depth is concerned, only an occasion, an invitation to open ourselves to each other. And words will be the medium of such opening of self and of corresponding answer, only where speaker and hearer possess themselves interiorly and are willing to surrender themselves. (Yet, paradoxically, even where pride or fears or insecurity put up a wall between a man and his neighbour and he uses words as a shield and a veil, his very words will betray him, betray that here is a human being who lives in an unnatural state of dis-unity, of dis-traction.) But whenever the human word is the expression (however trivial be the matter spoken of) of man as a personal being who lives, grows, and finds himself through communion with others, the word becomes a communication, a sharing, of the unique individual self. Such a word will transmit something of the man – his experience and what he has made of it, his under-

<sup>1</sup> Gen 1, 3ff.

<sup>2</sup> Heb 1, 3.

<sup>3</sup> On the human word, as described in the following section, cf Max Lackmann, *Der Christ und das Wort* (Graz: Styria, 1962), ch. 1.

standing of reality, the values he adheres to – and will draw the other into this inner realm.

Words are also the means of interpreting and taking possession of the world and other persons. Who has not had the experience of how the lack of the right word for an object or situation or relationship is a block to understanding, a block to the movement of love, to the relationship of familiarity, of at-homeness? And, on a more primitive level, of security that I desire to establish between myself and my world? The naming of the animals by Adam was such an interpretation and taking possession; it is repeated in every generation by every child as he seeks to come to grips with his world. The child is father to the poet, for where most men are content with the worn counters, often the debased coinage of inherited names for things, the child and the poet see the world with fresh eyes and name things anew. The 'I love you' between two persons is the interpretation of and entering into, in a fully human way, the encounter between them. The words can be spoken lightly and frivolously, but they can also be a clarifying light, an ordering power, in a relationship that is struggling to find itself, a gesture of self-giving that knows no limits, and an invitation to communion.

These traits that every human word potentially possesses in some degree are explicable only because the person who speaks is himself a word spoken by God. He is made in the image of God, the Speaker. His whole being, his actions, his words, are the echo of the creative word of God and dimly mirror its attributes and powers.

*The revelation of the Father: the words of the Word*

These potentialities of the human word are realised to the full in the words of Christ and, indeed, in all that makes up the reality of the Word as he appears among us, concerned always with his redemptive mission, with the loving purpose of the Father which he is to bring to fruition.

The Word of Life is our food, whether through his words heard in faith or through his flesh sacramentally eaten in faith, and creates a community of life between himself and men: 'As the living Father has sent Me and I live by the Father, so he who eats Me, shall also live by Me'.<sup>1</sup> For he alone 'has the words of eternal life'.<sup>2</sup> The intimate oneness ('You in Me, I in you') created by the reception

<sup>1</sup> Jn 6, 57.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 6, 68.

of the Word and his words, here expressed in terms of eating, is expressed in the good shepherd parable in terms of knowledge. 'I know My sheep and My sheep know Me, just as the Father knows Me and I know the Father, and I give My life for My sheep'.<sup>1</sup> The knowledge which Christ has of men and, more importantly, the knowledge of himself which he communicates to them as the Word incarnate, and through his preaching to them, establishes a relationship that touches the depths of the Word and of men. The basis and model for the intimacy, depth and vitality of this knowledge is the community of loving mutual knowledge that exists between Father and Son in the hiddenness of the Trinity. And as the Father watches over the incarnate Son, so the Son protects those whom he 'knows' – that is, affirms as his own in loving self-communication to them – even to the point of dying that they may live. To each of them Christ gives a name that is theirs before the Father, a name that singles them out and calls them to eternal life.<sup>2</sup> He who is chosen by God and opens himself to the divine call, experiences the creative, transforming power of God's word spoken in the Word incarnate and in the words of the Word. 'He who hears My word and believes Him who sent me, has eternal life, and does not come to judgment but has passed from death to life'.<sup>3</sup>

What was said of men and their words is incomparably more true of the Word incarnate and is indeed constantly explicit in his preaching in the fourth gospel: Christ is, in his being as God and man, a Word spoken by the Father. In his humanity and in his actions and words it is always the Father who speaks: 'Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak from my own resources. And it is likewise the Father, remaining in Me, who does the works I do'.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, God who spoke in fragmentary and varied fashion in the prophets,<sup>5</sup> has now expressed his very self to men through his Word spoken into our world. He who sees Christ sees the Father.<sup>6</sup> This 'seeing' is not yet vision but the dark knowledge of faith.<sup>7</sup> Only he who opens himself to the words of Christ and surrenders himself to the demands these make on him can hear the Father speaking to him in Christ. But where there is faith and surrender – and these are themselves the work of the Father<sup>8</sup> – one who listens to Christ hears the Word spoken in eternity and the voice of the Father.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jn 10, 14–15.

<sup>2</sup> Cf 10, 3–5; 16.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 5, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 14, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Heb 1, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Jn 14, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Cf 12, 44–45.

<sup>8</sup> Jn 6, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Cf 7, 16–17.

*The glorification of the Father*

Christ is thus in his person, his humanity and all his activity the living revelation of the Father. Closely associated in the fourth gospel with the themes of mission and witness (revealer) is that of Christ's glorification of Father or manifestation of the Father's glory. The coincidence of revelation and glorification is readily grasped when we understand what the Father's glory is.

The term is derived from the Old Testament where *kābōd* (literally, heaviness or weight) signifies what is important or honourable, and consequently can in various contexts mean wealth, material power, honour, splendour. To 'glorify' someone is to acknowledge his power and importance. In glorifying God the israelite looked to him as holiness and power; God's own glory was this holiness (his incomparable otherness) and his power as manifested either by striking phenomena in nature (usually light-phenomena, e.g., the lightning on Sinai or the pillar of fire in the desert, but also the storm, the earthquake, etc.) or by miraculous deeds.

In the New Testament the same idea of God's glory is found. Thus at Cana, by the miracle of the wine 'Jesus . . . manifested his glory',<sup>1</sup> that is, his power. The goal of Christ's return to the Father, through suffering, death, and resurrection, is 'the glory which I had in Your presence before the world existed'.<sup>2</sup> This eternal glory of his godhead Christ had never lost; but during his mortal life the divine power and holiness did not shine forth in his human nature except briefly in miracles and in the transfiguration. Once ascended to the Father, he would possess the Spirit fully as the redeemer, and would exercise the saving power and sanctity of the godhead.<sup>3</sup> His very suffering and death (as inseparable from resurrection and exaltation) are themselves already part of his glorification; for by the death that leads him to life he will also draw all men to himself and be able to give them divine life.<sup>4</sup>

Equally important in the fourth gospel is the glorification of the Father by Christ, the shining forth of the Father's glory in Christ's person and work. His mortal life, his suffering and death, despite their lowliness, even their horror, have already glorified the Father.<sup>5</sup> He has always referred to the Father his miracles and the teaching that astonished his contemporaries.<sup>6</sup> In all things he sought to be

<sup>1</sup> Jn 2, 11.<sup>4</sup> Jn 12, 32ff; 10, 10.<sup>2</sup> Jn 17, 5.<sup>5</sup> Chs 13-17 *passim*.<sup>3</sup> Cf 7, 39.<sup>6</sup> Jn 7, 15.

obedient to the Father.<sup>1</sup> Those with eyes to see could glimpse, reflected in the humility and sinlessness of Christ before the Father, the majesty of the just<sup>2</sup> and holy<sup>3</sup> Father himself; they could glimpse, reflected in the goodness and mercy of Christ to men, the loving Father who sent his Son into the world to save it.<sup>4</sup> Most of all is the Father glorified in the death of Christ; for here, more than anywhere else, is manifested the divine power that is in the service of love, and the divine otherness that would unite men to itself. The ultimate in Christ's self-surrender, in loving obedience to the Father and in loving self-sacrifice for men, is also the ultimate in the Father's manifestation of his desire to save men and to bring them home to himself in Christ.

The fourth gospel is, in a sense, a narrowly conceived gospel, in that its basic themes are relatively few. Its inexhaustible wealth lies in the depth to which it develops these few themes. Its concentration is on Christ as the One sent, and as the revealer to men of the Father's loving concern for them. But it develops these ideas in meditations that will never cease to give new insight to the believer: meditations on Christ as the life-giving bread, as the light of life, as the living water, as shepherd and door to the fold, as way and truth and life. Always it is to the Father that each image ultimately leads: the Father from whose bosom Christ came;<sup>5</sup> the Father whom he revealed and whose glory he made radiant before men; the Father to whom, through the lowliness of suffering and death and in the splendour of resurrection and exaltation, he was returning.

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<sup>1</sup> Jn 4, 34; 5, 30.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 3, 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 17, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Jn 1, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 17, 11.