

THE GOAL OF CHRISTIAN TEACHING

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

THE GOAL of christian teaching is stated in John 20, 31: 'That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name'. We should never forget that Jesus does not give us ideas *about* God. He brings us into touch with God in our daily lives. This is the object and the lesson of the parables. They constantly question us about the decisions we take for granted. Jesus was a questioner. He invited people to make their own decisions. His very presence was a question: 'Who do you say that I am?' (Mk 8, 29). Mark's gospel reiterates it: 'What sort of man is this?' (Mk 4, 41). But to ask this question implies another question, 'Who am I?' The gospel, rightly understood, does not supply us with answers; rather, it poses questions about the fundamental values, about the deepest meaning of human life. Jesus was an enigma to his contemporaries. He turned their values upside-down. He was a pharisee who antagonized the pharisees. He was one of their own; yet he was one who rejected their legalistic interpretation of the Law. They taught and he taught. They taught in terms of legalistic interpretations of the Law. The Pharisees could tell you exactly what was permitted, what was right or wrong. They could tell you that it was forbidden on the Sabbath to tie knots; but a woman was allowed to tie a knot in her girdle. So, in order to draw a bucket of water from the well on a Sabbath, it was permissible to use a knot made by a woman for her girdle.

The Jesus of the gospel always teaches out of his personal experience. Learned though he was in the law and the prophets, he knew farmers, fishermen, people who did shady business deals, women who made bread. He was a man of his own world and time. He spoke out of his own experience, not out of some theoretical manual, or some course in theology. His knowledge was couched in terms of what he came to know personally, of one living in a particular age and situation. Because the gospel gives us what he lived, and felt and

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thought, should we in our christian teaching want to do otherwise?

Paul lists teaching as one of the charisms (gifts) of the Spirit (1 Cor 12, 38). All are not teachers. I may have a Ph.D. in religious education, but that does not mean that I am a teacher, a guru, in the strict sense of that word, one who leads another to eternal light. The purpose of any christian teaching is to communicate to others the sure knowledge of Jesus, born, living, dead, and risen: a knowledge that comes from faith, which means that I believe in the incredible.

At the same time, it is crucial that we realize that the 'incredible' is not an abstract idea but a person, Jesus Christ. Christian teaching should always lead us to this incredible person: Jesus Christ. As Mark emphasizes, he was an enigma even to his closest followers. They continually came up against the question, 'who then is this?' (Mk 4, 41). Indeed, the lives of Jesus's followers were nothing more or less than the living out of that question. They had been with him, seen him die, knew his risen presence (cf Acts 1, 22). They made the simple profession of faith, 'Jesus is the Lord'. But that profession of faith was made through the gift of the Spirit, and not because of overwhelming and all-compelling rational evidence. For them, Jesus was never the conclusion of an irrefutable syllogism. Certainly they knew him; and yet they did not know him: that is, they had an awareness that there is always more to be known. As Paul repeats continually in one form or another, 'we walk by faith, not by sight' (2 Cor 5, 7). Faith is believing what we do not see. Otherwise, how can it be faith? Faith is always a leap into the dark, just as 'hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?' (Rom 8, 24) We believe and hope truly when we put faith and trust in what we do not see, what we cannot prove conclusively to anyone else, but what we know is true: true, in the good biblical sense of the word (not greek philosophy, please!). Truth is the solid rock under my feet, it is the God who gives me the firmness from which I can take that leap into faith and hope: 'The Lord is my rock' (Ps 18, 2).

We stand on that rock and Jesus invites us to take the leap. Dare we? Perhaps this is the central question that christian teaching has to grapple with: Dare we? Dare we? Dare we have the courage of Jesus, his confidence in humanity, to lead others into a situation that demands a life or death decision? Dare we teach as he did? And how did Jesus teach? Quite simply, the gospel tells us, in parables. What is a parable? The best description I have come across is from the late C. H. Dodd: 'The parable is a metaphor or simile, drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or

strangeness, leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought'.¹

The parables are Jesus himself. They are enigmatic because he is. They pose a question because he is the divine and the human question. Jesus invites us to live with the question that constantly teased Francis of Assisi: 'Who, God, are you and who am I?' The parables are about human relationships. If we believe that love of neighbour and love of God are two sides of the same coin, they are about our relationship with God. We tend to divide the two in some way or other. But Jesus never does. He seems to have the supreme confidence that the person who truly loves his fellow human beings really loves God. Perhaps the parable of the Good Samaritan makes this point most forcibly (Lk 10, 25-37). It is interesting to note that God is not mentioned in this parable. Nor is he in most of the parables. We put in the 'commercial' for God. We might ask ourselves why Jesus did not think it necessary to do so.

The parables are born out of human situations that the hearers can recognize as part of their own lived knowledge. But they pose a question which jolts the hearers. For example, the Samaritan would have been a very definite jolt for a Jewish audience. They would react, in bewilderment, anger, sincere questioning; but they would certainly react. Jesus was opening up a whole new world. Could a heretic, one who was ostracized by the orthodox Jew, really be an example of what neighbourly love was about? It was the equivalent of holding up Karl Marx as an example to Senator McCarthy.

Jesus did not give an answer. He reframed the question in dramatic form and left his questioner to decide for himself. It was up to him to accept or reject the message. Did he wish to identify himself with the priest, the Levite or the Samaritan? In terms of common sense and Jewish law, he could comfortably have sided with the priest and the Levite. 'Don't get involved' is a very safe principle, faithfully applied some years ago in New York City when some twenty-odd (very odd) citizens watched a young woman being stabbed to death. Faithfully applied when the affluent world stands back from the oppressed and starving world and says, 'What is that to us?' (cf Mt 27, 4) But to side with the Samaritan, that would have demanded a complete change of heart. Yet when all is said and done, this is the whole purpose of Jesus's teaching: to invite people to a complete change of heart.

¹ *Parables of the Kingdom* (New York, 1961), p 5.

Jesus was a man without prejudice. He was open to recognize faith in a pagan centurion, in a gentile woman, in a kind Samaritan. He was not concerned about putting labels on people, but on seeing who they were in their real selves. He could say to a collaborationist, outcast, tax-collector: 'Follow me' (Mk 2, 14). His was not a command but an invitation. 'Go now and sin no more' (Jn 8, 11), set free the oppressed and disgraced woman.

How does the teaching of Jesus compare with that of the popular evangelists on American television? They are many. Their following numbers thousands. Nor does one question their sincerity. But their approach is totally contrary to the spirit of the gospel as preached by Jesus Christ. Their announcement of the good news is not very different from the roman catholic preachers of missions in the closing decades of the last century until the second world war. The technique is to pull out the 'guilt-stop' on the organ. It is to belabour people with their sinfulness to the point where they are desperate for any outlet. The outlet is provided, 'Come up and confess to the Lord Jesus'. Confess what? Their sinfulness? When did Jesus ever invite this? He invited them (and I use the word 'invite' deliberately) to faith. Jesus opens up to us the possibility of becoming the kind of people we, in our hearts, want to be, but perhaps doubt that we can ever be. He says to us, 'You can be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 6, 43-48). He says to us that we can have compassion as our Father has compassion. Paul will reiterate this: 'Be imitators of God as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice' (Eph 5, 1-2).

The gospels and the rest of the New Testament (and what is wrongly called the Old Testament) make the simple point that God is near us. He is not a distant judge, condemning or approving us from afar. He is the warp and woof of our lives. He has pitched his tent in our encampment (Jn 1, 4). As the early teachers of the Church repeated, 'God became man so that man might become God' (with all due respect to the feminists, who are rightly forceful concerning their identity but confused on their greek or latin etymology). We should never forget that Jesus learned what he knew about God, Yahweh, the 'unknowable One' from what we call the 'Old Testament'. If he could call Yahweh, 'Abba' — Daddy, it was because he truly understood what the Old Testament was about. He read it as we should read it, in terms of a relationship of deep love: of a love that has the right to be angry, but is never vengeful; a love that yearns to forgive but comes up against the wall of self-

justification; comes up against betrayal and still continues to love.

Such was the life of Jesus. It was a life that overcame the fear and hate that lie beneath revenge. A life that was a triumph over death. Such is the life that we are invited to enter into by our baptism. Such is the life that we are invited to renew in our Eucharist. We make our profession of faith: 'Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life'; how do we live that? How do we teach people to live that? How indeed, in a world of affluence and of oppressive poverty? A world in which Christians worry about being able to afford a third car, whilst other Christians are preoccupied by the thought of how they are going to be able to give their children, not enough, but something to eat for the day. How many are aware of that reality? How many want to be aware of it?

The goal of christian teaching is too easily reduced to what is called moral theology. And that is so easily reduced to sexual morality. The phrase of William Blake is worth repeating: 'If Christianity were morality, then Socrates was the saviour'. Jesus did not live amongst us, as one of us, to give us an ethical code. He came to put new heart into us. And he is here still to invite us to believe in ourselves, to believe in what we do not see.

This is difficult. But then, Jesus never claimed that it would be easy. He promised us persecution, though he did not invite us to provoke it. He does, however, invite us to challenge the world in which we live. We are invited, not compelled, to challenge the values of a materialistic, achievement-oriented world: a world in which success, fame, reputation, status and recognition are the all-important objectives. The gospel offers us a completely opposite objective. It proclaims that life is about the true relationships of love and kindness that we build between ourselves and others: even, and especially, if they are our enemies, those who wish our death.

Of course, this is easy to say in the affluent world, where too many Christians have become so compromised with the structures of materialism that they are not even worth persecuting. But for the peoples of, say, Mexico, Central and South America, the reality of their lives is very different. (I use those countries as but one example; there are many more.) From the point of view of christian education, how do you tell people to build relationships of love, kindness and understanding with those who seek to oppress and dehumanize them? What do you preach to workers who receive fifty cents for a hard day's work from a 'Catholic' millionaire who lives off their pain and sweat? How do you preach the gospel of love to

those whose most beloved are shot down by 'good' right-wing Catholics? What is the goal of christian teaching to the oppressed and starving (literally) of the world? A lecture on *Humanæ Vitæ* or a practical action that does something about their situation?

The goal of christian teaching is very different in a situation of unchristian affluence and one of abject, grinding, de-humanizing poverty and bare subsistence. Can the luxury of preoccupation about purity of doctrine and morals (and there certainly should be such preoccupation) be imposed on that majority of the world's people who, unable to read or write, live in hope that their children may not die of malnutrition? Who teaches the dying lepers of India? Mother Theresa or the Synod of Bishops? Does Christ reach out and touch their rotting bodies through the decrees of Ephesus, Chalcedon, Vatican II, or through the compassionate hands of a loving woman who sees Christ in them? The lovely, ancient greek name for God was *Philanthrôpos*, the lover of humanity: all human kind, in the root sense of kind, for we are all his kith and kin, and all can call him our Father.

In his own teaching, then, Jesus did not provide answers; he brought people before the questions of their daily lives. He invited them to examine their own deep attitudes, motivations, fears and prejudices. He did not feed them information, he gave to them the fruit of his own life among them. He was one of them and they knew it: which is why so many resented and hated him. He was getting too close, not merely to the bone, but to the marrow of their religious lives. He was their brother; and, as Cain slew Abel, they murdered him. He came to challenge them, but their fear, their need for security interpreted the challenge as a mortal threat.

Jesus never questioned the jewish belief in the one God. But he did question their understanding of the one God, and he did question the way in which they translated that understanding into practical daily life. He questioned the exclusiveness of their idea of the one God when he saw faith in a pagan roman centurion and a canaanite woman, in a renegade Matthew and a despised prostitute. He questioned their understanding of religion in practice. For them, it was strict adherence to rule and regulation. To perform ritual exactly was for them to be with God. For Jesus, the sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath: a viewpoint that was lost to catholic moral theology several centuries ago, but which is now beginning to emerge again.

Not that Jesus was any sort of antinomian. He was simply one

who saw things in perspective: 'Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?' (Mk 3, 3). The question silenced those who were out to trap him, because the true answer demanded of them a complete change of heart and mind. (Jesus would never have succeeded in the Vatican 'diplomatic service.') And the simple reason was that he was prepared to die for what he said. When the situation called for it, he was the most uncompromising of persons, quite unthinking of the consequences to himself. He was one totally unconcerned about his own reputation, but not imprudently. He avoided Jerusalem until it was evident that the final confrontation that would result in his death was his God-given destiny. But that cost him the agony of Gethsemane and Calvary.

Jesus spoke to others through his life, and his life was who he was in the depth of his being: the Son of the Father. We who are baptized in him can only teach in the measure in which our words express our being in him. Otherwise, we might as well give up. We may teach academic religion, and explain what *apokatastasis* is all about. And the answer is given by Gully Jimson in Joyce Carey's *The Horse's Mouth*: 'Clever, but is it worth it?'

We teach in the measure in which our faith in Jesus leads us to 'have life in his name'. In other words, to find our own destiny in what he was, and still is, about. To say 'Amen', to the Eucharist means, 'I want in my daily life to be what you were about in your life as a Jew amongst us'. It means that our ambition in life is to be in our world what Jesus was in his world.

That means, of course, being women and men of our times. It means being people of the here and now and not mourners of the times past (Jesus called that looking over your shoulder whilst you are supposed to be ploughing straight ahead). Nor does it mean seeking some future Utopia, even if that is in heaven. If the abstract doctrine of the Incarnation means anything in practice, it means that we start from where we are, here and now.

This, today, demands that we become more and more aware of our world as a whole. This is where the so-called media fail totally. We are not informed by newspapers, TV, popular magazines; we are simply programmed. We are treated like babies. The rattle is shaken to distract us from what is the real centre of interest. Blinds are drawn on what 'they' would find it inconvenient for us to see. Perhaps the first question facing christian education is, 'How do we keep people honestly informed on what is really happening in the world?' The second question would be, 'How do we show people

that this concerns them?' It is really the spirit of the prayer of the faithful in the liturgy, in which I broaden out my particular need to an awareness of a vaster, universal need. Let us by all means have catholic papers and periodicals; but let us remember that catholic means universal. Let us distinguish between diocesan gossip sheets, and journals that seek to supplement the filtered information given in the daily newspapers and TV. Of course, this would be very unpopular, but Christ never sought popularity. We need honesty and not cover-ups. Let us courageously admit the state of affairs and not try to pretend. Let us ask people to be honest in what they think and feel, and not tell them what they ought to think and feel. One simple question might be: 'What do you think and feel about the Lectionary?' It has its merits, but what are its defects? Are we to be saddled with lengthy readings from the Books of Kings for how many years? Christian teaching must be honest, from an honest appraisal of a particular situation.

But, ultimately, 'to have life in the name of Jesus' means that we become lovers of mankind, imitators of God. Jesus was a person open to all people. His openness was the result of a deep, loving relationship with his Father. He knew what he believed and was not threatened by other beliefs. If our aim in christian education is to lead others to a unique relationship with Jesus, this should blossom forth into an openness of vision towards others, Jew and Moslem, Hindu, Buddhist. To have life in the name of Jesus means to be able to recognize real love, wherever it may be found. It means shedding prejudices that cloud our vision and deafen our ears. We are to have conviction without prejudice. Our faith should open our eyes to all faith, not provide us with 'catholic blinkers'.

One final question: 'Where are the goals of christian teaching sought and found?' In theological and catechetical meetings? In schools? Or in the home? Where in practice, do children learn from their own experience what it means to be accepted and to be loved? Can you teach a five-year-old girl who has been brutally abused by her father, to say 'Our Father?' Christian education is done in the family. It is a lesson christian teaching has to learn from Judaism. The great universal family of God has to be reproduced in the microcosm of each christian family. Fortunately, this is being stressed more and more. But we still have need to insist upon it. Only christian parents can educate christian children. And how do they do this? By teaching them, through their love, to love one another. After all, that is what Jesus did.