

In January we looked closely at the relationship between the church and the world. Today I'd like to return to the fountainhead, to the centre of all our faith, to Jesus himself. Not Jesus as a philosopher or great teacher or a disputed historical character for the gormenghast of theologians and biblical critics to nitpick over. But Jesus as he is given to us by the gospels. For if we read the gospels with care and devotion, they allow us to look into his face. It is possible to see Christ directly and to draw near to him. But it needs imagination. And imagination has got a bad name – like when my dad used to say I had a vivid imagination. And he meant it as a complaint. Or when people accuse children of *seeing things*.

But we can see things. Only to do so means you have first to open your eyes. And the eyes are they eyes of imagination. Imagination is a gift of God, along with faith hope and charity. One of the most revelatory imaginations in English poetry was Samuel Coleridge. And he even defined imagination as *that willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith*. It's just right to see the words *poetry* and *faith* rubbing up against each other like that. For poetry is a kind of faith. The word for *poetry* in Greek means both doing something and making something. And when we make a successful poem we are not taking leave of reality but bringing reality closer.

And the language of the gospel-writers is some of the best poetry we have. The poetry of the gospels is true, sparse, direct and it creates a whole world. You don't find many florid adjectives in the gospels or descriptions of the weather. And here's a thing: you don't get any speculation about how people were *feeling*. In the gospels, souls are matters for psychoanalysis or vile introspection. Souls are worn on the sleeves. And the gospels show us Jesus wearing his soul on his sleeve. Always. In his every meeting with man woman and child. In his anguished prayers to the Father.

Come then, with your imagination on full beam, to these Epiphany gospels. When we draw near to the vision of Jesus in them we know we can trust the vision because it is raw and edgy and untidy and it doesn't leave out the bits that make us wonder what's going on. Think back a couple of weeks to that story about the boy Jesus when he stayed behind in the temple. And the ill-tempered exchange with his Mother: she says *Why hast thou thus dealt with us? Behold thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing*. And he replies: *How is it that ye sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my father's business*.

Hear the piping soprano intonation of the twelve year old Son of God in that. Look at the scene and you see that there's no phoney religious picture being drawn here. The boy was insolent and his Mother was livid. Both Mother and Son are real. You can if you try see their faces.

A week later we get the wedding at Cana in Galilee. If the wet-nellie modern versions of the Bible had really wanted to give us modern English here, they would have said something like: *There he was on a ten days' booze up with his mates and his mother comes in pestering him. They have no wine!* And his reply: *Woman, what have it to do with thee?* Open your imagination and see that scene. She embarrasses him in front of his friends and her reply is a put down in front of all the guests. This is telling it like it is. Here's no Cathedral bookshop schmaltzy religious postcard. Here is a very uneasy

exchange. Because we know that such exchanges happen a lot in families, we can see the truth of it. The marvellous thing about that straight talking is that helps you understand that the gospel-writer is telling the truth when he comes to the miracle as well.

Let's go further on into these stories, to when they *bring out a dead man; and he was the only son of his mother; and she was a widow*. Now shut your eyes and watch what happens next. It says that the people *stood still*. That would be sort of stillness like *patience on a monument*, a stillness you could hear and feel. There would be an exchange of looks between Jesus and this woman. There is no extravagant counselling service given to her. He says just two words: *Weep not*. It's astonishing. What was she supposed to do for God's sake? She'd lost her husband. And now her only son. And he says *Weep not*. You have to see his face when he says this. And then the miracle again told with such understatement: *And he that was dead sat up. And he delivered him to his mother*.

The gospels are not humanistic. They are not Renan's *Vie de Jesus*. They are natural tales in a supernatural context. But it's not all compassion and tenderness. Remember when Peter has confessed *Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God*. A rosy moment if ever there was one. But when in the next breath Peter denies that there is any need for Christ to be crucified, Jesus turns to him and says *Get thee behind me Satan!* What about the look on his face then?

Or when he said, *Think not that I come to bring peace but a sword*. Or when he curses the fig tree. Or when he says *And these shall go into everlasting punishment*. When he takes a whip to them that dealt in pigeons in the temple, hear the crack of the whip. See the flashing of it in front of the court of the temple. And all against a sky getting ready for Good Friday.

And see Jesus with Mary Magdalene. This is the sinner who washes his feet and dries them with her hair. There is the ointment in the alabaster box – ointment for his anointing unto death. She takes down his broken body from the cross. And she goes to the sepulchre on the first day of the week to anoint his corpse. She has touched him when scarcely anyone else has. Think then of the blinding hurt this woman of all women must have felt when he reveals himself to her in the Easter Garden and speaks but one word so tenderly – her name, “Mary!” Naturally, she goes to hold him. And what does he reply? *Don't touch me*.

Go into the Garden of Gethsemane when he sweats blood. See his face turned upwards to his Father when he says *O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me*. In a garden. In the darkness. By himself. You only have to close your eyes to see it. That bloodied face when he says *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*.

So we can see Jesus. We see him through God's gift of imagination and poetic faith. I suppose what I've been asking you to do is meditate. Take these stories and visions and picture them, hear them, feel them and they will become real to you. This is what believing in Jesus means, For belief is not a set of propositions to be argued about – not something intellectual and distanced. Belief is entering into a world. If you want your belief in Jesus to be strengthened – when you wish you could draw closer to him

– just practise this imaginative kind of prayer. And he will come to you and be nearer to you than your own self. There is such a thing as true make-believe. It is real and it is the imaginative, poetic suspension of disbelief.

If you want to know whether there's someone in the next room, don't stand there like some philosopher weighing up the arguments. Open the door and walk in. You want to draw near to Jesus and feel the comfort of his presence? Well you just do it. *Seek and ye shall find*

To make real his promise, all you need do is respond.

Look towards him and you will see him and he will be with you always. For he says: *Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke unto you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart; and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*