

The Image of God Jesus brings us

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The need to re-focus our faith on the essential aspects of Jesus message

Every religion has its own vision, understanding and experience of God. Judaism, Islam and Christianity share a common belief in one God who is seen as the creator of all, he is the all powerful, the almighty and the all transcending, penetrating and embracing reality. The question is: what God image did Jesus come to bring? Did he only confirm Israel's God image or did he bring something new not known up to his time? Jesus claims that no one knows God except he, the Son, and those to whom he wants to reveal him (Lc 10:22). As Christians we hold, therefore, that only Jesus has brought us the right knowledge of God and that we can only through him come to know who God ultimately is. Because in him God has come to earth, he has *pitched his tent among us* (Jn 1:14), he has become one of us in every aspect (Phil 2: 7-8). To get to know Jesus means to get to know God and who he wants to be for us.

We, therefore, have to go back to the roots, to the Jesus who walked over this earth and ask the question: What was Jesus really all about? Have we preserved his message or are we out of focus? Jesus had a vision which he expressed adequately in the words: "*I came to throw fire and I want to see it burning*" Lk. 12:49. The vision contains two basic Symbols that contain his whole message in a nut shell: (1) **Abba**, His name for God and (2) **Kingdom of God** as God's plan for the whole of creation. With the word Abba Jesus expressed his personal experience of who God wants to be for us, his creatures. This God experience of Jesus we can express in three statements; (1) God loves me always unconditionally. (2) He forgives me always. (3) He is always with me. This image of God is the foundation of our Christian faith. It has been called the fundamental achievement of Jesus with regards to all the God images known in the history of religions. It is **the true image of God** finally revealed in the person Jesus of Nazareth. "No one has ever seen God, it is the Son - who is closest to the Father's heart - who has made him known" (Jn 1:18).

1. God loves me always unconditionally

The greatest mystery of my life is that God loves me in a way no one could ever love me. I am created out of love and held in existence out of love every moment of my life. The first fact about me is not that I am a *sinner* who will be loved and appreciated if I fulfill certain requirements. The first and most important reality of my life is that *I am a precious being* in the eyes of God, I am accepted, appreciated; I am loved, cared for, desired by God as *his only child*. Here we need a basic correction of focus in our spiritual life. The fundamental, all determining reality of our lives is: we are loved personally not just collectively. The result should be a deep joy and peace in the Lord and not fear of punishment and hell. The aim of all our spiritual life, of all pastoral planning and activity must be to lead people to the fullness of life (Jn 10:10), to make them authentic, healed, restored, set free in the realization that the most basic fact about them is: they are loved beyond any imagination. In the eyes of God we are first not sinners who can approach him only with fear and contrite hearts but we are his beloved ones, in whom he delights whenever we turn to him and he thinks of us. We must constantly be on our guard not to mix up the first fundamental reality about our lives that "we are loved when we were still sinners" with number two that we fail to see, accept and respond to his love, that means that we are sinners.

Pope Benedict XVI in the opening statement of his first Encyclical, *Deus Caritas est*, turned back to this image without any reservations or qualifying statements when he states:

"God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 Jn 4:16). These words from the First Letter of John express with remarkable clarity the *heart of the Christian faith*: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny. ... In acknowledging the centrality of love, Christian faith has retained the core of Israel's faith, while at the same time giving it new depth and breadth.

This shift in the God image has been called the "most revolutionary change in the whole history of religions". With Jesus' God image the sun of an unconditionally loving God finally rose irrevocably above humanity. He put an end to the time of fear and anxiety concerning God and pushed open the door to a new age, an age which stands under the sign of hope and love. This is to be regarded as the most fundamental achievement of Jesus. In his first encyclical Pope Benedict XVI contrasts the God of the Bible to the surrounding cultures of Israel in these words:

The world of the Bible presents us with a new image of God in contrast to the image of the

surrounding culture... he is creator out of love but most important. God loves human beings, he is in love with them. And he adds the importance of this message for today: In a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence, this message is both timely and significant.

Quoting Hosea 11 the Pope insists that God's love for us is even greater than his justice which is so strongly portrayed in the Old Testament: **"God's passionate love for his people-for humanity-is at the same time a forgiving love. It is so great that it turns God against himself, his love against his justice"**.

2. God forgives me always

The second most important characteristic of the God-image of Jesus is: God forgives you always and wants to restore you to the fullness of life. There are many names given to Jesus, but one of the more outstanding ones is definitely: Jesus, *the man born to forgive*. Forgiveness is one of the main features in Jesus' entire message. There is no limit to his forgiveness. There are some misunderstandings concerning forgiveness which are important to notice.

First, forgiveness is not easy. It involves a process that does not come easy. Forgiveness is never an instinctive response that comes naturally and effortlessly. We should not forget: to forgive is not human but divine. It is a gift from God rather than something we as humans can do. We want an eye for an eye and most of the time two for one.

Secondly, forgiveness cannot be rushed. We have to see it as part of a process that begins with a hurt and ends - at its final and long range goal - with the event of reconciliation. We have to become aware of the depth of the offense against us and the anger burning within us so that we can forgive with all our wits about us and ensure lasting peace. There should be no pressure with regards to the length of time. We need time to confront our wounds, to face our hurts head on, to vent our emotions. Only then can real healing begin.

Thirdly, forgiveness never means forgetting. It is not the memory of the hurt that will minimize the pain, but hopefully it will lessen the pain in the stomach, in the arm and the headaches, while the power of the negative memory decreases.

Fourthly, forgiveness is not weakness. The one who benefits from forgiveness most is myself. A look on what non-forgiving is doing to me is the best way to forgive: the way it affects my life, my work, my self-esteem, how destructive it is for all my relationships. Only forgiveness will break the vicious cycle of revenge, capable of mutilating, if not destroying each of us: me and the person who offended me. Not to forgive is to save grudges, to lick wounds, to resent (to feel again), to keep score of wrongs, to plot revenge, to remember the tiniest slight, to retaliate. Ultimately, not to forgive means to hate. In the words of Martin Luther King: "Hate is just as injurious to the person who hates. Like an unchecked cancer, hate erodes the personality and eats away its vital unity."

3. God is always with me, he is a compassionate God

There are many names given to Yahweh in the Bible, but the most adequate seems to be *Emmanuel*, which means *God - with - us*. Yahweh is a God who belongs to us, who cares for us and who loves to be among us. In the Hebrew language the word is "rahamin". The word is taken from the word "womb of a woman." Thus the word "compassionate" bears the connotation of "wombishness," loving the way a mother loves the child of her womb, nourishing, giving life. It is a very feminine and motherly term and denotes the ability to suffer with, to enter deeply into a situation, to be filled with empathy, as if one is experiencing the situation personally and not as an observer. The word really means: to be able to share the suffering and pain of others and also to experience their joy and happiness as if it was all happening to me. Others have defined compassion with the phrase "*wounded wonder*". This goes beyond appearances to recognize and approve of the inner worth and value of another person, to discover the "only child of God" in each person. No matter how wounded the other person may be, behind this "wounded wonder" one recognizes in an intuitive way any person's inalienable value. The person's woundedness is not the focus of attention. Once we see a person with the eyes of God, that he is an "only child", a sense of reverential wonder should arise in us. In short we can say: compassion is the key to understand correctly Jesus' whole ministry and life. Jesus chose for his *lifestyle* compassion. Only so can we explain his compassionate solidarity with the poor and marginalised people of his time. His whole *preaching* is motivated by compassion. The core of his message was the unconditional and unrestricted compassion of God. All his *actions* are motivated by compassion and so was his *death* to be seen as a supreme act of compassion with suffering humanity. Lastly we could say, even Jesus *intercessory prayers* during his ministry were ultimately motivated by compassion.

Many people imagine God as all powerful, far removed from all earthly concerns. He is just 'up there'. If we are in deep trouble and all seems to crumble under our feet, when suffering and hurt seem to question even God's very existence, then we cry out to him like this: "You are all powerful, you claim to love me and care about me, if this is so, where are you? Please, come and rescue me, help me! Open a window and stretch out your mighty arm and pull me out of all the misery and hurt I experience right now. Do something about it!" These are the cries we hear in so many psalms.

God's answer in such a situation will be something like this: "I cannot reach you from on high, my mighty arm is too short. But trust me. I really do love you and, therefore, I will surely do something that fits your situation. I will come down into your life, into your misery and anguish. I will be there to share your anguish, taste your misery and weep with you. I will console you, help you, comfort you, heal you, show you a way out. I will be your guide. I will be with you as your friend. But you will have to understand something very important: I cannot live your life and make everything pleasant for you, free of pain and suffering. That I cannot do. You must live your life and to live means to encounter anguish, pain, suffering, many worries and real problems and ultimately death. This you share with every creature on earth. The difference is: I will always be there with you and in particular when you feel lonely, dejected and hurt." God cannot intervene with force and might because he has decided to deal with us only through love. One will never understand God if we cannot come to see that. This is the reason why God is so powerless in a violent world because his love is powerless when face with violence, hatred and brutality.

Whoever wants to experience God today must let himself be guided into a dimension in God's being that was already there all the time but comes forcefully into the foreground today: the defenselessness of God' love. God is so inconspicuous, so defenseless in our violent time, that he disappears. He vanishes - so to speak - from our sight... Many people live in a way as if God does not exist at all. They have no need for him. God has simply vanished from their thinking and planning. He is not only not missed but he is just not there any more" (J.Bours).

To be a Christian means to opt for the way Jesus chose: the way of defenseless love. This sounds ridiculous in a violent world. But it is only compassionate love that will bring the Kingdom of God to earth. Jesus demanded from his disciples that they should love one another as he has loved them. If his life principle was compassionate love, obviously, our love for each other receives its measure from here. It is therefore compassion that must shape and order our life as disciples of Jesus. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit and not just a natural way we used to act but it is surely a sign that the risen Christ lives in us.

Most probably, there is only one way through which God's glory can be praised: to be as compassionate as the Father in heaven. Most probably compassion with all creatures is the only holiness which we can ever reach - and that is probably enough. We are not called however, that through us God's perfection should be revealed - but that God's very nature, which means his compassion, be actively demonstrated. God's glory is his wounded love.

Compassion means to accept people as they are: with all their weaknesses, faults, their compulsions, inherited prejudices, vices, bad habits and acquired attitudes and bear them. One does not approve of what is wrong or false but one does not condemn. St. Paul in his letter never gets tired of telling his readers that it is in "bearing each other's burdens" that they prove to be disciples of Christ.(Phil 2:1-3)

It is only in compassionate love that we participate in the mission of Christ to redeem the world the way Jesus did. Only suffering love is redemptive. We redeem each other by bearing each other's burden in love. This is particularly important to realize where we live in community. There is no ideal community since we are all wounded and lack life. But in our union with Christ we can participate in the healing, liberating and life-giving work of Christ which he does for each one of us as we progress in being shaped into his image. Saint Paul regarded it as part of his mission, so it is also our mission to fill up in compassionate love for all the redemptive work of Christ for the whole world. We do this by carrying on his mission of compassionate love which he entrusted to us, his disciples (Jn 20:21)

Christianity is *first of all not a dogmatic* religion nor a *general morality* nor an *ascetic religion* it is a **mystic religion**. This means, we believe in a personal God who affirms my being as unique, who accepts me, appreciates me, authenticity. Furthermore, we must say: Christianity is **therapeutic** religion. God wants us to be healed, restored fully alive and well on all level of our being: spiritual, psychological, and physical. Jesus came that we *may have life and have it to the full*. (Jn 10:10)

All scriptural texts must be read from the *center* of the whole Bible. This center is without doubt the God

image of Jesus. Concretely and accurately expressed that means: all statements of the Bible have to be measured whether or not they resonate with the Abba- experience and Abba-proclamation of Jesus. All words of the Bible ought to be preceded by the Abba-Word of Jesus. Only from this God experience can they be proclaimed and if needed must be corrected. Alone from Jesus clear and unconditional love can they be understood as Jesus related.

Such reading of the Bible may sound new for many readers and to concede to such an image they may find not easy. But this is, after all, the truth we cannot circumvent if we want to be honest with the sources of our faith. This truth will make us free - it will let us live with the Abba-God and 'to remain in his love.' After all, as Christians we owe it the world because the Abba-Jesus belongs not only to us but to the whole world. The principle of improving our Christian life is therefore, not *correction* through fear but through *persuasion* by presenting the Christian message in a way that people come to see and experience first of all the fundamental, all determining reality of their lives: that they are loved personally not just collectively. The result should be a deep joy and peace in the Lord and not fear of punishment and hell. The aim of all our spiritual life, of all pastoral planning and activity must be to lead people to the fullness of life (John 10:10), to make them authentic, healed, restored and set free in the realization that the most basic fact about them is: they are loved beyond any imagination.

Saint Paul has only one prayer for those he loved, it contains all we really should be concerned with:

And I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts, living within you as you trust in him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love; and may you be able to feel and understand, as all God's children should, how long, how wide, how deep, and how high his love really is; and to experience this love for yourselves, though it is so great that you will never see the end of it or fully know or understand it. And so at last you will be filled up with God himself. Eph. 3:17-18

Morning prayer for one who believes in the God image of Jesus

Lord, I thank you for this new day. I know the most important reality of my life is that you love me and that you look at me this moment with such tenderness and love as no one ever could, I am your only child. You desire to forgive me and to heal me where I want healing so that this day will be a brand-new beginning with "a future full of hope". Whatever I have to face today, one thing I know you will be there with me as my best friend, helping, consoling, strengthening, healing and guiding me. There is absolute nothing I have to be afraid of. All this I know because your Son has told us so. Amen.

When Mother Teresa was asked how she could face the overwhelming odds against her work in Calcutta, where the people she cared for were just a tiny fraction of those dying in the streets, she replied, "The good Lord did not send me into the streets of Calcutta in order to be successful in what I do but to be faithful in witnessing to his love present in the midst of human suffering. This I try to do through the love I show to suffering people. "

**Success is no Word for God in the Bible!
It is *faithfulness* to Jesus' message that God asks of me.**