

Chapter One

The approach of God our ultimate context

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In Jesus of Nazareth we see God's approach in sovereignty: God acts in self-disclosure through the person of Jesus, his words and actions, his embrace of execution and his resurrection. Approaching us, God addresses us to the depths of our familiar worlds, assumptions and personal attachments. In so doing, God reveals not only himself, but ourselves and our world in a new light. This self-revelation arouses us to awe and worship, impelling us to seek and serve his will in reverent love.

We may speak of these things in terms of God who in Jesus Christ enlivens us with *knowledge of God, our ultimate context*. In his words and actions Jesus Christ reveals and embodies the approach of God in sovereignty as our ultimate context. In Christ, God engages our familiar contexts comprised of our habitual practices and assumptions, worldviews and personal commitments and breaks them open, animating them as signs pointing to the deeper context of his approaching kingdom. Relative to this deeper context, these familiar contexts are provisional.

We may understand in these terms (1) Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God in parables; (2) his acts of healing and liberation, as signs of that kingdom; (3) his radical exhortations regarding our attitude towards our enemies, wealth, the necessities of life, and self-preservation; (4) his teaching and practice in relation to the culture of family and community belonging; and (5) his teaching and practice in relation to his Jewish religious culture. Each of these concerns the personal activity of Jesus who is in himself the personal, incarnate sign of God.

Knowing God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit

The knowledge to which God raises us is inseparable from *participation in the mystery of himself and his purposes for us and the world*. This knowledge is a matter of personal relationship to God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, enlivening within us a radical responsiveness which is at once receptive to and responsible before him in unqualified, lively personal self-giving - the offering of heart, soul, mind and strength. It is the paradox of grace, that this *act of submission* to God constitutes not passivity but rather the *most lively personal action in which we ever engage*. Further, our knowledge of and participation in the mystery of God *always remains* for us a matter of lively responsiveness to God as we seek afresh the will of God and indwell deeply what God has revealed to us, oriented towards God's coming kingdom. Such knowledge is a matter of personal immersion through faith, hope and love in the eschatological mystery of God's kingdom.

Such knowledge of and participation in the mystery of God belongs first to Jesus Christ himself. It is into his vital relationship with God that we are raised by God. It is legitimate therefore to speak of us as knowing and participating in the mystery of Christ, while this remains fundamentally the mystery of God into which we are raised with Christ.

The drama of divine encounter

The approach of God through Jesus Christ precipitates a crisis for those approached and summoned to radical responsiveness. Faced with the demands (as they are experienced) of such responsiveness, people may rather be evasive. The approach of God consequently unfolds a drama; it becomes the occasion of judgement. In the New Testament this drama is portrayed as God calling people through the action of the Spirit from death to life, from ignorance to knowledge, from darkness to light, and from blindness to sight, to which people respond either by embracing or by rejecting this call. This drama becomes itself a matter of reflection especially in St John's Gospel and in the 'Captivity' Epistles to the Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians.

Rejection of God's call is understood in the scriptures as a matter of blindness and evasion. Evasion takes two basic forms: (1) a dismissive stance in which we push away in rebellion the demands of transformation, or (2) a disoriented stance in which we experience these demands as overwhelming. Adopting the former stance, we deceive ourselves about God and misrepresent him to ourselves so as to rob God of power to challenge and transform us and our world in a demanding way. We may dismiss God either by rejecting him or (less obviously) by accepting him but in such a way as to capture and domesticate him to ourselves and our own familiar world. Adopting the latter stance, we yield ourselves to spiritual captivity, driven by phantoms secretly constructed by our own evasion of God. Either way, the 'open secret' of God is hidden from us by our own blindness and evasion. So too, the reality of ourselves and of our world is hidden from us: evasion of God is evasion also of ourselves and of our world.

This drama is played out in terms specific to our habitually indwelt practices and assumptions, worldviews and personal attachments as God addresses these to their depths. Breaking these open, God brings them alive as signs disclosing the reality both of himself and of themselves. However, these provisional contexts may prove the occasion rather of blindness and evasion, and harden into idols animated by our evasion of God. In this way the approach of God places under judgement our indwelling of habitual practices and assumptions, worldviews and personal attachments.

(text, for revision in light of the above)

Jesus and the Kingdom of God as our deepest context

'The time has arrived; the kingdom of God is upon you. Repent, and believe the Gospel' (Mark 1.14). With this proclamation, St Mark tells us, Jesus of Nazareth began his public ministry in Galilee; and this message was precisely the gospel, the 'good news' (Mark 1.14).

Jesus announced the long-awaited action of God: the fulfilment of hopes long cherished among the Jewish people that God would one day effect a new 'Exodus', himself coming to lead his people from foreign occupation into the freedom of his own sovereign rule. These hopes, a matter of prophecy during the Jewish exile in Babylon centuries earlier, had not been fulfilled by their return to Israel nor during the centuries of foreign domination which followed. Their fulfilment was still awaited.

But the fulfilment of these hopes, which Jesus announced, was a fulfilment which fundamentally judged and renewed their meaning. In particular, Jesus shunned the expectation that these hopes would be fulfilled by a divinely instigated political coup against the Roman Empire and its occupying forces. The coming of God's sovereignty was not to be equated with any such political event. Its coming would be different - its coming would be, as Jesus said enigmatically, 'among' or 'within' people (Luke 17.21). Its origins would be 'secret' and its outward manifestation gradual, as when a barely visible seed germinates unnoticed and grows eventually to produce a fine crop (Mark 4.26-32).

For Jesus, the sovereign approach of God demanded an utterly radical response. Such a response was evident in his own example, actions and teaching. He urged his listeners that they must put

the kingdom of God above everything else. Repeatedly Jesus addressed the things which fundamentally ruled their choices - the bedrock beliefs and attachments which gave meaning and determined the course of their lives. He called his listeners to let go of these, in order simply, like children, to receive and enter into the kingly rule of God.

By way of illustration, Jesus pictured the coming of God's sovereignty as like when a merchant finds a priceless pearl, or a person finds treasure buried in a field: in each case the lucky finder sells all his possessions in order to invest everything he has in what he has found (Matthew 13.44-45). Again, the coming of God's sovereignty is like when a shepherd finds a lost sheep, or a woman a lost coin, and this is such a cause of celebration that other sheep, or coins, are quite forgotten (Luke 15.4-10).

Now how are we to understand this wholehearted commitment to the kingdom of God, to which Jesus calls his listeners? Jesus portrays it as an *appropriate response to something seen to be of such value that it completely re-orders our world*. It is about seeing the world with new eyes. It is about being impelled by a huge appreciation of what has come to light and in so doing has shed new light upon the whole world. This was the meaning of Jesus' summons to repent. Sometimes Jesus' call to repentance has been understood as a call to radical moral action. But the repentance he preached was not just a matter of turning over a new leaf, or making better moral choices. It was about turning about and finding the world revealed in a whole new light; it was about finding oneself given remarkable new bearings and a whole new direction in one's life.

More than this: the repentance Jesus urged was not only about seeing the world in a new way; it was about seeing the world for the first time as it really is. The four Gospels of the New Testament portray Jesus as seeking to heal a blindness which afflicts human understanding. To see the world in the context of God's kingdom is to see the world as God sees it, which is to see it as it is.

Jesus called for a radical transformation in how we see the world. However, this has not always been sufficiently recognised by interpreters of Jesus' teaching. Often the moral thrust of Jesus' teaching has been plainly seen; so too, the goodness of Jesus' acts of liberation. But the character of each as disclosing the kingdom - as opening our eyes to see a new world - has sometimes been seriously overlooked.

The same applies to the parables in which Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God. Sometimes these have been taken to convey timeless truths, which Jesus framed in pictures to make them easy to grasp for uneducated country people. However, it is evident from the Gospels themselves that these parables were often puzzling to their listeners. This was because properly understood they presented paradoxes which could not be grasped within the context of the assumptions and attachments of those who were listening. Indeed Jesus' parables were aimed (so to speak) precisely at breaking open this context and setting everything in the context of the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God was therefore in its own way a secret, for it was hidden from the familiar worldview of Jesus' listeners. His parables spoke of this secret, and his listeners either found their eyes and ears opened to the kingdom of God, or they were unable to make sense of Jesus' teaching.

A key parable in this regard is Jesus' parable of the sower, because it told precisely of how his parables themselves worked. For this reason Jesus, having offered this parable, asked his uncomprehending disciples: 'Do you not understand this parable? How then are you to understand any parable?' (Mark 4.13). As he went on to explain the parable Jesus quoted the prophecy of

Isaiah - 'they will look and not see, listen and not hear' (Isaiah 6.9-10). This hardly meant that Jesus' purpose in using parables was to hide the Gospel (c.f. Isaiah : lest they turn and be healed'). On the contrary, his purpose was to open eyes to the secret of the kingdom of God, along with the transformation of the listeners' familiar world which this involved. Accordingly Jesus urged 'if you have ears, then hear'. Of course in these circumstances it would be hardly surprising if Jesus was nevertheless accused of hiding his message. Such accusation may lie behind the question put to Jesus, why he always taught in parables. In reply he testified to their purpose: 'Is a lamp brought in to be put under the measuring bowl or under the bed? No, it is put on the lamp-stand. Nothing is hidden except to be disclosed, and nothing concealed except to be brought into the open. If you have ears, then hear' (Mark 4.21-23). Jesus' intention was to be 'heard' - to have his listeners grasp and respond to the secret of God's arriving sovereignty.

Importantly, responsiveness to Jesus' proclamation of the sovereign rule of God was already an indication of that rule arriving. For such responsiveness involved precisely a readiness personally to yield up one's familiar world to the rule of God. Just as in Jesus' own response to the kingly rule of God, and to his own vocation under it, this rule of God was already manifest in him, so in people's response to Jesus, God's rule was already manifest in the grace of God at work in them.

It is also important to recognise that the reception of the kingdom of God which was depicted in Jesus' parables was not a cool, detached affair. It was a passionate embrace. Response to the arriving sovereignty of God as one's deepest context involved both dawning recognition of this secret, and unqualified commitment as one entrusts oneself fully to it.

The twin elements of a radical discernment and total commitment have been held, by Christian theologian Ian Ramsey⁶, to characterise all religious encounter. They most clearly characterise the embrace of the kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus in parables. As we shall now see, they also characterise response to two major aspects of Jesus' ministry when these are understood in their vital role of breaking open people and their world to their deeper context in the coming kingdom of God. I refer here to the acts of healing and liberation which Jesus performed on the one hand, and his radical moral exhortations on the other.

Sometimes, of course, these two elements of Jesus' ministry have been treated as quite separate. On occasion it almost sounds as if one is being told that Jesus came with information from God and while he was spreading this, took the opportunity to put his divine authority to good use; or even that Jesus came to 'sell' God using miracles as a marketing tool. But in reality Jesus' actions and message embodied a common end: both sought that response of radical discernment and total commitment which the sovereignty of God demands, and which already points to its arrival. Let us now explore this in more detail, looking first at Jesus' acts of healing and liberation, and then at his radical moral exhortations. Next we shall consider Jesus' engagement with the culture of family and community family life, and finally his engagement with the religious culture of his nation.

Jesus' acts of healing and liberation

The Gospels record Jesus as performing many acts of healing, exorcism and other acts of liberation which included embracing tax-collectors and prostitutes with God's forgiveness. They also make a point of recording that sometimes when Jesus responded to appeals for healing and liberation he paid attention to the 'faith' of those appealing to him. How are we to understand this? What sort of thing was the 'faith' to which he attended?

Consider, for example, Mark 2.5. Here we read of Jesus' response to those who brought a paralysed man to him for healing: 'When he saw their faith, Jesus said to the man "My son, your sins are forgiven"'. It is evident that in saying this Jesus spoke with the authority of God - only God could forgive sins - *to those with faith to see this authority*. In Jesus' action, the secret of God's sovereign action disclosed itself; Jesus looked for eyes of faith which would see this, and would experience healing or liberation as a miracle of God manifesting the arrival of God's sovereignty. For the eyes of faith, such a miracle broke open the world of the beholder and relocated all that he or she knew within the context of God's approach. The Roman centurion who asked Jesus to heal his servant showed this same faith: indeed so boldly did he discern God's authority in Jesus that Jesus exclaimed 'not even in Israel have I found such faith' (Luke 7.9). In the same way the blind man called Bartimaeus had faith that Jesus was the Messiah, loudly called upon him with the Messianic title 'Son of David'. Jesus told him: 'Go: your faith has healed you' (Mark 10.46-52).

Such faith was itself a gift from God, and Jesus himself recognised it as a sign of God's kingdom already breaking in with healing and liberation. To a woman healed from a long standing haemorrhage he said 'your faith has healed you' (Mark 5.34); to a prostitute whose gratitude to Jesus showed (as he said) that her sins had been forgiven, Jesus said 'your faith has saved you' (Luke 7.50); to the leper who, as one of ten healed by Jesus, turned back 'with shouts of praise to God', Jesus said 'Your faith has cured you' (Luke 17.19).

Other Gospel passages indicate that Jesus' acts of healing and liberation were, in his own understanding, signs of the kingdom of God coming upon the world. When Jesus was approached by the disciples of John the Baptist who asked whether he was the awaited Messiah, (Matthew 11.4,5) Jesus pointed to such actions as a fulfilment of the messianic prophecy (as it was understood to be by Jesus' day): 'the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the dumb will shout aloud' (Isaiah 35.5, 6). However, Jesus immediately acknowledged that this was a secret whose disclosure required faith; those lacking the eyes of faith would find him a stumbling-block (Matthew 11.6). On another occasion, after Jesus' prayer had seen a vast crowd miraculously fed, Jesus reprimanded his disciples 'Do you still not understand? You have eyes: can you not see? You have ears: can you not hear?' (Mark 8.17-20). The miracle had carried the message of God's sovereignty breaking in, but they had not grasped it. On another occasion again, Pharisees had disputed the authority by which Jesus performed exorcisms, claiming that he had authority from Satan. In reply Jesus pointed out that, if he cast out demons rather 'by the finger of God', then 'be sure the kingdom of God has already come upon you' (Matthew 12.28; see also Mark 3.27).

It is clear, then, that the 'faith' Jesus sought was more than the sort of faith one places in an expert to perform a task - whether faith in a doctor to prescribe a medicine which will cure one's illness, or faith in an airline to carry one safely to a destination, or faith in an independent report to tell one 'what really happened'. In each of these cases faith involves trusting that another, rather than oneself, will perform a broadly definable task for oneself. The faith that Jesus sought, by contrast, involved a basic trust in God which was the occasion precisely of people being given eyes to *see for themselves* the secret of God's action. The faith for which Jesus looked was faith to see and trust in what Jesus was doing as a sovereign act of God breaking open one's familiar world. Again, such faith was more than a piece of private information - a gnostic secret readily accessible to any lucky enough to be given it. Rather it was a matter of receiving from God the grace to allow one's whole world to be transformed by the sovereign approach of God. The costliness of such grace is apparent in Jesus' radical moral exhortations.

Jesus' radical exhortations

We have seen how Jesus' parables for the kingly rule of God worked to awaken the hearts and minds of his listeners to a startling reality. Now if Jesus' second-order teaching about the kingdom worked in this way, what about his first-order moral exhortations and instructions to people? Do we find the same here? Let us consider some examples.

(1) *Exhortations on loving one's enemy or oppressor.* Jesus told his listeners 'Love your enemies; do good to those that hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who treat you spitefully. If anyone hits you on the cheek, offer the other also; if anyone takes your coat, let him have your shirt as well. Give to anyone who asks you; if anyone takes what is yours, do not demand it back' (Luke 6.27-30). How are we to understand this? Was Jesus setting this down as a basic rule of life (it is important to note here that he asked for something decisively more than passive resistance: he called for his listeners actively to invite further oppression)? It seems rather that Jesus was concerned to address the 'bottom line' ruling his listeners' behaviour. Rather let God rule your behaviour, he urged; and this means allowing that God's love may require you to act in this way which utterly contradicts your normal behaviour. You must be free to act as God requires, even in this way, Jesus said. Only then will you be free to recognise God's will, and see your oppressors in a true light, and judge and act well.

In such ways Jesus challenged the unspoken limits his listeners imposed upon their responsibility to love their neighbour. For example, when a lawyer probed these limits by asking him: 'Who is my neighbour?', Jesus told a parable in which neighbourly love was exemplified by one who was (for Jesus' listeners) the most offensive of 'neighbours': a Samaritan, who rescues a Jewish man when he has been attacked by robbers (Luke 10.29-37). Again, when Peter asked Jesus how many times he must forgive the brother who wrongs him, Jesus allowed no limit: forgive, not seven times but seventy times seven, he said (Matthew 18.21-22; c.f. Luke 17.4). Those who allow the limits within which they live to be broken open in this way will find themselves embraced with the same unqualified love by God in his sovereign action towards them (Matthew 6.14).

(2) *Exhortations regarding wealth.* When a rich young man pressed Jesus regarding what he must do to gain eternal life, Jesus challenged him to sell his possessions and follow him (Matthew 19.21-22). How are we to understand this? Did Jesus regard the possession of wealth as contrary to God's will? Once again it would seem rather that he was concerned to address the hold which this wealth had acquired over its owner. The hold of wealth upon its owner was enough of a commonplace for Jesus to exclaim how hard a rich man will find it, to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19.23). Elsewhere, Jesus similarly warned of the power of money to become one's master: 'No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the first and love the second, or he will be devoted to the first and despise the second. You cannot serve God and money' (Luke 16.13). Jesus called for freedom to receive the kingdom of God - to see and obey God's will. The wealthy must be free enough within themselves to lose their wealth for the sake of God.

Does it follow from this that God always requires that wealth be forsaken? Not necessarily. What is vital, is that one who is wealthy can acknowledge this vocation as a real possibility, and recognise and freely fulfil this vocation when it is given. Those who do fulfil this vocation, we might note, become a dramatic sign of God's kingdom in the world. They display in themselves the normal limits of life broken open by God and normal attachments set within the new context of love for God. They testify to the treasure which, by faith, they see in God, who (as Jesus said) will honour their faith by rewarding them with treasure 'in heaven'. Their worldly wealth is set in

the new and deeper context of God and of the deeper meaning 'wealth' acquires in this context. Worldly wealth, for its part, is now seen as provisional - and disposable.

(3) *Exhortations regarding the basic necessities of life.* Preoccupation with personal riches was hardly an issue of course for most of Jesus' followers. Their poverty brought other preoccupations, namely, with the basic necessities of life. However Jesus addressed this basic preoccupation in a similar manner to that with wealth. He told his disciples in their poverty not to be concerned with these things (Luke 12.22). How are we to understand this? Was he telling his followers to concentrate on God and simply go without food and clothing? Was he presenting these simply as alternatives? Surely had his disciples acted on this understanding, they would have starved? Again it seems that Jesus was not setting down a general rule of life, but rather challenging his followers to entertain the unthinkable and risk losing even the basic necessities of life as they entrusted themselves wholly into God's hands. Only when they had become free to live out this radically contingent life would they be open to the sovereignty of God - and to life which is decisively more than food and clothing. And will not God show himself trustworthy, asked Jesus - God who feeds the birds and clothes the flowers? 'Set your minds on God's kingdom, and the rest will come to you as well' (Luke 12.31). And now, for those who entrusted themselves entirely to God, the world would become a new place. Beforehand, both the world and God had been seen in the context of these basic necessities; but now these necessities would themselves be seen, with the world, in the deeper context of God and his sovereignty. Attachment to these things would become provisional. They would be received as gifts freely given by God, gifts which, vital though they were, might be withdrawn by God. Those who received them in this way would show themselves able to give themselves freely to the kingdom of God. Again the basic issue was one of freedom - freedom to participate in the kingdom of God.

(4) *Exhortations regarding self-preservation.* Jesus said 'If your right eye causes your downfall, tear it out and fling it away... if your right hand causes your downfall, cut it off and fling it away; it is better for you to lose one part of your body than for the whole of it to go to hell' (Matthew 5.29-30). We naturally defend our bodies from injury. In Jewish culture the right eye and the right hand stood for the vital perception and activity through which we engage the world. Paradoxically Jesus urged that his listeners forego even these if they block access to the kingdom of God. How are we to understand this? Once again Jesus presented the demands of the kingdom in extreme form, urging his listeners to conceive of losing even that which was most integrally part of themselves in order that they might receive power of sight and action anew in God's kingdom.

The inner logic of these and other radical exhortations by Jesus is expressed in his saying 'Whoever gains his life will lose it; whoever loses his life for my sake will gain it' (Matthew 10.39). Eternal life lay in letting go the basic attachments which framed life in order to receive life back framed by the sovereignty of God.

In the beatitudes, Jesus' pronouncement of blessings may be understood in similar terms to the radical exhortations we have considered. St Luke records Jesus as turning to his disciples and saying 'Blessed are you who are in need; the kingdom of God is yours. Blessed are you who now go hungry; you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now; you will laugh' (Luke 6.20-23). In each case Jesus spoke of those who have responded to his announcement of kingdom with the abandon. Paradoxically those who have let go and lost so much are blessed, and will be blessed, with abundance in the sovereign rule of God.

We may summarise the logic of Jesus' radical exhortations, then, as follows:

- (1) They were not simple instructions for routine daily living. They were not timeless moral rules of conduct. Rather they were challenges so radical that they were paradoxical drawing their hearers (if they had ears to hear) to let go the world as they knew it, to see everything with new eyes and to live by this new light.
- (2) They were not simply challenges to put God first. They were not merely calls to make it our first priority, to obey new laws from God. Rather they were calls to be responsive to God in his sovereign freedom, allowing him to shape and rule the whole of our lives .
- (3) They were not simply challenges to existing moral codes in the name of new openness to other possibilities. Rather they sought renewed attentiveness to God with its possibilities both for moral correction and for deeper responsible upholding of existing moral codes in the deeper context of God's sovereignty.
- (4) They were not simply challenges to replace familiar moral rules with another set of rules from God. They did not simply replace one moral framework with a other. Rather they started precisely from the basic attachments and assumptions of Jesus' listeners, without which it might seem to them unthinkable to live, and opened these up to renewed meaning in the context of God's sovereignty.
- (5) Similarly they were not simply calls for philosophical detachment in place of basic attachments to the world. Rather Jesus engaged these attachments and sought their transformation in the light of the kingdom of God.
- (6) Accordingly while they called for a readiness to let go and loose one's hold upon basic attachments, they did not teach that such loss would be the last word. Rather, 'letting go' was entailed in opening up to the blessings of the kingdom of God. The last word would prove to be the generous action of God: 'good measure, pressed and shaken down and running over, will be poured into your lap' (Luke 6.38).

In the exhortations we have considered, we have been concerned with personal attachments of the sort which arise in many cultures and which are not directed in any particular way towards participation in one culture rather than another. Let us turn now to explore how Jesus engaged the cultural context which he shared in common with his followers and other listeners. We shall explore how the logic of his parables, his acts of healing and liberation, and his radical exhortations is evident also in his attitude towards this culture. We shall consider this in two parts, making a broad distinction between (a) the culture which bound together Jesus' listeners in the roles and relationships of family and community, and (b) the religious culture of the Jewish nation, the maintenance of which was in Jesus' time vigorously pursued by scribes and Pharisees.

The Gospel, culture and community

In the life of village and countryside which was the setting of much of Jesus' public ministry, people understood who they were by reference first to their father, their families and wider kinship ties, and to the communities in which they lived and worked. The social roles and relationships involved in this were expressed formally in conventions regarding such matters as marriage and the ownership of property, inheritance, and social intercourse including rules of conduct, conversation and the exercise of hospitality. For us who live today in a Western culture which so highly exalts the individual, it is hard to grasp how much solidarity was felt towards these conventions, as in any traditional rural society and how unthinkable it would be to its members to violate or disregard them.

It was within such a cultural setting that Jesus said 'Do not call any man on earth "father", for you have one Father, and he is in heaven' (Matthew 23.9); and when hearing that his mother and

brothers were looking for him, turned to his disciples gathered around him and asked 'Who are my mother and my brothers?... Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother' (Mark 3.33-35). It is hard for us in modern Western culture to grasp how extraordinary such exclamations will have sounded to Jesus' listeners. Similarly, looking forward to the early Church, it is hard for us to grasp how dramatic a witness was the practice deriving from this whereby Christians called each other 'sister' and 'brother'.

Once again, therefore, we see that Jesus challenged habits quite fundamental to his listeners' worldview. Here the habits in question were their cultural attachments and assumptions. His challenge was radical: 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even his own life, he cannot be a disciple of mine' (Luke 14.26). The final phrase here - 'even his own life' - reminds us how radical, to the point of paradox, was the challenge Jesus posed here. And yet, Jesus urged, the sovereignty of God would bring abundant renewal, in its own terms, of what has been lost. Thus on another occasion when he was reminded by his disciples of the homes they had left to follow him, Jesus replied 'there is no one who has given up home, brothers or sisters, mother, father or children, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive in this age a hundred times as much' (Mark 10.30).

In various other passages we meet Jesus posing radical challenges to the cultural conformity of his listeners. In Luke 9.57-62, for example, we find gathered together some responses by Jesus to would-be followers. To one Jesus gave the warning that he himself, as the Son of Man who inaugurates the kingdom of God, had no place of rest such as even a fox or bird has, let alone the normal home and place within the fabric of human community life. To another who came asking that he might first 'bury his father', Jesus said 'leave the dead to bury their dead'; you must go and announce the kingdom of God'; to one who came asking that he might first say goodbye to his people at home, Jesus said 'No one who sets his hand to the plough and then looks back is fit for the kingdom of God'.

Another such challenge to cultural conformity appears in the parable Jesus told in response to the exclamation 'Happy are those who will sit at the feast in the kingdom of God' (Luke 14.15). In reply Jesus told the story of guests who had been invited to a feast but who declined to attend because of pressing commercial contractual or domestic responsibilities (Luke 14.16-24). It is important to realise that the excuses given might have seemed perfectly reasonable to Jesus' listeners. Once again Jesus presented his listeners with the paradox that entry into the kingdom of God required letting go that which was basic to life as they knew it in their culture.

Another example of such challenge is the command which Jesus gave to his disciples as he sent them ahead to villages he would be himself visiting: 'Exchange no greetings on the road' (Luke 10.4). Formal greetings have an important place in traditional cultures. The behaviour which Jesus asked of his disciples would have been quite shocking and paradoxical to those meeting them on the road. It would signal that something was at hand which was deeper than the very bonds of community itself, something which would set that community itself within a new context - namely, the kingdom of God.

Perhaps we may think of such challenges as Jesus instructing: 'Call no human culture your context; for you have only one context, and that is your Father in heaven and His kingdom'.

The Gospel, culture and religion

If Jesus' message of the kingdom of God was announced to people in the setting of their local communities and their culture, it was also announced in the context of the religious culture of his

nation. The heart of this religious culture lay in Israel's identity as God's chosen people, bound in covenant to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For the previous half-millennium Jewish people had sought to preserve this identity while their country was in political subservience to other nations. Their subservience had begun when Babylonian armies invaded the country, destroyed the temple at Jerusalem, brought to an end the dynasty of kings originating with David, and deported many Jewish people into exile in Babylon. It had continued beyond the eventual return of the exiles and through ensuing centuries of rule by a succession of puppet-kings imposed by Persian and Greek Empires. It had given rise at one point to the Maccabean revolt, sparked by the erosion of Jewish religious culture by the culture of their Greek rulers.

In the time of Jesus, efforts to preserve the distinctive identity of the Jewish people under Roman occupation and were being vigorously pursued especially by the Pharisees or 'Righteous Ones'. They sought to police and enforce religious cultural practices among the general population in the course of their daily lives, while the Scribes were concerned to interpret the Torah to this end. Great importance was placed on the externals of cultural practice, including rules for maintaining purity and the highly visible public practice of keeping the sabbath. Meanwhile hope lived on among the general population, in the face of continuing Roman oppression including especially taxation, that God would soon send his Anointed One or Messiah to free his people to live under his own rule.

There is persuasive evidence in the Gospels that Jesus understood himself called as God's Messiah. This reality, however, like the reality of the kingdom of God coming upon the world, was by its nature a 'secret' from the world: it could be grasped only when people were ready to yield up themselves and their world, to be transformed within the new context of the coming sovereignty of God. Recognition of Jesus as the Messiah involved yielding up culturally established expectations of the Messiah, to be transformed by the reality of Jesus.

Jesus' mission posed a challenge also to the Scribes and Pharisees and their claim to interpret God's will with authority. Jesus called them 'blind guides' (Luke 6.39; Matthew 23.16f). He attacked their preoccupation with appearances which turned faithfulness to God into public displays of conformity to religious cultural rules. Jesus relocated these rules within the context of a divine purpose which plumbed the depths of the human heart. He rejected their preoccupation with keeping the sabbath, re-locating this within God's good purposes for human life (Mark 2.27; 3.4). And he criticised their obsession with ritual purity which neglected purity of heart: he pictured them as like whitewashed tombs, spotless to the eye but full of corruption (Matthew 23.27).

Jesus went further than criticising the interpretation which the Scribes and Pharisees placed upon the law of God. He set the law of Moses itself in the context of God's deeper intention, now testified by himself. Thus in St Matthew's Gospel Jesus is presented as taking such laws in turn and setting them in the context of God's radical intention, announced now by himself: 'You have heard that our forefathers were told.... But what I tell you is this:...' (Matthew 5.21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44).

Indeed in Jesus the Messiah all the institutions of Jewish religion were set in a new light, and their meaning fulfilled. We shall consider this at greater length in the next chapter. For the moment we might simply illustrate this by a challenge which Jesus made to the Pharisees' understanding of the Messiah. Jesus asked them whose son was the Messiah, and they replied 'The son of David' (Matthew 22.42f). 'Then how is it', Jesus replied, 'that David by inspiration calls him "Lord"?. He went on to quote Psalm 110 (attributed to David): 'The Lord said to my

Lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet'. Jesus then asked the Pharisees 'If then David calls him "Lord", how can he be David's son?' Jesus disclosed the paradox of a Messiah who is *more than* a son of David, one who sets King David himself within a whole new context.

We have seen how Jesus repeatedly presented in one way and another a paradoxical challenge to the basic assumptions and attachments of his listeners in order that these might be opened up to a new and deeper context in the sovereign rule of God. We have seen how Jesus embodied such paradoxical challenges in himself in the course of his ministry, and that he accepted his own killing as the final and crucial embodiment of such challenge. Here above all he would embody the summons of God to let go life in order to receive life anew from God's own sovereign hand. If in his ministry Jesus offered many signs of the kingdom, his death and resurrection - the 'sign of Jonah' (Matthew 12.39, 16.2) would be the one greatest sign of all.

Following and rejecting the way of Christ

In the new context in which Christian believers found themselves, a second distinction arose between responsive to Christ and rejection of him. How do New Testament writers portray this distinction?

The distinction between acceptance and rejection of Christ arose first for Christian believers as a distinction within their own lives between the life of faith which they followed and the alternative of their turning from Christ. That is to say, it arose for them as a present choice between responsiveness and evasion, faithfulness and betrayal. The distinction then arises also as that between the responsiveness of Christian believers and the rejection of Christ by unbelievers.

How, then, is the distinction between acceptance and rejection of Christ to be pictured within the Christian life? As we consider briefly the testimony of New Testament writers we find two characterisations recurring. In the first case this is understood as the distinction between two rival sources of authority or control over human life; in the second case it is understood as the distinction between the proud self-rule of human beings and their submission to God. Seen in terms of the kingdom of God as our in-breaking, deepest context, each of these represents a certain kind of 'context' constitutive of life pursued in evasion of the sovereignty of God.

Thus St Paul in the first place contrasts life 'in the Spirit' with life 'in the flesh'. In Romans (Chapters 6-8) and in Galatians (Chapter 5) this is presented as the contrast between being led by the Spirit or led by corrupt passions and desires which are at war with life in the Spirit. To follow these desires is to be a slave to sin (Romans 6.6) which 'reigns' in our mortal body, 'exacting obedience to the bodies desires' (Romans 6.12). We are not free to follow the law of God, in which our inmost self delights and which our mind approves (Romans 7.22,23; see also Galatians 5.17), and in which we do indeed find freedom (Galatians 5.1,13). Rather, we are prisoners to the rival law of sin (Romans 7.23; Galatians 5.16,17). The question facing every person is one of sovereignty: 'by which of these two would I be ruled?'

We find a somewhat different emphasis when, for example, Paul challenges those in Corinth who he sees as turning from Christ's service to self-important posturing. He reminds them that they are a garden planted by God, and a building with its foundations in Christ (1 Corinthians 3.5-17). They are not to pass judgement on Paul, for it is God who judges (1 Cor. 4.1-5); they possess nothing that was not given to them (1 Cor. 4.7); they have not 'come into their kingdom' (1 Cor.

4.8); what matters fundamentally is not their knowledge but rather that they love God who knows them (1 Cor. 8.1-3). Here the focus is upon human pride and its rebellion against Christ; the question facing those whom Paul addresses is whether they will persist in proud self-rule, or yield to God and his wisdom.

Turning to the writings attributed to St John, in 1 John we find attention given to the distinction (among Christian believers) between following and rejecting Christ. Like St Paul the author characterises life turned towards and turned away from Christ, but he does not explore, as does St Paul in Romans, the inner tensions to which the Christian believer is subject in this regard. John contrasts true and false Christians, and characterises them in terms of what they 'inhabit' or 'indwell' - the former live 'in Christ', the latter live 'in sin'. The former live in the light; they love God and their fellow-Christians; they do what is right; and thereby they do not sin. The latter, although they claim the name of Christ, hate their fellow-Christians, live in the dark and in blindness, and they sin. The former are children of God; the latter, children of Satan: 'anyone who sins is a child of the devil... no child of God commits sin... this is what shows who are God's children and who are the devil's: anyone who fails to do what is right or love his fellow-Christians is not a child of God' (1 John 3.8-10).

1 John also portrays the distinction between a godly and ungodly life in terms of the contrast between love of God and love of the world: 'Do not set your hearts on the world or what is in it. Anyone who loves the world does not love the father. Everything in the world, all that panders to the appetites or entices the eyes, all the arrogance based on wealth, these spring not from the Father but from the world (1 John 2.15-16). This appeal brings into focus rejection of Christ both through captivity to desire (*'do not set your hearts on'*, all that *panders to the appetites or entices the eyes..*), and through proud autonomy (*'arrogance based on wealth'*). The same pride characterises those who have turned away explicitly from Christ, no longer acknowledging him or holding to what they 'heard from the beginning', whom John calls 'the antichrist'.

When we turn from references to rejection (implicit or explicit) of Christ among believers and ask about consistent, explicit rejection of Christ by unbelievers, what do we find? Paul refers to those whose 'unbelieving minds are so blinded by the god of this passing age that the gospel... cannot dawn upon them and bring them light' (2 Corinthians 4.4). More generally in the New Testament, however, references to unbelief connote the 'natural' condition of people before receiving the Gospel, rather than the condition of those explicitly rejecting the Gospel. We shall return to this point in a moment.

It is in the fourth Gospel that we find the most sustained portrayal of consistent rejection of Jesus as the Christ, at the hands of Pharisees and other members of the religious establishment of his nation. Their rejection is based upon their confidence in themselves that they have authority to interpret God's purposes and requirements. Repeatedly Jesus comes into conflict with their ideas, and when this happens their response is to uphold their ideas and reject Jesus. As Jesus continues in his ministry they are provoked to attempts to seize him and stone him. Repeatedly they demand that Jesus give account of himself in their own terms (e.g. John 2.18; 6.42; 8.13, 8.19), failing to see that these terms are rather to be seen in the light of Jesus. It would seem fair to say that in St John's Gospel rejection of Christ is portrayed as a matter of rebellious self-rule which in this case is dressed up as religion. We should not infer from this, however, that St John would have us see all rejection of Christ in these terms; his focus is in the first instance upon Jesus' rejection by a particular group of influential people, namely the Pharisees and other religious establishment figures of his day.

The disputes between these people and Jesus centre around enigmatic questions raised by Jesus such as where he 'comes from', who is his 'father', and whether he is the Messiah; what is the source of Jesus' authority, and who or what counts as a testimony to this; what he means by speaking of himself as the 'bread of life', and by saying that anyone who obeys his teaching will never see death. In each case dispute centres around Jesus' enigmatic disclosure of the secret of the God's action through himself, to which they are blind. Jesus says of their blindness: 'You study the scriptures diligently, supposing that in having them you have eternal life; their testimony point to me, yet you refuse to come to me to receive that life' (John 5.39). An extended reflection on this refusal is offered in the story of Jesus' healing of a blind man on the sabbath day. The response of some of the Pharisees was to say: 'This man cannot be from God; he does not keep the sabbath' (John 9.16). Interrogations follow; it is clear that they are reluctant to believe the healing is genuine. Once they have been persuaded of this, however, they hold back from the possible implications for who Jesus was. Instead they hang on to one confident claim: 'we are disciples of Moses'. 'We know that God spoke to Moses', they say, 'but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from'. Earlier, of course, it was the fact that they *did* know where Jesus came from which counted against his being the Messiah (John 7.27-29). Their wilful blindness is vividly exposed. This story of healing closes as follows:

Jesus said, "It is for judgement that I have come into this world - to give sight to the sightless and to make blind those who see". Some Pharisees who were present asked, 'Do you mean that we are blind?'. "If you were blind, Jesus said, "you would not be guilty, but because you claim to see, your guilt remains". (John 9.39-41)

Life before encounter with Christ

A third distinction arises for Christian believers in their new situation, between this and their situation before being confronted with Jesus and with the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. The latter situation also remains, of course, that of those who have still not yet heard the Gospel.

The previous distinction we considered was that between those who accept or reject Christ; we now consider as distinct from both of these responses to Christ, the situation of those for whom the question of response to Christ does not yet arise. How do New Testament writers portray this situation and its relation to acceptance and rejection of Christ? Here we find a variety of emphases.

In St Paul's writings we meet a strong emphasis on the gracious initiative God which *both* brings about the new situation of decision *and* empowers the response of faith which God intends. The distinction emphasised here is between this whole saving action and its absence whether because it has not yet been apprehended or because it has been rejected. These latter two tend to be treated together. Paul portrays life as it is before encountering Christ in the same dark terms as life as it is when Christ has been rejected. Notably, in Roman 1.18-32 Paul depicts the general state of human life before encountering Christ as one in which people already have knowledge of God but reject him. This rejection involves corruption both of mind and will.

Turning to Ephesians and Colossians we find the Christian life similarly contrasted with a previous life which is depicted as a life of sin and blindness (Ephesians 4.17f, 5.8; Colossians 1.13, 3.5-10). Thus we read the appeal: 'Renouncing your old way of life, you must lay aside the old human nature which, deluded by its desires, is in process of decay (Ephesians 4.22)

We need to remember here that while Paul portrays the general state of human life of Christ as depraved, his primary concern is with the sheer greatness of God's saving action in Christ. Consistent with this he emphasises God's forgiveness and forbearance towards those who remain sinners. He anticipates that his fellow-countrymen who have rejected Christ may yet find themselves incorporated finally within God's saving action (Romans, Chapter 11). Paul had of course experienced this forbearance towards himself personally. He had heard something of the Gospel and rejected it, persecuting Jesus' followers - although not without acknowledging later that he had been 'kicking against the goads'. At that stage, as we might put it, he had not yet truly 'heard' the Gospel. It could be said that the Gospel is not truly heard until, in God's time, it evokes faith, and God's action in Christ is fulfilled in the hearer. Thus it could be argued that when Jesus, as he was nailed to a cross, cried 'Father, forgive them: they do not know what they are doing' he was actively willing and indeed 'performing' this truth for his forbearing Father.

The coming of Christ, then, was a 'crisis' bringing people to a new decision - the decision to put their faith in Christ and let their world be remade under the sovereignty of God, or fail to rise to this decision. However this point of decision was not without precedent. Both within the lives of individuals and within the history of God's chosen people, this point of decision was related to many previous occasions of decision (and to the outlook formed by these) for or against faithfulness to God. Thus Paul saw Abraham's acts of faith as illustrating the faith to which Christians are called (Galatians 3.1f; Romans 4.1f). The author of Hebrews points to the faith of godly people in Jewish history as an example to Christians (Hebrews 11.1-39). Having done so the author concludes 'All of these won God's approval because of their faith; and yet they did not receive what was promised, because, with us in mind, God has made a better plan, that only with us should they reach perfection'.

Equally, Jesus had compared scribes and Pharisees who rejected him with those whom they acknowledged as their forefathers who had stoned and killed the prophets. 'Go on', he had told them, 'finish off what your fathers began' (Matthew 23.32). Jesus' parable of the wicked vineyard tenants had implicitly made the same comparison. Stephen, in the speech which was followed by his own death by stoning, described the same picture of an historical perversity which found its fulfilment in the killing of Jesus. Again, Jesus had compared those who reject the message of the Kingdom of God unfavourably with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah - the very personification of sinners. Nevertheless the fulfilment of perversity expressed in the rejection of Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom of God remains lies the context of God's gracious power always to reverse this (as in the conversion of St Paul) so that 'the last become first'.

Where the emphasis of New Testament writers lies upon relating acceptance and rejection of the Gospel to antecedent occasions of decision for or against God, the contrast between these choices is foremost, while the contrast between the situation before and after the coming of Christ remains more in the background. Here the continuity between Christian and Jewish faith is implicitly emphasised. We find this especially in the Letter of James and in the Letter to the Hebrews. Even where, as in the latter, Christ is pictured in bold terms as fulfilling antecedent faith, the very retention of old religious categories (in this case, particularly of sacrifice) tends to emphasise this continuity.

When we turn to St John's Gospel, we find a clear statement that in Jesus, God brings people to a new point of decision. Those who have not met Christ are 'in the dark', and have not yet faced the decision brought upon them by the coming light of Christ. More than this, the world they inhabit is under the rule of Satan, the 'Prince of this world'. God's intention in revealing the light of the world in Christ is that people should be saved; however this new point of decision also brings to

light precisely the choice to remain in the dark, revealed in the blind resistance of those who will not place their faith in Christ. They remain where they were, in the dark, while those who place their faith in Christ are led forward into greater love, joy, understanding - and life. Whereas Paul tends to portray faith as a choice the absence of which God receives with forbearance as a choice not yet made, John tends to portray rejection of Christ as a choice which excludes those who make it from progress into life. In a sense St John's Gospel is in its entirety a sustained reflection on the 'secret' of what God is doing through Jesus and the mystery of human blindness to this. Disclosing the truth of Jesus, it is an exploration of the question which the 'other' Judas put to Jesus: 'Lord, how has it come about that you mean to disclose yourself to us and not to the world?' (John 14.22) The picture is presented succinctly in the following passage:

'It was not to judge the world that God sent his son into the world, but that through him the world might be saved. No one who puts faith in him comes under judgement; but the unbeliever has already been judged because he has not put his trust in God's only son. This is the judgement: the light has come into the world, but people preferred darkness to light because their deeds were evil...' (John 3.17-22).

Having wrestled with some distinctions raised by the new situation of the first Christian believers, we must remember that their context lies in the dawning kingly rule of God and the relation of Christian life to this. The distinctions we have briefly explored between acceptance and rejection of Christ and the situation where the question of these does not yet arise are not distinctions within a fixed framework for detached observation. Rather they are distinctions within a paradoxical, dynamic, eschatological setting. This setting, we have seen, is the breaking open of those contexts within which we live in order that these may be judged, transformed and renewed within the ultimate context of God's sovereignty. Within this setting, the response of faith is, as we have seen, an ever renewed beginning. In the light of the distinctions we have explored, we may say that this represents on the one hand an intention always to be faithful and not unfaithful to God, and on the other hand an intention always to recognise new ways in which the Gospel *raises the question* of faithfulness (or unfaithfulness) to God.