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Exegesis for the Christian Year by Henry Gustafson

Henry A. Gustafson is Professor Emeritus of New Testament Theology, United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, New Brighton, Minn. He now lives in Santa Fe, N.M. This article appeared in *No Other Foundation* , Summer, l998, pp. 5-10. This text was prepared for Religion Online by John C. Purdy.

A New Testament scholar analyzes selected scripture used with the Christian calendar.

Gospel for the First Sunday in Advent: Matthew 24:36-44

Three questions are considered: (1)Who is the Son of Man? (2) When is he coming? and (3) What does this coming mean?

Gospel for the Second Sunday of Advent: Luke 3:1-6

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The author explains that through the gift of the Spirit it is possible to follow Paul's injunction always to rejoice, pray and give thanks.

Gospel for Christmas Eve: Luke 2:1-20

The author treats Luke 1:21 as a traditional announcement story, with special attention to these three words used of Jesus: "Savior, "Christ," and "Lord."

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Gospel for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany: Mark 9:2-9

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Epistle for the Second Sunday of Lent (Reminiscere): Philippians 3:17-4:1

The author focuses on two contrasting ways of life that were open to Christians in the third decade of the Movement: to live according to the example of Christ, or to set their minds on earthy, sensual things.

Gospel for Trinity Sunday: John 3:1-17

The author finds in this passage three distinct terms for the goal of life as manifest in Christ:: Kingdom of God, eternal life, and salvation.

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Gospel for the First Sunday in Advent: Matthew 24:36-44

The principal theme in this text for the First Sunday in Advent is: "The Son of Man is Coming." Four times this claim is made. Three times it is made explicitly about the "Son of Man" and once about "the Lord."

The context of this claim is an eschatological sermon: Matthew 24 and 25. At its beginning Jesus' disciples ask him: "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" In response they are told of the birth pangs of the new age (24:8). This new age had been proclaimed at the outset of Jesus' ministry (4:17). Its coming was the good news that was to be spread throughout the world (24:14). But it would be characterized in part by a time of suffering and judgment (24:21, 30). Still it would be consummated in an ultimate victory -- when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and' great glory" sending out his angels to gather his people (24:30f.).

In attempting to interpret this picture and the claim of our text we will consider three questions: 1) Who, according to Matthew, is this Son of Man?; 2)When is he coming?; and 3) What does this coming mean?

"**Who is this Son of Man?"**

Throughout his gospel, Matthew identifies the Son of Man with Jesus. When the disciples ask Jesus "what will be the sign of your coming?" (24:3), he responds by speaking of the coming of the Son of Man (24:30). This identification is developed rather fully in Matthew 16. There, Matthew's version of the question raised at Caesarea Philippi about Jesus' identity begins with Jesus asking "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And then in tandem he asks, "Who do you say that I am?" (vv. 13-15). "Son of Man" and the personal pronoun "I," both point to Jesus.

In the verses that follow (16:21ff.), Jesus is identified implicitly with the suffering servant. The language here is the same as that used to forecast the sufferings of the Son of Man in Matthew 17:22f. and 20:17ff. And finally, in 16:27f., the Son of Man appears as the glorious judge who ultimately "will repay everyone for what has been done." The context makes it clear that Matthew is still speaking of Jesus. Thus the earthly Jesus, the suffering servant, and the glorious judge are all used by Matthew to speak of the same person. Readers familiar with his gospel will readily understand, therefore, that in our text (24:42) the phrase, "your Lord is coming," is just another reference to the "coming of the Son of Man."

A second question arising out of our text's repeated assertion that he is coming is:

"When is the Son of Man coming?" or "When is the end of the age?"

In its lead sentence (v. 36) our text says that no one knows when. The text then proceeds through a series of brief parables to emphasize both the uncertainty as to when Jesus would come and the certainty that he would come, and hence, the importance of being prepared.

The first parable recalls the disaster that struck the people of Noah's day. They failed to be watchful and were caught unprepared. The text does not fault them for their wickedness, as did the source in Genesis, but for their being so fully involved in the ordinary activities of life -- eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage -- that they took no thought of that future which would help define both the character and meaning of their present.

The last parable in our text focuses on a homeowner who likewise failed to be watchful. When the thief came he was unprepared. Here again no negative observation is made about the homeowner except that he failed to be watchful.

The two intervening parables carry this same message: Two persons working in a field, two others grinding at a mill. In each setting one may be taken and the other left. No advance warning as to when is indicated. So "keep awake." "You do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (vv. 40-42).

Through all of these parables the message is clear. A crisis is approaching. When it will come cannot be determined. No chronological calculations can be made. But it will surely come. So be ready.

However, this "when" question is not so easily resolved. The Gospel's emphasis upon a future coming needs to be correlated with another and most basic conviction that gets expressed throughout Matthew's gospel. Something has already happened. A definitive change in the times occurred with the appearance of Jesus. The change is anticipated in the story of the star which announced his birth. It is further expressed in the unique events accompanying

Matthew's description of Jesus' death and resurrection. These include accounts of earthquakes, of the raising of saints and their appearance in Jerusalem, and of a descending angel who opens the tomb. This change is made most explicit in the appearance narrative that concludes this gospel (28:18-20). Here the promised presence (*parousia*) of Jesus -- with you always to the end of the age" -- is set forth. And the account shows the risen Jesus sharing with his people "the victory of the son of man." (1)

Accordingly, it is evident that Matthew asserts the Son of Man is present with his people now and to the end of the age, and that at the same time he proclaims the Son of Man is coming at the end of the age. The Gospel claims that he is already here and that he will come again.(2)

How can the Gospel writer do this? Only because of his non-literalist approach to the future hope. To help show how far Matthew is from a literalist eschatology, George Caird directs attention to Matthew's version of Jesus' trial before the high priest.(3) To the question 'Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God," Jesus says, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven."

The words "from now on" (26:64) convey the conviction "that the coming of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven would be seen not merely at the end of time but continuously or repeatedly from the moment of Jesus' death.(4)

It appears then that Matthew's emphasis on the final judgment does not rise out of any preoccupation with the end of the world but rather from a recognition that the final judgment is forever pressing upon the present with both offer and demand. How could it be otherwise in a gospel which begins with the birth of him whose name is Immanuel, God with us, and ends with his promise, 'I am with you to the end of the world' ?"(5)

N. T. Wright supports this metaphorical approach to the language of the future hope. He notes that the word *parousia,* translated "coming" (vv. 37 and 39), means "presence" or "arrival." It is not a reference to the literal downward travel on a cloud of Jesus or the Son of Man. Rather it means "presence" as opposed to "absence" (*apousia*). It denotes the arrival of someone not present.(6) In our First Testament, persons often experienced the parousia or coming of God. God came in visions, in storms, in the quiet breath, or in victory over their enemies. In Plato the term is used as a synonym for "participation."(7)

The other word in our text, translated "coming," (vv. 42 and 44; it can also be translated "going") also is meant to be understood metaphorically. For here we are not reading flat prose about the end of the space-time universe. There is no literal scenario regarding what is going to happen when or next. Rather, this is prophetic language which speaks of God confronting people with judgment and vindication. It is poetic language that represents both what is hoped for and what is feared. This anticipates our third question:

"**What does this coming mean?"**

From our discussion above and our observation of the "Immanuel motif" it is obvious that an answer requires attention to the whole gospel story. However, in our particular Advent text, it is the motif of judgment that gets the attention. We are not given much information about the hereafter, but we are confronted by the absolute seriousness of God's claim upon us and the importance of dealing with that claim now.

In Noah's generation, some were saved in the ark and some were swept away in the flood. Similarly, when the Son of Man comes some will be saved; some will be caught unprepared. A separation is envisioned. Of workers in a field or at a mill, some will be taken, some left. Scholars debate what "being taken" means. N. T. Wright, rejecting any literalistic notion of a rapture, i.e., of a sudden supernatural event removing individuals from this earth, interprets "being taken" as being taken in judgment. The picture, he says, is of secret police coming in the night or of enemies sweeping through a city, seizing every one they can. If disciples were to escape it would only be because they remained alert.(8) Others understand "being taken" as being similar to the experience of Noah's family who were rescued from the dangerous flood waters. With either interpretation, however, there is a note of separation at the last judgment. That judgment will disclose those who belong to the true people of God and those who do not.

The only criterion on which the judgment is based that appears in our text, is preparedness. However, elsewhere in Matthew more substantive bases are offered. In 16:24-27, the future judgment that involves "repaying everyone for what has been done" is related to the moral demands placed on Christ's followers. This ethical link is also evident at the end of the Sermon on the Mount. Using a phrase to designate the coming judgment -- "on that day" -- the text (7:22f.) says that many Christian prophets, exorcists, and miracle workers will appear before the messianic judge. They will seek to defend themselves by appealing to their past words and deeds, saying "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?" But their defense will fail. The judge will say "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers" (lit. "You workers of *anomia*," of lawlessness) Matthew believed that even within the Christian community there were false prophets, i.e., persons who used the right words and did charismatic deeds, who yet were leading people astray. By their *anomia* they were causing love to grow cold (24:11). And this was a most serious offense. For loving God, neighbor and self were God's most important commandments. To do them was to do God's will (22:34-40).

The practical expression of this ethical demand is made explicit toward the end of the eschatological sermon -- in the parable of the sheep and goats. Here, (25:3 1ff.), the Son of Man comes to judge people on the basis of their response to the Christ who confronts them now in the needy persons of their world. "As you did it (or did not do it) to one of the least of these, you did (or did not do it) to me" (25:40,45). The ones who did not do it, the loveless ones, are

relegated to eternal punishment, and the others, the righteous, to eternal life.(25:46).

It is important, however, to remember that in Matthew this is not the last word. The message of the last judgment is to be heard in the context of the gospel. The judge is none other than Jesus. It is he who calls us to take seriously the summons to love God, neighbor and self. As responsible persons we will be called to account for what has been done. We will discover that the meaning of our present acts is only fully discernible at the end. The significance of planting seed, enriching the soil, (or polluting it), will be known at the harvest. Thus our behavior has consequences, both now but also not yet.

How shall we think about these negative consequences, about punishment? They are best understood, not as some quid pro quo, but as expressions of the purgative love of God. Such an understanding leaves room for hope in God's power to create justice. And as Hans Kung has written, though salvation for all is not *a priori* guaranteed, still even in hell there are no limits to the grace of God. As love is stronger than death (Rom. 8:28f.), so also is justice. Accordingly, our prayer for the future is for the loving judgment that is an aspect of the final victory of God's rule.(9)

Believing that the future as well as the present belong to God, the minister of these Advent texts might find it well to listen to Hans Kung's admonition: to take care lest she preach judgment too loudly and insistently before the small and defenseless and too softly and half-heartedly before the powerful of this world.

Notes

1 Raymond Brown, An Introduction to The New Testament, (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 218f.

2 Cf. M. Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew*, ("N. I. B."; New York: Abingdon, 1997) ad loc.

3 George Caird, The Language and Imagery of The Bible, (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1997) 268.

4 Ibid.

5 N. T. Wright, Jesus and The Victory of God, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press,1996) 341.

6 E. Oepke, "*parousia. pareimi*." (TDNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 860f.

7 Wright, op. cit. 366.

8 Hans Kung, Eternal Life?, (New York: Doubleday, 1984) 210.

9 Ibid.212.

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Gospel for the Second Sunday of Advent: Luke 3:1-6

Our text introduces Luke's narrative of the ministry of Jesus. It begins with a "sixfold synchronism." The first reference, the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberias Caesar (beginning August or September AD 26 or 27), tells us when the story began. The other five references, identifying various rulers and priests, fulfill the same function, and together they all indicate Luke's concern to relate his story to contemporary Roman and Palestinian history

These are not the first references in Luke's Gospel to historical figures. Others were identified when he wanted to locate the annunciations to Zechariah and to Mary (1:5), and again when he wrote a narrative of Jesus' birth (2:1). Luke valued these synchronisms not only as a means of giving his narrative a chronological and geographical orientation, but also as a way of expressing his conviction that the story he is about to tell has a meaning for this world. To his readers, who as Gentiles had been taught to eulogize Caesar as divine and to view Caesar's and Rome's military conquests as "good news," or who, with Jewish contemporaries, had concluded that the prophetic voice had been stilled -- to them Luke writes of another source of good news: the story of Jesus, and he declares that the word of God is still to be heard: it had come to John. The "sixfold synchronism" was used to give a context for this dramatic announcement, signalling the opening of Jesus' ministry: "the word of God came to John."

This clause was familiar to readers of Jewish Christian scriptures. They knew it from the story of Jeremiah. The word of the Lord came to him, repeatedly: in the days of Josiah (the thirteenth year of his reign), in the days of Jehoiakim, and in the days of Zedekiah (Jer. l:lff.).

The word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah was portrayed as powerful:

> "I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
> to pluck up and to pull down,

to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant." (Jer. 1:10)

And it was effective: "The Lord said to me...I am watching over my word to perform it" (Jer. 1:12). It was understood not simply as some message from heaven. Rather, it was God's power going forth to achieve something in the world. The word spoken was like a deed done. It was dynamic and vital. It would not return empty, but would accomplish the divine purpose (Ps. 33:9; Isa. 55: 10-1 1). This is especially clear in the symbolic acts of the prophets. When Jeremiah identified Jerusalem with a potter's vessel, which he then smashed in the valley of Hinnom (Jer. 19), his hearers got the point. They understood this word not merely as predictive of their future. The word was effective. It helped to bring about the results it predicted.

As Jeremiah heard the word of the Lord, so, says Luke, did John the Baptist. His life setting may have been Qumran. There, near the north end of the Dead Sea, a group of priestly and Levitical origin had built a community. In the pure air of the desert, they were making a protest against the worldliness of the Jerusalem hierarchy. Daily they gathered for study, for worship, for ritual washings and table fellowship. Josephus tells us: "They disdained marriage, but had children by adoption. These they reared in accord with their own principles." Very possibly with the death of his elderly father and mother, the priest Zechariah and Elizabeth (1:7), John became one of those children.

These people had moved into the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord. By righteous living they hoped to hasten the sending of the messiah. Their ritual baths or washings were designed to help them. One of those various washings was meant to cleanse them of their ritual sins and enable them to enter into the Covenant (I QS 5:8,13). Hopefully, after years of probation they would have a spiritual cleansing as well. The ritual cleansing was open only to the "sons of Light." All others were outsiders -- permanently. They belonged to the "spirit of darkness." To associate with those outsiders was to be defiled.

Somewhere along the way John rejected this exclusive perspective. He left the Qumran community and went north into the wilderness, near to where the Jordan flows into the Dead Sea. Here, says Luke, "the word of God came" to him (3:2). Luke doesn't tell us anything about the struggle John may have had in leaving the community or in rejecting some of its more exclusive teachings. He only indicates John's response to that dynamic word. He writes that John began to preach a baptism of repentance.

This baptism was more than a ritual washing. It was a baptism of repentance! Like the prophets before him, John called his hearers to repent, to turn around. The Hebrew word which the prophets used for this action was shub. It means "turn back." A person who has been going in a "wrong" direction needs to turn or to return. The Greek word which Luke uses for repentance is metanoia, which means literally, a change of mind. Some commentators warn against making too much of this meaning in this context, yet it remains true that the simple act of turning

usually and logically follows upon a change of mind. In the words of Anthony of Sourozh: "When you choose the thoughts upon which you allow your mind to dwell, you choose your life. Thought is the real causative force in life..." As the King James Version of Prov. 23:7 has it: "As a man thinketh in his heart so is he." People were thinking wrong. Accordingly, John began a repentance movement, preaching a baptism of repentance.

John's baptism was an ethical rite. Not improbably he was inspired by the prophet Isaiah, who before him had called people to the waters of repentance.

> "Wash yourselves;
> make yourselves clean;
> remove the evil of your doings
> from before my eyes;
> cease to do evil,
> learn to do good;
> seek justice,
> rescue the oppressed;
> defend the orphan,
> plead for the widow.
>
> Come... though your sins are like scarlet,
> they shall be like snow;
> though they are red like crimson,
> they shall become like wool" (Isa. 1:16-18).

Like that, in the preaching of his baptism, John called his hearers to "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (3:8). Selfish persons who before had refused to share food and clothing must now begin to do so. Extortioners, whether tax collectors or soldiers, must stop extorting. Their ways of living needed to be changed.

John's baptism was also understood to be for everyone. He spoke to persons far outside the confines of the Qumran community. Luke was impressed by this. Where Matthew and Mark note John's use of II Isaiah v. 3: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight," Luke extends the quotation through words expressing II Isaiah's hope: "and all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (cf. II Isa. 40:3-5). John's baptism of repentance is thus given a universal relevance. The words in the next paragraph support this. There John says to the crowds who came out to hear him "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (3:8). He believed that kind of thinking was wrong. The merits of Abraham and their special connections would not save them. Like everyone else they needed this baptism of repentance.

Further, John's preaching of baptism was a prophetic, symbolic act. Its purpose was to enable

people not only to hear what God was saying to them, but also to experience what God was beginning to do. In the repentance movement which his baptism introduced, they were to share in the fulfillment of an eschatological expectation. They were to be part of the hoped for salvation under the rule of God. The symbolic significance of John's baptism was plain, the waters of the Jordan had been the gateway to the promised land -- both for the people of the Exodus journeys and for those who had returned from the Babylonian Exile. Now, in these waters of the Jordan, John's hearers were to experience the salvation of God. His prophetic word was this symbolic act; the baptism of repentance. Through it the way of the Lord was being prepared. The repentant were to experience the forgiveness of sins. That which obstructed their experience of God's rule was to be overcome. To submit to the waters of baptism in the Jordan meant to move from the bondage of Egypt, of Babylon, of sin, to the land of promise, freedom, salvation. The preaching of this baptism signified and helped bring about the presence of the kingdom -- the salvation of God (3:6 cf. 16:16).

To grasp the significance of the Advent claim that the word of God came to John requires imagination. Often among the twentieth century cerebral types this gift is lacking. Preoccupation with cybernetics and technologies tend to enervate one's capacity to experience an epiphany. We often fail to make "intellectual space" for God in our reflections about our social and personal lives, and we tend to dwarf our assumptions about the perceptive capacities and destinies of humans. The imaginative way in which John and Luke used their tradition to understand God's ongoing advents, is an appropriate exemplar for the minister who would interpret both this Advent text and the advents which our God continues to make.

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Epistle for the Third Sunday of Advent: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks to all circumstances."

Always? Without ceasing? In all circumstances? Are these admonitions realistic? Is such consistency in these responses appropriate? Can one share them with people in the river valleys of middle America, people whose homes, property, personal possessions, and even family members have been destroyed by the flood waters of 1993?

Certainly there are innumerable situations in the lives of us humans wherein such admonitions seem almost unthinkable and inappropriate. Wouldn’t it be much better to suggest the use of some lament from the Psalms, such as: "Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, 0 Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide you face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?" (Ps. 44:23f.)

The people to whom Paul addressed these admonitions had experienced persecution. He had told them that they would. It was "what we are destined for" (3:3). Yet interestingly, he never suggests a helpful and appropriate lament. He does urge people to "weep with those ,who weep." And at the end of a long list of difficulties which he had encountered, caused by both natural phenomena and human opposition, he wrote of the "daily pressure" he felt because of his "anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant" (2 Cor.11 :28f). Nevertheless, he ends not with a lament, but with the almost incredible claim that "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). He had learned through the cross of Christ and through his own experience in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:18-2:5) that "power was made perfect in weakness."

This doesn’t make much sense to a materialistic society whose view of reality is one-

dimensional, whose values are measured in terms of acquisitions and successes, and whose cravings for a low-level ephemeral "joy" tend to be addictive and insatiable.

But in the context of Paul's thought it makes sense. For here we have another view of reality. One in which the significance of "advent" is paramount. With the coming of Christ a new age had been begun (1 Cor. 10:11). Currently, it was commingled with "the present evil age" (Gal. 1:4). But soon, with a new "advent (parousia) of our Lord, Jesus Christ" (v. 23), that which had been begun in this new age, would be fully consummated. It was this life of the new age and the potential of Christians for this life, now, in their community and world, that Paul is calling for here.

This life, characterized by an abiding joy, unceasing prayer and thanksgiving in all circumstances, is further described as "the will of God (for them) in Christ Jesus." The significance of the phrase "in Christ Jesus" is ambiguous. It may be understood to mean the will of God as it is expressed in Christ Jesus. If one interprets it this way then look to Jesus for illustrations of the meaning of these admonitions. And people of the Early Church did. They found in both his life and teaching this emphasis on joy, on prayer, and on thanksgiving.

The author of Hebrews wrote that Jesus, "for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross" (12:2); and others quote him teaching, "Blessed are you when people persecute and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad. . ." (Matt. 5:1 if.). The influence of this tradition about Jesus' life and teaching was pervasive. The most common responses to sufferings and limitations called for by New Testament writers was joy and then hopeful endurance. (e.g., Jas. 1:2; 1 Pet. 4:13; Col. 1:24, Phil. passim).

Further, in their accounts of Jesus' life and teaching there was also considerable emphasis upon prayer and upon the intimacy with God that he experienced and that he encouraged others to share. It appears that God was never far from his consciousness. When he considered the birds of the air, the flowers of the field, the setting sun, when he saw a farmer ploughing a field, a woman patching a garment, a child rebuked by his disciples, a person ravaged by illness -- he was alive to God's presence and will.

The Early Church found his sense of God's involvement in all of life undergirding a responsive spirit of gratitude. He found reasons for thanksgiving both in God's judgment upon human pride and in God's grace toward humans in their weakness (Matt. 11:25).

The phrase "in Christ Jesus," however, points not only to the place where God's will for his readers' lives may be seen, it also indicates a relationship wherein this will may be realized. Through a transforming fellowship with Jesus Christ, the new life of joy, unceasing prayer and thanksgiving becomes a real possibility. This life in Christ begins with a faith participation in Christ's death and resurrection. One dies to a selfish, loveless, self, and comes alive, open to the new life that is shaped by fellowship with him and the members of his body.

When writing of this relationship, Paul along with many other New Testament writers, tells his readers that it is given by and enabled by God's Spirit. And persons entering into this fellowship with Christ come to share the Spirit of Christ or the Spirit of God. To the church of Rome he wrote: "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you...his Spirit dwells in you" (Rom. 8:9-1 1). Here he urges readers not to "quench" or suppress the Spirit. For the fruit of the Spirit of Christ could be seen in the realization of those characteristics which Paul was calling for.

However, the words "do not quench" suggest the possibility that a problem was foreseen, or perhaps, had arisen. This problem developed a short time later in the Corinthian community. The Spirit endowed the community with charismatic gifts. These were sometimes misused. Some early Christians, in their enthusiasm for the new life, became more interested in ecstatic experiences than in the will of God for them. Accordingly, Paul calls them to "test everything," and the "abstain" from that which their prophets (forth-tellers, not foretellers) saw as contrary to God's will. Paul was not opposed to their enthusiasm, and certainly not to their joy, but to anything which was incompatible with love and the other "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22).

The last two verses of our text begins with a prayer. Herein a sense of need, along with the sense of wonder, evident above in the descriptions of the new life, conspires to nurture the hope that the Christ who had come in Jesus would fulfill what through him had been begun. Paul prays that "the God of peace" (a common Pauline title) will "sanctify" his readers entirely. He is concerned lest the peacemaking activity of God, through which their new life of joy, prayer and thanksgiving was sustained, should be rejected. His readers need to be ever more fully reconciled to, or set apart entirely for, the purpose which is adumbrated in the wondrous peace that they already know.

His prayer for their ongoing sanctification or consecration looks to the future. "May your spirit, soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." He hopes that in every aspect or dimension of their lives they may be sound and blameless, anticipating the intentions of the God of peace . For God's intentions include a future, wherein at the parousia, the advent of Christ, a judgment would be made. The God of peace, who had called them to their new life in Christ and who had set them apart for the living of the Christ-like life, would act to conserve everything of value in their lives. The advent hope was that they who through faith were learning with the help of God's Spirit to share in Christ's death and resurrection, would taste fully in that life where God would be "all and in all."

This hope, this "horizon of expectation," not only imposed a challenge to his readers, it was accompanied with a word of assurance. They would have help in living out this consecrated life. For the One who had called them and the One to whom they were accountable, is faithful. "He will do this." He will both sanctify them and keep them without blame in this new life in Christ.

At the beginning of these comments we raised a question about the relevance of Paul's admonitions to people who are being seriously threatened and hurt by the vicissitudes of life. The text indicates Paul's belief that they are relevant to persons, 1) who share a new life in fellowship with Christ, 2) who are open to and are guided by God's Spirit, and 3) who live with an expectation that the Christ event includes a final fulfillment of God's loving purpose. Whether we can offer these admonitions to people with whom we work today depends, I think, on whether they share in that new life and can relate to its possibilities.

The story of one person who would have found them relevant is described in Harry Emerson Fosdick's A Faith for Tough Times. After being smitten with a painfully serious case of arthritis this person received a visit from one of her friends. The visitor lamented at length the arthritic's condition, concluding that the illness would certainly change the color of her life . To which the friend responded: "And I propose to choose the color."

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Exegesis for the Christian Year by Henry Gustafson

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Gospel for Christmas Eve: Luke 2:1-20

Some say that ever ‘gainst that season comes
Wherin our Savior's birth is celebrated
The bird of dawning singeth all night long:
And then, they say, no spirit dare stir abroad,
The nights are wholesome, then no planets strike,
No fairy takes nor witch hath power to charm
So hallowed and so gracious is the time.

Shakespeare caught the mood of Luke’s narrative: shepherds in their fields, watching their flocks by night, the birth and swaddling of a baby, the announcement by an angel, the shining of the star, the canticle of the heavenly host, shepherds glorifying and praising God: "so hallowed and so gracious (was the) time."

In this narrative Luke sets forth the wonder of Christmas. The story unfolds in three parts. The first (vv. 1-7) locates the birth of Jesus. It happened when Augustus was Caesar, emperor of the Roman world (27B.C.-14 A.D) (1) It happened in Bethlehem, the city of David, where Joseph and Mary had gone to be enrolled for a census. It happened in a place where there was a manger. Then and there Jesus was born and wrapped in swaddling clothes.

The second part (vv. 8-14) interprets this birth. Using the form of an announcement story Luke tells of the appearance of an angel, of the fear of the shepherds, of the message they were given, and of the sign which confirmed it (2) Added to the announcement is a canticle. A heavenly host joins the angels in offering praise to God for this event and proclaims peace to people with whom God is pleased.(3)

The third part (vv. 15-20) describes responses made to the news of this event. The shepherds checked out the message, found the sign, the babe lying in a manger, and shared the interpretation which they had given. The people marvelled at their words. Mary kept them in

her heart and wondered. The shepherds then returned to their work, glorifying and praising God for the event and its interpretation.

For Theophilus and other Gentile Christians, who needed to "know the truth concerning the things of which they had been informed," these paragraphs were written. We will attend mostly to the second section where Luke, using four of the five elements of an announcement story, interprets the event of Jesus' birth. He hoped that his readers would hear the good news of that message, observe how it evoked a response of worship, and thus perhaps, see "how hallowed and how gracious (was) the time."

The time was a time of fulfillment. In the angel's announcement the word translated "this day" makes this explicit. It has the nuance of an inaugurated eschatology. "To you is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." In the event of that birth the hope for a promised one was realized.

The setting for this announcement was near Bethlehem, where shepherds were watching flocks by night (v.8). That would have seemed appropriate to Theophilus and other Gentile Christian readers. They were familiar from their Scriptures with the biblical stories of David, the shepherd from Bethlehem (I Sam. 16:11); and they

knew the prophetic expectation that out of Bethlehem would come forth a ruler of Israel (Micah 5:2,4). Also as denizens of the Hellenistic world, they would have known that shepherds commonly were present at the births of heroes and gods. (4)

The significance of the shepherds' presence, however, varied with the different cultures. In the Greco-Roman world, they often appeared as representatives of an ideal humanity. In later rabbinic Judaism they came to be associated with thieves and criminals.(5) To Luke they probably represented the common people, the lowly, the persons loved and befriended by Luke's Jesus (cf. Luke 19:10).

To them "an angel of the Lord appeared." To speak of the appearance of an angel was a way of referring to the presence of God. For the terms angel and God often were interchangeable.(6) Thus here, what v. 9 attributes to the angel, v. 15 attributes to the Lord. In the latter the shepherds say: "Let us go ... and see this thing which the Lord has made known to us." To be confronted by an angel of the Lord was to experience God's glory (v.9). It was to experience the splendor, the brilliance, associated with God's presence. (7) Luke's shepherds, relatively free from the artifices of the sophisticated and the pride of intellectuals, were able to open up to a glory that was not their own (cf. I Cor. 1:26ff.).

Confronting that glory the shepherds "feared a great fear" (v.9). This was the standard response to divine appearance in an announcement story.(8) And it was met with words of assurance;

"Do not be afraid" (v.10). These in turn were backed up with a reason, the announcement: "For to you is born this day ... a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (v.11).

In the substance of the announcement is the root cause, not only of the shepherds ~returning to their work, "glorifying and praising God," but also of the gladness and worship that have moved people in Christendom through the centuries to celebrate Christmas as a hallowed and gracious time.

Three words stand out interpreting the announced event. They are "Savior," "Christ," and "Lord." Each has a functional significance and each came to be used as a title for Jesus.

The most frequently used of the three was Christ. Like the Greek christos and Hebrew meschiach, the word means "anointed one." There had been many anointed ones in Israel's history. They included prophets, priests and kings. Most prominent among them were the successors to the Davidic throne. In the days of Jesus and the early Christian movement many expected one of these successors, some Davidic Christ, to rise up and deliver the people (Luke 20:41; Mark 13:21). The Book of Acts names a number of possible messiahs or christs: Judas, Theudas, and the Egyptian (Acts 5:33ff.; 21:38). Josephus tells us of the role which these and other would-be-messiahs played.

That Jesus claimed to be one of these christs is doubtful. The title's national and political baggage made it unacceptable to him.(9) When others confessed him as the Christ, "he charged . . . them to tell this to no one" (Luke 9:21). The veto, however, did not work. The messianic excitement of the times imposed on him an identity which he rejected, and yet for which he was crucified . He was crucified as a king (Mark 15:26; Luke 23:2,38). The title on the cross ... "King of the Jews" linked him with a national political goal that he would not own. His kingdom was not of this world.

Early on, however, Jesus' followers came to call him Christ. And they found in their scriptures allusions to a kingly model, which they used to support their practice. Thus here, in his reference to the "city of David", Luke reminds his readers of the belief that Bethlehem was the place where a ruler like David, would be born (Micah 5:2). His use of the word "this day" was a reminder of a coronation psalm (Ps,2:7): "You are my son, today I have begotten you." And his language in the statement: "Unto you is born ... a Savior ... Christ, the Lord" recalls that of Isa. 9:5-7: "To us a child is born; to us a son is given ... and his name will be called 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.' And of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over his kingdom...." Clearly Luke is tapping into sources referring to a Davidic, kingly, Christ.(10).

However, those sources, so important to the many who were longing for a national, political liberation, were not adequate. His description of Jesus' life and ministry gave little support to hopes for a national restoration. More important for Luke, when giving content to the Christ

title, was the tradition of the eschatological prophet (Acts 7:37). (11) This non-royal messiah, anointed with God's spirit (Isa.61:lf.), often, in late Judaism, was linked with the prophet Samuel. With his priestly traits and teaching function he was referred to as the "Christ" and viewed as "a light to the Gentiles." And sometimes his image was blended with the coming of Elijah. (12)

This prophetic model, propagated by a group of instructors in the law and in the synagogue, (13) was most useful to Luke. The picture of an eschatological messenger, anointed by God's spirit, a bringer of good news to the poor, a liberator of the oppressed, a proclaimer of the coming of God's rule, who effects a new covenant community, is a light to the Gentiles, and a bestower of peace (all ideas associated with this prophetic model), are most helpful to Luke in filling out his depiction of the ministry of Jesus.

The idea of rejection, of prophets being repudiated along with the message they proclaimed, was also a piece of this messianic tradition. It knew that to call a people to repent, to change, was to invite hostility. The Jesus that Luke describes did just that and was crucified. But as Luke saw it his crucifixion helped confirm him as the true eschatological prophet (Acts 7:51-53), the one whom God had raised up and made both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:32-36; 4:27ff.). He saw this Jesus as one who from the beginning had been anointed by God's spirit (Luke 4:16f.) at his baptism in the Jordan (Acts 10:38) and even before, at his birth (Luke 2:26ff.).

All of these texts show that for Luke the title Christ or Messiah was tied not to some national, political hope, but to the model of the eschatological prophet. Jesus fulfilled this prophet's role. And the event at Bethlehem was the birth of this Christ; the birth of God's agent for bringing a new form of salvation, a non-political, non-national salvation, to humankind. This was the good news of great joy, not only for Luke's shepherds, but for his readers, past and present.

In addition to the title "Christ" Luke's angel used "Lord" for this child. That would have seemed appropriate to many of Luke's readers. They lived in a world where, as Paul observed, there were "lords many" (I Cor. 8:6). It was a title readily ascribed to a variety of heroes and gods, to Cyrus, Romulus, and Remus, Sarapis, and Mithras.

It also could have made sense to some strict monotheists, to people who had been brought up in the synagogue circles of the diaspora and were acquainted with the apocalyptic thought of the time. They could use the title not only for Yahweh but also for someone whom Yahweh had sent. "Behold, I send a messenger before you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place which I have prepared. Give heed to him and hearken to his voice, do not rebel against him, for he will pardon your transgression; for my name is in him" (Exod. 23:20f.). The title "Lord" (kurios, in Greek, mara(n), in Aramaic), understood as a name for God, could be conferred on God's envoy.

In the apocalyptic writings, both Enoch and Moses, envoys whom God had taken up, were

given the name "Lord." God's own name. Moses was called "Lord of all prophets." And to Enoch all seventy of the names of God were given. He was granted power, authority and lordship over all of creation. Thus, in the circles of some diaspora synagogues and apocalyptic thought, the name of God was set upon God's messengers. Yet never did this use threaten a clear monotheistic faith.(14).

Compatible with this practice was the way of speaking about and addressing Jesus in the early Christian communities. There, the title "mara" was used when praying for Jesus' return: thus "marana tha," ("Our Lord, come!" I Cor. 16:22). In the community of the Q source Jesus appeared as a prophetic messenger and miracle worker, and was called "Lord" (Luke 10:17). The Apostle Paul, in a teaching context (I Cor. 7:10) used the same address: "To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord." These uses of the title "Lord" for Jesus by the early Christian are in line with the messenger tradition of Judaism and compatible with their monotheism. Paul was clear about this, distinguishing between the one God, the source of all things, and one Lord Jesus Christ, God's agent of creation (I Cor. 8:6).

This idea that a title used for God could also be given to someone whom God sent illumines also the use of the Christological affirmation of Phil. 2:9-11.

> Therefore God has highly exalted him
> and bestowed on him the name
> which is above every name,
> that at the name of Jesus
> every knee should bow...
> and every tongue confess that
> Jesus Christ is Lord
> to the glory of God the Father.

Here, the "name that is above every name" is set upon the prophetic messenger, Jesus. He is called by God's own name ... the Lord.

Luke used this title for Jesus after the resurrection. In Acts he shows Peter telling his hearers that this Jesus, whom they crucified, God raised and made "both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:32-36). And this title, used only once in the gospel of Mark (11:3), became for Luke the main title, not only for the risen Christ but also for Jesus in the earlier phases of his story. Luke retrojects the title into the narrative of Jesus' ministry and uses it even of his infancy: in his description of Elizabeth's encounter with Mary ... "the mother of my Lord;" and in the angel's announcement to the shepherds. (15)

In this birth narrative the word "Lord" is used both for God (v. 15) and for Jesus(v. 11). Yet, Luke is not challenging monotheism. Rather, like others in the Jewish Christian community, he presents Jesus as one upon whom God has set God's own name. To acknowledge Jesus is to

acknowledge God (cf. Luke 12:8f.; also John 13:20). For he is the Lord. He speaks for God. And as Lord, kurios, he has authority over his servants, douloi. He has the right to call them to account, the right to direct and to guide them. He has the power to save them.

Luke's understanding of this title and its widespread use reflect an experience of faith expressed elsewhere in the Early Church: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9f.). To know the Lordship of Jesus was to be involved in a saving relationship. This, in part, was the good news of great joy which Luke's readers were invited to experience.

The remaining title given the child by the angel in Luke was "Savior." "Unto you a Savior is born...." Luke's readers were aware of many saviors. Included among them were gods, physicians, kings and emperors.(16) Not far from where Luke may have been writing was an inscription hailing Caesar Augustus as "savior of the whole world." (17) This Augustus was the very ruler by whose reign Luke located Jesus' birth. He had brought peace to the world, the pax Augusta and in gratitude people celebrated his birthday and remembered the gift of peace received in and through him. An inscription from Priene read: "The birthday of the God has marked the beginning of the good news through him for the world."(18) Doubtless, many of Luke's readers were familiar also with the remarkable work of the well-known Roman poet, Virgil, The Fourth Eclogue (40 B.C.). It speaks of an age to come in which the "virgin of peace" would return and in which a child, the "descendent of the gods," would be born. With his coming, Virgil wrote that "our guilt will disappear, the earth will be freed of its fear and there will commence his rule over a world made peaceful." For many people in Luke's world, this hope defined as a savior was what salvation meant. (19)

The idea of expressing ones hopes for the future by the birthday of a child was familiar also to Luke's Christian and Jewish readers from their own Scriptures. The prophet Isaiah had written: "a young woman shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14). And the title "Savior" also appeared. The Bookof Judges used it for persons whom God raised up to deliver Israel from its enemies (Judges 5:9, 15), and in Second Isaiah it was used for God's own self:

> There is no other god beside me,
> a righteous God and a Savior;
> there us none beside me. (45:21)

Early Christian preaching was influenced by both of these contexts. In Phil. 3:20, Paul wrote: "Our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." The titles here are the same as the those used by Luke's angel. However, the time reference is different. The text in Philippians looks forward to a future salvific event: "we await a Savior." In Acts, Luke uses this title when writing about work currently going on; the work of the risen, exalted Christ: "God exalted him... as Leader and Savior to give repentance to Israel and

forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:31); and again: "By raising Jesus" (Acts 13:33) "God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus as he promised" (Acts 13:23), and "through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:38). Thus the giving of repentance, forgiveness and freedom are identified as aspects of the ongoing saving work of the risen Lord and Christ.

In the Synoptics, the title "Savior" is used only once: Here in Luke 2:11, where Jesus' saving work is related not to his coming again nor to his work as risen Lord, but to the very identity and significance of his person. He was their Savior. In writing about the ministry of Jesus, Luke gave a focal place to scriptural texts highlighting his salvific character. The story of his ministry began at the Nazareth synagogue with his use of Isa. 61:lf. and with his claim of having been anointed by God's spirit, having been sent both to preach good news to the poor and to set at liberty the oppressed (Luke 4:18). When Luke considers the doubts of Jesus' contemporaries he accents again Jesus' salvific work:

> Go and tell John...
> the blind receive their sight,
> the lame walk.
> the lepers are cleansed,
> the deaf hear,
> the dead are raised up,
> the poor have good news preached to them (7:22).(20).

Throughout his gospel Luke tells the story of the work that helped earn for Jesus the title "Savior." In a world where Samaritans were despised he showed Jesus telling stories in gratitude to God. In a society which treated women as second class citizens he showed Jesus welcoming them into his fellowship, along with the Twelve, and taking them with him on his travels through the cities and villages of Galilee. In a religious community that excluded sinners, he showed Jesus eating and drinking with them, telling stories accenting God's care for them, and extending his hospitality and best wishes to them. The Jesus of Luke's gospel was one who broke through the barriers of nationalism, sexism, and religious chauvinism, who awakened repentance, set people free, who opened communities and brought in peace. Indeed, as Luke stated, he was One who had come "to seek and to save the lost" (Luke19:10).

Confronting the task of beginning the story of this life, Luke found it appropriate to retroject the Church's title for Jesus, the title Savior, back into the good news of his birth: "unto you is born a Savior." That news is celebrated by the shepherds as they return home, glorifying and praising God, and then attested by the witness of the prophet Simeon:

> Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace...
> for mine eyes have seen thy salvation.... (Luke 2:29f.)

Added to the message of the angel is a brief canticle. Most probably it was not part of the original announcement story. Perhaps Luke included it here because of the nuance it adds to the good news of the angel. It is a song by the heavenly host of peace on earth.

This peace is not the same as the peace brought about by Caesar Augustus. It has more in common with the quality of life envisioned in the Hebrew word, shalom, (be whole, be complete). In Luke's scriptures this word meant not merely the end of hostilities, but rather the well-being that comes from God. To extend this greeting was to express a wish for a life of wholeness, a life lived in accord with God's will and fulfilled in some ultimate salvation (Isa. 9:6; Zech. 9:9f.): To the prophet, Second Isaiah, it was the mark of God's messianic rule (cf. II Isa. 52:7), and it included such qualities as harmony, order, security and prosperity. (21)(Isa. 48:18; 54:10; cf. Ps. 29:11; Jer. 16:5).

In the preaching of the Early Church this peace had to do with ones relationships with God (Luke 7:50; Rom. 5:1), with others (Acts 9:31; Eph. 2:14-17), and with self (Rom. 8:6; Phil 4:7).(22)

In the teaching of Jesus this peace was associated with salvation (Luke 7:50;8:48). The mission of himself and his disciples was to leave this peace with those whom they visited (10:5). And it represented the quality of life which the departing Christ wished for his followers (Luke 24:36).

The heavenly host had promised peace to those with whom God was well pleased. Later in his gospel Luke identified persons with whom God was pleased. God was pleased with Jesus. This was declared at his baptism (Luke 3:22). God was also pleased with Jesus' disciples. "Fear not, little flock. it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). It was for this God-pleasing community of Jesus and his disciples, that the heavenly host envisioned this promised peace. And as Luke told the story this was good news of great joy for all the people; for sinners as well as righteous (v. 10)

The last standard element in the announcement story is the sign. "This will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12). The sight of that well-cared-for child was the sign.(23) It confirmed the good news of the angelic message.

For Luke's readers, past and present that sign has been enriched. Their knowledge of the life and ministry of Jesus, their experience of him as risen from the dead, and their recognition in him as 1) that hoped-for eschatological prophet (the Christ), as 2) God's own envoy, who could and does bear God's name (the Lord), and as 3) one who did and does God's saving work (the Savior) -- all contribute to the significance of that sign received first by the shepherds. Hence, even today, we readers find it possible to share in the shepherds' joy and gratitude and to confess with Shakespeare's people: "So hallowed and so gracious is the time."

Notes

(1) Luke also says that the birth occurred when Quirinius was governor of Syria. This raises the first of a number of problems with the text. Luke 1:5 and Matt. 2:1 indicate that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great. Herod died in 4 BC, and Quirinius was governor of Syria from 6 to 9 AD. For discussion of this and other historical questions see Raymond Brown, The Birth of The Messiah (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 394ff., and Howard Marshall, "Commentary on Luke"(NIGTC, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 96ff.

(2)Announcement stories characteristically have five elements: 1) an appearance; 2) a response of fear; 3) a message; 4) an objection; and 5) a sign. Cf. Luke 1: 11ff., 26ff. The objection,(number 4), is missing here. Perhaps, obliquely, it is to be found in the last section of the narrative where the shepherds go to Bethlehem to check on the truth of the message.

(3)In support of the reading of this text see Joseph Fitzmyer, "The Gospel According to Luke I-IX " (*The Anchor Bible*. New York: Doubleday, 1981). 410f.

(4)Ibid., 39Sf.

(5) Sanhedrin 25.

(6)See also Gen. 2Z~11, 14; Judg. 6:2, 14; Isa. 63:9.

(7)Exod. 16:7,10; 24:17; 40:34; Lev. 9:6,23: Ps. 63:3.

)8)Cf. Gen. 15:1 Dan 1O:12,19~, Luke 1:30; 2:10; 8:50.

(9) Cf. Oscar Cullmann, Christology of the New Testament (Philadelphia: Westminster Press,1959)

(10) Cf. Nils A. Dahl, The Crucified Messiah and Other Essays (Minneapolis: Augsburg,

1974), 23-28.

(11)Cf. Deut 18:15,18; also Zech 4:3,11-14; 4Q Florilegium.

(12) Edward Schillebeeckx, Jesus, (New York Crossroad, 1981), 494.

(13) Ibid., 486ff.

(14) 490f.

(15) Cf. Luke 7:13,19; 10:1, 39, 41; 11:39~, 12:42, 13:15; 17:5f.; 18:6 19:8, 31, 34 22:61; 24:3,34. See also J. Fitzmyer, op. cit. 197-204.

(16) W. Foerster and G. Fohrer, "Sozo... ." TDNT, 7 (1971) 965-1024.

(17) R. E. Brown, op. cit., 415.

(18)W. Dittenberger, ed., Orientis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1903-5), II, #458, lines 40-42.

(19) See Appendix IX in R. Brown, op.cit., for a translation of Virgil's Fourth Eclogue.

(20) Cf. Isa. 29~.18f.; 35:5f. 61:1.

(21) Cf. Isa. 48:18; 54:10; also Ps. 29:11; Jer. 16:5; and Charles Talbert, Reading Luke (New York: Crossroads, 1980), 33f.

(22) Also see Gal. 5:22 and Col. 3:15.

(23) The Wisdom of Solomon 7:4-5.

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Gospel for Christmas Day: John 1:1-14

From its earliest days the Christian Church has been a singing community. Many among its members heard the injunction to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.., and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Col. 3:16). They gave heed. With song they celebrated among other things the birth of Jesus (Luke 1), the exaltation of Christ (Phil. 2:5-11), God's inscrutable ways (Rom. 11 :33ff.), the gift of love (1 Cor. 13), God's work of salvation (Eph. 1:3-10), and their future hope (Rev. 21).

Included among their songs was a hymn which the author of our text used in the prologue of his gospel. It belongs to a literary genre found frequently in our Hebrew Christian scriptures; a genre which celebrates the story of God's creative and redemptive work (e.g., Ps. 78). The hymn has been described by many as salvation history in hymnic form. In John it was used to be part of his story of the revealing Word of God. The hymn brought that story to its climax in its statement about the Incarnation (v. 14). It was a Christmas hymn and appropriately is placed at the beginning of the gospel story.

The text of the hymn is believed by many to have had four strophes or stanzas. These poetic stanzas of the early hymn are distinguished from the prose of the gospel writer, in part by their staircase parallelism (a word toward the end of one line is used in the first part of the next) and by the chiastic character of some of the sentence structure. The stanzas as identified by Raymond Brown are: 1) The Word with God, vv. 1-2; 2) The Word and Creation, vv. 3-5; 3) The Word in the World, vv. 10- 12b; and 4) The Community's Share in the Word, vv. 14,16.

The first stanza focuses on God as one who communicates. The early singers of the hymn celebrated this faith. Their song begins with: "in the beginning was the Word." The Word existed. Even before creation (v. 3), before all time, before all worlds, it was.

No question was raised about how it came to be. Rather, the song proceeds to affirm a relationship. "The Word was with God." The stanza uses the word was not only for existence,

but for a relationship. In the beginning God was, yet was not alone. "The Word was with God." So God was understood as One who speaks. This means that the revelation which the community receives (cf. v. 14) has its origin before time. For the Word was in the beginning with God.

Here there is no metaphysical interest in or speculation about the so-called inner life of God. Rather the stanza moves on to a third affirmation and to a third use of the word "was." "The Word was God." Here, Word appears as a title; and the title points to a function; and the function is communication. To call God Word implies that God is One who communicates. And to humans who know something of a hunger for the infinite, this is good news. God is Word and, therefore, can be known.

In the second stanza the hymn focuses on the revealing work of the Word in Creation. "All things were made by the Word." In their Hebrew Christian scriptures, the singers would have found similar claims made of both Wisdom and Word. Wisdom was described as a divine, pre-existent partner of God in the work of creation. "Before the beginning of the earth Wisdom was beside him, like a master worker" (Prov. 8:23,30). Word was viewed as a creative and effective instrument of God's will. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. God said: Let their be... and there was... "(Gen. 1:1-3). "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made" (Ps. 33:6).

According to our hymn, this creative Word was the source of life. What has come into being in him was "life" (v.4). This was the view of the Gospel. This life meant "knowing" God (17:3), not merely knowing about God, but experiencing God as being altogether significant for one's life. It was the Word that made God known. Thus, the Revealing Word was the Life-Giver.

The stanza also declares that in this life is light. The knowledge of God is like light shining in the darkness. To know God as Creator is to know ourselves as God's creatures. Thus, the Word, the Revealer, is a source of both life and light.

Tragically, however, humankind too often fails to hear the Word, to receive the life, and to see the light. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness did not comprehend it (v. 5). The apostle Paul expressed it this way:

> "What can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.... They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the creator." (Rom. 1:19ff) -

They knew God. Their senseless minds were darkened. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness did not comprehend it.

The word translated "comprehend," may also be read as "overcome" (NRSV). Raymond Brown takes this reading and sees here a reference to the fall of man(sic) and the failure of the darkness to overcome because God had put enmity between the serpent and the offspring of the woman (Gen. 3:15). Jesus, the offspring, would be victorious over the darkness.

If the reading comprehend is adopted, then the phrase, did not comprehend, is parallel to and interpreted by words in the next stanza: Ídid not know him,(v.10). The world did not know him. In the darkness it did not hear the Word. It did not see the light. It did not comprehend.

At this point, if the singers of the hymn were already familiar with the Gospel as proclaimed by John, they would be thinking not only of the Word given in creation, (v.3ff.), but also of the Word made flesh (v. 14). The light shines (present tense) on. It shines in the ministry of Jesus and in the lives of those who follow him (cf. 3:11; 9:4). There is continuity between creation and incarnation. And there is good reason for song.

In stanza three (vv. 10-1 2b), the story of the Word in the world is stated. But there is some ambiguity. It is possible that the singers and the author of the Gospel of John are thinking of the experience of Jesus. Thus, v.11f, "he came to his own (home) and his own people (the Jews) did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become the children of God."

Certainly, there is much in the Gospel that supports such a translation. C. H Dodd saw chapters 2-12, the book of signs, as the story of the rejection of the Word spoken in Jesus, and in chapters 13-17, the book of the passion, he found the story of those "who received him, who believed in his name."

Yet it is also quite possible that the early singers of the hymn were thinking not so much of Jesus here. For the good news that the Word became flesh is not introduced until the next stanza (v. 14). Rather they were still celebrating the work of the creative Word. "He (it) was in the world and the world came into being through him" (v. 3). Yet the world didn't know him (cf. v. 5). Verse 11 then reads: "he came to what was his (i.e., the world which he has made, v. 3), and which he loved, (cf. 3:16), and his own people (the world of human creatures) did not accept him." Instead of the Creator, they worshiped and served the creature and gave their fragmented selves over to multiple no-gods.

Not everyone, however, rejects the Word. Indeed, the good news is that there are people who receive God's Word; who see themselves as creatures of the Creator and are enabled to live as the children of God. They live not in darkness, but in the light of God's revelation. Here they

experience a new mode of existence. They live as the sons and daughters of light (12:36). They are the children of God (1:12).

With the fourth stanza the hymn introduces two new dimensions in this story of God's Word. One has to do with the person of the Revealer. The other with confessional character of the recipients' response. Up until now the hymn has been explicit about the revelation in creation. But here it becomes "The Word became flesh." Here "flesh" refers to the sphere of the human. The Revealer is a man, a particular man. People know his father and mother (6:42). They know where he comes from (1:45).

Many take offense at this. They want something more spectacular; some divine figure, some hero or god-man, some fascinating, mysterious being, able to impress everyone with the feats of might and glory. But what they saw was only a man; a man of compassion, a man who claimed to speak the truth. And they saw no glory here.

But those who sang the hymn saw it. They declared: he dwelt (lived, NRSV) among us and we beheld his glory, full of grace and truth." They discovered the paradoxical truth that "in his sheer humanity he is the Revealer" (C. K. Barrett).

The Greek verb for "dwelt" may have been chosen because of the similarity in sound and meaning to a Hebrew verb; a verb which, along with its noun, shekinah, was used to speak of the dwelling of God with Israel (e.g ., Exod. 25 :7f.) and of the cloud (e.g., Exod. 24:16), which was the visible symbol of God's presence and glory.

With these associations the verb could help the singers convey what it was they experienced in the life and ministry of Jesus. His story, replete with rejection, betrayal, and abandonment, was one in which they had encountered God's glory....full of grace and truth. Indeed, his being "lifted up" on a cross was not only crucifixion, it was exaltation (cf. 3:14; 12:32). His passion was his glory. The story of his love, of his giving himself for others was the story of God's grace and truth.

A final observation: the confessional character of the hymn's fourth stanza is noteworthy. Here for the first time the first person pronoun gets the verb. Until now the Word has been the subject of the action, but here the singers began confessing their own faith. "We have seen his glory" (v. 14). "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (v. 16.). The "We" as Bultmann contends, is not primarily a reference to some historical eye-witness. It includes all believers. The sight here is not to be regarded as mere sensory, historical seeing. It is "the sight of faith." And it is the experience of singers in every generation who truly celebrate the glory of God as manifest in his incarnate Word.

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Gospel for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany: Mark 9:2-9

Two lines in this narrative provide the foci around which the author's thought can be examined. They are: "It is well that we are here," and "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!"

In the first of these the reader sees Peter still wrestling with the issues which had been brought to light in the previous narrative. Therein, at Caesarea Philippi (8:27-38), the questions of "Who is Jesus?" and "What is a disciple?" had been given ominous answers. Jesus was presented as the Son of Man who was to suffer and die, and his followers, the disciples, were to share in his suffering. They were to lose their lives for his sake and the gospel's.

The protest of Peter's, that such a future for Jesus, God's messiah, was impossible, was interpreted as a temptation. Jesus' response to that temptation was "Get behind me, Satan!" And to that he added his belief that not only would he suffer, but they would too.

This Caesarea Philippi narrative is linked by the gospel writer to the text in Mark 9:2-9. The transfiguration narrative begins with a time reference: "six days later." What took place then is to be understood with the earlier experience at Caesarea Philippi in mind.

"Six days later" Jesus took his disciples Peter, James and John, "up a high mountain apart." Why? Mark isn't explicit about this here, but the purpose of a similar visit mentioned in Mark 6:46 is clear. There Mark says that Jesus "went up on the mountain to pray." Luke (9:28) states that was also Jesus' purpose on this occasion, when he, according to Mark, was transfigured. And readers familiar with the biblical tradition are not surprised. The mountain was a place where often God was encountered. (cf. e.g., Exod. 34:29-35; 1 Kings 19:8, 11; Matt. 28:16.) And in Mark's ongoing narrative it was understandable that the tempted Jesus should have felt the need for such an encounter, both for himself and for his disciples.

Further, such an action was consistent with Jesus' practice. He was a person of prayer. He came from a people who emphasized its importance as a way of opening up to the will of God. Like them he most probably recited the Shema every morning and evening (cf. Deut. 6:4 and 5-7; Mk. 12:29) and the Tephilla (a string of benedictions, cf. Mk. 12:26) at three separate times during the day (cf. Dan. 6:10, 13; Acts 3:1). And in addition to these there appear to have been numerous times that he responded to a felt need in prayer (Mk. 1:35; 14:32).

On the occasion described in our text Mark says Jesus "was transfigured" before them. The literal meaning of the Greek word translated "transfigured" suggests that he "assumed a different form." But a literal interpretation is not indicated here. Certainly Luke's parallel text doesn't view the event as a literal "transfiguration" or "transformation." He doesn't use that Greek word. Rather, he simply interprets the happening on that mountain. It was like that which happened to Moses on another mountain when "the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God" (Exod. 34:29). Elsewhere in the New Testament that Greek word is used metaphorically to describe the spiritual "transformation" of believers into the likeness of Christ (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18). Thus these texts indicate that whether speaking of this experience of Jesus or of later Christian followers the word could be used metaphorically to point to a relationship with God -- "transfiguring" or "transforming" relationship.

In Mark's Gospel the statement about Jesus' transfiguration is followed by a reference to Elijah and Moses. How were these persons involved in his relationship to God? Some believe that the priority of Elijah in Mark's narrative shows that the Jewish expectation regarding the end time was uppermost in Mark's mind. In the biblical narrative, Elijah was translated directly from earth to heaven (2 Kings 2:11) and by many in the first century world he was expected to return soon (cf. Mal. 4:5f). The role of Moses in first century eschatology was not so well developed though some rabbis taught that he, too, went directly into heaven. After all, his burial place was not known (Deut. 34:6; cf. also *The Assumption of Moses*). In any case, the appearance of Elijah and Moses in our text is thought to point to Jesus as God's eschatological prophet who also would be assumed into heaven and then would return at the end of time.

Luke offers another suggestion. He declares that the subject of the conversation of Jesus, Moses and Elijah was the "departure (exodon) which he [Jesus] was to accomplish in Jerusalem." This view picks up the motif of the passion prediction at Caesarea Philippi and was carried forward in the thought of the Early Church as it speaks of Jesus as a servant who "became obedient to the point of death -- even death on the cross" (Phil. 2:8).

Another possible interpretation of the relevance of those names to Jesus' relationship to God emphasizes the representative character of these persons. Using the order found in Matthew and Luke, "Moses and Elijah," they are viewed as representatives of the "law and the prophets." These, the law and the prophets, were their scriptures, and were of great importance to both Jesus and his disciples. They had been taught from childhood to search their scriptures to learn the will of God for their lives.

Each of these interpretations is possible. However, it is in the light of the last possibility and of its relevance to the emphasis upon spirituality in our culture today that I suggest we consider Peter's response. If the phrase "Moses and Elijah" refers to the "law and the prophets," then we may imagine Jesus in the immediate context opening to the disciples the scriptures in a way that would account for Peter's words: "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here."

This positive response to Jesus' interpretation of their scriptures is posited elsewhere in. the gospels. In Luke's narrative of the Emmaus Road experience, we have an example: "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" (cf. Lk. 24:32, 45).

That Jesus sought help from the scriptures for understanding his life and mission is clear. He knew how to listen to them and how to interpret them in relation to their own highest utterances (cf. Mk. 2:25; 12:29-31). For him they were not merely sources in the present (cf. Matt. 9:13; 12:7). They spoke of God as our creator, sustainer, and redeemer; the loving giver of bread and forgiveness and protection from evil; the One who calls humans into relationships of love to Himself, to their neighbors, to their worlds, and to themselves.

Along with Jesus and Peter, Christians have discovered the inspirational value to their scriptures. They have found the Bible to be a "soul-book," a book which deals with issues of life and death, of good and evil, of sin and guilt, of love, forgiveness, and freedom; a book of guidance and inspiration.

In our text, it appears that Peter was moved by the way in which Jesus interpreted these scriptures. Listening with at least part of his mind to Jesus' "conversation" with these sources, he declared: "It is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Staying up there on the mountain with Jesus and those sacred sources was for Peter like attending some spiritual retreat for the modern Christian: the quiet time, the holy place, the aids to worship: stained glass windows, helpful spiritual directors, rich meditations, prayers and songs, celebrating with thanksgiving the gifts of forgiveness, acceptance and freedom.

But there may be a problem here. Is Mark suggesting that this was Peter's way around the rebuke he had earlier received from Jesus? If he, Peter, could keep Jesus on the mountain, at prayer, interpreting the scriptures, perhaps he wouldn't need to worry about the ominous possibility of a Messiah who suffers and who calls his followers to share his cross. But no matter what was Peter's intention, it was clear to Mark that the divine will lay in another direction. For as he reports it, from an overshadowing cloud came a voice. 'This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him." And what had the Son said? "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel will

save it."

Not infrequently in our spiritual quests, we Christians try to find life in the reading of scripture and meditative prayer, only to discover the practice lacks vitality and that life eludes us. Numerous observers of this phenomenon have said that a reason for this lack of life and vitality in meditative prayer is that we separate it from action (cf. John 5:39). But these must not be separated. How well we care about our neighbor is as vital to the spiritual quest as what we do when we are turning inward, in our quiet time. Prayer that does not make a difference in the character or our outward life loses its vigor. A pious life may flourish for a brief time, but unless it leads to a more caring and responsible relationship with other human beings and to efforts to change conditions that cause human need and suffering, it will most likely not endure.

With the injunction of the heavenly voice in Mark’s narrative, the spiritual retreat, the time of prayer, had come to an end. The disciples were with Jesus only and he led them down the mountain to a world in need where "on the next day" (Luke) they were confronted with human misery and with a call for help (Mk.9:14-29).

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Epistle for the Second Sunday of Lent (Reminiscere): Philippians 3:17-4:1

The text for this Sunday focuses on the questions of how a Christian ought to live and why. Two options are in view for the "how" question. The first, v. 17, is that the readers ought to "live according to the example (they) have in us" (in Paul and others). The second, vv. 18 and 19, is to live "as enemies of the cross of Christ." Verses 20 and 21 indicate why Paul believes his readers pursue the first option.

The historical context of these verses is set in the third decade of the Christian movement. It was a time when Christians were asking what their faith meant for the character of their lives. They may have had access to "a pattern of teaching" (Rom.

6:17), i.e., a definite form of ethical instruction. Yet their use of and response to such a pattern is neither clear nor uniform. To some who delighted in the law of the Jewish heritage and found it saving, the teachings of Jesus Christ enriched the deposit. Legalistic and ascetic Christians were able to add new requirements to old (Gal. 3:1-5; Phil. 3:2). To others the gospel meant freedom. They had come to believe that salvation was not the result of their obedience to the law, but the free gift of God’s love, and what mattered now was a faith that worked through love (Gal. 5:6). Among those who celebrated this good news of freedom were persons who neglected this positive use of faith’s freedom for the works of love. These held that "all things were lawful" (cf. 1 Cor. 6: 12f.) and celebrated as freedom the license for a self-indulgent, profligate and uncaring life.

It is to this latter group that vv. 18 and 19 of our text refers. They live, Paul writes, as "enemies of the cross of Christ." Their god is their belly. . . their glory is their shame; their minds are set on earthly things." The phrase "enemies of the cross of Christ" does not by itself identify these persons. There were many such enemies, but these Paul distinguished as being devoted to their belly (koilia). Liberated from food laws, these probably economically upper middle class

Christians had become gluttonous. They seemed to think that the Kingdom of God was a matter of food and drink (Rom. 14:17), and they gave themselves to serving not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own "sensual appetites" (koilia - Rom. 16:18). Perhaps they were people like those referred to in 1 Cor. 8-10 and Rom. 14-15, who were more concerned with their freedom to eat whatever they pleased than they were with the spiritual health of those whom they might cause thereby to stumble; or they may have been like those at Corinth's agap feasts whose gluttonous sensual impatience created divisions in the Body of Christ, and who ultimately made it necessary to eliminate the common meal in favor of a fasting communion(cf. I Cor. 11:17 ff. and Jude 12).

This devotion to their bellies was but one illustration of their problem. These enemies of the cross had set their minds on earthly things; on a self-indulgent planning and getting, owning and spending. They sought the meaning of life in visible, tangible, ephemeral phenomena. They had subverted the glorious freedom available in Christ into a shameful bondage of irresponsible self-seeking. And in doing this they had become "enemies of the cross."

That these persons would have recognized themselves as "enemies of the cross" is very improbable. For they too celebrated the cross and resurrection of Christ. Yet, in Paul's judgment, the description was appropriate. This becomes evident when considering our text's other option: the alternative way of life to which Paul is calling his readers. He wants them not merely to celebrate the cross of Jesus, but to share it. They were to be imitators of the One who had embraced the cross. The literary context of v. 18 forcefully supports this observation.

By itself the verse (18) urges the readers to "join in imitating (Paul) and to observe those who live according to the example you have in us (plural)." Paul is not pointing to himself alone, but also to Timothy (2:20), Epaphroditus (2:29f.) and others (3:17), as exemplars. Yet none of these are the ultimate example. That designation belongs to Jesus Christ. Paul made such an appeal explicit in writing to the Corinthians. "Be imitators of me," he wrote, "as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1).

That this is Paul's meaning in v. 18 is supported by the character of the letter as a whole. The concern for fellowship is dominant. The word fellowship (koinoia) appears in every chapter. The prefix syn (with) appears with verbs that speak of striving, struggling, rejoicing, and sharing with one another. Syn also appears with nouns identifying co-workers, fellow soldiers, fellow imitators and sharers in the faith and work of the gospel. And clauses calling readers to "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord, looking to the interests of others" are frequent. Together these all demonstrate the letter's deep concern for fellowship and unity.

The focus of this fellowship is their life in Christ. In him they are to find their unity; the same mind, the same love, the full accord. The injunctions to "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit" but rather "look to the interests of others," are motivated by the example of Christ (2:1-

5). "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." And then with the help of a hymn (2:5-11) he elaborates.

Like him (Jesus) they were not to regard equality with God as something to be grasped. Rather they were to empty themselves of their selfishness and live their lives out in service to one another; "to the point of death, even death on a cross."

That Paul and his co-workers took Jesus' example seriously is evident throughout the discussion that continues on through to our text. In 2:1 7f. he considers with joy the prospect of his life-blood "being poured out as a libation," which he, along with his readers, can offer in the service of the gospel. In 2:20f. he comments on Timothy's Christ-like concern for their welfare. In 2:29 he tells how Epaphroditus "came close to death for the work of Christ." From this wider context it is clear that the imitation Paul is calling for in 3:17 is rooted in a profound commitment; to the point of letting go of, or dying to, the self-seeking self and coming alive to a Christ-like life.

The data for imitation here consists not of a series of rules for behavior, but of a new perspective. From this perspective one approaches life motivated, not by "selfish ambition or conceit," but by a concern that "looks. . . to the interests of others." This perspective Paul calls the "same mind." It is a mind like that of Jesus Christ (2:3-5). This "same mind" he urges upon both the mature Christians mentioned in the verses that immediately precede our text (3:15) and upon the two women of Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche, in the verse that immediately follows our text (4:2).

That those who share this mind are friends rather than enemies of the cross is clear from Paul's discussion of his own aspirations. Like Christ he had come to a place in his life where he sought to empty himself. He did not cling to the things of which he once had boasted. Now he had come to regard his credentials, his honors, his achievements, his own goodness, as "loss compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus (his) Lord" (3:8). The pattern of Christ's self-emptying had become the pattern of his own life. Motivated by "the same mind," "the same love," he sought to give himself in the service of Christ to the interests or welfare of others.

The reason why Paul's readers ought choose the option of living their lives according to the example they have in Paul and others is thus addressed in the context leading up to the first verse of our text. To live that way is to take on a Christ-like life. It means knowing Christ, not merely knowing about Christ, but experiencing Christ as significant for one's total life.

As Paul saw it, the example involved not only a self-emptying, but also an exaltation. The verses 20 and 21 also reflect the influence of the hymn in 2:5-11. Having urged his readers to follow the example of those who look to the interests of others (the friends of the cross), and having described the other life option (that of the self-indulgent enemies of the cross), Paul now focuses on the hymn's words about God's work of transformation.

In the gospel story God exalted Jesus who had given himself, not to selfish pursuits, but to a life for others. Though humans had rejected him, God exalted him, giving him "a name above every name." Divine approval was given to that which humans had discounted. Looking at Jesus' self-giving love, Paul concluded that this is what God intended for humans.

Paul's personal hope was to be like Christ, not only in his death, but also in his resurrection (3:10). In this hope he invites his readers to share. The profound myth of the Christian movement held that the fullness of humanity was not to be found in food and drink or in the temporal accomplishments, but in the realization of one's life in God. God is to be "All and in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). This means, using a spatial metaphor, that "our citizenship (or homeland) is in heaven." From there the One who already has shown us the way, will come to lead us on into the fullness, the glory, of God. Thus he shares in completing the transformation of selfishly oriented selves into his likeness. For now we live in expectation that the good work begun and being done in us will be completed (1:6).

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Gospel for Trinity Sunday: John 3:1-17

This text may be divided into two sections. The first, verses 1-10, is the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. The second, verses 11-17, begins as if it were a continuation of that conversation, but then almost immediately proceeds as a monologue through which the Christian community proclaims its gospel to its hearers.

The immediate literary context, including two narratives and two discourses, is dominated by the theme of new life. In the first narrative Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding celebration in Galilee. The sign symbolized the replacement of the old rites of purification by a new messianic salvation (2: 1ff.). His next significant act was his cleansing of the temple. The act was accompanied by his promise to raise up a new temple when the old one was destroyed. This promise was understood in the light of the resurrection (2:22) -- for then it was that the Church of Christ came alive to this new life and by the power of his Spirit was made the temple of God and the house of prayer for all nations (John 20).

These two narratives are followed by two discourses. In the first Jesus tells Nicodemus, a good, pious, wealthy man, a representative of the religious establishment, that he needs to be born from above (3:lff.). In the second, Jesus addresses a woman, a Samaritan, on the periphery of respectability, who represents the wider Gentile world (4: 1ff.). Her need is not simply for water from Jacob's well, but for the living water which Jesus gives (cf. 7:37-39).

Clear from this literary context is our text's dominant concern. The old order is yielding place to the new. And the way in which our text contributes to this motif can be gotten at by asking two questions: one, about the appropriate need, or goal of life; and two, about the means to meeting that need, or achieving that goal.

I

With three distinct terms and in five different verses our text speaks. of this need or goal. The terms are "kingdom of God", "eternal life", and "salvation". The first of these terms occurs in vv. 2 and 5, where Nicodemus is told that unless one is born from above one cannot enter the "kingdom of God." The meaning of that term is not defined in this conversation, but its importance is clear both from the way it is introduced and its setting. It comes as an abrupt response to the polite observation of Nicodemus: "You are a teacher come from God..." The gospel writer omits all the social amenities of an oriental visit and zeroes in on the need of Nicodemus.

He came "by night." The possible reasons for his coming at night include: the merit attributed to studying the law at night; the symbolic significance of darkness in this gospel, and the fear of the hostility of some religious leaders toward those who confess faith in Jesus (cf. 12:41; 9:22). Each of these accents the importance of the visit.

He came with a question. It may be presumed that like the "rich, young, ruler" of the Synoptists, he was asking: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responded in effect: "If you want to enter the kingdom of God, you must be born from above." But in the Synoptic gospels we learn that when the rich, young, man rejected Jesus' advice, Jesus observed: "How difficult it is for those having wealth to enter the kingdom of God: (cf. Mark 10:17-23). Significant for us is the observation that to the Jesus of the Synoptic story, entering the kingdom of God was tantamount to receiving eternal live.

The same can be said regarding the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel. Here the term "kingdom of God," which is dominant in the teaching of Jesus in the Synoptics, is rare, appearing only twice (3:3,5). Instead of "kingdom of God," John's Jesus usually uses the term "eternal life." It is his equivalent for "kingdom of God." And though eternal life is not explicit in the conversation with Nicodemus, it is found twice in the monologue which extends that conversation into its post-Easter setting. In v. 15 he writes that the Son of Man must be lifted up so "that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." In v. 16 he says that God loved "so that everyone who believes...may have eternal life." Clearly, this eternal life is a term by which our text speaks of a goal appropriate not only to Nicodemus, by to all the readers of this gospel.

The third term which this text uses to speak of the goal of life is found in v. 17. "God did...send the Son...in order that the world might be saved through him." Here the metaphor of "salvation" describes that end for which "eternal life" was used in the previous verse. Thus for the Fourth Gospel, being saved, entering the kingdom of God, and having eternal life are all terms identifying the need and goal both of Nicodemus and of the rest of humankind.

Of these three terms, "eternal life" is by far the most common and useful to the evangelist. He declares that his reason for writing this gospel is that his readers may have eternal life (20:31). And in 17:3 he tells them what it means. "This," he writes, "is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." To have eternal life is to know

God.

In both Hebrew and Greek the verb "to know" is used not merely for a cerebral knowledge; knowing about something, but for a coming to an immediate sense of that something as affecting oneself. Thus one could "know" illness, childlessness, punishment, peace, a woman, a man. The objects are known not in themselves, but in their actions or effects.

To "know God" in this way means for us as for them to experience God's presence in our everyday relationships. It means discovering God doing the kind of work disclosed by God's Word, God's Son (5:19) -- creating (1:3), life-giving (3:16), judging (3:19). It means finding God in all the experiences and relationships of our lives; in our "world making"; in creative occasions of giving birth to a child, to a painting, to a poem, to a sermon, in sustaining events of eating a meal, cleaning a house, recycling our refuse, providing jobs, maintaining friendships; in experiences of judgment because of our reliance upon destructive weapons, because of our loss of integrity; and in redemptive relationships wherein we experience forgiveness, renewal, and peace. In all such events, whether pleasant or painful, one may relate to God at work, and if one does, one can be said to "know God" -- who to know is eternal life.

II

What our text offers in answer to the probable question of Nicodemus (i.e., "What must I do to inherit eternal life?") are materials which spell out both divine action and human response.

The divine action is apparent from the beginning. Nicodemus is told that if he wanted to reach the goal of life he had to "be born from above." The verb, "be born" is in the passive voice. It is to be the object of another's action. It was not something that Nicodemus could do, but something that must be done to him.

Moreover, as the adverb indicates he must be born "from above." The adverb is ambiguous. It could be translated "again." And clearly that is the way Nicodemus first understood it, as a "second time" (v. 4). As if the only way to find the true goal of life was to start all over again, but in this text it is not being "born again," but being born "from above," i.e. being "born of God," that really matters (cf. 1:12).

In verse five this is made more clear. To be born from above "is to born of 'water and Spirit."' The meaning of water is debated. But to the readers of John's Gospel its reference to Christian baptism would have been strong. Baptism included a group of experiences which were associated with an entrance into the Christian life. These included repentance, faith, forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Spirit, and acceptance into the body of Christ. The reference to Spirit in v. 5 singles out a particularly important aspect of Christian baptism. Nicodemus was being told that what he needed was not simply to be born again or a second time, but to be made alive by

the life-giving Spirit.

If one asks how this divine birthing works (female image), the Gospel writer says it is a mystery. The work of the Spirit is like the movement of the wind. The words "wind," "blows," and "sound," respectively, in v. 8, may be translated "Spirit," "breathes," and "voice." Using these alternatives the text reads: "The Spirit breathes where it wills, and you hear its voice, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes." In this translation the mystery of this birth experience is joined with the affirmation that it is a divine work. When in openness to the work of God's Spirit one allows God's love for the world to reshape attitudes and actions, then one is born, not simply again, but "from

above," and to eternal life.

Accordingly, to be born from above does not indicate some metaphysical change, not some idea of divine generation, characteristic of Hellenistic circles of thought. Rather, it is a relational change in which the Spirit of God is at work.

This present activity of God's Spirit is related to that which had been revealed in Jesus Christ. In the monologue we hear of the Christians' witness to that which they had seen (vv. 11ff.). They had seen the Son of Man "lifted up" (v. 15). This one who had descended (v. 13), who had humbled himself, was "lifted up," first, upon a cross (12:33), being obedient to the point of death, and then into glory (cf. Phil. 2:5ff.). His being "lifted up" (hypsothenai) was used both for his crucifixion and his exaltation. His passion was his glory. His cross was seen as God's act of love for the world (v. 16). In it Christians saw both his descension and ascension, his coming from and his going to the Father (13:1).

The significance of this as an act of love is declared but not developed in v. 16. A later text, which holds parallel references to Christ's descension and ascension, draws the picture more fully. In 13:3-35 the author writes that "Jesus, knowing . . . that he had come from God and was going to God. . . girded himself with a towel . . . and began to wash the disciples' feet." There, and in the interpretations which follow, it is made clear that, motivated by love, he had come to serve, to give himself for others, and to enable others, who have received his gift, to follow his example. By their love everyone would know that they were his disciples.

These divine gifts of Son and Spirit call for a human response. That response is faith. This is implicit in the dialogue with Nicodemus when the birth from above is linked to Christian baptism (v. 5). That birth was not something which Nicodemus by himself could bring about: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." But in submitting to baptism one in repentance and faith opened up to the work of God's Spirit.

This necessary response of faith becomes explicit in the monologue. There, though the noun, "faith," is never used, the readers are invited to believe in the Son or in his name (vv: 15, 16,

18). That believing meant not only acknowledging the Son as the revealer of God and the divine will (1:18), but also accepting him as the Lord of one’s life.

It soon becomes apparent that this response to God’s saving activity is, in part, not only the means of achieving the goal of Nicodemus and other humans. It is itself the realization of that goal. For this believing is a way of knowing. To believe in Jesus Christ and in the God whom he discloses is "to know God and his Son Jesus Christ," and this is eternal life. This imaginative faith helps to effect the transition into a new perspective on life, into a new way of relating, and of thinking, and of knowing, and of living. Thus "believing" becomes both the means to life and the life itself, and is in part an answer to the question of every Nicodemus.

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