

The Risen Christ: Has Jesus of Nazareth Been Distorted?

Jesus' figure, as it emerges from the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, is the figure of a rabbi, a teacher of the Law in the purest tradition of the people of Israel (Jn 3:2). Although, later on, the first Christian Community gave more importance to the conflicts with the Pharisees than actually occurred, they did not forget that Jesus' teaching was very close to the teaching of the Pharisees on many points (Mk 2:16; 12:28; 12:32). Both disciples and opponents saw him as a self-taught master of the law (Jn 7:15). How then did we go from there to the figure of Christ as it appears particularly in Paul's letters: the Lord of history, the new Adam, the one who received the ineffable "Name"?

The apostles believed in the resurrection of Jesus and so did the entire Christian community who were born of this conviction. There was no doubt that he was the Messiah; people also believed that he was God's Son in a very special sense, different from what the Jews understood by this term. A long time was needed to draw all the inferences from this. This passage was undoubtedly more difficult for those who had known Jesus personally and who had seen him through the eyes of their Jewish culture, not because Jesus was not utterly Jewish, including his way of teaching, but because what they loved in him was preventing them from seeing beyond.

They certainly recognized themselves in James' letter, the most "Jewish" of the apostolic writings. While acknowledging Jesus as "our Lord," the author of the letter sees Jesus first as the teacher of a new law which included the best of the Old Testament (2:1 and 8). With the help of the impact of the Nazareth group, the "brothers of Jesus," the Christian communities of Palestine would grow fond of this image they had of the Galilean rabbi. He had risen, of course, but he had not set the world clock back to zero, and his heritage was first of all an example of *doing* good, not just teaching the Law.

Within just a few generations, these "Judeo-Christians" would find themselves like strangers to the faith of the Church whose center had moved from Jerusalem to Antioch, then to Rome. It is there that Paul played a decisive role that he himself did not choose. He did not invent Christ the Lord and Redeemer: he was already present in Peter's first proclamations (Acts 2:32-36; 3:15). Paul, however, had not been influenced (and at the same time limited) by the image and the words of the Galilean rabbi. On the contrary, his conversion had been an encounter with God himself in the person of Jesus, and he saw the Master's itinerant preaching as the first stage of a wider destiny (2 Cor 5:16).

If Jesus had not risen, he would have remained a teacher; until then, his words were perhaps more important than he himself was. But his body disappeared from the tomb; this first-ever happening, if true, did not fit into the laws of the universe. So the visions of the resurrected one conveyed but one message: Jesus, the Lord! This went far beyond Jeremiah exultant in glory or Elijah taken up to heaven. On the day of Pentecost Peter said that God had raised his holy servant (Act 3:15) and he added: "God has made him Lord." Before long Jesus will be recognized as "the son of the woman taken up to heaven to seize the book of history" (Rev 12:5; 5:7). Paul and John have authority to speak about him because they are true witnesses; both of them were privileged to get a glimpse of the above (Rev 4:1; 2 Cor 12:2).

From that moment, it was knowing who Jesus was that gave the understanding of his

words, because he was God born of God. From that point on, his whole human adventure was a new beginning.

Therefore, when Paul speaks of Christ as the “image of God” (Col 1:15), he is not primarily inviting us to find the goodness of the Father in Jesus’ gestures: instead he is thinking more directly about the Son who, from the beginning, is the manifestation, the projection and the active wisdom of the forever invisible God. Christ is the one who passed through our history and our time so that, through him, all of creation including humankind would be seen as part of the divine mystery (Col 1:20).

In the gospels, Jesus chose to be the proclaimer of the Reign of God. With Paul, however, there is not just Kingdom, but our life in the risen Christ (Col 3:1). There we see the gap between Christian faith and the position of the non-Christian Jews who were the most sympathetic toward Jesus and acknowledged him as one of their own. Paul was not the one who built a wall of misunderstanding; the scandal was found in Jesus’ resurrection as well as in his death on the cross.

These are not less scandalous for today’s Christians. Although we have faith, at times we are besieged by doubt: is all of that certain? Many books written by unbelievers, or even by educated Christians, will reinforce our doubts: “The resurrection? There is no other basis than an empty tomb – and do we even know that? Yet, all these reasons do not overcome a deep-seated conviction in the hearts of believers. Then, people interpreted; they believed; they saw.... To say that he had risen was a way of exalting him and of reasserting the hope of the community...” A sense of God tells them that truth is found in the mystery rather than in the interpretations that seek to do away with it (1 Jn 2:27).

We have just said “a sense of God,” because it is not a matter of human *feeling*: we *believe*, which means first of all that we receive the testimony of the apostles and of the Church, and we believe the way they did. If we welcome faith, God will not leave us alone with our doubts, there is also an added promise: the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:18). There can be no lasting faith without a spiritual experience (Heb 12:18-24), and this is even truer for those living in a culture impervious to faith, as we are.