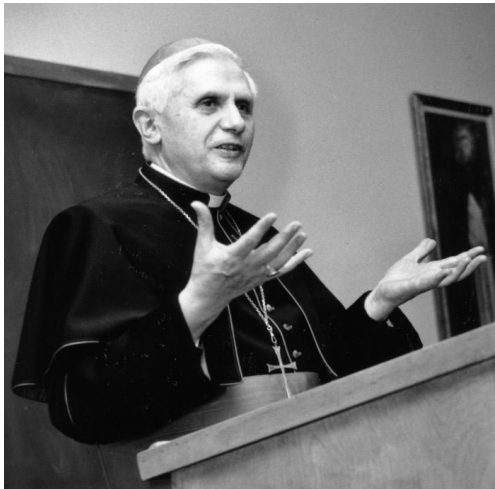




**JESUS CHRIST
TODAY, YESTERDAY, AND
FOREVER**

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“Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13, 8). This was the understanding which those who had known Him on earth and had seen Him risen from the dead came to have. What this means is that we can only come to truly recognize Jesus Christ today if we understand Him in unity with the Christ of “yesterday” and if we look through the Christ of yesterday and today toward the Christ of eternity. Meeting Christ always involves these three dimensions of time as well as the transcending of time where its origin and future can be found. If we set ourselves upon a search for the real Jesus, we have to prepare to extend ourselves just this far. We will usually encounter Him first of all in the present: as He shows Himself in the present moment, as men see and understand Him, as they live in Him or in opposition to Him, as His word and work are actively experienced today. But if all of this is to become a true coming to know Him and not just a second-hand knowledge, then we have to go back and ask: from where does all of this come? Who was He really when once He lived as a man among men? We will have to consult the sources which witness the beginnings and adjust our today accordingly where it may have been diverted by its own willful fantasies. This humble submission to the witness of the sources, this readiness to let our dreams dissolve and obediently accept reality is a fundamental condition for a real encounter. This kind of encounter requires the asceticism of truth, a humility both in hearing and in seeing which brings about the actual perception of the True.

Modern theology has set before us some fascinating images of Christ today formed from the experiences and needs of our age: Christ, the liberator, the new Moses on the new exodus; Christ, the poor among the poor, as He reveals Himself in the beatitudes; Christ, the all-loving, whose essence is a pro-existence, expressing His deepest being in the word “for.” Each of these images emphasizes something essential to the figure of Jesus; each of them poses fundamental questions: What is freedom, and where does man find that road which doesn't go just anywhere but leads to true freedom, to the real “promised land” for human existence? What is the happiness of poverty and what do we have to do so that we ourselves and others may attain this blessedness? How does Christ’s “being for us” come to us and where does it lead us? About all these questions today there is serious discussion and that can always prove fruitful provided one does not try to resolve the problems by appealing simply to today but allows his glance to be directed to the Christ of yesterday and forever as well. Within the limits of our present consideration, it will not be possible to enter into this debate which undoubtedly furnishes the background for established points of view today. From the methodological point of departure which I have thus far described, I would like to choose another way, namely to transfer our present day questions and thought into a biblical framework and to draw forth from them there our three-fold extension of yesterday - today - forever. I think of Christ’s fundamental word to us in the Gospel of John: “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (Jn.14, 6). The idea of the way obviously

corresponds with the exodus question; life has become a key word in our age confronted as it is with the threats of a “civilization” of death which truly is the loss of all civilization and culture; the theme of pro-existence is here clearly evident. “Truth” on the other hand does not entail the favorite concepts of our time; truth is associated rather with intolerance and thus is evaluated more as a threat than as a promise. Precisely for this reason it is important that we inquire about it and permit ourselves to be questioned about it by Christ.

Christ the Way -- Exodus and Liberation

Jesus Christ today- the first image by which we can see Him in this age of ours is the image of the way which from the history of Israel we call the exodus: the way to freedom, to the future. We are aware of the fact that we do not live in freedom, that we are not at the place where we really belong. It is true that the new theology of the exodus has been developed in connection with situations of political and economic oppression. But it is less the government of this or that state which comes to mind. Rather it is the basic form of this present world of ours which is built, not upon mutual solidarity, but upon a system of acquisition and power, one which creates and also needs dependence. The same thing, strange to say, is true as well for people of the ruling classes who are in no way happy with their kind of freedom and power; even they feel dependent upon anon-ymous structures which take their breath away and this occurs precisely where the form of government guarantees the greatest possible freedom.

Paradoxically, the call for liberation, for a new exodus into a land of real freedom, is raised with particular intensity among those who have possessions and freedom of movement way over and above what people could heretofore have imagined. We are not at the place where we ought to be, and we are not living in the way we would like to live. Where is the way? How can one find it? Exactly at this point we find ourselves in the position of the disciples to whom Jesus says: “You know the way where I am going” to which Thomas replied “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” (Jn. 14, 5).

There is only one place in the Gospels where the word exodus is used; it is found in the Lucan account of Jesus’ transfiguration. There it is said that during Jesus’ prayer on the Mount His countenance changed and His raiment became dazzlingly bright. Two men, Moses and Elias, were shown in glory and spoke with Him about the exodus He would have to complete in Jerusalem. It is immediately clear that the word “exodus” here means simply a passage, death. Moses and Elias, both of whom suffered greatly for the sake of God’s will, speak of Jesus’ Passover, of the exodus of His Cross. For this reason, they are both privileged witnesses to Jesus for they have preceded Him upon the way of the Passion. They both are authentic interpreters of the exodus: Moses, the leader of Israel’s exodus from Egypt; Elias, who lived at a moment in Israel’s history when its people indeed found themselves geographically speaking in the land of promise, but as far as living was concerned, they had

returned to Egypt for they lived in forgetfulness of God and under a tyrannical king. Because of him indeed, the tyranny of life was apparent, but this reflected the fact that an exodus had occurred. The people had thrown off God's word from Sinai, the wisdom of the Covenant and the interior goal of the exodus, as though it were a fetter so that they might come to a self-made freedom, and this proved the harshest tyranny of all. Thus, Elias had to travel symbolically back to Sinai, to retrace the wanderings of Israel, in order to bring back to it anew from the Mount of God the fruit of the exodus. In this way Elias makes clear what is the true center of the history of the exodus: the exodus deals neither with a merely geographical nor a political way. On neither a geographical nor a political map can one plot this course. An exodus which does not lead to the Covenant is no true exodus.¹

In this connection, there are two important observations to be made concerning the biblical text. While Luke begins his account with rather vague information as to the time, "and it happened about eight days after this had been said," Matthew and Mark offer a precise date for the trans-figuration: six days after Peter's confession with its sub-sequent promise to him of the primacy. H. Gese has brought out the Old Testament background to this determination of the time: "After six days with the mountain covered with clouds, Moses ascended Sinai and entered into the

¹ For more detail here cf. J. Ratzinger, *Kirche, Ökumene und Politik*. Johannes Verlag, 1987, pp. 235-240.

light of God” (Ex. 24, 16).² Moses was accompanied on his ascent by the high priest, Aaron, and the archpriests, Nada and Abihu (Ex. 24, 1); in the same way, Jesus is accompanied by Peter, James and John. And just as Moses’ face became radiant because of his encounter, “so Jesus was transfigured with a supernatural light.” In the Sinai event, God reveals Himself with the introductory words, “I am Yahweh,” which are a prelude to the ten commandments. In the transfiguration, the voice calls out: “This is my beloved Son, listen to Him.” Jesus is the living Torah, the Covenant in Person in whom the law becomes grace. Matthew’s chronology however has another hidden feature. J. M. Canghai and M. Van Esbroeck have clearly shown how the dating of both events—Peter’s confession along with his receiving the promise of the primacy and the transfiguration—were arranged in accordance with the calendar of Jewish feasts and thus their exact meaning can be determined. The confession of Peter falls upon Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, which is followed by five days of fast and is concluded by the feast of tabernacles an echo of whose substance can be discerned in the offer to set up three tents at the transfiguration.³ We need not go into here all the

² H. Gese, *Zur biblischen Theologie. Alttestamentliche Vorträge*. Munich, 1977, p. 81.

³ J.-M. van Canghai- M. van Esbroeck, “La primauté de Pierre (Mt 16, 16-19) et son contexte judaïque”, *Rev. theol. de Louvain*, 11, (1980), 310-324; esp. 310f. Valuable insights for the interpretation of the transfiguration pericope can also be found in P. H. Kolvenbach's *Der österliche Weg. Exerzitien zur Lebenserneuerung*, Freiburg, 1988, pp. 220-227.

implications which might be drawn from these assertions regarding both events and their inner connection. We will consider only the one which is essential for us: in the background of the first event can be found the mystery of reconciliation and in the second the feast of tabernacles which in substance entailed giving thanks for the land along with a remembrance of the homelessness of the children of Israel in their wanderings in the desert. Israel's exodus and the exodus of Jesus are connected: all Israel's feasts and all its ways lead into the passover of Jesus Christ.

We can say this then: the "passage" of Jesus in Jerusalem is the real and true exodus whereby Christ travels the road to freedom and Himself becomes the way to freedom for mankind. We may add the observation that in Luke's Gospel all of Jesus' public life is described in terms of an ascent toward Jerusalem; thus Jesus' whole life appears as the exodus in which He is at once both Moses and Israel. In order to understand all the aspects of this way, we have to take a look now at the resurrection as well. Thus we see that the letter to the Hebrews referred to Jesus making His exodus by a road which does not end in Jerusalem: "He has opened for us a new and living way through the veil, that is to all say, his body" (Heb. 10, 20). His exodus leads Him beyond all creation to "the tent not made by human hands," into contact with the living God (9, 11). The promised land which He reaches and to which He leads involves a sitting "at the right hand of God" (cf. Mk. 12, 36; Acts 2, 33; Rm. 8, 34, etc.). The desire for freedom and liberation stirs in every

man; every stage he reaches along this road, however, brings with it the realization that it is only a stage, that nothing of what he has attained really corresponds to his longing. The desire for freedom is the voice of God's image in us; it is the desire to "sit at God's right hand," to be "like God." A liberator who would be worthy of the name has to push open this door and all the empirical forms of freedom will have to be judged accordingly.

But how does this occur? What does exodus really mean? Man and mankind have been confronted and are continually confronted here with two ways. There is the voice of the serpent who says: take leave of your self-imposed guilt and dependence, make yourself God and give up the One who can keep on presenting you with limits. It is not particularly amazing that a portion of those who have heard of the message of Christ identify Him with the serpent and wish to understand Him as a liberator from the old God.⁴ But this is not really His way. How does he appear? There are two discourses of Jesus in which He refers the promise of sitting at the right hand to men. In the parable of the universal judgement, He speaks of the sheep whom the King - the Son of Man - places on His right and to

⁴ J. Magne has recently offered an impressive portrait of this "gnostic" interpretation of Jesus and tries to bring it home in both of his works: *Logique des dogmes* and *Logique des sacrements* (both published by the author, Paris, 1989). Along the same line there is Bloch's *Auslegung des Christentums*; cf. esp. *Atheismus im Christentum*, Suhrkamp, 1968, for example, p. 116ff. Also: L. Weimer, *Das Verständnis von Religion und Offenbarung bei Bloch*, dissertation, Munich, 1971.

whom He hands over the kingdom. These are the ones who have given Him to eat when he was hungry; gave him drink when He thirsted; took Him in when He was homeless; visited Him when He was sick and in prison. They did all this for Him in as much as they did it for “the least of His brethren” (Mt. 25, 31-40). In the second text, the two sons of Zebedee ask to sit at the right and left hand of Jesus in His glory; to them the response is given that sitting at the right and left hand is reserved to the will of the Father. A condition for it, though, is that they drink of the cup which He drinks and undergo the baptism with which He must be baptized (Mk. 10, 35-40).

We have to keep both of these points of instruction in mind as we turn once again to the interwoven fabric of texts relative to the confession of Peter and the transfiguration. Both of these events are tied together by Jesus’ prediction of His death and resurrection as well as His speaking about His exodus which Peter opposes and for which he cherished completely different hopes. To Him came the sharp reply: “Get behind Me, Satan” (Mt. 16, 23). At that moment Peter assumes the role of the Tempter by urging an exodus without the Cross--an exodus which does not lead to the resurrection but to an earthly utopia. “Get behind Me”--against this attempt to limit the exodus to some empirical goal Jesus sets the demand of following Him. The existential counterpart to the idea of a way of liberation is to be found in the following of Jesus as the way to freedom, to liberation.

To be sure, we should not fix too narrowly upon the idea of following as the centerpiece of the New Testament's exodus theology. The proper understanding of following depends upon a correct understanding of the figure of Jesus Christ. Following should not be reduced to the moral realm alone. It is first of all a Christological category and only thence does it become a moral charge. The concept of following says too little if one's thinking about Jesus is too limited. If Jesus is looked upon only as a pioneer in the struggle for a freer kind of religion, for a more liberal morality or for a better political system, then His following has to be reduced to the acceptance of set thoughts on a program. What it amounts to is that one attributes the beginnings of a program to Jesus, a program which has to be further developed by one's self and whose application can be understood as a joining of one's self to it. This kind of following by means of a community program is just as arbitrary as it is inadequate for the empirical relations between past and present are very different; what a person believes he can take over from Jesus does not rightly exceed general intentions. Taking refuge in such reductive thinking about following and thus about the message of the exodus frequently arises from a kind of logic which at first glance appears quite plausible: Jesus may have been both God and man, but we now are only human; we would not then be able to follow Him in His divine being but only in so far as He is man. This kind of explanation leads us to think much too little of man and of our freedom and to fall completely away

from the logic of the New Testament where the daring sentence is found: “Be imitators of God” (Eph. 5, 1).

No, the call to follow is not concerned simply with the human virtues of Jesus. Rather it involves His entire way “through the veil” (Heb. 10, 20). The element which is essential and new in this way of Christ Jesus consists in the fact that He opens up this way for us for it is thus that we first come to freedom. The aspect of following Him means: to walk towards communion with God which is why it is attached to the paschal mystery.⁵ And so after Peter’s confession, Jesus speaks about following Him: “Whoever wishes to come after Me must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me” (Mk. 8, 34). This is no petty moralizing which views life chiefly on the negative side nor is it a kind of masochism for those who do not like themselves. We cannot get on the track toward a true understanding of this word either if we take it in the opposite sense of a strict morality intended for heroic souls. The call of Jesus can only be understood in the paschal context of the whole exodus by which He “passed through the veil.” It is in the light of this goal that ancient human wisdom makes sense, that the one who loses himself is the only one who finds himself, that the one who gives life is the only one who receives it (Mk. 3, 35).

⁵ This interpretation, so obvious to the Fathers, finds concise expression in a marvelous phrase from Augustine: “Ascendit Christus in caelum: sequamur eum.” *Sermo* 304, 4 PL 38, 1397. Still quite important in this regard is R. Peterson's contribution, *Zeuge der Wahrheit*, found in his *Theologische Traktate*, Munich, 1951, pp. 165-224.

Because of this, following is best defined by those elements which we discovered previously in the two discourses of Jesus: baptism, cup, and love. This whole concept of following was fully a part of the vision of the Fathers. In place of the many texts which could be cited, I would like to refer just to one passage from Saint Basil: “The plan of God and of our Redeemer for mankind consists in recalling us from banishment and in leading us back from that estrangement which arose fundamentally because of disobedience ... The following of Christ is necessary to the very end of life, not just in His life as regards His gentleness, humility, and patience, but also in His death ... How do we come to the likeness of His death? ... What good comes from such an imitation? It is first of all necessary to overcome our former way of life. This, however, is impossible unless one is reborn according to the word of the Lord (cf. Jn. 3, 3). For this rebirth is the beginning of a second life. In order to start the second, an end has to be put to the first. Just as for those who turn around on a double track in a stadium, there is a stopping and a certain moment of rest separating the movements in different directions, so is it necessary that there be a turning point, too, which is visibly a death between lives, which puts an end to what went before and gives a start to what comes after.”⁶

We can put this in practical terms: The Christian exodus entails a conversion which accepts Christ’s

⁶ “On the Holy Spirit” XV 35, *Sources chrétiennes*, Nr. 17 bis (ed. B. Pruche O.P., Paris, 1968, 2nd edition), pp. 364ff. (= PG 32, 128 C- D 129 A -B).

promise in all its implications and which is prepared for the losing of one's self and one's whole life for its sake. Conversion also entails overcoming the pride of self-sufficiency and giving one's self to the mystery, to the sacrament found in the community of the Church, whereby God enters into my life as its director and frees it from its isolation. Conversion entails for the believer the disappearance of love which is the resurrection, for conversion implies a dying. It is a cross which bears Easter within it but which nonetheless has to hurt. So it is that eternal life becomes more and more present in the midst of this life and the exodus shines forth in a world which in itself is everything but a "promised land." So it is that Christ becomes the Way, He Himself and not simply His words. So also does He become in truth "today."

Christ the Truth -- Truth, Freedom, and Poverty

Let us take at least a brief look now at the other two assertions which go along with the "way": truth and life. Our age looks upon the confession of Christ "I am the Truth" with the same kind of skepticism as Pilate-questions it in a way which is both arrogant and sadly resigned: what is truth? Sooner than become acquainted with the word of Christ, modern man would return to the fifth trope of Diogenes Laetius: "There is no truth. For the same thing which is just for one is unjust for another, what is good for one is another's evil. Let our motto then be: have caution

when judging about the truth.”⁷ Skepticism seems to us to be an imperative of tolerance and thus of true wisdom. We should not forget, however, that truth and freedom are inseparable. “I no longer call you servants but friends,” says the Lord, “for the servant does not know what his master is doing: but I have called you friends for I have made known to you what I have heard from My Father” (Jn. 15, 15). Ignorance means dependence; it is slavery: when you do not know, you remain a servant. As soon as understanding dawns and we begin to grasp what is essential, we start to be free. Any freedom from which the truth is excluded is a deception. Christ the Truth means: God changes us from ignorant servants into friends in as much as He permits us to become sharers in His own divine self-knowledge. The image of the friend of Christ is especially dear to us today but His friendship consists in the fact that he has drawn us into His confidence and the sphere of confidence is the truth.

If we speak today about knowledge as a liberation from the slavery of ignorance, we usually are not thinking in the main about God but about the “fashionable sciences,” about art, and how it concerns things and people. God does not enter into consideration; He appears to be unimportant to the question of life’s possibilities. A person first of all must learn how to affirm himself; once this is assured, then he can make room for such contemplation. Within this reduction of the knowledge question, we find not only the problem

⁷ IX 83 and 84; the reference follows R.-P. Martin, *Pontius Pilatus. Römer, Ritter, Richter*, Munich - Zurich, 1989, p. 96.

of our modern concept of truth and freedom but also the chief problem of our age. For it is presumed that it makes no difference at all for the disposition of human affairs and the ordering of our lives whether there is a God or not. God appears to lie beyond the sphere in which our lives and that of our society operate: the well-known “Deus otiosus” of the history of religion.⁸ A God, however, who is without importance for human existence is no God for He is powerless and unreal. But if the world does not come from God and is not governed by Him, then it is reduced to a paltry thing for this means that it does not come from freedom and that there is no power in the freedom which is found within it. The world then becomes the composite product of various forces, and all its freedom is only a sham. To this extent we meet again, from the other side of the coin, with the fact that freedom and truth are inseparable. We can know nothing about God and God does not want to know anything about us, then we are not free beings and part of a creation opening itself to freedom but elements in a system ruled by laws of necessity in whom, for some unknown reason, the desire for freedom will not be extinguished. The question about God is at one and the same time the question about truth and freedom.

Basically we have come again to the point where once there was a parting of the ways between Arius and the

⁸ Helpful here is A. Brunner's *Die Religion*, Freiburg, 1956, pp. 67-80; cf. also E. Dammann, *Die Religionen Afrikas*, Stuttgart, 1963, p. 33; G. van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, Tübingen, 1956 (2nd edition), p. 180ff.

Church universal; the question concerns what is distinct-ively Christian and at the same time the problem of man's ability to know the truth. The real heart of the Arian error is found in its assertion of a concept of God's absolute transcendence. This Arius had learned from late classical philosophy. Such a God cannot share Himself; He is too grand, and man is too small, there can be no contact between them. "The God of Arius is enclosed in impenetrable solitude; He is incapable of sharing His life fully with the Son. In his eagerness for God's transcendence, Arius makes the One God, the Most High, a prisoner of His own greatness." Even the world, then, is not God's creation, for such a God cannot act outside Himself; He is enclosed in Himself just as, in consequence, the world is locked up in itself. The world does not proclaim any Maker and God cannot make Himself known. Man does not become His "friend"; there is no bridge of trust. In a world where God is a stranger, we remain bereft of truth and thus are servants.

Here again we have a word from the Christ of John's Gospel which is of supreme importance: "He who sees Me sees the Father" (Jn. 14, 9). Christoph Schönborn has given impressive evidence as to how the deeper struggle within the controversy over the icon of Christ reflects the problem of man's ability to know God, and thus his ability to know the truth and his vocation to freedom.⁹ What does that person see who looks upon Jesus the man? What can the icon reveal which depicts

⁹ Chr. Schönborn, *Die Christus-Ikone*. Novalis-Verlag Schaffhausen, 1984, p. 20.

this man Jesus? For some people, all that can be seen is a man, nothing more, because God cannot be captured in an image. The divine being surely lies in the “person” which, as such, cannot be “circumscribed” and cannot be put into a picture. It was precisely the opposite view which was to carry through the Church as orthodox, that is, as the proper interpretation of Sacred Scripture: He who sees Christ really sees the Father; in what is visible the Invisible, the Unseen One, is seen. The visible figure of Christ is not static and one-dimensional, only to be understood as belonging to the world of the senses, for the senses themselves imply a movement and an awakening beyond themselves. The one who looks upon the figure of Christ is taken up into His exodus of which the Fathers make specific mention in connection with the event on Mount Tabor. He is led upon the easter way of passover and learns how to see in the visible more than the visible.¹⁰

After great beginnings in this field of knowledge by Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa, a first summit was reached in the work of Cyril of Alexandria. Cyril does not deny that human existence is first of all a veil, a cover concealing the glory of the word. “The incomparable beauty of the Godhead permits the humanity of Christ to appear directly as the ‘extreme of unloveliness.’ Yet it is exactly this utter abasement which reveals the greatness of that love from which it arises. Devotion all the way to the dissolution of death

¹⁰ *ibid.*, esp. pp. 30-54.

makes the Father's love visible ... The Crucified is 'the image of the invisible God' (Col.1, 15)."¹¹ Christ's human existence thus appears as "the figure of the Father's love made visible, the translation into human form of eternal sonship."¹² Maximus the Confessor carried this theological line of thought to its height and sketched out a Christology which takes prominence as a single, grand interpretation of the word: "He who sees Me sees the Father." In the exodus of Christ's love, that is to say, in the passage from inner contradiction to communion made through the obedience of the Cross, true redemption, which means liberation, is achieved. This exodus leads from the slavery of self-love, self-corruption, and self-imposed silence to God's love: "In Christ man's nature has received the ability to imitate the love of God ... love is the icon of God."¹³ For this reason the one who sees Christ, the Crucified, sees the Father - indeed the whole mystery of the Trinity. Now we must consider this: if one in Christ sees the Father, then surely this means that in Him the veil of the temple has been torn apart and the inner realm of God has been laid open. God, the One and the only One, then becomes visible not as a Monad but as a Trinity. Man then truly has become His friend, initiated into God's most intimate mystery. No longer is he a slave in a darkened world for he knows the heart of truth. This truth, however, is the way; it is fatal in the loss of one's self and yet is life-

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 96.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 97.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 134.

giving. It is the adventure of love which alone brings freedom.

I would like to add yet a second observation. In reflecting on Christ as the “Way,” the thought of freedom and liberation suggested itself. It becomes clear now that truth is also inseparably bound to freedom. On the other hand, it seems to be widely held, and not unreasonable, that the idea of the poor Christ is to be associated with the topic of truth. One does find here a thorough-going consistency. Truth has been discredited in history because it was offered in a pose of power and was turned into a pretext for oppression and maintaining control. Plato had already realized the danger which arises when man looks upon truth as a possession and thus as a force by which to dominate. Out of awe for truth’s greatness, he associated knowledge of it with the irony of self-distrust as an expression “of that true lack of conformity which arises not from skepticism but from the very highest assurance.”¹⁴ Thus the eighty-year-old Romano Guardini embraced Plato’s understanding of truth and made it characteristic of his own way which was marked by both an ardent witness to the truth and a retracting of himself. To me the play of Plato’s paradox between irony and truth appears to make a bee line for the paradox of divine truth which reveals itself as utter poverty and powerlessness in the Crucified: He is the icon of God because He is the manifestation of

¹⁴ R. Guardini, *Stationen und Rückblicke*, Würzburg, 1965, p. 50 (in his word of thanks, “Wahrheit und Ironie”, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday).

love; for this reason the Cross is His “glorification.” In his tractate on love, William of St. Thierry gave forceful expression to the divine paradox, namely that the truth of the triune God, supreme in splendor, appears in the utter poverty of the Crucified: “When ‘God’s image,’ God the Son, saw how angel and man were created in His image, that is in the image of God (without themselves being the image of God) and how through a disordered attempt to seize the image ... disaster struck, He spoke His thoughts: Alas! Misery alone stirs no envy ... And so I wish to offer myself to men as a man despised and the least of all, ... so that man might burn with eagerness to imitate my humility which is the way he should come to glory”¹⁵ Truth itself, real truth, is rendered bearable for man, indeed is made the way when it has entered and enters into the poverty of the helpless. It is not the wealthy reveler but the despised Lazarus outside his door who bears the mystery of God, His Son.¹⁶ In Christ poverty has become a true sign, the interior “power” of the truth. Nothing else opened the way to men’s hearts for Him like his truthfulness in poverty. God’s humility is the door to truth in the world; there is no other. This is the only way in which truth can become “the way.” What Paul says at the close of his letter to the Galatians after all his arguments still holds good: his final argument does not consist in words but in the wounds of Jesus

¹⁵ Wilhelm of St. Thierry, *De natura et dignitate amoris*, 40.

¹⁶ The christological significance of the Lazarus story is brought out in fine fashion by P. H. Kolvenbach, *op. cit.*; see note 7 p. 136.

which he bears upon his body.¹⁷ In any controversy over the real nature of Christianity or the true faith or the proper way, it is communion with the Cross which is the ultimate and decisive word.

Christ the Life -- Pro-existence and Love

Our concluding reflection has to turn at least briefly to the third word of Jesus' self-description: Jesus the Life. The frenzied desire to live which we encounter in every part of the world has allowed an anti-culture of death to arise, one which is more and more tracing its lines upon the physiog-nomy of our age: the unshackling of sexual desire, drugs, and the sale of armaments have formed an unholy trio whose lethal net stretches ever more oppressively over the world's peoples. Abortion, suicide, and power blocs are the concrete ways in which this syndicate of death operates; the Aids virus, which breaks down the body's immunity system, has become a portrait for the interior sickness of our culture. There are no longer any elements to protect spiritual immunity. Positivist thinking offers the spiritual organism no ethical resources for maintaining immunity; it is rather the ruination of the spiritual defense system leading to an impotent surrender to death's deceptive promises which appear as a masquerade for getting more out of life. Medical research with all its resources is on the look for a vaccine to combat the disintegration of the body's ability to maintain immunity and this is its duty.

¹⁷ H. Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater*. Göttingen, 1962 (12th ed.), pp. 279-285.

Nonetheless, it will only shift the field of devastation somewhere else and it will not put a stop to the successful campaign of death's anti-culture if there is not at the same time recognition of the fact that an immune deficiency in the body is an outcry from the abused being of man, an image in which the real sickness is projected: the defenselessness of souls in a spiritual state where the true worth of human existence, of God, and of the soul itself is held to be vain.

It is at this point that the realism of the Christian has to reveal itself anew; Jesus Christ has to be discovered in today. A fresh understanding is needed of what is meant by: I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Admittedly, a prior and accurate examination of sickness would be called for, but this is not possible here. Sufficient for our purposes is a consideration of the simple, basic question: why do people escape into drugs? Broadly generalizing, we can say: a person does this because life, as it presents itself to him, is too stale, inadequate, and empty. After all the enjoyments, all the acts of independence, and all the hopes which a man runs through, it still is much-too-little. To accept and endure life as a hardship becomes unthinkable. It ought rather to be an untiring, boundless hurst of pleasure. This works out in two ways: in one there is the desire for abundance, for infinity, which contrasts with the limitations of our lives; in the other there is the determination to have everything simply without pain and without effort. Life is supposed to give itself to man without his giving himself. We could also say,

therefore, that the essential feature in this whole proceeding is the denial of love which brings one to escape into deception. Behind this, however, stands a mistaken image of God, which is really a denial of God and the worship of an idol. God is understood in the way that the rich man acted who could not spare anything for Lazarus for he himself wanted to be a god; although the plenty which he possessed turned out, as it always does, to be too little. God is understood in the way of Arius for whom God can have no external connection since He is everything in Himself. This kind of God wishes to be man, one to whom everything is devoted but who Himself gives nothing. The real God then is actually an adversary in competition with man who has become so inwardly blind. This is the true heart of his sickness which has caused him to settle into a deception and to reject love which even in the Trinity consists in the giving of self without conditions and without limits. Since this is the case, it is the crucified Christ—Lazarus--who is the true image of the Triune God. In Him the being of the Trinity--all its love and self-giving--can be seen without distortion.¹⁸

At this point we can perhaps begin to understand what those decisive words of Jesus in His high priestly prayer may mean. They could strike us at first with a sense of absolute unreality as a religious expression of the world beyond: “This is eternal life, that they recognize you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have

¹⁸ cf. Kolvenbach, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-142.

sent” (Jn. 17, 3). In general today we no longer realize that this business of God is something supremely real, indeed, the true key for unlocking the answer to our deepest needs. This, however, evidences the seriousness of the sickness of our civilization. Actually there will be no cure until God is recognized once more as the foundation point upon which our whole life is built. Only in a relationship with God can human life become true living. Without Him, life rests on its doorstep and destroys itself. A saving relationship with God, how-ever, is only possible in Him whom He has sent, through whom He Himself is God-with-us. We cannot “produce” this relationship. For this reason, Christ is the life, for He brings us into relationship with God. From here and here alone comes the source of living water.

“Whoever is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink,” Christ proclaims on the last and greatest day of the feast of tabernacles (Jn. 7, 36). This feast recalls the thirst Israel experienced in the parching heat of the desert wasteland which seemed like the realm of death from which there was no way out. Christ, however, proclaims Himself the Rock from which will well up an unending fountain of fresh water: in death He becomes the source of life.¹⁹ Whoever is thirsty, let him come: has not our world with all its power and

¹⁹ cf. here the lovely exegesis of this text by Kolvenbach, *op. cit.*, pp. 176ff; here one finds important insights too into the concept of “life.” For the historical background on this text and the exegesis of the Fathers on it, see R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, Part II, Freiburg, 1971, pp. 211-218.

possibilities become a wasteland in which we no longer find the living source? Whoever is thirsty, let him come: even today He is the inexhaustible source of living water. We have only to come and to drink so that the following sentence holds true for us too: “Whoever believes in Me, out of his body, as the Scripture says, streams of living water will flow” (7, 38). Life, real life, cannot simply be “taken” by man nor can it simply be received. It draws us into the dynamic of giving, into the dynamic of Christ who is life. To drink the living water from the rock means to ratify the sacred mystery of the water and the blood. This stands in radical opposition to that desire which propels toward drugs. It is a consent to Love, and it is the entry into Truth. And just so, it is Life.