"Searching for the Face of the Lord in Ratzinger's Jesus of Nazareth"

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The Pope and Jesus of Nazareth: Christ, Scripture and the Church

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Contents

Centre of Theology and Philosophy
Veritas Series Introduction
Contributors
Acknowledgements
Abbreviations

Foreword
John Milbank

Introduction
Adrian Pabst and Angus Paddison

PART ONE HISTORY AND CH

1 Once There Was No Historical Jesus
   Henri-Jérôme Gagey

2 Christ of History, Jesus of Faith
   Francisco Javier Martínez

3 If Jesus Knew He Was God, How Did I
   Fergus Kerr OP

4 Christ, Descent and Participation
   Simon Oliver

5 Searching for the Face of the Lord in Re
   Jesus of Nazareth
   Peter J. Casarella
or descending unfolding of incarnation. This is revealed in the singular hypostatic union in the person of Jesus who enfolds creation. This indicates that descent is not some kind of unfortunate necessity occasioned by human sin and suffering, but is the character of the receipt of the divine gift of being. It indicates that creation is theophanic and revelatory, and thereby counters the modern notion of revelation as a bounded piece of information which erases reason. Rather, Christ arrives so as to reveal the theophanic nature of creation, and by means of a new light to intensify creation’s (and therefore reason’s) theophanic character. At one and the same time, for Cusa descent betokens our ascent in such a way that, realizing that we are not God, we immediately ascend to share in God as children of the Father of lights: ‘The ascent to God occurs precisely in the descent of humble service, in the descent of love, for love is God’s essence, and is thus the power that truly purifies man and enables him to perceive God and to see him’.30

Perhaps the spiritual bond lies in the non-in-difference of persons toward one another that is also called love, but that does not absorb the difference of strangeness and is possible only on the basis of a spoken word (parole) or order coming, through the human face, from most high outside the world.1

Introduction

"Come," my heart says, "seek his face!" Your face, Lord, do I seek." (Ps. 27.8) The words of the Psalmist frame Pope Benedict’s meditation on the life of Jesus in its first instalment.2 Every reader of good will is asked by the Bishop of Rome to take into account that this meditation was written as a personal search for the face of the Lord rather than as an exercise of the magisterium (p. xxii). These words could signify a shift as one approaches the twilight of an already complete theological life from reason to experience,3 were it not for the fact that the biblical reference actually demonstrates that the methodological acumen of the theologian Joseph Ratzinger

30 Ratzinger, Jesus of Nazareth, p. 95.


2 Joseph Ratzinger, 2007, Jesus of Nazareth: From Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration, trans. Adrian J. Walker, New York: Doubleday. All parenthetical citations are to this translation.

3 In a bibliographic entry Ratzinger describes the final book of Rudolf Schnackenburg in just these terms.
has thereby reached its zenith. The language and conceptuality of a personal encounter has accompanied Ratzinger’s scholarship on Jesus research virtually from its beginning, and the existential and ontological reality of a personal revelation dominates this text no less than before.4

1 The Centrality of the Quest for the Face of the Lord

The search for a discrete face of an otherwise invisible God can thus be taken as the literary, hermeneutical and theological key to Jesus of Nazareth. The face in this case is unveiled by revelation itself, but the revelation of a divine countenance is no Überbegriff or conceptual ordering tool. It is the christocentric rendering of the image of Israel as a disfigured Suffering Servant in Isaiah 52:14. The effective realism of this image is echoed by Bernard of Clairvaux’s commentary on the Song of Songs (“Impassibilis est Deus, sed non incompassibilis” [p. 87]) and by C. S. Lewis in his reflection on how the message of the cross transcends myth: ‘About the dying God. Rum thing. It almost looks as if it really happened once’ (p. 271). Ratzinger has written in the past about the inner connection between the reality of Christ’s death and its ability to communicate: ‘Death, which, by its very nature, is the end, the destruction of every communication, is changed by [Christ] into an act of self-communication; and this is man’s redemption, for it signifies the triumph of love over death’.6 The face of a dying God never stands over against us as an object. It is by its very nature a word that envelops us in its expression of a message of salvation.7 As agents and hearers standing before this word, we are free to act in response (Antwort) to this word (Wort), but a stance of utter neutrality or indifference seems radically inappropriate to the form and content of the communication.

8 Ratzinger, Behold the Pierced One, pp. 53–4.
10 On the relationship between Christology and apocalypticism, I still find instructive Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (eds), 2002, Silence and the Words: Negative Theology and the Incarnation, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Peter J. Casarella

Ratzinger is less beholden to such dualisms but preserves the essential insight. For Ratzinger, Jesus of Nazareth appears in four Gospels written from four distinct standpoints and with four sets of motivations. Even given his tilt towards a Johannine synthesis, Ratzinger never succumbs to the temptation to introduce an artificial hierarchy into the diversity of images. The individual writings (Schriften), he states in the foreword, point somehow to the living process that shapes the one Scripture (Schrift, p. xviii). The play on words between a signifier that refers to an assemblage of written materials and another that signifies either a single writing or what we call Scripture is difficult to render into English. It is nonetheless critical to see that the unification of the writings lies in a living process that takes its form in writing. Writing seen as a phenomenon abstracted from a reader, an interpretative community, or the incarnate presence of a witness remains a dead letter, which is no excuse for ignoring the legitimate tools of philology. Ratzinger’s point seems to be that listening to the echo of a written word can be a way of bringing things together, a thought that flies in the face of our postmodern fascination with fragments. Learned ignorance still prevails when it comes to grasping a reality that finally surpasses our understanding. In other words, there is no single finite image that Trumps the intrinsic pluriformity of a Word that is infinite.12

The focus on suffering scandalizes the contemporary mind since Christianity is already saddled with the charge of being overly pessimistic and inimical to an integrated sense of embodied selfhood. Ratzinger clarifies the Christian response to suffering in his exegesis of the second beatitude: ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted’ (Matt. 5:4). In general, he sees the Beatitudes as portraying a veiled interior biography of Jesus, a kind of portrait of his figure (p. 74). The blessing of those who mourn is thus also an extension of the meditation on the crucifixion of the Word. He delineates a positive Christian meaning to suffering, even to the tears shed on behalf of those in the eighth beatitude who undergo persecution for righteousness’ sake. Citing the conversion of Peter, the marking of the righteous who moan and groan over the abominations of Jerusalem (Ezek. 9), and Mary at the foot of the cross,

11 Brev., proI. No. 4, as cited in Ratzinger, Theology of History in St Bonaventure, p. 196, note 22. The idea finds an echo in Martin Luther according to Ratzinger.


Ratzinger sees Christian mourning as a radical form of resistance to a world that demands conformity to injustice and evil. Far from the charge that Christians spiritualize the plight of the persecuted by waiting for a future redemption, Ratzinger takes the tears of the righteous as a present sign of the Kingdom in our midst (p. 86). He utilizes the biblical language of the heart to construct an integrated spiritual theology of liberation.13 When the Lord comes to wipe away these tears, even present injustices of which we are not aware shall be rectified. The consolation promised to the righteous mourners is not the erasure of tears or the silencing of the deafening cry of those who have suffered.14 Some like Judas reject the possibility of hope altogether. Others like Peter allow their hearts to be softened by the love of the Lord. In neither case does the Christian mandate to mourn countenance withdrawal from the world or resignation. Tears as a form of resistance here can be seen as akin to what anthropologist James Scott calls ‘the weapons of the weak’.15

To make this connection is not to transmute the spiritual core of resistance to evil in Ratzinger’s book into a political strategy of social change but to acknowledge explicitly the convergence of his spirituality of suffering with the need to counter in an effective Christian manner the structures of injustice in the world. The encyclical Deus Est Caritas (God is Love) promulgated under his pontificate makes it clear that the Church cannot remain wholly indifferent to social suffering.16

The taking on of flesh in the incarnation is imitated in the proper, ecclesial reading of Scripture. In citing ‘the old doctrine of the fourfold sense of Scripture’, Ratzinger underlines that literal, allegorical, tropological, and analogical senses remain ‘dimensions of the

13 On the meaning of the heart in Ratzinger’s understanding, see Ratzinger, Behold the Pierced One, pp. 51-69.


16 Cf. Deus Est Caritas, No. 28: ‘The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply.’
one word that reaches beyond the moment' (p. xx). He claims furthermore that the Scriptures as testimony to the Word live within the subjectivity of the pilgrim people of God, and the people of God or the Church are likewise receiving their sense of self as a people from the incarnate Word of God.

There are many dimensions of these claims that merit closer scrutiny, especially Ratzinger’s defence of ‘canonical exegesis’ (p. xix). From a hermeneutical standpoint, what merits particular attention is the notion that an ecclesial reading of certain words may uncover ‘a deeper value’ to those words as they are read and re-read over time (pp. xix–xx). If the genetic fallacy is the unmasking of the view that only what is exposed in its pristine originality is what counts as true, then Ratzinger has hereby proposed a fairly original approach to understanding the relationship of Scripture and tradition. In a sense, Ratzinger draws out the christological and interpersonal implications of what Maximus the Confessor called ‘the thickening of the Word’.17 The speech of the Word as it unfolds in history carries within itself a performative dimension that allows for more mature understandings to take root and blossom within the community of faith. When historical-critical exegesis becomes consumed by the genetic fallacy, such assertions are considered uncritical. The unhappy alternative to recognizing growth in the Word is to treat its utterance as a once-and-for-all event.18 It then becomes hard to reconstruct the life that this Word breathed into the early Christian community, a community moved by the message of the kingdom in their memory of the passion of the Lord to pray fervently, spread the Good News, and accept martyrdom.

3 Ratzinger’s Meditation on the Face of the Lord

The first two chapters of Jesus of Nazareth lay out a kind of blueprint for what follows. The first chapter treats the face-to-face dialogue between Father and Son as the inner grounding for the character of the Word as word (p. 7). The scenes portraying Jesus’ withdrawal to pray to the Father enhance our understanding of this filial communion (‘they give us a glimpse into Jesus’ filial existence, into the source from which his action and teaching and suffering

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17 See Maximus the Confessor, Ambigua 33, 1285C–1289A.
18 The discussion of the parable of the mustard seed in chapter 3 and throughout the book lies behind this statement.
Peter J. Casarella

come together here with the Ur-Sakrament of the water and wine flowing from the wounded Christ: (1) the theophany at the wedding at Cana that signifies, inter alia, Christ’s status as Bridegroom of the Church; (2) the vine as rooted in God’s self-revelation in the person of Christ as well as a fruit-bearing gift to Christians, who in turn are called to prune themselves through moral self-examination; and (3) the winepress of love, another existential rendering of the cross of Christ. All in all, these images impress upon the reader the paradoxical task of actively ‘remaining’ in Christ by being true to the gift of his Spirit. Spiritual detachment from our self-made ideas of self-improvement is the key to being in communion with the Lord. Again, what is often mistaken for passive resignation because of the complete absence of a pre-programmed plan of action nonetheless requires a vigorous process of inward renewal.

The images of bread and shepherd are employed in this chapter to make similar points about personal renewal but with even greater emphasis on the notion that remaining with Christ is simultaneously a form of remaining in the Church. The multiplication of the loaves, for example, sheds light on Jesus as the new Moses because in the Old Testament the people of Israel experienced ‘manna from heaven’. Just as Moses gave bread from heaven, so too Jesus mediates and surpasses the Mosaic mediation. ‘The Law has become a person’ (p. 268). Ratzinger also reinterprets Jewish sacrifice through the cross of Jesus Christ, and Christ’s sacrificial death is thus regarded as a non-negotiable part of the Gospel message. This last claim would seem self-evident were it not for the fact that so many contemporary theological proposals still attempt to subordinate the element of sacrifice to the notion of a memorial meal when in fact the interplay between the two is the real point of the biblical witness in its entirety.19 The sacrifice of love depicted through this image (Christ’s as well as that of the believer) comes not from an impulse towards self-denial but from the deepest desire to love and be loved.

According to Ratzinger, the context for the story of the shepherd in John is the notion in the ancient Near East that the king is a shepherd instituted by God. In the parable of the lost sheep the king/shepherd displays mercy and a word of welcome to the one who strayed. The slain shepherd in John 10.11 also sheds light once

4 Jesus of Nazareth within US Scholarship on Jesus

again on the meaning of the cross for Christian discipleship. Jesus is also depicted as the gate (John 10.7–8), for the sheep come and go through this gate. The sheep freely choose to become his followers. Christian obedience is part of the relationship but so is the superabundance of life represented by Christ. Here too at the core of the ecclesial disclosure of the biblical message we see that Jesus is encountered as fundamentally a personal reality rather than as an institution or abstract set of rules.


Peter J. Casarella

is a good example of a highly regarded book by a Catholic Biblical scholar in the United States who also raises the issue about how to unify the distinct portraits in the New Testament. Matera’s conclusion regarding the ‘diverse unity’ of New Testament Christology is distinct from Ratzinger’s inasmuch as the personalist philosophical categories explored in this essay are nowhere to be found. On the other hand, Matera has no problem acknowledging that the Fourth Gospel highlights Jesus’ intimate relationship with the Father and remains ‘the crowning achievement of the Christology of the New Testament’. He even states that ‘the genius of the New Testament canon is its ability to hold the diversity and unity of the New Testament in a creative tension that requires each generation to correct and deepen its understanding of Christ.’ From this comparison of Matera and Ratzinger I would not draw the conclusion that we are dealing with identical methodologies. On the other hand, I think that the idea that the canonical witness serves as a principle of unity is adumbrated by both and serves as the point of departure for a future discussion of how ‘canon’ functions hermeneutically and theologically in the interpretation of the New Testament.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a personal reflection as a teacher. I have taught Jesus of Nazareth twice in a class entitled ‘Introduction to Catholicism’. This exercise was designed as a general education course for undergraduates at DePaul University in Chicago. Once the class consisted almost completely of young students in the School of Commerce. These so-called ‘millennials’ are oversaturated by input received via information technology and to precisely the same degree deprived of meaningful personal contact with one another and with God. ‘Facebook’ and other highly sophisticated instruments for social networking permeate their lives; the scandal of the divine countenance remains a distant reality. Far from being repelled by a putatively conservative Pope, they report that they encounter in this text a broad-minded compass of cross-cultural images and judicious sifting of decades of Jesus research. In an ethnically diverse postmodern metropolis that vacillates between a self-consciousness of cultural amnesia and justified fears of rank dogmatism, the Pope’s personal search for the face of the Lord rings true. For this group Jesus of Nazareth imbibed in small dosages stimulates intellectual curiosity and awakens self-examination.

Benedict wrote Jesus of Nazareth to present the person of Christ to the people of God today. Benedict’s own insight into the urban life of developed countries is already clear when he names the sudden appearance on weekends of relatively aimless foot traffic on city streets as a sign of our times. (US citizens might need to envision a European pedestrian zone to grasp the point!) My small pedagogical exercise in Chicago also seems to confirm a remark made by Cardinal Ratzinger in a sermon delivered in 1988 in Chile: ‘We must remain on the quest for what is greater than us, and we must help those who struggle to stand up in order to find the true light without which everything in the world is darkness.’

Ratzinger does not view Jesus as a figure who came to set up a club. He views him as the revelation of a word of salvation that must be communicated most urgently in those places where its reverberations have not yet been felt.

Searching for the Face of the Lord