

Reproducing the Pattern of His Death

Basic Attitudes for Christian Spirituality

Situating the Question

In his Epistle to the Philippians, in a very intimate and personally revealing passage, Paul writes about himself:

"All I want is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death. In this way I can hope to take my place in the resurrection of the dead". (Phil. 3.10-11)

In writing this he was merely outlining his own response to the invitation of Jesus, recorded in Mark's Gospel: *"If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me"*. (Mk. 8.34) Paul wanted to follow Jesus into the triumph of his resurrection, but he clearly realized that following Jesus meant firstly sharing his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death.

The motivation for Paul's choice to follow Jesus was based on his knowledge of Jesus. Knowledge in the Hebrew mind was not an academic "knowledge about", but an enfleshed knowledge made possible only by love. I would think that only in this "love-knowledge" relationship could any of us find the inspiration to face life as Jesus faced death, and to run the risk of "losing our life in order to find it", sustained only by trust in Jesus and the subtle intuition that in that way we might in fact find our life and live it to the full.

Paul's comment in Philippians 3.10-11 seems to sum up for me the essential features of any disciple's looking at life and responding to it. It sums up the authentic Christian spirituality. Indeed, the pattern of Jesus' death reveals the deepest dimensions of Jesus' own spirituality.

I presume that Paul was not a masochist, and that Jesus was not inviting his disciples to suicide. Jesus loved life. There is a sense in which we can say that in his moments of dying Jesus was never more truly alive and, indeed, living life to the full, at a depth and with an intensity that he had never had to muster before.

In wanting to reproduce the pattern of Jesus' death, Paul was paradoxically expressing his own desire to live life to the full.

What, then, was the pattern of Jesus' death?

I: The Mind and Heart of Jesus

There are at least two ways of looking at Jesus' death - one from the more superficial aspect of his physical suffering, and the other from the dimension of the inner struggle going on within his spirit. Paul does not seek to imitate the physical suffering and death of Christ. Simply at that level, to wish to do so would be a choice against life, not for it. To appreciate Paul's attitude, and indeed to follow the invitation that Jesus makes to every follower of his, we need to explore that inner dimension of his spiritual struggle.

Jesus' spiritual conflict was the cosmic encounter with evil, his struggle with it, and his determined refusal to be drawn down into it. It was his ultimate encounter to the death with temptation and his eventual radical triumph over it.

In reflecting on the life and death of Jesus, the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews writes:

"It was essential that he should in this way (by sharing our flesh and blood, and in taking to himself descent from Abraham) become completely like his brothers so that he could be a compassionate and trustworthy high priest of God's religion, able to atone for human sins. That is, because he has himself been through temptation he is able to help others who are tempted" (Heb. 2.17-18).

And later in the same Epistle we read:

"For it is not as if we had a high priest who was incapable of feeling our weaknesses with us; but we have one who has been tempted in every way that we are, though he is without sin" (Heb. 4.15).

"He has been tempted in every way that we are". That is an extremely thought-provoking statement when we think over the temptations to which we are open, not just the more easily recognized temptations, for example, to sexual impropriety but to despair, to bitterness, etc.. It is a claim that challenges deeply any attitude to the humanity of Jesus that would have him only pretending, as it were, to grapple with temptation. It is probably truer to say that Jesus faced temptation at a depth and with a viciousness that we can only suspect.

The Context

The Epistle to the Hebrews clearly presumes that Jesus' temptations were real temptations. If they were not real temptations, Jesus' victory would be no victory. The "pattern of Jesus' dying" is his encounter with and response to the temptations that oppressed him. To understand the response and to reproduce it in our own lives, we need first to explore the temptations of Jesus as he moved into his Passion. And to understand the temptations, we need to appreciate their context.

Failure

The context of Jesus' Passion was basically the context of failure and disgrace. As he looked back over his life, he saw that the message he had preached had not been accepted nor even understood. His life had started off successfully enough. Under the impact of his personality and his miracles the crowds had followed him at first (Mk.145). There was some initial indignation and opposition by the Pharisees (Mk.2.7), but their influence at the start had not been great.

In time people began to grasp to some extent the consequences of his activity and preaching. The Kingdom of God would not be ushered in by their having to do nothing other than to bask in its glory (Mt.7.13-14). It would not be an external, structural reality from which they would benefit, but would consist in a relational network of people whose attitudes to life would have to change completely (Mt.5.1-10). Their own participation in it would require a complete conversion - a radical change from self-reliance to trust in God as their saving and forgiving Father, and from control of their own destiny through their response to the Law to surrender in faith and hope (Mt.10.37-39). It would involve a dying to self and to their familiar and homespun securities; and all that involved risk. Above all it would mean moving beyond the empty sense of security derived from the belief that God was "on their side" to a personal and intimate relationship with him.

As the implications of the message became clearer, his popularity waned and the numbers dwindled (Jn.6.66). He faced a major decision. If he lost the people, how could he preach to them? If he preached the truth as he knew it, who would be there to hear it? In time the conflict with the authorities declined to such an extent that he could not even talk about his loving and merciful Father without provoking their accusations of blasphemy and being the occasion of their own obstinate rejection of truth (Cf.Jn.8). He had to walk into unpopularity and rejection with his eyes wide-open.

As Jesus went into his Passion and his encounter with death, no one had really understood what he had tried to share with them. His experience was surely the experience of failure!

All the evangelists speak very soberly of the physical suffering of Jesus. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark highlight more clearly the dimension of Jesus' failure and rejection, and allow us to look more closely into the depth of his hurt and temptation. Luke is concerned to present his picture of the suffering Jesus as the "faithful disciple of Yahweh", and focuses more clearly on the responses that Jesus made in the light of his feelings and temptations.

At the time of his Prayer in the Garden, not only was the over-powering sense of failure preying on his mind but his concern for the disciples he loved filled his heart to breaking-point. They would all lose faith. One of them had already betrayed him; Peter whom he trusted and relied on so much would, under pressure, deny that he had ever even known him. And Jesus knew that it would be his own weakness and arrest that would be the cause of their losing faith, and that he would not be around to pull them together. As Matthew recounts the prayer in Gethsemane, the concern of Jesus was that they "should be awake, and praying not to be put to the test" (Mt. 26.41). They were oblivious to the drama in which they were to be suddenly caught up. As he went into death, there was no indication that any of the disciples had remained faithful.

Integrity

The context of Jesus' struggle was failure. The reason for the failure was his own integrity, his effort to remain authentic and responsive to his own deepest convictions and to be true to his conscience. He could have manipulated the people and been more persuasive by being selective in what he preached and omitted to preach; he could have used the power of his miracles to better effect to draw people to his banner. But his own inner sense of honesty could not permit him to do that.

Through the long hours he had spent in prayer with his Father, Jesus had come to recognize the dignity and the beauty of his own humanity. He knew the depths of his Father's love for that humanity that he had received from Mary his mother. His sense of the dignity of his own human nature brought him to an appreciation of the humanity of each human person. His sense of himself was the source of his respect for our freedom. His knowledge that God calls to love and nothing less, and that our freedom is essential for any response of love we might make, both meant that he could do no more than what he did do.

Recognition of human dignity also brings with it a recognition of human limitation. Being truly authentic means accepting our human limitations and living within them. It means making peace with human weakness, and ultimately even with death.

*"...who, being in the form of God,
did not count equality with God
something to be grasped.*

*But he emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
becoming as human beings are;*

*and being in every way like a human being,
he was humbler yet,
even to accepting death, death on a cross" (Phil. 2.6-8). [New JB trans.]*

Jesus freely chose to take to himself the limits inherent in genuine humanity. He lived within the limits of human growth and gradualness. "Jesus increased in wisdom, in stature, and in favour with God and men" (Luke 2.52).

Developmental psychologists have mapped out for us in various ways the sequence of the stages of human development. His own thinking was conditioned by his culture and language, and by the people among whom he grew up.

Where he did differ from us was in the area of sin. Jesus clearly did not sin. And yet Paul, in his Epistle to the Corinthians, wrote "...God made the sinless one into sin" (2 Cor. 5.21). And, while Paul did not explain his comment further, we know that Jesus at least knew the limitations of living within a network of social relationships that were inevitably scarred by the sins of the community.

His choice to be authentic also involved a choice to love. Having made that choice, he accepted the consequences of powerlessness. Any choice for love is a surrender of all other power - of coercion, of persuasion, of manipulation.

And yet his option for authenticity led him to rejection, to death, to total failure in the one mission to mankind that really mattered.

The Temptations

Absurdity v. Authenticity

Deep in his spirit Jesus felt the overwhelming temptation to read authenticity and faithfulness to truth and love as getting nowhere, as meaningless. His pursuit of truth had led him into absurdity! Life is absurd; integrity is powerless to bring change!

Matthew speaks of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane as an experience of "great distress" (26.37). The Greek original could as accurately be translated as "breakdown". They are strong words. Luke uses the Greek word "agony" which describes more properly a "wrestle" between two antagonists, as in the stadiums and in the games.

This was the climax of the struggle to death between Jesus and the Evil One, foreshadowed in the Proto-Gospel of Genesis. And the drama was being enacted within the heart of Jesus as he struggled with the compelling logic of despair, and refused to succumb. Jesus went into death believing that, despite all appearances to the contrary, his sense of his own authenticity and of the dignity and freedom of each human person, and his consequent surrender of all power other than love, must somehow make sense and be vindicated by his Father.

He grappled with the frightening finality of death. Like every human being he had to move into the totally unexplored experience and unimaginable reality of death, and he had to do it alone. And he faced it with a clarity that was intensified beyond our imagining because of the perfection of his humanity.

Absent God v. God of Meaning

Jesus' act of faith in the ultimate meaning and value of human integrity could have been possible only because he believed that he could trust his Father. It was his Father who had created human nature, who had put that sense of integrity and truth within every human breast. He had met his Father in prayer, and knew him as his "Abba", and as a God of love and of meaning.

His immediate and inescapable experience of failure was proclaiming the opposite, that authenticity made no sense! The Evil One was calling him to lose faith in his God of meaning. At the level of his feelings he was aware only of what seemed the frightening and callous absence of his God. What he felt was expressed so dramatically in his cry, "My God, my God, why have you deserted me?" (Mt.27.46). Yet, from the deeper and truer level of his spirit he was able to pray, as the dutiful and faithful disciple of Yahweh, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Lk.23.46). In the light of his experience, Jesus could face death with equanimity and with trust only because he believed that

somehow his God, the God who gives power to love and meaning to integrity, was the God "who raises the dead to life", the God who sees human history in the light of "the long haul", and not just of the restricted and limited short-term assessment of immediate consequences.

Jesus could enter into the finality and mystery of death because, along with a good number of his contemporaries, he believed in resurrection.

Whether Jesus knew the time of his eventual resurrection is another matter. In hindsight and with the benefit of two generations of Christian reflection on the mystery, the evangelists have Jesus speaking of "resurrection on the third day". This may be a case of their putting onto Jesus' lips what he may never have clearly said himself. Even if they were his own words, "the third day" was a term common in Hebrew literature that meant nothing more specific than "the day when God intervenes" (Cf. Hosea 6.2). Certainly there would seem to be little temptation to despair, and little or no need to actualize his own resources of trust in God, if Jesus knew he would rise literally on the third day.

Jesus grappled with the temptation to futility and to disbelief in any God of meaning, but confronted it with the unshakeable conviction that somehow his God was present and actively involved in his death and giving meaning to what he was doing.

Bitterness v. Forgiveness

All three Synoptics mention the reactions of the crowds, the leaders and the two criminals crucified with Jesus. The passers-by jeered at him and taunted him; the leaders likewise mocked him; so, too, did the thieves.

The negative responses of people to Jesus' message must have been an enormous weight on his heart. John's Gospel devotes whole chapters to the on-going controversies with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Through expediency the chief priests and the Council had callously organized his removal. They were the ones who, in his mind, should have been the first to understand the truth of his message and lead the people in a whole-hearted surrender to God. They had done the opposite; they had thwarted his plan; they had rejected his message of forgiveness and mercy. In bitter irony they had clamoured for the release of a murderer and for the death of himself who refused even the violence of self-defence. The hurt of their rejection must have bitten more deeply into him than the barbaric indifference of the soldiers who attached him to the cross.

He was tempted in every way that we are. The hurt of their response must have stirred in his heart strong feelings of aggression, resentment and bitterness.

It is Luke particularly who highlights the third dimension of the response of Jesus to this further facet of his suffering. As he so clearly shows, Jesus overwhelmed the temptations to aggression and vindictiveness by his determined choice to forgive. He likewise asked his Father to forgive his oppressors, and he promised to the thoughtful criminal that he would be with him in paradise that very day.

Hopelessness v. Commitment

A fourth temptation would have been tearing at Jesus' heart at the same time, one connected to the preceding ones and yet with a uniqueness of its own - the temptation to lose hope in people and to withdraw his commitment to them. Somehow he had to find the strength to believe that the ones who, even as he died, were either outrageously mocking him or totally indifferent to him, or who had betrayed or denied him or had fled in fear, could somehow, though he would die without ever seeing it, think again, find courage once more, repent of their sin, share his vision and love of his God, be converted and follow his way.

The accounts of his last Supper make clear that he accepted his own death as a death for us. It made sense to die for us only if he had hope that we would change. He felt the power of the Evil One drawing him into hopelessness, and refused to give in or to withdraw his commitment. He knew the dignity of the human person that he had discovered for himself in his own quiet hours of prayer with his Father. He knew the possibilities of the human heart. He refused to despair in us. He kept hoping against hope, and moved over into death buoyed up in that hope that we could change.

The Victory

The pattern, then, of Jesus' death was that he allowed life to touch him; he experienced reality and shielded himself from none of it; he felt the temptations arising from the hurts, and faced their stark message and their apparent logic. He deepened, almost to the point of being submerged, the feelings of the absurdity that followed on his choice of integrity and of love; he faced the absence of an unheeding and uncaring God and the finality of death; he knew the bitterness of resentment and unforgiveness; he felt the hopelessness of pouring out his life and moving over into death for a thankless, unresponsive, selfish and hopeless humanity.

He did not recoil from the temptation. He faced it and drew from the deepest reaches of his own spirit, of his values and convictions, the power to respond to temptation and to overwhelm it by love. His love was a love that chose integrity and truth, that knew God to be the God who gives meaning to the meaningless and who raises even the dead to life. He tapped into the possibilities deep in the being of every human person that called forth forgiveness and provided him with the strength to commit himself, even through death, for the sake of those possibilities and the radical dignity and worth of every human person.

The experience of temptation led him to plumb depths of his own spirit that he had never had to plumb before, to actualize strengths that he had never needed before, to be human to an extent and with an intensity never witnessed before. Jesus truly was never more fully alive, never more totally human, than in the moments of his dying. The Gospel of John in its Passion narrative gives something of this impression, and particularly underlines the irrepressible will of Jesus, his dignity, his control, his peace.

The Presence of the Father

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews comments thus on the death of Jesus:

"During his life on earth, he offered up prayer and entreaty, aloud and in silent tears, to the one who had the power to save him out of death, and he submitted so humbly that his prayer was heard. Although he was Son, he learnt to obey through suffering; but having been made perfect, he became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation..." (Heb. 5.7-9).

The Father heard his prayer. He did not save him from death. That apparently is not the way that the Father works. He saved him out of death by flooding him with life, enabling him to face death without being crushed and without succumbing to its mesmerising finality, and eventually to burst from the tomb, living and life-giving. The Father was present to the dying Jesus as source of strength and source of commitment, calling him and enabling him to drink from the limits of his own resources and to overwhelm the evil that assailed him, whether conscious of the cosmic extent of the struggle or not, with his response of love.

Jesus obeyed his Father, and through this total obedience he became perfect - perfectly and totally human. Our English word "obedience" has connotations of submitting to someone stronger than we are, of consenting to some externally imposed requirement. The original Greek word is a composite word that means "to listen from close up (or from under)". It is a picture word conveying the image of someone with his/her ear up against the heart of the other. Obedience really means bringing our

own hearts to beat in tune with the heart of the other. It is an act of love. It is wanting what the other wants, valuing what the other values, sharing the vision of the other and committing oneself to it.

Jesus learnt to obey his Father. He came to understand and to explore the depth of the love that the Father has for human dignity, for Jesus' own human integrity and truth, and consequently for ours. The discipline of his suffering meant that he had to depth this to a level he had never had to reach before. And he came to say "yes" to that dignity and that worth, to respect it with an awesome intensity, to commit himself to it with an absolute commitment - to the point of the ultimate sacrifice of death. What Jesus learnt from the heart of the Father was the extent of our dignity. He learnt the extent of the Father's commitment to that dignity. In total obedience and with an equally deep love he committed himself to us totally.

II: The Life of Active Ministry

The Source of Salvation

The Epistle to the Hebrews (5.9) says that Jesus "became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation". We open ourselves to salvation as we in turn obey Jesus, as we attune our hearts to his, and through his to the Father's. It becomes ours, therefore, as we depth the truth of our own dignity and worth, as we value our own integrity and truth, as we accept the dignity and worth of every other human person, and as we commit ourselves to that dignity totally.

That is why St.Paul can write in his Epistle to the Philippians that he wants "to reproduce the pattern of Jesus' death". He sees that simply as the way to become fully alive, and eventually "to take his place (with Jesus) in the resurrection from the dead". To obey Jesus and to find salvation mean to reproduce the pattern of his death, or, as the Gospels put it, to take up our cross and to follow him.

What does this involve, then, for us?

It means that we commit ourselves, too, to the vision and the priorities of Jesus; that, like Jesus, we let life touch us; that we feel the temptations that life brings us; that we respond to these temptations in the same way that Jesus responded to his. Our spirituality is to be modelled on the spirituality of Jesus, on his values, beliefs, and resources.

Sharing his Sufferings

No one can be protected from the vicissitudes of life. We do, however, have some control over the nature of the inner suffering consequent upon these vicissitudes. In the face of the evil of the world we can choose our response.

We can choose the inner suffering of absurdity and despair, of the sterile meaninglessness of a world without God, of the superficial and unsatisfying logic of the short-term, of the poisoning and paralysing choice of bitterness and the refusal to forgive. We can face life with no hope and look on everyone as beyond redemption and on the world as condemned to an unchanging sameness.

The other alternative is to taste the suffering involved in living the consequences of our own integrity with its seeming powerlessness; the feelings of irrelevance and nonsense involved in trusting a God who, we believe, makes sense of the meaningless sometimes only in the long term; the dying-to-self involved in forgiving and the price of the perseverance involved in pouring oneself out for others, trusting against hope that they may one day change and be converted.

When St.Paul prayed to share the sufferings of Jesus, he was praying that his sufferings would be those involved in the second alternative. Those were the sufferings of the dying Jesus. Those sufferings were the way to life.

Context of commitment

It is the context of our life that gives flesh to the living out of our spirituality. I would like briefly to allude to a few consequences of this spirituality of Christ as it touches the lives of all involved in active ministry, priests, religious and laity.

To some extent we can shield ourselves from the difficulties of life by choosing not to love. That, however, would be to betray our call to discipleship. The source of Jesus' experience of failure was his commitment to love. Luke makes this point quite clearly in his final prelude to the public life of Jesus, the meeting at Nazareth of Jesus and his fellow townspeople. There Jesus declared his Manifesto in the words of Isaiah:

*"The spirit of the Lord has been given to me,
for he has anointed me.
He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor,
to proclaim liberty to captives,
and to the blind new sight,
to set the downtrodden free,
to proclaim the Lord's year of favour" (Luke. 4.18);*

and it was there that he was violently rejected by the former companions of his childhood.

The starting point of our imitation of Christ is a commitment to depth in ourselves and to share with others the wonderful good news of God's love for all, and consequently to allow our own liberation to grow, to share in the liberation of others, and to work together for justice and reconciliation.

The catch with that is that a lot of people, including sometimes ourselves, are surprisingly not all that interested in the change, the unfamiliarity and the conversion necessary to be free. And a number of other people, again including ourselves at times, benefit from the injustice and exploitation done to others, and do not want justice and freedom for them.

The Call

Being Authentic

The choice to be authentic means firstly that, like Jesus, we accept and respect both the wonderful dignity of our human nature and at the same time its limitations.

It means that we accept the fact that to be human is to grow. To refuse to grow is to be untrue to the thirst for life and fullness imprinted on our nature by our creating Father. But growth is painful. It is sometimes easier to refuse to grow and to change, to opt instead for the familiar and the unchallenging, even to obstruct and to attack change both in ourselves and in the institutions that we make up.

Integrity means that we make peace with gradualness and that we respect the laws of sequential growth in ourselves and in others. It means that we accept the need for performance and ambition in the establishing of our own sense of identity, and it equally means that we be prepared to relinquish in time our reliance on performance in order to surrender to the risk of intimacy, of forgiveness and of grace. Eventually it means that we move to the even broader task of universal love and of generativity. Each of these transitions can be painful, and the temptations to stay as we are, to secure our own comfort and peace, are strong. We do so, however, at the price of our integrity and the call of our creating and redeeming God who sent Jesus that we might live life to the full.

Being authentically human means that we need to make peace even with our weakness. We have some strengths, but we do not have them all. What we admire in others is often beyond our own reach, and vice versa. We cannot do everything. None of us is "superman". We live, for example, in a day that has only twenty-four hours and not twenty-eight. We are not called to do whatever is good, but to discern what God is asking of us, to do no more than that, and to surrender the rest. Jesus had to choose between consolidating where he was, or going "to the neighbouring country towns, so that I can preach there, too" (Mark 1.38) - he could not do both. With time the very process of ageing brings us in touch with new weakness and limitation.

Eventually we have to make peace even with our sin. At the price of our sense of self-reliance we have to surrender to the need for forgiveness and of mercy. In doing so we find our true dignity, and learn to respect ourselves because we are loved by God.

A further consequence of the choice for discipleship is that we commit ourselves to follow our own duly informed and educated conscience. Jesus allowed himself to be led by the Spirit. It is so easy to avoid facing truth and its consequences and to persuade ourselves that what we are really doing from fear of the opinion of others or from a concern for our own comfort is being done for the sake of pastoral flexibility or maintaining peace or some other equally inadequate excuse. And yet, at the same time, we also have to recognize that often we are not sure what our conscience is asking of us, and we have to live in uncertainty.

Basically the commitment we make to ministry is a commitment to love. We know that love is the only kind of power that can ultimately give life and bring freedom. The commitment to love immediately rules out the possibility of using other kinds of power, all other kinds of power, even ostensibly for the good of people. It applies across the board, within the Church as well as in the broader world outside. It precludes manipulation, coercion, persuasion. It is notoriously ineffective. It raises whole issues of the interrelationship of institution and individual person, because institutions made up of imperfectly converted and motivated people necessarily require some kind of sanctions. It requires clear perceptions of priorities; and the constant readiness to change and to repent, because our on-going experience and reflection reveal that we do not consistently discern priorities clearly and choose appropriately.

The commitment to love also involves a commitment to non-violence (which is not the same as non-resistance to evil). It is the unwillingness to counter violence with violence; it is the choice to overwhelm evil with love, rather than to double it by retaliating. Non-violent resistance sometimes calls for total self-sacrifice; more often it means apparent ineffectiveness. There are plenty of champions of justice who are prepared to seek it with violence. That was not Jesus' way. His non-violence made him unpopular, no doubt, to the Zealots, the "urban guerrillas" of his day; and makes his followers equally unpopular in our day. It is also ineffective. It ensured the inevitability of Jesus' arrest when he was apprehended in Gethsemane, but also elicited his strict censure there of the violent response of one of his followers (Mat. 26.52-54). It makes sense only in a world where God is the basis of meaning.

It means that we may have to leave free to go their own way, even to walk into disaster, those whom we love or for whom we have responsibility. That was the experience of Jesus. He had to let his own special friends, his own disciples, walk unheedingly into unfaith. He could not, and would not even if he could, live their lives for them. He could not, would not, make their decisions for them. He had to let them grow up. Handing them over into the loving hands of his Father did not help all that much. He had learnt the requirements of love precisely from that same Father. As far as the Gospels are concerned, Judas did not come back. On the other hand, the Peter whom he had to leave to walk into utter perplexity and loss of faith did grow up and was a wiser and greater man. We follow the same paths as Jesus. The choice to love makes us notoriously vulnerable.

Where our way of life is one that involves our working closely with others, an option for love may mean at times all the pain and frustration of working for consensus. The democratic vote can sometimes simply mean the coercive imposition on the minority of the will of the majority. At times it may be appropriate. Often it is not. An honest commitment to consensus will mean for many the readiness to devote the time and effort needed to develop the necessary skills of listening, assertion and negotiation.

Forgiving

We are familiar with the temptations to bitterness and to unforgiveness. Not only is our world polarized; in some ways, too, our Church is also. Forgiveness is a decision. It is a decision that has consequences. When we decide to forgive, we surrender our right to use the memory of the wrongs again, either for our own self-pity or to store up and accumulate them in order to attack again whoever has hurt us.

In a situation of ongoing disagreement or difference, forgiveness involves a commitment to seek whatever common ground there is and to work for reconciliation and even at times for consensus. It involves the need to move beyond the words or the positions we may have adopted to listen to our own hearts and to the hearts of those with whom we disagree. It is a consequence of choosing the spirituality of Jesus. It leads to life and to peace, but it has its price. Forgiveness can seem like the surrender of our own dignity and self-respect, or of our loyalty to our friends and respect for them.

Committed

Perhaps our greatest temptation is to lose hope in people. We get hurt through life. We lose our enthusiasm, even our courage. We try some things and our efforts are rejected. We know the temptation to cut our losses: we do our job; we do what is expected of us. But we lose our commitment, and we do little or no more than seems necessary.

It is difficult to keep pouring out our lives, to keep working enthusiastically or to try to introduce innovations only to be met with little or no response. It is easier to settle down, to look after ourselves, to make life comfortable - to lose hope.

But to lose hope is to choose against life. Jesus faced blankness, indifference, rejection, mockery and blasphemy. In the face of that he chose to pour out his life "for the many". He knew the temptation, but he also listened to his own depths and to the heart of his Father. He died still hoping against hope in people. And for many his hope and his commitment bore fruit. There is in the depths of every human person an opening towards truth and a connaturality with love. Jesus believed that. He saw it in himself. We wanted to set it free in everyone. He would never give up hope in people's changing and being converted; he would go to death for the sake of that hope.

A truly Christ-based spirituality calls for a commitment in hope to people.

Our active ministry and life style, therefore, whether we be priests, religious or laity, present us with infinitely nuanced temptations to work other than in love - to compromise and to find our way around our consciences, to choose power in one or other of its many forms, to lose patience with the apparent ineffectiveness of non-violence and love, to avoid the risk of intimacy and to settle instead for substitutes. We lose confidence in our God who gives meaning, sometimes too late and only beyond the grave, to our striving for integrity and authenticity, and we prefer more tangible results and accountable successes, even at the price of what we know we are really called to be. We know we can give lip-service to forgiveness but not have the energy to follow up its consequences. We feel the enticing attraction to settle down, to make life comfortable, to be "realistic".

It is by facing these temptations, recognizing them and naming them, and then by choosing instead to be authentic, to trust, to forgive and to hope that we work out our salvation and come to savour that life in abundance that Jesus wishes to share with us.

The Outcome

As we respond to life as Jesus did, we know his peace and his joy, and we get in touch with the "blessedness" he spoke about in the beatitudes. There is an irrepressible quality to these experiences. We do not have to force ourselves to find them. They come of themselves. They do not depend on circumstances beyond our control, and require no "flying-carpet" ride through life. Like Jesus who could thank his Father even on the night he was betrayed, like Paul who could write: "... *as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so, through Christ, does our consolation overflow*" (2 Cor. 1.5), we, too, find the unexpected presence and power of peace and joy within us. Even in the very moments of our "*reproducing the pattern of his death*", we "*know Christ and the power of his resurrection*" (Phil.3.10). It might seem to be paradox, but our experience knows it to be truth.

The victory that Jesus has won over evil, and in which we share, is not a victory in which everything has been done already for us. The victory won for us by Jesus means that we now have within us the resources to face whatever comes and to triumph in love. It is a victory in which we actively participate, and through which, precisely by our own participation, we ourselves become more fully alive and more authentically human. No one can do that for us, not even Jesus. But he does do it with us as we allow his Spirit scope to breathe within us.

Mission to the World

According to John's Gospel, on the night of his resurrection Jesus appeared to his disciples and commissioned them to do what he had done:

*"As the Father sent me,
so I am sending you" (Jn. 20.21).*

Jesus had been sent to engage with evil and to overwhelm it with truth and love. He showed the way to us. The Epistle to the Hebrews writes:

"As it was his purpose to bring a great many of his sons into glory, it was appropriate that God ... should make perfect, through suffering, the leader who would take them to their salvation" (2.10).

The same Epistle consequently recommends:

"Let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection" (12.2).

We follow the path that Jesus has trodden. He has commissioned us to show the same way to others. That is our mission: we show the way, and we show it by living it ourselves. We cannot live the lives of others for them, any more than Jesus could live ours. But we can show them and, by our love, we can empower them, as Jesus has done with us. Though we might all feel embarrassed to say so, really our mission to others must be summed up in the words of St. Paul, "*My brothers, be united in following my rule of life*" (Phil. 3.17), or, more succinctly, "*Take me for your model, as I take Christ*" (1 Cor. 11.1)

Like Peter we would all like to follow in the footsteps of a popularly acclaimed and universally accepted Christ. But there is no such Christ. Like the two sons of Zebedee, we would like to share in a victory where struggle is not necessary. But there is no such victory. Jesus has won the victory, but it was won on the wood of the cross. We share in his victory, but we do it as we drink his cup and are baptized with his baptism (Cf. Mark 10.35-40).

As with the mission of Jesus, so, too, then, with our own: the success of our ministry will be counted not by the numbers of those who may listen to us or cooperate in our projects but in the ones who are encouraged by our example and empowered by our love to engage with the evil in their own breasts and to meet it in love. It will be found in those who allow the failures of their lives and of their relationships and their projects to touch them and who feel the consequences of those failures, but choose, whether wearily or resolutely, to continue to reach out lovingly in trust, in forgiveness, in hope, etc..

Jesus' message really is one of love, of peace, of joy and of happiness - but not as the world understands and gives them. His message is one of victory, but of victory through the Cross, even for his followers. They have to engage with life and they have to let life touch them. It will hurt, not because God wants it that way, but because of the sin of the world and the mutual destructiveness in which it takes shape. This sin of the world can be overwhelmed. Jesus has made it possible. But where it touches people, there people have to engage with it.

Conclusion

A truly Christian spirituality is one that responds to life as Jesus did. That is the only Christian spirituality. *"All I want is to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and to share his suffering by reproducing the pattern of his death. In this way I can hope to take my place in the resurrection of the dead"*. As we treasure our experience and ponder it in our hearts, as Mary did, I believe that our pondering can fruitfully be done only by relating it to the pattern of his death.

Other values and insights will modify many forms of this basic Christian spirituality; various lifestyles will determine the concrete shapes that it takes; and wisdom and experience will dictate how best to ponder and to get in touch with those spiritual depths of Jesus. But all must be based firmly on him or they will fall short of salvation. And he wants so much that we share his experience of life and taste that life "to the full"!