

## GOSPEL

I believe that the Incarnation makes possible a surprising and entirely new flowering of love and knowledge. For Christians the Biblical God can now be loved in the flesh. Saint John says that he has sat at table with him, that he has put his head on his shoulder, heard him, touched him, smelled him. And he has said that whoever sees him sees the Father, and that whoever loves another loves him in the person of that other. A new dimension of love has opened, but this opening is highly ambiguous because of the way in which it explodes certain universal assumptions about the conditions under which love are possible. Before I was limited by the people into which I was born and the family in which I was raised. Now I can choose whom I will love and where I will love. And this deeply threatens the traditional basis for ethics, which was always an *ethnos*, an historically given "we" which precedes any pronunciation of the word "I."

The opening of this new horizon is also accompanied by a second danger: institutionalization. There is a temptation to try to manage and, eventually, to legislate this new love, to create an institution that will guarantee it, insure it, and protect it by criminalizing its opposite. So, along with this new ability to give freely of oneself has appeared the possibility of exercising an entirely new kind of power, the power of those who organize Christianity and use this vocation to claim their superiority as social institutions. This power is claimed first by the Church and later by the many secular institutions stamped from

its mould. Wherever I look for the roots of modernity, I find them in the attempts of the churches to institutionalize, legitimize, and manage Christian vocation.

I speak here, not as a theologian, but as a believer and an historian. For thirty years I have declined to speak as a theologian because, in the Roman Catholic Church's more recent tradition, one thereby claims an institutional authority. I have chosen instead to write as an historian curious about the undeniable historical consequences of Christian belief. And I think I can provide evidence for my claim that when the angel Gabriel suddenly appeared before that Jewish girl in Nazareth and said "*Ave*," he did something that cannot be neglected by the historian, even though it doesn't fit in the ordinary sense within history or the study of history. I believe that that angel told that woman that from that moment on she was to be the Mother of God, and, presuming her maiden-like yes, that he whose name the Jews never wanted to pronounce was to become a living person, as human as you or I. I, therefore, listen to him, as nobody before this event could have listened to another or looked at another. This is a surprise, remains a surprise, and could not exist as anything else. It constitutes an extraordinary kind of knowledge which in my tradition one calls faith. I do not expect everyone to share this sense of what, by now, for me, is obvious; but I do think, nevertheless, that I can demonstrate that the Incarnation, the enfleshment, of the Biblical, the Koranic, the Christian, Allah, represents a turning point in the history of the world for believer and unbeliever alike. Belief refers to what exceeds history, but it also enters history and changes it forever.

The Old Testament of the Christian Bible, taken as a whole, is prophetic. At its heart are people who speak about what has not yet come to be. Older Biblical scholarship tended to ask how it was that such people arose only amongst that particular tribe, or people whom we today call the Jews. Biblical scholarship of the last forty years has altered the question. The authors who have most impressed and interested me have asked: how is it that the Jewish people came into existence around their prophets? What makes the ancient Jews unique is that they became a social "we," an "I" in the plural, around the message that whatever happens in history or can be seen in nature

is a foreshadowing, in the sense that pregnancy foreshadows birth. (I mean pregnancy here in the old sense in which a woman was said to be "expecting" or "in good hope," not the current sense in which the womb has become the mapped and monitored public place in which an embryonic citizen resides.) The prophets of Israel made the astonishing claim that they could step outside the family and tribal context in which tomorrow turns in a circle with yesterday, and instead speak about a tomorrow which will be totally surprising, messianic. It is around the announced Messiah that the historically unique phenomenon of God's people comes into existence, and the Old Testament in this sense is pregnant with the Messiah. "The whole creation," the apostle Paul says, "has been, until this time, groaning in labour pains."

The image of pregnancy should not be read as suggesting that the Incarnation was in any sense necessary, pre-determined or inevitable. It was and remains an outworking of pure, unconstrained freedom, and this is something very difficult for the modern mind to grasp. What happens, with us, is the outcome either of chance or some chain of causal necessity. We have lost the sense that there exists between these extremes a realm of gratuity, or gift, a realm that comes into being in response to a call, rather than a determinative cause. Call  
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The word gratuity itself reveals the loss of this sense. A gratuity today is something trivial, a tip, and the gratuitous is primarily understood as what is un-necessary, un-called for, and, therefore, beside the point. But, in the Bible, this is the primary form of "causation" — from God's summons to Abraham to Jesus' running into Philip and saying "Follow me." The Gospel exacts from its readers the recognition that what it presents is neither necessity nor chance but a superabundant gift freely given to those who will freely receive it.

This gift becomes fully visible only at the moment of its rejection, the moment which I take to be the point of the Gospel, the Crucifixion. Jesus, as our Saviour but also as our model, is condemned by his own people, led out of the city, and executed as somebody who has blasphemed the community's God. But he is not simply executed. He is hanged on a cross, a way of dying with a powerful significance in the Mediterranean tradition. This meaning becomes clear when

we examine descriptions of suicide by hanging in Greek and Roman classical literature. The first such account concerns an Italian queen, who is very angry at her people and wants to leave them, so she hangs herself in the woods to die without touching the earth. In that way, she expects her spirit to remain around to haunt her people rather than being absorbed into the realm of the ancestors. In Greek and Roman tradition to hang someone on a gibbet to die without touching the earth is a way of excluding them not just from "our" people here, but also from our people in the other world, from our dead.

If, therefore, we take as our example this man who says, Let this chalice pass from me, because he so much fears it, it is an example simultaneously of loyalty to his people and of willingness to accept being excluded from them by what he stands for. This, in the supreme form, is the Christian attitude towards this worldly community, an attitude which Christians tried to embody in everyday life. The same willingness to step outside the embrace of the community is evident in the parable of the Samaritan. Jesus tells the story<sup>2</sup> in response to the question of "a certain lawyer," that is, a man versed in the Law of Moses, who asks, "Who is my neighbour?" A man, Jesus says, was going from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was set upon by robbers, stripped, beaten, and left half-dead in a ditch by the road. A priest happens by and then a Levite, men associated with the Temple and the community's approved sacrificial rites, and both pass him by "on the other side." Then comes a Samaritan, a person whom Jesus' listeners would have identified as an enemy, a despised outsider from the northern kingdom of Israel who did not worship at the temple. And this Samaritan turns to the wounded one, picks him up, takes him in his arms, dresses his wounds and brings him to an inn where he pays for his convalescence.

The story is deeply familiar. Dictionaries recognize the good Samaritan as a friend in need. The United States has so-called Samaritan laws, which exempt you from tort actions, if you inadvertently do harm while offering aid. This familiarity disguises the shocking character of the Lord's tale. Perhaps the only way we could recapture it today would be to imagine the Samaritan as a Palestinian ministering to a wounded Jew. He is someone who not

only goes outside his ethnic preference for taking care of his own kind, but who commits a kind of treason by caring for his enemy. In so doing, he exercises a freedom of choice, whose radical novelty has often been overlooked. Once, some thirty years ago, I made a survey of sermons dealing with this story of the Samaritan from the early third century into the nineteenth century, and I found out that most preachers who commented on that passage felt that it was about how one *ought* to behave towards one's neighbour, that it proposed a rule of conduct, or an exemplification of ethical duty. I believe that this is, in fact, precisely the opposite of what Jesus wanted to point out. He had not been asked, how should one behave towards one's neighbour, but rather, who is my neighbour? And what he said, as I understand it, was, My neighbour is who I choose, not who I have to choose. There is no way of categorizing who my neighbour ought to be.

This doctrine about the neighbour, which Jesus proposes, is utterly destructive of ordinary decency, of what had, until then, been understood as ethical behaviour. This is what modern preaching has not been willing to insist upon, and why this teaching is as surprising today as it was in the beginning. In antiquity, hospitable behaviour, or full commitment in my action to the other, implies a boundary drawn around those to whom I can behave in this way. The Greeks recognized a duty of hospitality towards *xenoi*, strangers who spoke a Hellenic language, but not towards the babblers in strange tongues whom they called *barbaroi*. Jesus taught the Pharisees that the relationship which he had come to announce to them as most completely human is not one that is expected, required, or owed. It can only be a free creation between two people, and one which cannot happen unless something comes to me through the other, by the other, in his bodily presence. It is not a relationship that exists because we are citizens of the same Athens, and so can feel a duty towards each other, nor because Zeus also throws his mantle over the Corinthians and other Hellenes, but because we have decided. This is what the Master calls behaving as a neighbour.

Several years ago, during my annual lecture series at the University of Bremen, I took the Samaritan as my theme because my students had asked me if I would discuss ethics. What I tried to point

out to them was the suggestion in this story that we are creatures that find our perfection only by establishing a relationship, and that this relationship may appear arbitrary from everybody else's point of view, because I do it in response to a call and not a category, in this case the call of the beaten-up Jew in the ditch. This has two implications. The first is that this "ought" is not, and cannot be reduced to a norm. It has a *telos*. It aims at somebody, *some body*; but not according to a rule. It has become almost impossible for people who today deal with ethics or morality to think in terms of relationships rather than rules.

The second implication, and a point I'll develop more fully later on, is that with the creation of this new mode of existence, the possibility of its breakage also appears. And this denial, infidelity, turning away, coldness is what the New Testament calls sin, something which can only be recognized by the light of this new glimmer of mutuality. The stress which the New Testament puts on relationship is also visible in the new account of virtue which appears amongst Christians. In the Platonic and Aristotelian teaching, virtue is something that I can cultivate in myself by the discipline of repeating good actions until they have become a second nature. Hugh of St. Victor, the twelfth century abbot who is one of my great teachers, takes this traditional account of the virtues as his starting point, but says that, for a man of faith, each one of them can flower only as a surprising gift which he receives from God, usually through the intermediary of his interlocutor or the person or persons or community with whom he lives. The flowering of virtues, as evidenced by what Hugh calls the delicacy of their perfume, can come about only as a gift to me and not something which I can do on my own, as in classical tradition. Virtue, in that view is very self-centred, building on my powers. Hugh presents the gifts of the Holy Spirit as gifts which come to me through those with whom I live.

Another of my great teachers, the late Gerhart Ladner, tried to define the new thing that came into the world with Christianity in a book called *The Idea of Reform*. I feel a very special sense of gratitude to Ladner because, to my knowledge, he was one of the first to confront the question of how an historian should treat the appearance in history of something new and unprecedented. Thirty-five years ago,

when the word revolution was in the air and I couldn't help but give my summer seminars at CIDOC? on issues relating to this concept, I demanded of every student that he read at least a certain part of Ladner's book before coming to the seminar. As Ladner expounds it, *reformatio* came to refer in the early Christian centuries to a way of behaving and feeling that had never been known before. The classical world had known renewal and rebirth as one phase of the eternal cycling of the stars and the seasons, but this was nothing like the idea, which had spread throughout Christendom by the fourth century, of a conversion that would sweep away the culture in which I was born and leave me in an entirely new state. A source I know from this period, for example, relates the story of a family of Irish brothers whose father had been killed. In the society from which they came a son had an absolute duty to avenge a father's murder, yet these young men forgot their revenge and went to live as monks on a barren island where they did penance for their sins. They were able, suddenly, to step outside the culture which had formed them and lived in peaceful opposition to it.

The mood, or ground-tone, of this new state was contrition. It was motivated not by a sense of culpability but rather a deep sorrow about my capacity to betray the relationships which I, as a Samaritan, have established, and, at the same time, a deep confidence in the forgiveness and mercy of the other. And this forgiveness was not conceived as the cancellation of a debt but as an expression of the love and mutual forbearance in which Christian communities were called to live. This is difficult to understand today because the very idea of sin has become both threatening and obscure to contemporary minds. People now tend to understand sin in the light of its "criminalization" by the Church during the High Middle Ages and afterwards. As I will later explain in more detail, it was this criminalization which generated the modern idea of conscience as an inward formation by moral rules or norms. It made possible the isolation and anguish which drive the modern individual, and it also obscured the fact that what the New Testament calls sin is not a moral wrong but a turning away or a falling short. Sin, as the New Testament understands it, is something that is revealed only in the light of its possible

forgiveness. To believe in sin, therefore, is to celebrate, as a gift beyond full understanding, the fact that one is being forgiven. Contrition is a sweet glorification of the new relationship for which the Samaritan stands, a relationship which is free, and therefore vulnerable and fragile, but always capable of healing, just as nature was then conceived as always in the process of healing.

But this new relationship, as I have said, was also subject to institutionalization, and that was what began to happen after the Church achieved official status within the Roman Empire. In the early years of Christianity, it was customary in a Christian household to have an extra mattress, a bit of a candle, and some dry bread in case the Lord Jesus should knock at the door in the form of a stranger without a roof—a form of behaviour that was utterly foreign to any of the cultures of the Roman Empire. You took in your own but not someone lost on the street. Then the Emperor Constantine recognized the Church, and Christian bishops acquired the same position in the imperial administration as magistrates, so that when Augustine [354–430] wrote to a Roman judge about a legal issue, he wrote as a social equal. They also gained the power to establish social corporations. And the first corporations they started were Samaritan corporations which designated certain categories of people as preferred neighbours. For example, the bishops created special houses, financed by the community, that were charged with taking care of people without a home. Such care was no longer the free choice of the householder; it was the task of an institution. It was against this idea that the great Church Father John Chrysostom [347?–407] railed. He was called golden-tongued because of his beautiful rhetoric, and, in one of his sermons, he warned against creating these *xenodochia*, literally “houses for foreigners.” By assigning the duty to behave in this way to an institution, he said, Christians would lose the habit of reserving a bed and having a piece of bread ready in every home, and their households would cease to be Christian homes.

Let me tell you a story I heard from the late Jean Daniélou, when he was already an old man. Daniélou was a Jesuit and a very learned scriptural and patristic scholar, who had lived in China and baptized people there. One of these converts was so happy that he had been

accepted into the Church that he promised to make a pilgrimage from Peking to Rome on foot. This was just before the Second World War. And that pilgrim, when he met Daniélou again in Rome, told him the story of his journey. At first, it was quite easy, he said. In China he only had to identify himself as a pilgrim, someone whose walk was oriented to a sacred place, and he was given food, a handout, and a place to sleep. This changed a little bit when he entered the territory of Orthodox Christianity. There they told him to go to the parish house, where a place was free, or to the priest's house. Then he got to Poland, the first Catholic country, and he found that the Polish Catholics generously gave him money to put himself up in a cheap hotel. It is the glorious Christian and Western idea that there should be institutions, preferably not just hotels but special flophouses, available for people who need a place to sleep. In this way the attempt to be open to all who are in need results in a degradation of hospitality and its replacement by caregiving institutions.

A gratuitous and truly free choice had become an ideology and an idealism, and this institutionalization of neighbourliness had an increasingly important place in the late Roman Empire. Jumping ahead another 150 years from Augustine's time, we come to a period when decaying Rome, and other imperial centres, were attracting massive immigration from rural and foreign areas, which made city life dangerous. The Emperors, especially in Byzantium, made decrees expelling those who couldn't prove that they had a home. They gave legitimacy to these decrees by financing institutions which would provide shelter for the homeless. And, if you study the way in which the Church created its economic base in late antiquity, you will see that by taking on this task of creating welfare institutions for the state, the Church was able to establish a legal and moral claim on public funds, and a practically unlimited claim since the task was unlimited.

But as soon as hospitality is transformed into a service, two things have happened at once. First, a completely new way of conceiving the I-Thou relationship has appeared. Nowhere in antique Greece or Rome is there evidence of anything like these new flophouses for foreigners, or shelters for widows and orphans. Christian Europe is

