

SHARING THE EXPERIENCE AND THE MESSAGE OF JESUS

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Deep within each one of us there is a longing—at times an ache or hunger—for a purpose, a meaning and a hope that will fill the empty space in us and leave us feeling satisfied and fulfilled.

It is a longing to be more fully human in ways that we cannot quite spell out and that seem to be beyond our reach. That longing is a crucial aspect of our humanity and it lies at the heart of our spirituality. Jesus has come to meet that longing and to bring us the fulfilment that we yearn for. In this talk I want to spell out some aspects of what that means.

THE BELOVED

At the age of about thirty Jesus felt a call to leave his home and to join the thousands of his people who were gathering to listen to the prophetic message of John the Baptist. He showed his solidarity with his people by going down into the water alongside hundreds of others to be baptized by John in the waters of the Jordan (Mk 1:9).

Coming up from the waters, Jesus had a remarkable experience—one which changed the whole direction of his life. As Mark describes it, Jesus 'saw the heavens opened'. This means that the vault of the skies was no longer a barrier between God's abode and our world. For Jesus, at this moment, God was evidently present to the human world, and at work in it. The Gospel says that Jesus heard a voice from heaven telling him: 'You are my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' (Mk 1:11). This overwhelming sense of being accepted by God and cherished as 'the beloved' reminds us that for Jesus, as for the prophets who came before him, the very foundation for any prophetic mission was an overwhelming assurance of God's love and care. It is consoling for us to know that even Jesus needed such an assurance. It makes us aware that he was fully one of us, not just God masquerading as a human being.

LED BY THE SPIRIT

The Spirit who descended on Jesus at his Baptism came not just to assure him of God's love but also to reveal God's will to him and to lead him in his ministry. The Gospels say that the Spirit first led him into a wilderness place (Mt 4:1; Mk 1:12).

There he spent an extended period of time exploring the significance of his experience and discerning his future.

The outcome of his discernment was his decision to share with his own people the experience he himself had at his baptism. He wanted others to have something of his own overwhelming sense of being loved and accepted by God. The heart of the 'good news' which Jesus preached was God's unconditional love for the people as a whole and for each individual. It was the fulfilment of the promises made by God through the prophets long ago (e.g. Je31:31-4; 33:6-9; Ezek 36:26-8). If people had that experience and lived out its implications then the 'reign of God' would indeed be present.

Jesus was particularly concerned about those who were outcast or disadvantaged in his world. The religious belief of his time gave little encouragement to such people. Those who were poor, or sick, or disturbed in mind—as well as those who engaged in such despised work as prostitution, collecting taxes or herding pigs—were given to believe that they were in some way cursed by God; certainly, neither their religious leaders nor their culture and belief-system gave them any reason to believe that God cared for them. Jesus went out of his way to meet and value such people. Moved by compassion for the plight of the outcasts, he made a deliberate choice to join them, to become an outcast himself/by mixing socially with them.

Precisely because these people on the margins of respectable society were so needy, they were the ones who were most open to the message of Jesus. For, like every other human being, they too had a deep hunger to be valued and respected, to be treated as people who were truly precious. So, when Jesus socialized with them and defended them, this was indeed 'good news' for them. His friendship with them, his sitting down to eat with them, brought them a healing of spirit, a restoration of their belief in themselves and their own value.

And, because Jesus was widely seen as 'a man of God', his friendship with the outcasts gave the clear message that they were loved by God.

JESUS, 'THE HUMAN ONE'

The account of the temptations of Jesus indicate that he resisted the temptation to present himself as a man of spiritual power able to provide instant solutions to the problems of those who followed him. He refused to turn stones into bread, or throw himself from the Temple or use spiritual power to impress or coerce people (Mt 4:1-12). Jesus rejected the temptation to be a figure of power, who would rule over others. He came not to be served but to serve and to give his life for others (Mk 10:45).

The kind of ministry chosen by Jesus to carry out his mission was a way that fully respects others and was, for this reason, slow and at times very painful. Instead of looking to God as a worker of magic providing instant solutions, he looked within. Instead of cultivating a power that would set him apart from others and above others, he explored and unveiled what it means to live a fully human life.

The key to understanding what Jesus stood for is the title he chose for himself. Instead of calling himself 'Son of God' he gave himself an unusual title which is usually translated as 'The Son of Man'. That is a misleading and sexist translation; a more accurate translation is 'The Human One'

What is meant by this title 'the Human One' which Jesus used of himself? It means that he is saying that he is one of us, in solidarity with all other humans in the world. It also suggests that Jesus is a model for what it means to be human. Furthermore, it indicates that the way he is showing us to come to God is through living human life to the full.

By using this title Jesus is telling us that the way to come close to God is to live authentic human lives rather than escaping from this world or running away from everyday human issues. This means that to be his followers we must commit ourselves to the values of justice, respect for others, personal

integrity, care for the environment, and so on, since these are key ways of living an authentically human life. In doing so we can live in conscious imitation of Jesus and in on-going dialogue with him.

A crucial point about this title is that it creates an inseparable link between what are called the vertical and the horizontal aspects of spirituality. When we speak of the vertical aspect we mean our personal relationship with God. When we speak of the horizontal aspect we mean our behaviour and relationships in this world—how loving we are, how we respect the environment, how we maintain our personal integrity and the extent to which we work for social justice and for a society which tackles poverty. The point about the title 'The Human One' is that it shows that in Jesus there was a full integration of the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of spirituality—and it invites us, too, to integrate the living out of ethical and political values with our personal relationship with Jesus, with the Spirit, and with the God whom Jesus called 'Abba, Father'.

WE TOO

The deep message of the title 'The Human One' which Jesus used of himself is that we who also are human are called to be what he is—to share his sense of total acceptance by God and the experience of unbounded love poured out on him.

Jesus came to tell us, and to witness to us, that to be fully and genuinely human is to stand before God with the same complete freedom of spirit which he had himself. To follow Jesus is to seek to live with the same total authenticity as he lived—a life so richly and deeply human that it goes far beyond the limits of what we commonly call human.

This was such an unusual and challenging message that Christians down through the ages have found it almost impossible to be content with it. Again and again they have yielded to the temptation to forget it or play it down by turning Jesus into a dominating figure, with superhuman powers. The most common way in which they have done this is by focusing on his divinity in a way that undermines and undervalues his humanity. If we do that we are missing out on the real power he had and which he offers to us—the power to be fully and totally human.

LIVING LIFE TO THE FULL

If we say that Jesus was 'fully and totally human' what does that mean in practice? We can begin to answer this question by looking at some of his rich human qualities—his compassion for those in trouble, his courage, and his deep friendships. We can note especially his willingness to leave himself vulnerable—for instance, when he asked his friends Peter, James and John to 'watch with' him during his agony (Mt 26:38).

A deeper level of vulnerability in Jesus came from his total trust in the one he called Abba. The ultimate test of this trust came when, nailed to the cross, he cried out in the words of the psalm: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mt 27:46). In order to enter into the fullness of what it means to be human, Jesus had to endure and transcend this sense of being utterly deserted both by his human friends and by God. The way he finally faced death shows that to be authentically human we too must

have faith like his. It means abandoning every attempt to control God or to specify how God's love will ultimately triumph.

Jesus teaches us that to be genuinely human is to commit ourselves even in the darkest times to the mystery which we call God and whom Jesus named 'Abba'. We make that commitment by clinging, like Jesus, to the hope that, beyond all hope and despite all the contrary evidence, there is a meaning behind the dark mysteries of life and death—and that that meaning will ultimately be unveiled as love.

CHALLENGE TO LEGALISM

Jesus was both sad and angry about the way the religious leaders of his time looked down on the sick and the poor. These leaders who should have understood the very heart of the Jewish religion had got it completely wrong. The central message of the Old Testament was the God had freely chosen to love the Chosen People. And now this message had been lost and legalism had taken over. The Jewish Law had been given by God as an instrument for the protection of the poor and the marginalised. But Jesus saw that it was now being used to oppress 'the common people'.

The stance of Jesus is just as important for us today as it was in the time of Jesus. The very heart of our Christian faith is the realisation God loves us not because we are doing good deeds or living good lives but quite freely and generously and long before we do anything at all to earn a reward from God. Furthermore, God even loves us when we are committing sin and living sinful lives.

That is all summed up in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee was a good man held in high esteem by his neighbours. His only fault was that he imagined God he was buying God's favour by his good works.

The tax-collector was one of those outcast people in the Jewish world because he was a lackey of the Romans, the colonial power, and also because tax collectors were notorious for squeezing money out of people. But Jesus tells us that his prayer was acceptable to God because he admitted that he was sinful. As a priest I have to ask myself: 'To what extent am I more like the Pharisee than the tax-collector? Do I half-consciously imagine that I'm gaining brownie points from God every time I say my prayers or do a good action?'

ON THE SIDE OF THE POOR

Jesus took the side of the people that were rejected and looked down on by the respectable people of his country.

That is a real invitation and challenge for us today to do the same. How do we look at asylum seekers, illegal immigrants, Travellers, drug-addicts, the people who have AIDS, the alcoholics? Of course there is no easy answer about what is the right way to treat such people. But anybody who looks seriously at the life and parables of Jesus can be in no doubt at all about the wrong way to look at them, namely, to judge them as a nuisance, or 'no-goods' or unlovable.

CHALLENGE TO SEXISM AND PATRIARCHY

One of the most interesting and exciting things about the life of Jesus was the way he related to women. In his time women were seen and treated very much as second-class citizens. But it is clear that Jesus went out of his way to challenge this. For instance, the most important point in the story of Martha and Mary is that Jesus allowed Mary, a woman, to sit at his feet in the position of a disciple—for up to then only men could ever be taken on as a disciple to a spiritual master (Lk 10:39-42). Another example: Jesus healed a woman who had been bent over for eighteen years and afterwards he called her a 'daughter of Abraham'. Now the phrase 'son of Abraham' was very common among the Jews and in the Bible. But never before in the whole Bible had the words 'daughter of Abraham' ever appeared until Jesus used them. (Lk 13:12-6). So he was really challenging the whole assumption that women are inferior to men in his eyes and in the eyes of God.

WHEN TO LET GO

There is one final point I want to note about Jesus. That is his ability to discern when it is right to hold on and when to let go. For three years he found ways to continue his ministry, despite all the opposition he aroused. Sometimes he went to Jerusalem to challenge the oppressive authorities in the seat of their power. At other times he withdrew to Galilee or across the Jordan. But then, while he was still in the prime of his life, he knew that 'his hour' had come. He realised that the only authentic human response to his situation was to accept that, from a purely human point of view, his mission had failed. His struggle in the garden of Gethsemane was about letting go his human powers and accepting death as he entrusted himself utterly into the hands of God (Mk 14:36 '... not my will but yours be done').

This shows us an important aspect of our spirituality. When we find ourselves up against intractable difficulties we need, like Jesus, to discern when to continue the struggle and when it is better to give up and let go. 'Letting go' can mean different things. It could be giving up a job which has become too stressful. It could be walking away from an abusive relationship. It could mean that we stop trying to control the lives of our partners, or our grown-up children. Eventually it involves facing death. At that point, 'letting go' means trusting that the darkness of death does not empty our lives of all meaning. It means rather following Jesus by entrusting ourselves to God, trusting that God's love will prevail in ways which we cannot predict, or even imagine.

WE SHARE THE MISSION OF JESUS

I hope that what I have been saying brings out the point that the more we understand the message and the values and attitudes of Jesus the more we experience it as 'Good News' for ourselves and also for others. Once we begin to experience even in a small degree the overwhelming love of God which he experienced we cannot help feeling invited to share that experience with others. That is the central meaning of mission today.