

**From Right Relationships - De-routeing and Re-rooting of Christian Theology**  
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**Chapter 8 Return to Jesus**

A return to Jesus as he is seen in the New Testament and the early church would be the best antidote to the de-routeing that has taken place in Christian life and theology concerning the identity, message and role of Jesus. Many of the things which were (and are) elaborated and discussed in theology are not from Jesus. They are often a distraction from the central message of Jesus, as we have seen historically. We need to make theology more simple, deep and challenging as were the words and life of Jesus. To help in this we reflect on his personality, his teaching, his understanding of his mission and consequently the conversion that Jesus wants.

**1. The Personality of Jesus**

From the gospels we see Jesus as a many sided personality He moved freely with persons of all categories, but the poor and the weak were his special concern. He was mentally and emotionally very mature. He was intensely human. He loved children and nature. He lived as a poor man in a society in which inequality was very marked, he was a person who lived for others. He was friendly, loving and understanding to all. He forgave even his executioners.

At the same time he was strong and uncompromising in his stand against injustice and the abuse of power by religious and civil leaders. His kindness was not complacency; and his gentleness was not conformism or indifference before unrepentant evil. He was venturesome and adventurous in being open to the unconventional. While preaching a lofty message, he associated closely with sinners. He was a fearless man of immense courage. In a society where social conformism was the norm, he challenged the prevailing values. He did not mind the risks of being misunderstood. He was prepared to take risks for the cause he lived for, including the ultimate sacrifice.

Jesus was a teacher who lived his message. He challenged persons like the rich young man to make an option in life. He was an extraordinary person by any human standards. He combined the seemingly opposite qualities of being simple and magnanimous, gentle and strong, contemplative and dynamic. He communicated a sense of joy, peace and security. He was a true lover of persons and a revolutionary, a revolutionary because he loved all.

His interpersonal relations have a deep social significance. For he was breaking through the taboos of his environment. Here was an eminently holy teacher making common cause with the down and out rabble. This was unthinkable for the Roman way or life, or even for the Jewish establishment. Thus the way he lived was a challenge to others; his friendships were a threat to those who despised the ignorant masses. In every instance of a dichotomy or clash of values he favoured the value that was for the dignity and freedom of the human person.

He opposed the domination of the rigid law above genuine love;

of the learned lawyer	above the ignorant laymen;
of the letter that kills	over the spirit that vivifies;
of the hypocritical Pharisee	over the humble Publican
of the shrewd priests	over the simple faithful;
of the guilty accusers	over the adulterous woman;

of the vendors in the temple	over the worshippers;
of the luxurious Dives	over the beggar Lazarus;
of the exploiting rich	over the miserable poor;
of the proud Jew	over the outcast Gentile;
of superstition	over the true religion
of the Spirit of formalism	over sincerity;
of unjust power	over weakness;
of hate	over love.

He transcended the bigotry of race, class and religion. He was truly a liberator of the human person and of oppressed groups in society. At the beginning of his public ministry he announced his mission in the words of Isaiah *“He anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to set-at liberty those who are oppressed”* (Luke 4.18). He contested the alienations of the day to which the poor Jews and others were subjected. He was thus introducing into human life and religion an element of contestation of the evils in every establishment. He tried to help persons to take responsibility for their lives with understanding and freedom.

Such personal liberation was to be: from selfishness, the desire for self-promotion strongly rebuked in the apostles who were concerned about their places in the messianic Kingdom: from materialism which places its trust in wealth and not in God’s Providence. Rejecting the ruling ethic of the time he proposed the beatitudes. True human happiness is in loving service, and struggling to bring about a just society even at the cost of personal sufferings.

He preached a message of interiority, sincerity, authenticity, and honesty – values which the modern world is beginning to recognize especially through the youth. He detested all forms of hypocrisy and duplicity whereby a person thinks one thing and says another, preaches one thing and lives another. We can see this in many of his relationships with persons. He motivated Zacchaeus the rich man to part with a large portion of his wealth. He called the apostles to leave all their possessions and follow him. He revealed to them the real meaning of life. He entrusted a mission to them. He gave them a sense of purpose, a new hierarchy of values, an understanding of a deep relationship to God, the courage to be their better selves.

Jesus explained the nature of true worship to the Samaritan woman who had had five husbands. *“Woman believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father ... But the hour is coming, and now is when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”* (Jn 4:21-24).

He was a liberated and liberating person in his relationship to women. His parables reveal an understanding of feminine psychology, e.g. the poor widow’s mite, the woman with the lost coin, the joys of childbirth. Women cared for him. They were part of his group of followers. They went with him up to the cross. They believed in him beyond death and were the first to find the empty tomb and proclaim the resurrection. We can think of these exquisite qualities by reflecting on his relationship with his mother. Mary was with him throughout his life, she followed him up to the foot of the cross a source of strength and sorrow to him. In his dying moments he shows his solicitude for her in entrusting her to John, his beloved disciple.

He gave a basic dignity and auto-sufficiency to each person in the context of the fatherhood of God and the inner voice of the Spirit within us. He thus de-emphasized external authority of

all types. He helped liberate persons from the fears of soothsayers, sorcerers and others who benefited from human ignorance and misery. Jesus thus stressed the personal worth of every human being whatever his social condition. He helped persons understand that their worth did not depend on the prevailing social values of power, wealth, social position, physical strength, intellectual acumen, legal eminence, or even of religion. Mere external laws had no moral binding force before God if they were unjust. This is a foundation of human responsibility and freedom.

He liberated persons from the fear of external authority. They had to be self-reliant and have confidence in the Father who loves all. *“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing. Look at the birds of the air ... Do not be anxious about tomorrow...” (Mt. 6.25-34)*

He strengthened them to face civil and religious authorities with an inner courage and trust in the Father. *“When they deliver you up, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour; for it is not you who speak but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Mt. 10.19-31)*

This personal liberation was the way both to interpersonal relations of genuine love and to courageous commitment to social justice. The deepest level of personal liberation is in the union of the believer with Jesus and the Father who has sent him. Jesus invites persons to follow him. *“I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father, but by me... Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me.”*

He constantly refers his message and his actions to the Father. In his moments of profound anguish he speaks to the Father as in the garden of Olives. He asks the Father to forgive his executioners. He has confidence in the Father to whom he goes at death and from whom he expects to return to his followers. The spirit of God, whom Jesus promised, will guide those who accept him. *“When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” (Jn: 16.13)*. Humans too can be divinized by keeping his new commandment of love; for thereby we abide in him and in the Father with the grace of the Counsellor, the Spirit. We touch here the mystique of Jesus’s inner life and his call to personal and societal liberation. It is in working for others that we truly realize ourselves and become one with God.

The teaching of Jesus concerning liberation from sensuality and selfishness to genuine love and other centeredness has a great relevance for today too. We live in a civilization where in spite of much material advancement; human personalities are often underdeveloped, disequilibrated and even shattered. The desire for individual pleasure without concern for others ruins the happiness of many families. The consumerism so dominant in our society keeps persons in a competitive tension of ever desiring more and more consumer goods. The lack of loving acceptance by others is one of the principle causes of psychological stress and mental disorders which are so widespread in our urbanized and “developed” societies. Class, race and other forms of social discrimination further alienate persons from one another.

Jesus on the other hand lived a life of great detachment from material comforts and of intense openness to all persons. He recommends a radical sharing and a childlike simplicity. *“Whoever humbles himself like this child he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:4)* The golden rule of conduct proposed by him is *“As you wish that others would do to*

*you, do so to them love your enemies, and do good and lend expecting nothing in return”*  
(Luke 6.31-35)

Liberation from attachment to material goods, from the tyranny of sensuality and the false concepts of social status were to be principal elements in one’s personal liberation. Such a teaching and example naturally had a social and political implication too. It was a categorical rejection of the colonial greed, moral debauchery and class exploitation of Roman society as well as of the rigid, stratified, hypocritical values of the Jewish leadership. His views on personal liberation had a social impact in addition to helping individuals and groups resolve their own personal dilemmas and realize their aspirations.

## **2. Core Teaching of Jesus: Love God and Neighbour**

The teaching of Jesus is very clear in his words and deeds as reported in the gospels, without the philosophical complications of later theologies. Jesus lived in a situation similar to ours. Exploitation of persons was rampant. The poor, the weak, the ignorant, the women, the children, the publicans and “sinners” were all exploited in different forms by the rich, powerful, local elite and the foreign rulers. Religion, too, aided in this ill treatment.

Within such a situation of deep seated exploitation Jesus presented a radical new teaching, backed up by his life witness. He announced it as the “Kingdom of God” ... the good news of a new person and a new society, of new personal and societal values, of a reign of righteousness, of right relationships ... Dharma Raj. He dethroned the prevailing values of money, power, prestige and group selfishness. Instead he proposes sharing, service, love of the human person for what one is, and a universal human solidarity. Naturally this upset the then social establishment.

### **a) God is Love**

The central teaching of Jesus is that God is “Abba”, Father. God is love. God loves us, understands us and fulfils us. In return we must love God and all human beings in God. *“I give you a new commandment love one another”* (Jn.13.34) This is the substance of his message, of the law and the prophets. The specificity of the disciples of Jesus has to be such love in interpersonal and societal relationships. Love gives glory to God and fulfils human persons.

The criterion for admission to the Kingdom is love: *“I was hungry, and you gave me to eat ... Enter into the Kingdom”... (Matt. 25). “Whatever you do to the least of these my brothers you do unto me.”*

Where there is genuine love there is God; and where there is no real love, God is not there – whatever be one’s religious affiliation or forms of religious worship. The religious organisation is for fostering such love. For Jesus love is the principal virtue, motivation and constituent of goodness. Love has to be operative, effective, creative. Love bridges the gaps, unites, builds solidarity and mutuality Love shares, is self-sacrificial and other-centered. Thus love is radical; it does not compromise with injustice, corruption, waste and unconcern for others. It is active tenacious and even ferocious when the loved one is in danger as mother when her child is endangered. Love never gives up (1 Cor 13:4-13)

Love is expressed in relationship to oneself and others. Relationality, openness to others, is central to the life of Jesus. He responded to persons in need, understanding them, empathizing with them; helping to resolve their problems. He was dialogical in his approach.

He learnt from them, as in the instance of the woman who touched his garment as related in Mark ch. 5 Jesus manifests God's concern

*“Relational power seen as passion for justice-making has to be shown as the driving force of the death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the elemental yet redeeming force by which God operates in and through us; possibly even the special giftedness of God's presence among us at the present time: ‘a passion for justice, shared and embodied, is the form God takes among us in our time’.”<sup>1</sup>*

Jesus passion for justice that led to his death at the hands of the powerful of the day. The life of the early church that believed in his resurrection was one of social equality, of sharing and contestation of the claims of emperors to be divine unto martyrdom. Sin is lovelessness, the turning away from God who is love. Love requires sharing; sin is selfishness. Sin, both personal and societal, is untruthfulness, insincerity, a turning away from God who is the truth.

### **b) Jesus Message: The Kingdom of God**

The kingdom of God is a situation in which sin, lovelessness, selfishness, untruth and injustice are overcome and love, mercy, truth and justice prevail. It is in right relationships between persons, among groups and with Nature and God. Jesus taught this in the prayer. *“Our Father, thy Kingdom come thy will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”*

Sharing of food is of the essence of the kingdom. Mercy and forgiveness are primordial conditions of the reign of God over us. Jesus conditions God's mercy towards us on our forgiveness of others. With unforgiving hatred of others we cannot be friends of God; for God loves all. Jesus worked for relationships in which compassion and love would be predominant.

Jesus emphasized the Kingdom or rule of God and righteousness over us rather than the rule by any earthly power or organization. The Kingdom of God is primarily within us. He did not stress the power of the religious authority or of a church. His mission and gospel were concerning a movement of love and understanding rather than about the growth of a religious institution or organization.

The kingdom of God is central to his teaching:

- seek ye first the kingdom of God (Mt. 6.33).
- difficulty for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Mt. 19.24),
- tax collectors and harlots go into the kingdom of God, (Mt.21.31)
- preaching the kingdom of God in parables (Mt. 13),
- better to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, (Mark 9.47),
- I must preach the kingdom of God (Luke 6.20),
- behold the kingdom of God is within you. (Luke 17.21),
- ... is nigh at hand (Luke 21.31),
- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5.3);
- Blessed are those who are persecuted for justice' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5.10);

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Grey: Redeeming the Dream – Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition, SPCK, London, 1989, pp. 102-03.

- Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord’ shall enter the Kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven (Mt. 7.21).

His values implied a fundamental critique of Roman power and greed. They made the Jews aware of the heinousness of the military rule that was imposed on them. Hence the view that “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21) was in itself an inner personal liberation from total allegiance to any temporal power. His message thus relativised the authority of both civil rulers and religious leaders. God alone is the Absolute.

### c) The Jesus community

The community, gathered around him, was to live the values of this divine rule. His mission is “to announce the good news to the poor, to liberate the captives, to set free the oppressed” (Luke 4.18). His kingdom means that the plan of God for humankind is to be fulfilled in a radically profound way, here on earth. It is a reversal of the usual conditions of society.

The poor became rich (Luke 6.20),  
 the first are last (Mk. 10.31),  
 the small become great (Mt. 18.4)  
 the hungry are filled, - the weary find rest,  
 those who weep laugh,  
 the mourners are comforted,  
 the sick are healed,  
 the blind see,  
 the lame walk,  
 the deaf hear,  
 the humble inherit the earth,  
 the prisoners are freed,  
 the lowly are exalted,  
 the oppressed are liberated,  
 and the dead live.

Those who lose their lives find it (Mt. 23, Luke 4).

We can discern it through faith, contribute towards it by struggling in hope. Love is its fulfillment, joy its fruit. To live the values of this spiritual mastery over our lives is to realize a new power, a joy and a peace that surpass all other joys. It is a pure, unselfish, active, creative and liberating joy. This is the joy of the wedding feast to which liberated humankind is invited. It is for us to respond willingly by a conversion of heart, a reversal of values and a fundamental option for life, solidarity, friendship and effective sharing in love. Then heaven would have begun for us here on earth.

This is redemption, salvation, human liberation, and fulfillment. Jesus died testifying to these values. Jesus preached the kingdom of God, not himself.

### d) Conversion Jesus Wants

Jesus invited persons and society to a radical conversion:

- From Death to life through death to self,
- darkness to light,
- error to truth, knowledge,
- ignorance to Awareness of self, others & God
- selfishness to unselfishness
- injustice to justice

- hatred & prejudice                      to love, including love of enemies  
Peace, Shalom, Forgiveness
- greed    to sharing
- profit-seeking                                to need-serving
- pride    to humility, service
- privilege                                        to equality, empowerment of all
- abuse of power                                to power being service
- patriarchy                                      to mutuality, partnership
- hierarchy                                        to community, reciprocity
- domination                                    to participation
- isolation                                        to cooperation, communion
- indifference                                    to caring, concern,
- apathy    to empathy, concern, commitment
- unfreedom                                      to freedom
- hypocrisy                                        to sincerity
- dishonesty                                      to honesty,
- duplicity                                        to authenticity

These pairs of words may not sometimes express correctly the difference between virtue and vice or good and evil e.g. there could be a healthy self-love. It is sometimes necessary to stress one's self worth, especially when this has been downplayed as in the case of oppressed persons and groups, including women. The oppressed need to affirm their self-worth to themselves and others due to long interiorization of a sense of their inferiority.

Jesus is the way, the truth and the light. This is the path he calls us to follow. His mission was not the presentation of highly intellectual dogmas, but the practical call to conversion of all persons from evil, and injustice to love, sharing and communion – to *koinonia*, and *diakonia*. These are also the content of what we understand by redemption, salvation and integral liberation for persons and communities, both here and hereafter. Return to the consideration of the kingdom of God and its values can have a very salutary effect on the Churches themselves. The words of Jesus “seek ye first the kingdom of God” have a relevance for the churches too.

*“Only in a secular history in which men and women are liberated for true humanity can God reveal his (sic) own being. There are many histories of suffering and disaster in human history; God cannot reveal himself in them except ... as a veto or as judgment. Believers see the face of God in the history of human liberation. Unbelievers do not, but at the level of human liberation (the material of God's revelation) that process can be discussed by both believers and unbelievers in a common language. Here understanding and indeed collaboration are possible. So the deciding factor is not the explicit confirmation or denial of God, but the answer to the question, ‘Which side do you choose in the struggle between good and evil, between oppressors and oppressed.’”<sup>2</sup>*

Churches too need to be evangelized so that they determine their priorities in terms of the gospels. A shift of accent from a church-centered theology to a kingdom-centered one can make Christians much more concerned with the love of neighbour and right relations in

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx: Church – The Human Story of God, Crossroad, New York, 1990, p. 7.

human society than with their exclusive self-interest. Seeking the interests of a Church is not necessarily synonymous with the furtherance of the kingdom of God.

Disciples of Jesus need to rediscover this movement-like dynamism of his teaching. The rigidity of cult, the arid formulae of dogma and the institutionalism of Churches tend to subdue this redemptive evangelical thrust and render it ineffective. If the churches are renewed by the sap of the gospel they can be standard bearers of this message and therefore agents of a profound transformation of humanity. They can then be torchbearers that light the path as peoples advance through the night towards their self-realization. For this the churches will have to allow themselves to be nailed on the cross by those who oppress the poor and the weak.

The past policies of the church were oriented primarily towards a conversion of persons to the church. Now this view has been altered substantially. Hardly anyone maintains today that membership of a church is essential for salvation. The more open view is that God's grace, (in so far as it is necessary), is adequately available to every human person for attaining one's destiny. The role of the church is seen as more concerned with the building of the rule of right relationships, of love and justice.

This perspective needs to be communicated very clearly to the world as a whole. Many still suspect Christians of considering conversion to the church to be the goal of our faith. We must not only clarify our present thinking and orientations for the future, we should also accept that we made mistakes in the past and seek the deeper causes for them. We should try to see where we went wrong and be prepared to correct ourselves frankly and publicly.

**e) Redemption in Jesus is in the realization of right relationships:**

The teaching, life, death and resurrection of Jesus show that Jesus did not share the presuppositions of classical theology about the original blessed state of humanity and an original sin that is communicated by generation. Neither did he teach that his death was to be salvific in the manner that was argued in the later centuries; nor, that the merits gained by him were to be distributed by the church through the sacraments. If these presuppositions are not accepted, much of what is done as the pastorate of the church would be seen to be not directly from Jesus teaching and example but due to later church formulations. The real demand and command of Jesus was for a conversion to right values and right relationships among persons and communities.

Such a conversion has to be the principal goal of the Christian mission. If religions cannot impact personal salvation beyond this life, the effective task of religions would be to transform human life on earth. This is a supremely spiritual task.

The perspective that Christian redemption is in the realization of right relationships is now gaining ground among theologians. It follows from the teaching concerning the centrality of the kingdom of God. The studies on the human life of Jesus and his social commitment have brought this understanding into greater relief. Such a view on right relationships is, of course, the main teaching of religions like Buddhism, as in the noble eightfold path.

Feminist theologians insist that women see better the importance of human relationships for our liberation, fulfilment and holiness. Women bring forth new life in suffering and with risk to the mother's life. They nurture life, are closer to the sources of life, and generally more sensitive to human feelings. Mary Grey develops this position in "Redeeming the Dream".

This is one of the principal themes of her work. She stresses that “... *the relational situation, its resources and strengths be recognized as the redemptive scene, and that the focus of this be widened from self-development alone, although it will be included, to the transformation of the very structures of society.*”<sup>3</sup>

She widens the context from interpersonal relationships to embrace the natural world both as resource and as itself in need of redemption. Quoting Martin Buber, she notes that the fundamental category of existence is relationality. “*What I mean by relationality as a basic category is a mutuality, a dynamism, a responsiveness expressed in a myriad of different ways.*” Thus the action of God in creation, of the Spirit of God “brooding over the waters” (Genesis) is relational. God must be the divine ground, the limitless source of relationality.<sup>4</sup>

“*If broken mutuality and broken relationships underlie all injustices, it is there that the redemptive task must begin.*” Where the basis of a relationship is injustice, God’s call may be out of such a relationship. In such a perspective, God is the motivation for a passionate energy for right relationships which includes justice.

“*Redemption will be to take responsibility for all the forms of relationality in which we are involved, personal and political ... here and now*”. Redemption is healing of persons and relationships. Those who take their responsibility in relationships, in situations of suffering as well as of joy, are responding to the call of the Spirit. It is also their own peace of mind and joy. There are many who participate in redemptive mutuality in our sad world, with or without a religious motivation.

A more otherworldly theology of redemption may neglect the response due to the demand of right relations. Thus much of the celebrations around Christmas and Easter, in and outside the churches, may evade the deeper demands of realizing right relationships of class, gender or ethnic groups and religions.

Social services may themselves give us the sense of satisfaction in dealing with the victims and consequences of wrong relationships, without a serious concern for removing their causes. We may tend to evade the spiritual challenge of working for right relationships that can remedy the causes of the conflict or of the exploitation. We tend to opt easily for the path of least resistance. And in ordinary life, how much easier to accept existing norms and compromises, to be the reconciler, rather than the one who challenges the system.

If redemption/salvation/liberation are in right relationships the mission of the church would be carried out differently, and the whole church would be renewed thereby in more open inter-religious dialogue and cooperation in action. The Spirit of God would be then better acknowledged and effective in our mutual relationships for the common good of all.

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Grey, op.cit., p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Grey, op., p. 86 ff. 153