

JESUS AND LONELINESS

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THE NEW TESTAMENT authors present the mystery of the loneliness of Jesus from many points of view. In the space allowed here, we can only attempt to take account of a few selected texts. But before considering specific scriptural passages, it may be helpful to offer some preliminary considerations on loneliness, uniqueness, solitude and communion.

The privileged history of religious experience narrated in our scriptures, and witnessed to by succeeding centuries of christian life, teaches us much both about the mystery of communion and about the mystery of loneliness. At the same time, we are taught that loneliness is not to be identified either with solitude or with uniqueness. Indeed we learn that solitude is necessary in order to overcome loneliness, for solitude favours in an irreplaceable way the discovery of uniqueness; whilst uniqueness is itself a prerequisite of communion.

Uniqueness is the quality of being the only one, of being without a like or equal. In the strictest sense of the term, only God is unique. Everything else that exists is alike, at least in being created, in being limited. God alone is infinite and totally perfect. By his own free initiative he has chosen to create us and to associate us with himself in his design of sharing his life with others. But in a very true sense each creation of the Lord, and especially every human being, is unique. Each person represents a combination of qualities and of experiences which, though created and limited, will never be repeated in exactly the same way. To know my own uniqueness, with its potentialities, limitations, successes and failures, is to identify myself; it is to answer the question, 'who am I'? Contemporary experience amply demonstrates that the perception and appreciation of the uniqueness of the identity of oneself, of others and of God is the condition of happiness.

Solitude is the state of being alone, without companions. God exists as three divine persons, who are in communion with each other and open to and creative of communion with all humanity. In this sense, then, God does not exist in solitude. However, God is unique; there can be only one God who is infinite. No created

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individual, no number of human persons, nor even the totality of human persons, can fully share God's life. It follows therefore that God does exist in solitude. He will always be beyond what we can know of him; he will always be more lovable than we can love him. This solitude is not an imperfection; it is the perfection of being infinite love. No one, no group, nor all of creation, can love with the perfection, the eternity, the totality with which God loves. His name is Love. Therefore only God knows himself fully as being a life which is unlimited love.

Analogically, but in an infinitely lesser degree, every human person, because unique, experiences the solitude of living the personal experience of his own life at a level and with an immediacy that no other created person – not even spouse or friend – can fully share. To be a person is to be solitary, just as to be a person is to be unique. But just as God in his very solitude is openness to all other persons, so too each human being, in the very centre of his/her existence where each is so unique, is related to God and to all other persons, in order to give to them and to receive from them, in order to share the gifts of life and life itself. Human solitude is essentially an inner dimension of our entire being. Whether physically alone or in the company of others, we are ontologically and psychologically solitary because of our uniqueness. Solitude therefore can be experienced whether we are separated from or in the company of other persons.

To become more aware of this dimension of our being, to be better able to grasp and understand the mystery of our solitude, it is most helpful actually to be physically alone, without companions, for periods of time. Ideally each day should include for every human being some moments of solitude. An extended experience of solitude, if adequately prepared for and well spent, can be useful for most persons. The statement 'I am never less alone than when alone' contains a profound truth. Solitude, when it serves to lead us into the region of our heart, favours an encounter with the God who dwells there and who invites us to reach out with greater love both to him and to all our brothers and sisters. The choice of the amount of physical solitude to be experienced by each person should be determined by the kind of presence and service of the Lord and of others to which one is called.

Loneliness is the experience of sadness and dejection because one is without company. Physical separation from others can entail loneliness if one does not enjoy spiritual communion with God or

other persons. But one can be surrounded by others or be in the company of another individual and still feel terribly alone because of a lack of adequate communication. 'The lonely crowd' has become a common way of designating the great number of persons who live in relative proximity, but in anonymity with regard to the vast majority, and as unknown and unloved even by those who are nearest.

The most acute form of loneliness is the sense of rejection we feel when we are abandoned by those who should be present to us with their concern and affection, by those who should share their lives with us and allow us to share our lives with them.

If the Divine Persons cannot experience loneliness vis-à-vis each other because they are totally present to one another in perfect transparency in a communion of mutual giving, God can still be said to be lonely in some mysterious way when human beings in their sinfulness refuse the invitation to communion offered by the Lord who loved us first. Indeed, because God's love for us surpasses our love for one another, it can be said that God is more lonely than we, because every human sin affects him more than it affects any or all of us.

Communion or fellowship consists in the mutual presence, knowledge and love of persons to one another. The relationship of the divine persons to one another constitutes the inner life of God. The ideal which God has conceived for every life, the goal towards which salvation history tends and which has already begun to be realized upon this earth because it already exists in our God, is likewise inter-personal communion.

Communion presupposes uniqueness, for only those can be joined together in union who already have a distinct, unique personal existence. Solitude prepares for and accompanies this communion, because awareness of our uniqueness enables us both to share all we are and have, and gratefully to accept all that others offer us of their gifts and of themselves. Loneliness is the lack of this communion. It results from the refusal or the inability to share on either or both sides of a relationship which is intended to flower into communion. And yet in a truly remarkable way, loneliness, when not subjectively caused but patiently endured, can be an expression of communion at least on one side, and can even mediate in patient preparation the loving response of the other side of an inter-personal relationship.

Against the background of this brief presentation of uniqueness,

solitude, loneliness and communion and their inter-relatedness, we can reflect upon the life of Jesus, in order to understand better how Jesus's loneliness is the means used by God to ground all communion of himself with human persons, and of all human beings with each other.

Jesus as unique

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.¹

Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, our Lord, is unique in his way of being. Among all the children of men he alone bears in himself the fulness of grace and truth; he is the only begotten Son of the Father.² No one else can say in the same way as he: 'I and the Father are one'.³ From his conception in the womb of Mary by the action of the holy Spirit⁴ until his death upon the cross, when he breathed forth his Spirit upon all those who would ever believe in him,⁵ the life upon earth of the Word who became flesh to dwell among us⁶ was unique and remains forever unrepeatable. The Church has always cherished the memory of the episodes of Jesus's life as narrated by the gospels, proposing to the faithful their celebration in community liturgy and their contemplation in private prayer.⁷ Each event of his life has been called a mystery; it continues to inspire generation after generation of his disciples to imitate him⁸ in whom they dwell and who dwells in them, him without whom they can do nothing.⁹

'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever'¹⁰ Having been brought to a unique perfection through his paschal mystery,¹¹ he contains in himself as the victorious Lord of history, the Lamb before the throne of God,¹² all the dispositions which were his during his life upon earth. He is the unique sum of his

¹ Eph 4, 4-6.

² Jn 1, 14. See the reflections of H. Urs von Balthasar on Jesus as the theophany *par excellence* as presented in J. Guillet, *The Religious Experience of Jesus and His Disciples*, 'Religious Experience Series' (RES), vol 9 (Saint Meinrad, 1975), pp 64-68.

³ Jn 10, 30.

⁴ Lk 1, 35; Mt 1, 20.

⁵ Jn 19, 30; see 7, 38-39; 20, 22.

⁶ Jn 1, 14.

⁷ For an overview of the contemplation of Jesus in the history of christian spirituality, see I. Noye *et al*, *Jesus in Christian Devotion and Contemplation*. RES, vol 1 (Saint Meinrad/Wheathampstead, 1974).

⁸ See E. Cothenet *et al*, *Imitating Christ*, RES, vol 5 (Saint Meinrad/Wheathampstead, 1974).

⁹ Jn 15, 1-11.

¹⁰ Heb 13, 8.

¹¹ Heb 5, 9.

¹² Apoc 5, 6 etc.

own unique perfections, the most beautiful of the sons of men,¹³ who, because he was lifted up on the cross, draws all men to himself.¹⁴

The consciousness which Jesus had of himself, of his unique identity, of his unique relationship to the Father and the holy Spirit, to the universe of men, things and events, was itself unique. One of the most difficult and persistent quests of contemporary New Testament scholars and systematic theologians is to discover as accurately as possible, through historical study and reflection upon the teachings of our faith, 'that mind which was in Christ Jesus'.¹⁵

The ardent desire of the christian contemplative is to receive from the holy Spirit the gift of counting everything as loss because of the surpassing greatness of personal acquaintance with Christ Jesus.¹⁶

There can be no doubt that Jesus, like all those endowed with human nature, progressed in his knowledge of himself, of his mission, of his destiny. What Luke says of him as an adolescent can be applied to his entire life: 'Jesus increased in wisdom and in years and in favour with God and man'.¹⁷ Some privileged experiences of new insights into his own awareness of his uniqueness are presented to us in the traditions surrounding his entrance into young adulthood,¹⁸ his leaving Nazareth and requesting baptism from John,¹⁹ his transfiguration,²⁰ his agony in the garden,²¹ his suffering and death upon the cross.²²

Surely every episode of his life was an occasion for Jesus to grow in awareness of his uniqueness; and yet there can be no doubt that moments of particular sacrifice or challenge occasioned a new depth of self-understanding not experienced before.

Jesus as Solitary

And after he had dismissed the crowds he went up into the hills by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone.²³

The gospels portray Jesus as deliberately withdrawing at times from the company of others in order to be alone, or with just a few

¹³ Ps 45, 2.

¹⁴ Jn 12, 32.

¹⁵ Phil 2, 5. See Bruno Brinkmann, 'The Humanity of Christ', in *The Way* (July 1975 and April 1976), and Gerald O'Collins, 'Jesus in Current Theology', in this issue of *The Way*, and in that of January 1977.

¹⁶ Phil 3, 8. The one who makes the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius is instructed to pray repeatedly for 'a deep-felt knowledge of our Lord' (Exx 104).

¹⁷ Lk 2, 52.

¹⁸ Lk 2, 41-52.

¹⁹ Mk 1, 9-11.

²⁰ Mk 9, 2-8.

²¹ Mk 14, 32-42; see also Jn 12, 27-33; Heb 5, 7-8.

²² Mk 15, 22-41.

²³ Mt 14, 23; see Mk 1, 35; 6, 46; Lk 5, 16; 9, 18.

of his disciples. These texts, for the most part, represent Jesus as desiring to be alone in order to pray to his Father. It would not seem to go beyond the evidence to suggest that in such moments of prayer Jesus sought to commune with his Father about his life and mission, and especially about personal choices that events placed before him, courses of action that he had to discern, attitudes he should adopt in face of mounting opposition.

Such moments of solitary prayer, which Jesus himself recommended,²⁴ we may reasonably conclude to have contributed greatly to that unequalled lucidity, that constant fidelity to the Father's will, that tender compassion, that limitless love which characterized Jesus in his teaching and in his healing, in his relationships with his Father and disciples, with his friends and enemies, in his suffering and in his death.

More than the other evangelists, John presents Jesus as 'contemplative in action'. He does only what he sees the Father doing;²⁵ that is, the works which the Father gives him to do;²⁶ indeed it is the Father dwelling with him who accomplishes them.²⁷ He judges according to what he hears from the Father.²⁸ His teaching is not his but that of him who sent him.²⁹

This contemplative union with God in action presupposes contemplation in solitude. Such prayer is the school where human beings learn to love the unique Lord with all their heart and with all their soul and with all their might.³⁰ Jesus, no exception to this rule, came to understand his own uniqueness in the solitude in which he adored his unique Father. Through such prayer, Jesus's bond of love with the Father was strengthened. He could teach others to pray daily for the coming of the Father's kingdom and for the accomplishment of his will, because he himself prayed in that way.³¹

But Jesus was alone not only in moments of solitary prayer. Solitude was a dimension of all his experience, much more so than in the case of other persons. He had no human companions with whom to share in an adequate way his unique awareness of his unparalleled relationship to his Father and his mysterious mission to the people of Israel.

He was alone in the decisions he had to take regarding his mission. It is instructive to reflect on the profound and dramatic

²⁴ Mt 6, 5-6.

²⁵ Jn 5, 19.

²⁶ Jn 5, 36.

²⁷ Jn 14, 16.

²⁸ Jn 5, 30.

²⁹ Jn 7, 16; 8, 28; 14, 24; 17, 8.

³⁰ Dt 6, 4-5.

³¹ Mt 6, 10; Lk 11, 2.

change that took place in Jesus when he was about thirty years old.³² Apart from the tradition concerning the visit made by the holy family to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve years old,³³ the evangelists tell us nothing of his childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. Luke is content to say that he 'increased in wisdom and in age and in favour with God and man'.³⁴ Nothing leads us to believe that during those years Jesus had particular insights regarding the mission that was to be his. We can be sure that his life was an intensely religious one,³⁵ but it is probable that it attracted no particular attention beyond his own town or even within it. Yet one day Jesus decided to leave Nazareth and to be baptized by John.³⁶ After this event which, in its externals, most probably resembled the baptism of all those who descended into the Jordan with an attitude of humble repentance, and after some time in solitude,³⁷ Jesus began a ministry of announcing in word and sign the coming of the kingdom of God. It is a different Jesus who returns to Nazareth; his fellow-citizens do not know what to make of him.³⁸ The gospel traditions tell us that even his relatives did not comprehend his actions,³⁹ and that his brethren did not believe in him.⁴⁰ Each of the gospels describes the life of Jesus as a drama which challenged his disciples and those to whom he ministered to recognize him for who he was. And during his lifetime no one really succeeded. As Jesus grew in self-understanding he could expect from his closest companions only a very imperfect faith in him.

Jesus was alone as a teacher. No one had ever taught like him;⁴¹ no one ever would in the future, for no one ever could. Because he alone lived the mystery of being the most perfect expression of God's love,⁴² he articulated this mystery with a conviction that no one else could totally share.

Jesus was alone as a worker of signs. Only of him could it be said, 'he has done all things well'.⁴³ His disciples shared in his power to do good,⁴⁴ but only in him was the force to heal identified with the healer.

Jesus had to face and overcome his temptations alone. It was a stroke of inspired genius on the part of the evangelists not only to

³² Lk 3, 23.

³³ Lk 2, 41-51.

³⁴ Lk 2, 52.

³⁵ For the religious practices prevalent in Jewish families in Jesus's day, see R. Aron, *Jesus of Nazareth: the Hidden Years* (New York, 1962), and *The Jewish Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y., 1971).

³⁶ Mk 1, 9; Mt 3, 13.

³⁷ Mk 1, 12-13.

³⁸ Lk 4, 22-28.

³⁹ Mk 3, 19-21.

⁴⁰ Jn 7, 5.

⁴¹ Mk 1, 22.

⁴² Jn 3, 16; 1 Jn 4, 9-10.

⁴³ Mk 7, 37.

⁴⁴ Mk 6, 7-12.

have placed before the beginning of Jesus's ministry a synthetic representation of the kinds of temptations he would always struggle against, but also to have situated them in the desert, where Jesus could rely only on the strength of the Word of God and his consolations.⁴⁵

Finally, he walked alone the road of his passion and death. His greatest struggle was to accept with unshakable faith, constant hope and patient love the sacrifice that was asked of him: a politico-religious condemnation, although he had devoted his efforts to the betterment of human society through the purification of men's relationship to God; and a humiliating death, when he had dedicated his life to bringing a fuller life to others. Even those who wished could not understand the paradox. Jesus felt himself enveloped by a darkness such as he had never experienced before; but he was able, even though alone, to contemplate all that happened as somehow willed by the Father.

We are led to conclude that in all his experiences, in all his thoughts and feelings, desires and decisions, words and works, Jesus was alone. Clearly, he had friends whose company he enjoyed and with whom he could share something of his mystery. But he ascended to unknown heights and was cast down to unimaginable depths where he remained alone, except for the bond of faith, hope and love which joined him to the Father in their Spirit. Jesus was able to be the man for others because he was the man from God and for God, because he and the Father were one,⁴⁶ and because, when all was said and done, he was not totally alone: the Father was with him.

Jesus as lonely

The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, every man to his house, and will leave me alone; yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me.⁴⁷

Having reflected upon the uniqueness and solitude of Jesus, we are better prepared to consider the kind of loneliness he experienced and to understand its meaning for him and for us. We saw that loneliness adds to solitude the feeling of sadness or dejection. Being alone does not necessarily entail being sorrowful or depressed.

⁴⁵ Mk 1, 12-13; Mt 4, 1-11; Lk 4, 1-13.

⁴⁶ Jn 10, 30.

⁴⁷ Jn 16, 32 at the end of the Last Discourses; see 8, 29.

Moments of solitude can be happy and uplifting, especially when in memory, thought and affection one experiences communion with the Lord or with other persons, even though they are not physically present. In solitude one can know the peace that comes from understanding one's life as being lived in harmony with God's design, from seeing his presence in the persons and events that form the fabric of one's life. And yet in the innermost recesses of the heart, the place of memories and aspirations, successes and failures, a place where no other human person can be totally present, we sense the loneliness caused by the necessary absence of others. One of the sufferings of life in this world is precisely the impossibility of total mutual transparency and therefore of perfect communication between those who love one another.

Jesus's solitude therefore was necessarily coloured by loneliness. Because of his faith, it was not a loneliness that overwhelmed him to the point of the loss of all hope. His loneliness included the pain of not being able to receive from others an understanding, an appreciation, a companionship that would correspond to the depth of his experience. Indeed, because his uniqueness was on another level from that of other human beings, because his solitude was deeper than that of any other person, his loneliness too knew no parallel.

We have seen that loneliness can include the feeling of rejection by those who should accept us and support us, and with whom we should have the relationship of mutual sharing of personal gifts and of life itself. Jesus's life was profoundly marked by his being abandoned by those who were the leaders of his people. They should have accepted him, changed their lives because of him, and exercised through him a positive influence upon the nation. Instead they envied him, feared him and vowed to destroy him.⁴⁸ They handed him over to the political authorities whom they despised.⁴⁹ They incited the people against him.⁵⁰ They mocked him in his dying moments.⁵¹ It is difficult for us to appreciate fully the loneliness that Jesus experienced because he was rejected by his own people, especially by the religious leaders who, had they been true to their calling and to the grace of the moment, would have recognized him for who he was, accepted him and his teaching, loved him and followed him.

Jesus experienced loneliness when many of his disciples abandoned

⁴⁸ Mk 3, 6 etc.

⁴⁹ Mk 15, 1; Mt 26, 57.

⁵⁰ Mk 15, 11-15.

⁵¹ Mk 15, 31-32.

him because of his teaching,⁵² when Judas betrayed him,⁵³ when Peter denied him.⁵⁴ Jesus loved his disciples.⁵⁵ He had called each one of them to be with him.⁵⁶ With them he went about the towns and villages; with them he prayed in the synagogues and taught in the Temple. He shared with them, who were his friends, the spiritual knowledge that was his.⁵⁷ He explained his parables to them.⁵⁸ He shared with them his power and his mission.⁵⁹ Yet when he came into the hour of his greatest struggle, they fled.⁶⁰

The most severe loneliness of all, Jesus's most bitter suffering, was his experience of dread in face of his imminent condemnation and death,⁶¹ and the sense of abandonment by the Father himself as he hung upon the cross.⁶² In no other moments of Jesus's life does the reality of his humanity appear so clearly. To be human is to be frail and weak, defenceless and inadequate before the forces of evil, especially the ultimate physical evil which is death. Jesus experienced this lowliness of the human condition; and, except for the presence of his mother, some other women and the beloved disciple in the vicinity of his cross,⁶³ he endured this trial alone.

The sense of abandonment by his Father meant the utter confusion and total emptiness felt by Jesus in face of the apparent failure of his mission and therefore of his life. He had gradually come to understand how his message and his mission were really himself, and that this was so because of his unique relation to his Father. His message was refused, his mission not accepted, he himself not received and therefore . . . was he right in thinking that his life was intended to be a revelation of the Father? Where was the Father in the depth of his humiliation, at the moment when all seemed to be irretrievably lost? How would he be vindicated? Jesus may not have been able to answer all these questions. But one thing he did know: the Father existed and he was his Son who wished only to do his will.

The anguish Jesus experienced in the garden and upon the cross places in even bolder relief the faith, hope and love which characterized his entire life and which reached their perfection at his death. That is why his death can be considered the culminating point of

⁵² Jn 6, 66.

⁵³ Mk 14, 10-11, 17-21, 42-45.

⁵⁴ Mk 14, 66-72.

⁵⁵ Jn 13, 34; 15, 12.

⁵⁶ Mk 4, 13-19.

⁵⁷ Jn 15, 15.

⁵⁸ Mk 4, 10ff, and par.

⁵⁹ Mk 6, 7-12, and par.

⁶⁰ Mk 14, 50, and par.

⁶¹ Mk 14, 32-42. See the excellent article of Brian McNamara, 'Prayer in Gethsemane', in *Supplement to The Way* (Spring, 1976), pp 79-87.

⁶² Mk 15, 34; Mt 27, 46.

⁶³ Mk 15, 40-41, and par. Jn 19, 25-27.

revelation, the clearest possible manifestation to us of what it means to use one's freedom to abandon oneself completely to the Father in the mystery of our passage from this world to full communion.⁶⁴

Jesus, Mediator of New Covenant communion

But you have come . . . to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.⁶⁵

It is highly significant that both Jesus's agony in the garden and his last moments upon the cross are narrated in the context of prayer in solitude and loneliness. Precisely because of his prayer, his unique communion with his Father in the Spirit, which accompanied the offering of his life during its entire course and especially at its climax, the death of Jesus became the source of that life which is the New Covenant communion of believers with the divine persons and among themselves. By his loneliness we have been healed. By his loneliness we have been made one.

But also by his loneliness our own loneliness can in its turn mediate communion. If the passion of Jesus continues until the end of the world in those who suffer on this earth, the loneliness of Jesus continues in all those who are lonely.

To the degree that Jesus abides in us and we in him, in the faith and love of contemplative prayer, we shall be able to love another as he loved us.⁶⁶ Our loneliness, like his and because of his, will serve to be a unitive force in this world because it will express the total gift of ourselves, no matter what the immediate reception or apparent consequences of that gift. Loneliness, in order not to remain sterile, must be accepted with faith, hope and love. Only then can loneliness mediate the birth and growth of faith, hope and love in the lives of others.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ See K. Rahner, 'The death of Jesus and the closing of revelation', in *Theology Digest*, vol 23 (1975), pp 320-329.

⁶⁵ Heb 12, 22, 24.

⁶⁶ Jn 13, 34; 15, 12.

⁶⁷ Cf Jn 12, 24.