

EXPERIENCE IN THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH

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THE FULL TITLE of this article should read 'The experience of Jesus's earthly history in the apostolic Church: norm for christian orthodoxy'. To orientate the reader to this fascinating, if difficult topic, two prefatory remarks concerning the word 'experience' may not be inappropriate. Firstly, experience tends to become a chameleon-like term and one perennially exposed to the danger of being used in ambiguous slogans. Not infrequently nowadays christians speak tautologically of faith-experience – as if there were any other kind of genuinely christian experience. And it is not so very long ago when the phrase religious experience was regarded with deep suspicion by an embattled Church suffering a state of siege from modernism.

The trouble is that the reality presented by experience – crucial as it is for the believer's entry into christian living and for his on-going perseverance in the faith – remains necessarily ambivalent, indeed even polyvalent. Is there then a criterion the christian can employ to discern the authentic character of his experience? How can one judge that a spirituality which appears to be personal, relevant to a particular situation, meaningful to one's existence as a christian, is not bogus, but in fact orthodox? The answer to this question can be simply stated at once: to be genuinely christian any spirituality must be founded upon a real and truly intimate experience of Jesus's earthly history. That is, the man of faith must have come to *know* Jesus's career in our world in the biblical sense of that word. He must, by *personal assimilation of the New Testament text by which that career is authoritatively interpreted*, have made it truly a part of his christian living.

Indeed, already in the history of Israel, her prophets realized that the only effective norm for distinguishing the true prophet from the false was whether the prophet's message centred in a recall of Israel to fidelity to the sinaitic covenant. For that covenant, as articulated by Moses and successive redactors of the pentateuchal literature, stood as an imperious reminder of Israel's right response of faith to her God's historical self-revelation through the series of events in

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her national life which we call the exodus. No old testament prophet thought of questioning the genuineness of the ecstatic experiences of these false prophets; but while admitting they stood in the prophetic line by reason of their experience, they judged them false, because that experience did not truly reflect the essential connection with the one God of history.¹

A second observation about experience is a necessary complement to the first. From the New Testament itself we learn that a humble acceptance of pluralism of experience with regard to Jesus's earthly history is of paramount importance as the criterion of orthodoxy. For heresy is actually the practice of an arrogant selectiveness, accepting or rejecting some of the variegated expressions of the experience of the apostolic Church, when they bolster or contradict one's own notion of the faith. It is crucial to accept the fact that our christian inspired literature reflects a certain historical relativism. Hence, when realistically assessed, that experience which is our theme discloses a truly kaleidoscopic character. And if one is to avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of historicism and biblical fundamentalism, it is imperative to permit these manifold experiences of Jesus's history, expressed by the sacred writers, to stand in tension by respecting their individual divergences and even contradictions: not to reduce them to some sort of one-dimensional conformity by applying the harmonizing flat-iron of edification. For we cannot afford to ignore the all too obvious fact that the privileged spokesmen for the apostolic Church created their personal attestations to their own experience of Jesus in his earthly career (of which none of them were eyewitnesses) out of varying cultural and historical backgrounds. Indeed, to neglect to attend to a certain historico-cultural relativism, characteristic of the various new testament documents, is in fact to place in jeopardy the salient character of christianity as an historical, not a mythical, religion.²

The witness of 2 Peter

We begin our investigation with 2 Peter, probably the last addition to the New Testament, written somewhere in mid-second cen-

¹ See Bruce Vawter, *Conscience of Israel: Pre-exilic Prophets and Prophecy* (New York, 1961), pp 21-28.

² We draw the reader's attention to the noteworthy insistence upon the historical relativism of both the NT documents and 'the dogmatic formulae' of the Church in the Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 65 (1973), pp 402 ff.

ture. Its otherwise unknown author, well aware of the duty of the Church to confront the modern world, involved as it is continually with the ongoing process of history, displays a deep sensitivity to, and sympathy with, the problem of historical relativism. He adopts novel terms, borrowed from current greek philosophical thought, to express the christian reality in non-biblical formulae. He speaks of *virtue* (1, 3), a word towards which Paul had evinced a certain aloofness (Phil 4, 8). He uses *knowledge* (*gnōsis*) for faith (1, 5), and has no hesitation in speaking of christians as 'sharers in the divine nature' (1, 4). He accepts contemporary scientific explanations of the origin of the world from water (3,6) – and even (contrary to Paul's view in Rom 8, 21) its final destruction by fire (3, 7. 10).

While making every concession he can to modernity, our author vehemently denies the orthodoxy of those 'false teachers' (2, 1) in the Church whose attempts to demythologize the christian message he is answering. These spawners of heresy, by whom 'the way of the truth is brought into disrepute' (2, 2), come ultimately (through their efforts to peel away the mythical envelope of the gospel) to scoff at the christian hope in 'the promise of his coming'. 'For they cry, just where is the promise of his coming? Our fathers have long been laid to rest, yet everything continues just as it has always been, since the beginning of creation!' (3, 4)

The sacred writer's response to these blasphemers is to appeal to Peter's personal experience of Jesus's earthly history (2, 1) and his teaching (3, 10, an echo of Mt 24, 43ff). He dwells particularly on Jesus's transfiguration. Since he writes under the name of Peter, the author speaks of this experience, of which he has in fact become cognizant only through tradition, in the first person.

For we did not lean upon cleverly fabricated myths when we made known to you the power of our Lord Jesus Christ and his coming. No! it was because we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty at his investiture by God the Father with honour and glory, and there came to him from the sublime presence a proclamation 'This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I take delight'. This very utterance we heard personally as it was borne out from heaven. For we were actually with him on the holy mountain (1, 16-18).

It is this personal and collective experience of the apostles which, in the first place, sets sharp limits to the process of demythologizing.

There is a second argument which also carries weight with this writer. 'Note the great importance of this fact: no prophetic piece

of scripture admits of private interpretation; for it was not by any mere human whim that men prophesied of old. Human though they were, it was under the impulse of the Holy Spirit that they spoke the words of God' (1, 20-21). Hence the authority of Jesus's earthly history reposes upon the Spirit-filled interpretation of the gospel-writers like Mark, to whose book our author has probably alluded,³ and 'Paul, our friend and brother . . . when he wrote you with his inspired wisdom' (3, 15).

The platonist transposition of Jesus's earthly history in Hebrews

We turn now to Hebrews, one of the most remarkable literary and theological creations from the apostolic Church – and possibly one of the most misunderstood in the New Testament. It is not an epistle, it is a sermon; it is not addressed to the Hebrews (jewish-christians), but to believers whose cultural background was hellenistic. Its unknown author probably took for granted, no less than his hearers, the *weltanschauung* which today is known as Neoplatonism. Many commentators have been misled into thinking of those to whom Hebrews is directed as jewish-christians, overcome by nostalgia for the gorgeous and ancient Temple-liturgy, to the point that they are tempted to renounce their christian allegiance and revert to Judaism. It is vitally important to bear in mind that *nowhere* in the document is there any mention of the herodian Temple. The preacher (for so we should regard him) speaks only of 'the tent', the portable shrine accompanying Israel's wandering in the desert.

There is however a more significant misapprehension that clings to the interpretation of this highly imaginative and original sermon. In order to counter and correct the tendency of his hearers or readers to fall away in their disillusionment from the christian faith, our erudite philosopher-preacher has – to convince his audience of the reality of Jesus's earthly history – transposed that history in terms of those 'heavenly realities', in virtue of which, for any convinced Platonist, the phenomena of our sublunary world and its history are truly real. Our learned author, not implausibly of alexandrian provenance, for he appears to be familiar with the attempts of Philo to present the teaching of the Old Testament in hellenistic dress, has made a brilliant attempt to shore up the wavering faith

³ It should be observed that connection between the parousia and the transfiguration of Jesus, made here in 1, 16-18, had already appeared in Mk 8, 38 and 9, 1-8 in the same sequence.

of these hellenistic christians by presenting the entire earthly history of Jesus as a celestial sacrifice in the true and real heavenly sanctuary. It is thus he hopes to convince them that these events which transpired here below, culminating in Jesus's redemptive death for all men, were no delusion or myth, but a divinely-engineered and efficacious reality.

What had led these believers to slip from 'the full certainty of hope' (6, 11) and 'the full certainty of faith' (10, 22)? From the author's exposition of christian faith in chapter 11, by his marshalling 'a cloud of witnesses' (12, 1) from the saints of the Old Testament whose lives displayed *hope* in God's promises on such an heroic scale, it becomes evident that for this christian thinker 'faith' is ninety-eight per cent hope. How did his hearers fall into their present state of hopelessness? Chiefly, perhaps, by the disillusioning experience of their 'weaknesses' (4, 15) in succumbing to 'temptations' to sin, despite their conviction that by baptism their 'consciences had been purified from the deadness of former deeds by the blood of Christ, who had offered himself to God through an eternal spirit without blemish', and so 'fitted them for the service of the living God' (9, 14-15). As a consequence, these poor christians, while still clinging to those professions of the faith handed down to them, had lost their initial sense of 'joyous confidence' (3, 6; 4, 16; 10, 19), particularly as, by the end of the first century, their salvation had not even yet been fully revealed. They heard the gospel-message with indifference (2, 2), or incredulity (4, 1), or boredom (5, 11); and so they stood in imminent danger of 'falling away from the living God' (3, 12). In addition to all this, they were terrified by the hostility of 'the world', possibly by the prospect of martyrdom for the faith (10, 32-34; 12, 4-11; 13, 13).

To confront these doubts and fears and to ward off the danger of apostasy, the author of Hebrews has decided to present Jesus's entire earthly life, which culminated in his death on the cross and his resurrection, as a high priestly action. He has probably received his inspiration for this new conception from an ancient christian hymn (possibly already familiar to his listeners), of which he cites a fragment. It speaks of 'Jesus, the Son of God' (4, 14)

- 1) Who (in the days of his flesh) offered urgent prayers and supplications
 To him who could rescue him from Death's realm,
 With a loud cry and tears.

- ii) And he was heard because of his fear [of God],
 And being thus made perfect became author of eternal sal-
 vation,
 Named by God as high priest (5, 7-10).

It will be observed that the words in parentheses, 'in the days of his flesh', are in all probability an interpolation by our author into the original hymn. Thus he betrays his design of interpreting Jesus's whole earthly career as a priestly activity. This hymn-fragment is intended by Hebrews as a hinge between the first great section of his sermon, where he presents Jesus as 'a compassionate and faithful high priest' (2, 17), and 'the capital point' of his exhortation: 'We have just such a high priest, who has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of majesty in the heavens, a minister in the real sanctuary, the tent pitched by the Lord, not by any human being' (8, 1-2).

The learned preacher-writer brings under tribute the learning of Alexandria with its rich use of allegory and symbolism, in order to emphasize the cosmic significance and the eschatological reality of what Jesus 'did once and for all, when he offered up himself' (7, 27) on Calvary. 'But if he had been on earth, he would not even have been a priest' (8, 4): the reality and universal efficacy of his self-offering could not have been perceived. For earthly, levitical priests 'are ministers of something which is only a copy and a shadow of the heavenly realities' (8, 5). 'But now Christ has come, high priest of good things already in existence through the greater and more perfect tent not made by hands, that is, not pertaining to this creation. He has entered once and for all with his own blood, not with the blood of goats and calves, into the sanctuary, having secured an everlasting deliverance' (9, 11-12). It is of the utmost importance to realize that this great theologian is not asserting that Christ became a priest only at his ascension into heaven. From the whole development which has led up to this point, it is clear that he knows Jesus's passion and death to be a truly priestly offering. As F. J. Schierse has shrewdly remarked, 'The author is obviously not speaking only of the ascension, he is giving a theological interpretation of Jesus's entire life'.⁴ And he adds: 'The daring figure of a "tent not made by hands . . . not pertaining to this creation . . ." is in-

⁴ See F. J. Schierse, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: New Testament for Spiritual Reading* (New York, 1969), p 55.

tended to be a theological description of Christ's entire historical existence'.⁵

This interpretation of our author's sophisticated use of allegory and symbol becomes more obviously the correct one in a passage which, with the help of Ps 40, 7-9 presents, Christ's sacrifice as the offering of his body: 'That is why, at his coming into the world, he says, Holocausts and sin-offerings you did not wish. Then I said, See, I come - as it is written of me in the book - to do your will, O God! . . . It is by this will of God that we have been consecrated, through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all' (10, 5-10).

Here then we are given a quite novel, highly scholarly transposition of the values inherent in Jesus's earthly history for christian orthodoxy, which probably dates from the close of the first century A.D. It may be helpful to turn now to inquire into the meaning of Jesus's life on earth which Paul has set forth in his letters.

The pauline experience

While Paul had been confronted with the risen Lord at the turning point in his religious life, a meeting which he regarded as on a par with the earlier post-resurrection appearances to Peter and the disciples (1 Cor 15, 8), he had had no experience of Jesus during his earthly life. Indeed, not a few commentators take the view that Paul did not set much value by Jesus's earthly history. It must be admitted that his letters contain only a single narrative from that history (1 Cor 11, 23-25), and his references to Jesus's teaching, even if one includes what appear to be allusion's to Jesus's sayings and parables, are relatively rare.⁶ If however one reads attentively those passages in the pauline letters which describe what might be called Paul's mysticism of the apostolate, it quickly becomes evident that these texts give expression to a profoundly intimate experience of Jesus's earthly history. (The most important references are 2 Cor 3, 5; 4, 7-12; 13, 3-4 and Phil 1, 18-12. Cf also Thess 2, 15; 1 Cor 4, 9-13; 2 Cor 6, 3-10; 11, 23-29; 12, 7-10; Gal 2, 20; Col 1, 24.)

It was out of these apostolic dealings with his young churches that Paul constantly deepened his experience of Jesus's earthly history, and came to articulate his distinctive christology which accor-

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 56.

⁶ See my discussion of this question in *Boasting in the Lord* (New York/Toronto, 1973), pp 25-30.

ded an important role to that history together with his own experience of the dynamic activity of the risen Lord Jesus. In creating this new approach to Christ, Paul was also a debtor to the traditional view of Jesus's earthly life, enunciated in an early christological hymn cited by him in Phil 2, 6-11. On that view, Jesus's entire life on earth is regarded as 'self-emptying' (Phil 2, 7), 'self-humiliation' (v8).

Thus from earlier tradition and from his own sufferings in the apostolate, Paul is led to adopt a realistic view of the entry of God's Son into the human family. It signified chiefly Jesus's participation in the sinful solidarity of the first Adam. Man, through Adam's transgression, had become 'hostile to God' (Rom 1, 30), was 'constituted a sinner' (Rom 5, 19). While Jesus, Paul knew, was not a sinner, yet through his becoming man the Son of God was somehow truly, albeit mysteriously, alienated from the Father. 'Him who knew no sin God made into sin, so that we, in him, might become God's Justice' (2 Cor 5, 21). 'Christ bought us freedom from the curse of the Law by being made a curse on our behalf. As scripture says, Cursed is every man who has been hung on a gibbet. And this, that Abraham's blessing might be extended to the pagans through union with Christ Jesus, and that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith' (Gal 3, 13-14).

What the Law could never do, because it had been rendered impotent through the flesh, God achieved by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to deal with sin; and he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just demands of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who live our lives not on the level of the flesh but with the help of the Spirit (Rom 8, 3-4).

Thus for Paul Jesus's earthly history meant that he did actually experience the lot of his sinful brothers and sisters, who stood under condemnation of death (Rom 5, 12).

If one reflects on Paul's starkly realistic assessment of Jesus's earthly history, which speaks uncompromisingly of his 'being made into sin', 'becoming a curse', 'being sent in the likeness of sinful flesh', 'made subject to the law', one comes to realize that these statements also possess a 'good news' or gospel character. For they also speak of 'our becoming, *in union with him*, God's Justice', of the pagan's sharing in 'Abraham's blessing' through the one who was 'made a curse', of mankind's liberation 'from enslavement to the Law', by him who 'was made subject to the Law'.

What has happened to make this paradoxical result possible? For Paul the answer is clear: the act of God the Father, in 'handing Christ over to death for our sins' and 'raising him for our justifying' (Rom 4, 25). And the divine purpose in all this Paul also makes clear: 'in order that he [the Son] might become the eldest of a large family of brothers' (Rom 8, 29). The initiative of God as loving Father in handing Christ over to death was not merely to break the Son's affiliation through his incarnation with the contaminated seed of Adam, and so restore the Son personally to a new, unprecedented life with God (Rom 6, 9-10). In Paul's view, the Father acted thus also to rescue the human family from sin and sinfulness. 'One died for all: in consequence all have died. And he died, in order that men, while still in life, should stop living for themselves and should live for him, who for their sake died and was raised to life' (2 Cor 5, 14-15). As for Christ himself, he has, by 'being raised from death by the glory of the Father' (Rom 6, 4) had his own unique, divine sonship somehow deepened and enhanced: 'he has been constituted Son of God in power by resurrection from death' (Rom 1, 4).

Jesus's earthly history has indeed played an essential role in pauline christology. Jesus's personal experience of human suffering and death has totally transformed this universal experience of mankind. For, by virtue of Jesus's life, it has now become suffering-with-Christ, dying-with-Christ, as part of the very process by which the believer is ultimately saved. Paul does not forget that suffering and death are, in a sense, truly part of our adamic inheritance. But as Professor Morna D. Hooker has astutely remarked: 'It is notable that the great majority of references to suffering and death in Paul speak of them in terms of our life "in Christ", and not "in Adam"'. This is very strange . . . yet because Christ is fully one with man in all his experiences, these can now be understood in terms of life in Christ'.⁷

The testimony of the fourth evangelist

Paul's testimony to his experience of Jesus's earthly history, we have seen, while most personal and highly original, stands in the direct line of the early, traditional approach. By contrast, John (the unknown author of the fourth gospel) has made a radical revision of the Jesus-tradition which he received from some apostolic source

⁷ See M. D. Hooker, 'Interchange in Christ', in *Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S. 22 (1971), pp 348-61.

that is independent of the source behind the synoptic gospels. Thus I venture to suggest that the fourth gospel constitutes the supreme achievement of the apostolic Church in interpreting and evaluating the experience of Jesus's existence here on earth.

The principal viewpoint from which this evangelist has chosen to survey that history is that of revelation, where for Paul it was redemption. Jesus's mission from the Father is to reveal his own self-identity through a perfectly human life, in order to disclose to men the 'God no man has ever seen' (1, 18). To appreciate John's creativeness, however, one must not miss the astonishingly bold character of the all-too familiar words of the prologue, 'The Word became flesh and pitched his tent amongst us: and we have beheld his glory!' (1, 14). From the first line of this ode, which John has prefixed to his gospel, Jesus is identified as the Word of God, pre-existing the created universe. As 'the Word' he is the perfect expression of the Father, while being himself 'God' (1, 1). His eternal existence stands in marked contrast with the 'becoming' of all that is created (1, 3). Thus, that John should assert that 'the Word *became flesh*' is doubly surprising. 'Flesh' in this gospel is a symbol of man's creatureliness and impotence in contrast with divine power. In fact in 6, 63a we read, 'The Spirit is the life-giver: the flesh is useless'. How then can the Word of God by assuming creaturely weakness reveal an utterly new, divine presence to history in the person of Jesus Christ (1, 18)? Secondly, how can John assert that the Word, 'through whom all things came to be' (1, 3), himself 'became'? A further surprise is the claim, which must be understood as an affirmation of faith by the apostolic Church, 'We have beheld his glory'. For 'glory' in the fourth gospel exhibits the technical sense it displays in the Old Testament: God's self-revelation in *power*, which in the bible is always associated with the divine Spirit. Yet, this single cryptic verse (1, 14) does in fact announce the principal message of our evangelist.

Accordingly, it may be helpful to assemble John's successive statements throughout his book, which help us discern his consistency in developing his seminal insight. We begin by recalling that the context for John's paradoxical remark already cited ('The Spirit is the life-giver: the flesh is useless') is Jesus's promise: 'The bread that I will give – it is my flesh given for the life of the world' (6, 51b). If 'flesh is useless' (and this includes even the flesh of the Word), how can Jesus's flesh give 'life'? A first clue to the conundrum is provided by Jesus's announcement during the feast of Sukkoth: 'If

anyone thirsts, he must come to me; and he must drink – I mean, the man with faith in me! As scripture has it, 'From his heart will flow rivers of living water' (7, 37ff). The evangelist's gloss on this remark is noteworthy: 'He said this concerning the Spirit, which those who found faith in him were destined to receive. For the Spirit did not yet exist, since Jesus was not yet glorified' (7, 39). And when, on the view of this evangelist was Jesus 'glorified'?

To answer this we must recall one of John's most innovative departures from the earlier tradition, in which Jesus's passion and death (indeed his whole earthly life) were qualified as a 'self-emptying'. For John, Jesus's passion and death constitute his 'exaltation' (3, 14; 8, 28; 12, 32. 34), his 'glorification' (12, 16. 23; 13, 31–32). And, in fact, we find this interpretation dominant in the johannine narrative of Jesus's death. 'When he had taken the dry wine, Jesus declared, It has been brought to perfect fulfilment'. (19, 30a). That is, God has brought Jesus's historical mission (his definitive self-revelation to men) to its consummation at his death, supreme proof of his love for 'his friends' (15, 13–14). John began the final section of his book with the remark that Jesus 'having loved his own who were in the world loved them to *the end*' (13, 1b): that is, to his dying breath *and* to perfection. And how, one asks, has the earthly history of Jesus been brought by God 'to perfect fulfilment'? John immediately (19, 30b) provides the answer: 'And bowing his head *he handed over the Spirit*!' By this proleptic representation of Pentecost the evangelist has solved the problem raised by the Prologue (1, 14), and has thereby given his attestation to his own experience of Jesus's earthly history.

To appreciate more deeply the novelty and the profundity of this johannine testimony we observe two characteristics of our evangelist's account of Jesus's public ministry. First, John insists, even more than Mark, upon Jesus's repeated failure to reveal himself to 'the world'. This is in fact the burden of the central narrative of Jesus's public life in chapters 7–10; and John returns to the theme before he comes to the Last Supper (12, 37–43). Thus the observant reader will have been puzzled by the second statement in a verse to which attention has already been drawn. 'The Spirit is the life-giver: the flesh is useless; *the words that I have spoken to you are Spirit and they are Life*' (6, 63). Why then did Jesus's words fail to win faith from 'the Jews'? Why, even as late as the Last Supper, are his disciples incapable of grasping his word – Peter (13, 36), Thomas (14, 5), Philip (14, 8–10), Jude (14, 22–23)? Only when 'Jesus is glorified' does his

earthly history become the bearer of the Spirit: only then do the disciples become capable of 'remembering' (2, 22; 12, 16). For John, it is only 'the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth . . . who will teach you everything and *make you remember* all that I have told you' (14, 26). 'When he comes he will convict the world of sin and [convince it] about justice and about judgment. [He will convict them] of sin, because they do not believe in me; [he will convince them] about the justice [of my cause], because I am returning to the Father, and they no longer see me; [he will convince them] about the judgment, that the prince of this world has been judged' (16, 8-11). The word-play on the greek term 'convince/convict' makes translation awkward, but John's meaning is pellucidly clear. The Spirit's intervention is what has given John – and indeed all those on whom Jesus pronounces a final beatitude in this gospel: 'Happy those who have come to the faith without having seen me' (20, 29) – an authentic experience of Jesus's earthly history.

There is a second theme in this gospel which must not be overlooked, and one that I can only call 'the poverty of the Son' (5, 19. 30. 36; 7, 15b; 8, 28b; 12, 44-50). All that Jesus says, all that he does, all that he *is*, he has received as gift from the Father. Consequently, it is not enough to consider Jesus a messenger from God, empowered to act and speak in God's name. When Jesus acts, it is 'the Father who performs his works'; when Jesus speaks it is actually the Father who speaks through Jesus. Hence to see Jesus with christian faith as 'the Son' (6, 40) is to see the Father (14, 9). Once again, towards the close of his book, John returns to explain the Spirit's relationship to these words and deeds of Jesus and his role in 'unveiling' them as those of the Father (16, 12-15).

We conclude by recalling John's repeated emphasis in his gospel upon the value for our christian life of *the word of Jesus*, which is for him the pivotal point of both faith and love. The first four chapters insisted particularly on the acceptance of Jesus's word as the radical foundation for faith (2, 5. 22; 4, 41. 50). Through his last supper discourse John (for the first time in his book) reiterates his conviction that together with faith, it is obedience to Jesus's word, 'You must love one another, by virtue of the fact I have loved you' (13, 34; 15, 12. 17), which creates the possibility of an authentic experience of Jesus's life. The novelty of John's interpretation of Jesus's commandment should escape no one: it is a 'command' to love! Moreover, nothing is said about love for God (see Mk 12, 29-41), or indeed about love for one's enemies (see Mt 5, 44).

The evangelist gives two reasons for this strangely 'new' doctrine of his. First, it is obedience to this word of Jesus that concretely expresses the disciples' love for Jesus himself (14, 15). In fact, only this experience of giving and receiving love within the christian community provides the essential condition for the gift of 'another Paraclete' (14, 16) and of his permanent 'abiding' in the disciples (14, 17) – an abiding which brings them a genuine experience of Jesus's relationship to the Father and of the mutual 'abiding' of Jesus and the disciple (14, 20). For this love for the Church on the part of the disciple wins him the Father's love and his 'abiding' in the true disciple of Jesus (14, 23).

Secondly, the observance of this 'new commandment' of Jesus creates that communion among the disciples which is not only the hallmark of discipleship (13, 35), but actually constitutes their christian vocation, to assure the ongoing challenge to the world through 'their word' (17, 20), the apostolic preaching. Just as Jesus in his lifetime had challenged 'the Jews' by proclaiming 'I and the Father are one' (10, 30), so this communion of love in the Church alone provides the disciples' continuation of that challenge of Jesus.

I hope that this random sampling of certain divergent testimonies to the experience in the apostolic Church of Jesus's earthly history has sufficed to show both the pluralism of the response to that history, and the superlative value which any authentically christian spirituality must of necessity attach to it.