THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH

By JAMES MCPOLIN

WE LEARN to recognize four faces of Christ the more we catch the individual perspective of each gospel. Each evangelist has etched for us his own distinctive profile of Jesus. Mark, for example, sets out to answer the question: who is Jesus? He is the expected one of his people and Son of God; but he is, too, a suffering Son of Man who walks a lone path to his death, seemingly abandoned even by God. No other gospel spotlights so vividly the humanity of Jesus: his limitations, his compassion, his anger and affection. We become more aware of his power in word and action in Matthew's gospel, where he is the teacher who comes to reveal God's will for humanity, who is worshipped as Lord of a new people, a Church for all nations; though he is himself a Jew rooted in the cultural and scriptural traditions of his country. Many, however, find themselves more touched by Luke's Christ, prodigal in his mercy and compassion towards the sinful and deprived. In parables such as the good Samaritan, and the merciful father of the prodigal, and of the older son who does not understand mercy, we find the essential features of Christ and his message according to Luke.

But when we turn to the Fourth Gospel, the features of Christ, at the first glance, look very blurred; they elude us behind long, abstract discourses and the seeming lack of action and interaction. Many readers of this gospel initially experience Christ more as an intangible, transcendent Son of God who speaks words difficult to grasp, rather than as the human Son about whom disciples could speak so concretely: 'whom we have heard, whom we have seen with our eyes, whom we have looked upon and touched with our hands . . . the Word of life' (1 Jn 1, 1). However, the features of the johannine Christ take time to emerge. Christ invited disciples to 'come and see', to 'seek'; and they 'stayed with him' (Jn 1, 38-39). Many people, those willing to stay and seek, say they find themselves closer to God in this gospel than in any other book precisely because of the way Christ is presented. Some maintain that it

was written to deepen faith in Jesus amongst those who were already Christians. At any rate, it is the result of an ongoing reflection for sixty years or more on the meaning of Christ. That is why it came to be known very early in the history of the Church as the 'spiritual gospel' and why the evangelist was called 'John the theologian'. In art he is the eagle who flies high and has the most penetrating gaze into the mystery of God become man.

It is also 'the maverick gospel', since Christ speaks and acts in such a different, sometimes startling way.[1] In the other gospels we watch him recoiling from suffering and experiencing the absence of God with a cry of total desolation: 'Abba, Father, remove this cup from me. . . . My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mk 14, 36; 15, 34). Now we are asked to identify with a Christ who faces suffering, not as a victim but as a conqueror and master of the situation, who considers his suffering to be a loving invitation, a gift from his Father: one who under interrogation and judgement himself acts as the interrogator and judge of his oppressors, and whose last words are a cry of triumph that he has carried out to the full, in the most supreme expression of love, the work his Father has given him to do. 'It is finished': that is, 'My work is brought to its perfect completion in love (19, 30. Cf 18, 4. 11. 21).

A whole Christology

However different the features of this Christ, however abstract his words, there is a wholeness about johannine Christology not matched by any other New Testament writing. Not that it is a complete profile of Jesus: 'There were many other things that Jesus did; if all were written down, the world itself . . . would not hold all the books that would have to be written' (21, 25). Yet the wholeness of the mystery of Jesus appears throughout the gospel as it sustains the tension between the transcendent Word, the full expression of the Father, and the human, 'made flesh' Christ. Above all, this Christology is whole because the whole person has to be engaged in the contemplation of Christ; and an integrated profile of Christ emerges, provided we approach the gospel with that contemplative stance which the evangelist demanded from the readers of his day. Here Christ calls for an understanding of faith as he discloses the mystery of his person in 'signs'; he engages our fantasy and imagination as he speaks in images and symbols: 'I am the vine . . . I am the good shepherd' (15, 1; 10, 11. 14). A strongly affective tone pervades the gospel, as Jesus discloses himself very personally and compassionately in his relationships with individuals (for example,

the samaritan woman, the blind man, the family at Bethany), and as he frequently speaks of his own special relationship with his Father and with christian disciples (10, 1-18; 15, 1-17). The features of the whole Christ will come into focus if we seek to understand the 'signs'; enter into the images and symbols and, without rushing, stay to experience the personal touch and warmth of the gospel.

The meaning of Christ is conveyed in 'signs'. For example, in multiplying the bread he discloses the 'I am the bread of life', that he sustains us in faith with his nourishing, living word and with the gift of his own life in the eucharistic bread. When he opens the eyes of the blind man to the light of day, we look beyond the healing action to 'the light of the world', God's revealer, who throws light on what God is like and on what we can become (chs 6-9). The raising of Lazarus to life is a 'sign' that Jesus shares his own life and the life of his Father with us now and forever: he is, he effects the total victory of life over death: 'I am the resurrection and the life' (11, 25).

Images such as the vine or the shepherd may be lost on our urbanized and industrial world, but what they express about Christ is a living reality of contemporary faith. The vine with its branches sketches a series of relationships of love (15, 1-17), which is the bond uniting Jesus (the vine) with his Father (the vinedresser), with disciples (the branches) as well as Christians with one another in a fraternal love (fruit) inspired by the example of Christ. 'Abide in me and I in you': this abiding is the permanent presence of one person to another, intimate familiarity like that of friends present to one another in listening, understanding and living response. Besides, this image conveys more vividly than Paul's Body of Christ the mystery of his closeness. 'I am the vine, you are the branches': he is, paradoxically, the whole tree, including the branches, since he radically affects our being, our whole way of life and our relationships with one another. He makes us into a christian community by drawing us together into his own life and love.

The shepherd-image is the strongest New Testament affirmation about the personal quality of the relationship Christ offers. He is shepherd because he offers his guidance, care and companionship, calling each disciple 'by name': that is personally, to follow him; 'good' because he freely gives, 'lays down' his life out of love for his friends; offering a special relationship of mutual 'knowing', of love and understanding, through which we are drawn into that very life Jesus himself receives from his Father. In such a relationship, he puts no barriers in the way of disciples who, having turned to him,

may 'go in and go out' as they please (10, 1-18): an expression of hebrew origin, meaning familiarity and free access in a relationship (cf Acts 1, 21; 9, 28).

Light, life and love are the distinctive features of the johannine Christ. Many are puzzled by the fact that the Last Supper account in this gospel does not mention the institution of the Eucharist. But, in fact, the evangelist wishes to focus on a reality which is more central and more comprehensive than the Eucharist: the meaning of Jesus's life and mission, as it reaches its climax in his passing to the Father. 'He had always loved his own who were in the world, and now he was to show the full extent of his love'. As Jesus washes the feet of disciples at the Last Supper, he is performing a symbolic action which epitomizes both the spirit of his whole life, so manifest in death, and the heart of his message (13, 1-20. 34). The inner meaning of this gesture is the spirit of self-giving love which moves him to lay down his life for friends, and moves christian disciples to care for one another: 'I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you . . . that you love one another, even as I have loved you'. Johannine Christology is a theology of love. It is in Christ that we see the meaning of God's love and the meaning of fraternal love (3, 15; 1 Jn 3, 16).

Though the brutal details of Jesus's suffering are toned down, thus allowing the light of the resurrection to penetrate the darkness and the distress of his humanity more than in the other gospels, yet the meaning of his death is presented with as much, if not more pathos and sensitivity. The passion of Jesus is explained in personal relationships of love; it discloses both the love of Father and Son for humanity and also their own mutual love: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . . that whoever believes in him, should . . . have eternal life'. The breadth of God's love is the world of man for whom Christ died, the depth of God's love is his most precious gift, his only beloved Son, whose whole life, and particularly his death, shows how much God wants to share his own life with mankind. The suffering of Jesus is both a loving response to his Father and also a free expression of his love for humanity; he, in turn, is the beloved of the Father, since he is a Son who gives himself for others (10, 17-18; 18, 11).

An affective Christology

A distinctively personal or affective tone dominates the relationships of Jesus. At the very beginning of the gospel we see him as the

incarnate Son who 'is nearest his Father's heart', or 'turned towards the bosom of the Father'. This image (*kolpos*, breast, bosom) expresses the closest of human relationships: of intimate friends, mother and child, husband and wife (1, 18. Cf Gen 16, 5; Deut 13, 7; 1 Kg 3, 20; 17, 19). Jesus is the only and beloved Son Incarnate, always turned towards his loving Father, responding to him always in loving obedience throughout his mission on earth. Similarly, the Beloved Disciple receives his name from the occasion when he 'rested on the breast (*kolpos*) of Jesus', a special gesture of affection by which he is drawn into the area of Jesus's friendship and experiences intimate communion with him, similar to Jesus's own experience of his Father. As Jesus responds to his Father's love, so also the Beloved Disciple is sensitive through faith and love to the presence of his risen Lord, even when the tomb is empty (13, 23; 20, 8).

In addition, Jesus frequently expresses that he is loved by his Father. In fact, the source of the joy he experiences in life is the fact that he loves and is loved by the Father. Just as prayer at times brings us a heightened awareness that we are loved, so, too, the prayer of Christ reflects that he is loved by his Father; out of love he has given to Jesus 'everything' that he has. All that Jesus does — his mission, his words, work and even disciples are gifts to him from the Father. The mystery of the relationship between Jesus and his Father is one of love: the Father is the One who gives to his Son, Jesus is Son because he responds fully to this love. However, this love Jesus experiences is not just a reality we contemplate at reading distance. We ourselves are drawn into the Father's love for his Son in our own attachment in faith and love to Christ: 'The Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from the Father' (16, 27. Cf 15, 9-11). For John, 'giving' is also an expression of love, as the prayer of Jesus indicates (17, 1-9. 23-4).

It is in his relationships that we see more clearly the whole Christ revealing himself. In fact, the central theme of the gospel is the personal self-disclosure of Jesus: he shows himself as the expected One of his people and as the Incarnate Son of God; those who respond to him receive a share in his life (20, 30-31). He breaks down social barriers as he, the man, the Jew, starts the dialogue with the woman from Samaria, asks for a drink of water, and then discloses himself as the giver of living water, the Spirit. He reveals too, the secrets of her life, not in order to judge her but to disclose

who he is himself, a 'prophet' who has special knowledge of the person. He seeks out and 'finds' the blind man in order to draw him to faith in himself (cf 4, 1-26; 9, 5. 35-38).

Death and resurrection do not deprive the transformed, risen Christ of this affective, personal approach. He calls Mary by name: that is, he invites her personally to recognize him in faith as her risen Lord, assuring her that in her longing, she will, like other Christians, be drawn into a closer attachment, a 'clinging' to him through the gift of his Spirit. He draws from a doubting disciple the deepest confession of faith in the gospel: 'My Lord and my God'. Peter, who had denied his discipleship beside a charcoal fire on a cold Good Friday, is now faced at a charcoal fire by the lakeside with the most personal question that can be addressed to man or woman: 'Do you love me?' In this fashion Jesus draws from him an assurance that he has the devoted love of a genuine disciple (cf 20, 16-18. 28; 21, 9. 15; 18, 18).

There is little of the commanding Lord about this Christ. In his frequent personal contact with people, he does not first and foremost call them to follow him; rather he takes the initiative in disclosing to them who he is and in this way he 'draws'. He invites them first to 'come and see', to discover who he is and what he means to them. 'Keeping commandments' is the active attention, docility and promptitude of love characterizing both the relationship of Jesus to his Father and that of disciples towards Jesus. It is the response of Jesus as he listens actively to his Father's will and word; it is also the loving response to God and to Jesus from the disciple who wants to 'do what pleases him'. We respond with greater freedom to a Christ who offers love rather than commands it, to a Christ who invites us to be less preoccupied with our response, and to look rather at the quality of friendship and love he offers us: 'You are my friends. . . . You did not choose me . . . I chose you' (15, 14. 16; 8, 29; Jn 3, 22; Jn 15, 10; 12, 32).

A whole theology

The johannine Christ is a person who has the courage to say 'I': 'I am the bread of life . . . the light of the world . . . the door of the sheep . . . the good shepherd . . . the resurrection and the life . . . the way, the truth and the life . . . the true vine'.[2] In this 'I am' style, which distinguishes this gospel as the most Christological, Jesus discloses who he is and what he is for us: the One sent by the Father to show and to share the life of the Father, to lay down his

life in love for his friends, and draw them through faith and love into the life of communion with God. The Kingdom theme, so dominant in the Synoptics, is generally replaced by the Christological 'I'; and even on the two occasions when the 'kingdom of God' occurs, it is identified with the person of Jesus: to 'see', to 'enter into the kingdom of God' is to enter here and now through faith into a life-giving communion with Jesus. Besides, Jesus applies to himself an Old Testament refrain, 'I am he', which describes Yahweh as a divine, saving revealer for his people. In this way it is conveyed to a jewish audience that Jesus is not another God beside Yahweh; he is transcendent, one with his Father, yet in such a way that God remains one (3, 3. 5; 4, 26; 6, 20; 8, 24. 28. 58 etc).[3]

We would be distorting the features of the johannine Christ if we attempted to separate Christology from the rest of the gospel, from its theology of the Church, sacraments, Holy Spirit, from eschatology or even mariology. 'There is little doubt', says R. Kysar, 'that for the fourth evangelist the person and work of Christ is the heart of the gospel from which all other concepts are sustained'.[4] The church is Christ, the whole vine with its branches, a community of love constituted by the gift and example of Christ's love; eternal life is both a present and a future gift, a sharing in God's life through our communion with Christ; the mission of the Holy Spirit is to generate, deepen and sustain attachment to Christ and his word, for the Spirit 'will lead you into the heart of the truth' who is Jesus.

Besides, though John may be called the most sacramental of all the gospels,[5] his centre of attention is never the sacraments in themselves but the person of Jesus, his mission and self-revelation on earth. In the sacraments the risen, incarnate Jesus prolongs his life — giving mission as he continues to disclose himself to believing disciples and draw them into personal communion with him. The risen Lamb of God continues to share his power of forgiveness with his community; in the blood and water flowing from his side we see Christ as the One who shares his life-giving power in baptism (water) and also in the eucharist (blood) which is the sacrament of mutual 'abiding', a presence of one person to another, a reciprocal indwelling which does not submerge the personality of the other (1, 36; 20, 23; 19, 34; 6, 36; 1 Jn 5, 8).

Above all, the mariology of John is uniquely Christ-centred, since he never calls Mary by her proper name: she is 'his mother' or 'the mother of Jesus', a title which focuses on her Son and on her

relationship with him. Her true greatness is that she is a mother who depends in faith and trust on her Son as she tells the servants at Cana to 'do whatever he tells you', and 'stands by' him as a loyal follower in faith at Calvary; whereas unbelievers in the gospel 'go away from' him. She who had given her Son physical life depends on him for that new life he communicates to believers through his death, symbolized by water flowing from his side. Therefore, she is like Eve, the 'woman' who derived life from the side of a man. 'Woman', a title of Mary as a new Eve, expresses this life-giving relationship she has with her Son, a relationship in which she receives life through her faith in and dependence on him, and which transcends any human tie of flesh and blood she has with Jesus (2, 1-11; 6, 67; 19, 25-34; Gen 2, 23).

In the words of Jesus to Philip, it is evident that johannine Christology is also a theology of God: 'He who has seen me has seen the Father'. The Father, who dwells in inaccessible light, is manifested in Jesus, the light of the world. He is God's revealer; and his 'distinctiveness and uniqueness shows up first and foremost in his distinct and unique relationship with the one he calls his Father'.[6] One of the most significant features sustained throughout the gospel is the Father-Son relationship. The evangelist soars at the beginning of the gospel to gaze at the Son alongside his Father as a Word, the most perfect self-expression of the Father: 'All that God is, he (the Word) is'.

A Christology in tension

This Christology, however, always remains a theology of God made man, sustaining consistently in tension the contrasts of the mystery of Jesus as a human God and a divine human. The centre of attention is not the pre-existent Word but the incarnate Son on his mission to the world of man. The prologue, an overture where the recurring Christological motifs of the gospel are sounded, begins with the Word eternally present with the Father. But the crescendo of its descending movement is the Incarnation; those who welcome and commit themselves to the Incarnate Son, a Word made flesh, receive God's greatest gift — his own life: the divine becomes human, so that we may become children of God. 'I came from the Father and *I have come into the world*: again I am leaving the world and going to the Father'. In these words John summarizes Christology as a circular movement with our attention directed towards 'I have come into the world'. He has taken his place as a man among men in

the world, but he is also a Son who came 'from the Father as the spring of the deity' and returns to his Father, still an incarnate but transformed, risen Lord (16, 28).[7]

The gospel does not allow us to focus attention exclusively either on the human or transcendent Jesus. As Sobrino says, 'The God in Jesus is not accentuated to the detriment of the man nor does the man prevail in Jesus, thus prejudicing God'. Often Jesus calls himself the one 'sent' into the world of man, fully involved in it. But what gives meaning to his mission is this other-worldly unity of action, will and love with the Father who sent him. He experiences loneliness when his companions abandon him, yet in that same moment 'I am not alone, for the Father is with me' (16, 32). Even when John seems to stress the humanity of Jesus by highlighting that he is a 'man', he quickly reminds us that he is more. 'Come, see a man', says the samaritan woman, 'who told me all that I ever did'. In dialogue with her, Jesus is truly a man who sits down beside the well physically exhausted from his journey, and asks for a drink of water; but he also has a special divine insight into her life, and he can promise the 'living water' of the Spirit.

'Behold the man': Pilate presents Jesus in his broken humanity to the crowd: 'Look at this poor, broken man. There's nothing to be feared from him'. But on a deeper level John wishes us to see him also as a powerful '(Son of) Man', now on his way to his Father, to his glorification. Jesus is a 'man' whose human life is in jeopardy because he speaks what he hears from his Father (19, 5; 12, 23-4; 8, 40).

In his very transcendence we seem to touch humanity: as when Jesus describes his unique relationship with his Father in affective terms, when he discloses the mystery of his life as Son to individuals in very personal and humane relationships with them. We may even say that he had to grow in his own life as Son of his Father, in so far as he had to live out and realize progressively in his mission what it meant to be an *incarnate* Son, responding to his Father in the varying demands of this mission.

Nowhere in the gospel do we see Jesus so clearly as the human God and the divine human all at once as in the events at Bethany (11, 1-54; 12, 1-8). It is the place where he discloses himself as the Christ, teacher and rabbi, the resurrection and the life, a Son who manifests the power and life of God in calling Lazarus from the tomb with a 'loud voice'. He is the Jesus who 'loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus', who experiences bereavement with tears and distress.

As he faces the reality of his oncoming death, he strengthens disciples, consoles Martha and Mary, and prays to the Father with confidence. Finally, as Mary anoints his feet, he accepts her gesture of loving faith, openly recognizing that his death will leave disciples and friends deprived: 'Leave her alone . . . You do not always have me'. Such scenes are in themselves the most living and convincing explanation of the Word who was made flesh. The Son of God takes on the vulnerable, earth-bound, perishable quality and the limitations of our human existence. God enters fully and unconditionally into human life in the man Jesus, so that in experiencing the man Jesus, disciples and friends experience God to be personally present in their midst.

A contemporary Christ

The features of this Christ also reflect the community and the contemporary situation to which the gospel was addressed. It reflects composition, culminating towards the end of the first century in a Christology which 'is quite foreign to the Synoptic gospels. With justice johannine Christology can be called the highest in the New Testament',[8] since it moves Christ higher into the sphere of the divinity and pre-existence. With its emphasis on God's love in Christ, it has been inspired by the experience of the Beloved Disciple who saw himself, and other christian disciples too, as loved by Christ and who still speaks to those who need to believe they are beloved.

The features of this Christ also reflect the community and the contemporary situation to which the gospel was addressed. It reflects the faith of the community of the Beloved Disciple, who experienced the risen incarnate Christ in the word of preaching and instruction which they found to be 'spirit and life', in the eucharistic bread of life, in their Church of Jew and gentile, a community of 'friends' and 'brothers' which was 'one', and at the same time threatened from without because of persecution and conflict with the synagogue authorities. Jesus's words about expulsion from the official jewish community, and about the struggle of faith against unbelief in terms of light and darkness, all reflect the contemporary situation of the community for whom the gospel was written. Though they professed that Jesus is 'Saviour of the whole world', of mankind whom the Father loves, yet as disciples of Christ, the light of the world, they experienced themselves at odds with and threatened by their 'world', the darkness of unbelief and persecution: 'if the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you' (15, 18; 3, 16; 4, 42; 6, 63; 15, 14; 20, 17).[9]

In this conflict, one of the basic charges against Christians was that they worshipped two Gods: the God of the Old Testament, who must be clearly 'one', and a divine Christ who 'makes himself equal with God'. The gospel replies in making clear that though Christ is a divine Messiah, a real Son, equal to God, he is not a second God, a usurper of God's powers, working independently of him. Rather, he acts in complete dependence on him and in no way does he act 'of his own accord'. His mission and his life come from God, so that 'the Father is greater than I'. 'We stone you . . . for blasphemy because you, although a man, make yourself God'. These words directed to Jesus are intended for Christians in that particular, contemporary situation. Therefore, the Christology of the Fourth Gospel is reactionary and contemporary, since it is fashioned out of a real, lived situation of the community, out of their deep faith-experience of Christ and their struggle with opponents whom they considered to be guided by the forces of darkness, of unbelief (5, 17-30; cf Deut 6, 4).

In addition, the cultural milieu which influenced the idiom, style and imagery of the gospel was both jewish and hellenistic. Though recent studies on the influence of gnosticism on the gospel are inconclusive, it is true that the evangelist does portray Christ with features that would speak to men and women of diverse cultural backgrounds in order to emphasize his universal appeal for anyone, Jew or gentile. They would understand that Jesus transcends all ideologies and 'know that this is indeed the saviour of the world'. A Word made flesh would remind Jews of their traditions about the wisdom and creative, life-giving word of God, and possibly gentiles of the hellenistic *logos*, a kind of cosmic mind of God giving structure and order to the universe. The gospel, then, would be proclaiming to a pluralistic community that the vast tradition of many different religious views of the world are fulfilled and transcended in a personal Word made flesh.

Though the Christology was conditioned by situations, categories and images of the time, it retains still a certain universal and transcultural appeal. It can remain contemporary only if the reader approaches and stays with the gospel in the contemplative attitude which perceives the whole Christ, as he speaks to the whole person in signs images and relationships. The Christ of this gospel, so distinctively personal, is experienced as contemporary by those who find themselves alienated from an industrialized, anonymous society, and even sometimes by those who say they find their local Church

impersonal and institutionalized. This gospel is remarkably free of explicit mention of church offices and structures. It faces all readers with a free and personal choice between light and darkness: the dramatic conflict continues to be lived out in the conflict between faith and unbelief in its recent forms, such as injustice and violence. The very fact that the Christology of the gospel was conditioned by a contemporary situation which made the community think in a new way about Christ, on the basis of traditions they treasured, shows that Christology is alive when it is contemporary. It cannot remain locked exclusively in categories or problems of the past; neither can it diminish the mystery and the message of the human God and the divine human. It always seeks to find a dwelling-place for the Word in contemporary human life with all its struggles and to give it flesh and life.

[1] R. Kysar, *The Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta, 1976).
[2] L. Boff, *Jesus Christ, Liberator* (London, 1980).
[3] P. B. Harner, *The 'I am' of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia, 1970).
[4] R. Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and his Gospel* (Minnesota, 1975), p 175.
[5] R. Brown, *New Testament Essays* (London, 1965), p 95.
[6] J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (London, 1978), p 335.
[7] B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel according to John* (London, 1908), p 235.
[8] R. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York, 1979), p 45.
[9] A. Y. Collins, 'Crisis and community in John's Gospel', in *Theology Digest*, 27, 4 (1979), pp 314-16.