



St Mark's CRC

Centre for Radical Christianity

Conference Paper

'Embracing the Other': Jesus, Human Being & Inclusivity

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Part One

Jesus in Context

OVER THE PAST two or three decades, there has been a marked shift in public opinion - certainly in this country, but I suspect in others as well - with respect to religion. Catalyzed by the demolition of the World Trade Centre on 9 September 2001 and the London bombings of 7 July 2005, religion has undergone something of a re-nationalisation - not in the sense of a mass revival (far from it), but in the form of a growing awareness of its potential impact on public life and, with that, a growing suspicion of its motivation, fuelling a growing antagonism towards its practitioners.

This is against a backcloth in which religion in post-war Britain had become increasingly privatised - the domain of personal choice where everyone was free to believe what they wished so long as it didn't detrimentally affect anyone else. Underlying this trend was an implicit relativism which, in tolerating different and often competing belief-systems, implied that no one was superior to any other or, indeed, that any one possessed exclusive access to universal truth. Within such a pluralist climate, multiculturalism could readily be embraced, almost as a measure of enlightened liberal democracy come of age.

But all this began to change on 14 February 1989 when Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa (legal opinion) against Salman Rushdie for his alleged blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the book *The Satanic Verses* (1988). Any notion that the practice of religion was an innocuous pastime for deluded enthusiasts was exploded in an instant as personal beliefs and convictions impressed themselves upon our public life with fearful intensity.

One of the implications of this has been a burgeoning intolerance towards organised religion by an ever increasingly vocal strain of zealous, proselytising atheism. Richard Dawkins is an obvious exponent, who in recent writings has gone beyond demonstrating the redundant and intellectually-bankrupt basis of organised religion, as he sees it, to openly recruit for his own brand of scientific fundamentalism. In the preface of *The God Delusion* (2006), he writes:

If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down. (Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p 5)

Although largely sympathetic to Dawkins, Sam Harris pushes further by highlighting the link between beliefs and behaviour. In *The End of Faith* (2005), we read:

As a man believes, so he will act ... Beliefs are *principles of action*: whatever they may be at the level of the brain, they are processes by which our understanding (and *misunderstanding*) of the world is represented and made available to guide our behaviour. (Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p 44, 52)

According to Harris, once this link has been recognised, it is no longer possible within a democracy simply to tolerate belief systems that are not only incompatible with other canons of human knowledge, but engender intolerance towards difference, promote dehumanizing patterns of behaviour and fuel a climate of suspicion and hatred.

Sam Harris then attempts to demonstrate that the stance of religious moderates or liberals is also no longer tenable in that, by seeking to keep a foot in each camp, they betray both:

Religious moderation is the product of secular knowledge and scriptural ignorance ... By failing to live by the letter of the texts, while tolerating the irrationality of those who do, religious moderates betray faith and reason equally. (Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p 21)

We could continue with this litany of what I'm describing as zealous, proselytising atheism, but I suspect there is no need because we are familiar with it and, in certain respects, sympathetic with its aims. Instead, we need to feel its force and embrace its challenges.

Until relatively recently, liberally-minded Christians, as well as members of other religious traditions, have tended to focus on trying to establish the intellectual respectability of their positions. A trend that has yielded many valuable publications and initiatives. What is required in the present time is something more. We need to engage with the issues brought into focus by Sam Harris and others. In particular, we need to explore how faith relates us to otherness, especially when manifested in people different from ourselves who know God by another name or who have no place for the sacred. Here are the kind of questions we must address:

Can faith engender a quality of human being that is not only able to tolerate difference, but be enriched by it?

Can faith relate us to 'otherness' in a way that is expansive and integrative?

Can faith be a resource for encounter, reconciliation and mutual enrichment?

In seeking to address them, our point of departure will be Jesus of Nazareth. In particular, we will explore, through the lens of historical-critical inquiry, whether we can identify in how Jesus has been remembered resonances of an impetus of faith that animated his own human being, and, in particular, the way it orientated him towards others.

As we turn our attention to first-century Galilee, it is important to identify a number of assumptions that will inform our investigations. I can't say they represent scholarly consensus (Is that possible in Jesus research?), but they are sufficiently uncontroversial to be listed without defence.

Firstly, the only access we have to the historical figure of Jesus is through the memories of those who encountered him personally or, alternatively, through a stream of oral tradition originating in someone who did. Jimmy Dunn puts it well:

The tradition itself in its earliest form is in a crucially important sense the creation of faith; or to be more precise, it is the product of the encounters between Jesus and the ones who became his disciples ... For the original impulse behind these records was, to put the point more accurately, *sayings of Jesus heard and received, and actions of Jesus as witnessed and retained in the memory* ... What we actually have in the earliest retellings of what is now the Synoptic tradition, then, are the memories of the first disciples – not Jesus himself, but the remembered Jesus. (J D G Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, [2003], p 129)

Secondly, we are interested in what was characteristic about Jesus, which may or may not be coterminous with what was particular or unique about him. Here, perhaps, a little explanation is required. Over the years, gospel criticism has developed various tools for distinguishing between material that is likely to have originated in Jesus from material that was probably augmented at a later stage. One such tool is known as the *Criterion of Dissimilarity* which, according to one of its pioneers, can be framed thus:

... the earliest form of a saying we can reach may be regarded as authentic if it can be shown to be dissimilar to characteristic emphases both of ancient Judaism and of the early Church. (Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* [1967], p 39)

Whatever the evangelists place on the lips of Jesus which could as readily have been spoken by someone from the Jewish matrix to which he belonged or the Christian community he brought into being is unlikely to originate with him. However, as one astute observer recognised some time ago it has a major shortcoming (some would say, a fatal flaw):

Use of the principle of dissimilarity, it is claimed, gives us what is distinctive in the teaching of Jesus. But the English word 'distinctive' can have two senses – as usual, the Germans use two words: 'distinctive' can mean 'unique' (what makes it distinct from other things, the German *verschieden*), or it can mean 'characteristic' (the German *bezeichnend*). In which sense is it being used here? Clearly the method is able only to give us the former – but what we really want is the latter: and the two are by no means necessarily the same.' (Morna D Hooker, *Theology* 75 [1972], p 574)

Thirdly, first century Galilee was predominantly Jewish. Extensive archaeological investigation evidences a massive depopulation during the 8th century BCE when, following Assyrian invasion, the inhabitants were deported en masse (cf 2 Kings 17.6). Significant repopulation of Galilee only occurs in the 2nd century BCE following the overthrow of the Seleucid (Syrian) empire by Jewish freedom fighters, leading to the reestablishment of Jewish rule over Palestine and return of Jewish exiles. Further, archaeological research relating to the 1st century CE confirms Jewish occupancy. Jonathan Reed, one of the foremost authorities, observes:

The archaeological artefacts found in Galilean domestic space are remarkably similar to those of Judea. In particular, they share four indicators of Jewish religious identity: 1) the chalk vessels, 2) stepped plastered pools, 3) secondary burial will ossuaries in loculi tombs, and 4) bone profiles that lack pork.' (Jonathan L Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus* [2000], p 44)

Fourthly and finally, I am using the words Jew, Jewish and Judaism generically. Strictly speaking, they relate to the religion of the rabbis which blossomed after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE. Before then, scholars refer to the Israelite and Judean religions to describe the religious beliefs and practices of the eras of the first (10th cent BCE) and second (520 BCE) Temples respectively. However, for our purposes, such distinctions would only add a further degree of complexity and, in all likelihood, confusion for little obvious gain.

So, having set our course, we are ready to embark on our quest to see if we can identify in how Jesus has been remembered resonances of an impetus of faith that animated Jesus' humanity and, in particular, the way he related to others.

If we were able to ask practising Jews of first century Palestine what God seeks from his people, they would almost certainly have recited the *Shema* in response:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might' (Deut 6.4-5; Matt 22.34-40/Mark 12.28-34; also Luke 10.25-28).

In its expanded form, comprising Deuteronomy 6.4–9, 11.13–21 and Numbers 15.37–41, this would become one of the defining prayers of post-70 CE Judaism - recited twice daily, carried in phylacteries upon the arms or forehead and housed in *mezuzoth* (plural of *mezuzah*) hung at the entrance of Jewish homes. However, there are good grounds for maintaining that twice-daily recitation of the *Shema*, at least in its abbreviated form above, was already an established practice by the turn of the eras (cf Nash Papyrus, 2nd cent BCE, Egypt; Josephus, *Antiquities*, 4.212-213; *Letter of Aristeas* 158-9).

Over the centrality of the *Shema*, there will have been near consensus, but differences would soon have emerged if we went on to examine how this imperative to love God was interpreted. For instance, Josephus, the Jewish chronicler with Roman sympathies (37-c100 CE) identifies four groupings: Essenes, Sadducees, Pharisees and freedom-fighters (Zealots).

The Jews had for a great while had three sects of philosophy peculiar to themselves; the sect of the Essenes, and the sect of the Sadducees, and the third sort of opinions was that of those called Pharisees ... But of the fourth sect of Jewish philosophy, Judas the Galilean was the author. These men agree in all other things with the Pharisaic notions; but they have an inviolable attachment to liberty; and say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord. (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.11 & 23)

In all likelihood there were more and, quite probably, there was considerable diversity within each. It is possible, though, to identify the defining characteristics of those mentioned so far, as well as one or two others (cf Herodians, Matt 22.16; Mark 3.6; 12.13; *Therapeutae* or Healers, Philo, *Contemplative Life* 1.1-11). And to help us appreciate Jesus' characteristic approach to faith we need to offer a brief overview:

Loving God through Obeying Torah (Pharisees; sources: NT, Josephus, Mishnah)

The Pharisees, as the name suggests (it comes from the Hebrew *pâraš*, 'to make distinct'), were concerned about being distinct through practising a discipline of life shaped by obedience to God's covenantal ground rules prescribed in the Decalogue (10 Commandments) and throughout the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy), which they extrapolated through a set of interpretative principles (*middoth*) to cover all aspects of life – from the birth of a child to burying the dead and everything in between. This generated a body of oral tradition which, following the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, was taken up by the emerging rabbinic movement under Johanan ben Zakkai and his colleagues (at Jamnia/Jabneh, east of Jerusalem), augmented and eventually codified into the Mishnah and Talmud (from the second century CE onwards). It is probable, that Pharisees contemporaneous with Jesus comprised of priests, scribes and community elders who limited social interaction, especially at meal times, to their own kind, observed strict hygiene and dietary standards, practised tithing and pursued patterns of behaviour deemed consistent with God's will.

Loving God through Ritual Observance (Sadducees; sources: NT, Josephus)

From what we can deduce, the Sadducees consisted of priests who serviced the Temple cult and influential community leaders who sat on the Jewish governing council known as the Sanhedrin (as did some of the Pharisees). To maintain the relatively autonomous operation of these institutions required careful diplomacy and, no doubt, a good deal of compromise with respect to Rome. That said, the Temple provided a visible reminder of God's presence among and commitment to his people. Furthermore, the sacrificial system operating within its gates constituted a tangible means of maintaining covenant through offerings, blood-letting and holocaust. For Sadducees, ritual and sacrifice possessed atoning capacities, capable of dealing with personal shortcomings and, no doubt, the fallout of political collusions deemed necessary to maintain the Pax Romana.

Loving God through Communal Living/rule (Essenes; sources Josephus, Philo)

Although not mentioned in the New Testament, we know about the Essenes, an Aramaic derivation meaning 'pious ones', through the writings of Josephus (37 – 97 CE) and the Alexandrian Jew Philo (50 BCE – 45 CE). It appears that they practised a kind of communal egalitarianism whereby members were bound to one another by oath, with all possessions held in common ownership, and by a pattern of life characterized by divine worship, wholesome labour, study of sacred texts, shared meals and the practice of good will, justice and peace. Given they could be found in many towns and villages, it seems likely that the Essenes organised themselves around some kind of cell-network. However, judging from the lengthy initiatory process and strict disciplinary procedures for errant members, their dispersed profile neither resulted in a loosening of affiliations nor a blurring of self-definition.

Loving God through Monasticism (Dead Sea community; sources: Dead Sea Scrolls)

1947 proved to be a seminal year for our understanding of first-century Palestine. It began with a goatherd searching for strays in the caves overlooking the north-west shore of the Dead Sea. What he discovered was a deposit of ancient manuscripts (the Dead Sea Scrolls) belonging to a community that, as subsequent archaeological investigations would demonstrate, resided at Qumran between approximately 150 BCE – 70 CE. Skeletal remains of over 1000 men, women and children have been found within its cemeteries, suggesting a mixed community, at least during certain stages of the site's

occupation. A number of *Community Rules* have survived detailing everything from initiation, beliefs and expectations through routine and worship to governance, discipline, death – affording unprecedented insight into the worldview, customs and lifestyle of this enclosed, self-sufficient community. Resonating through much of this body of evidence is the conviction that withdrawal from the corroding influences of alien rule, ‘impure’ compatriots and a corrupt Temple priesthood was an essential prerequisite to the pursuit of a holy life, as well as to prepare for the coming day of God’s reckoning. Although no explicit self-identification is made, the Qumran covenanters exhibit many similarities with the Essenes - some of whom according to the Roman historian Pliny the Elder - occupied that region prior to the quelling of the Jewish uprising around 70 CE (*Natural History* 5.17.4).

Loving God through Moral Renewal (John the Baptizer; sources: NT, Josephus)

Whether John the baptizer once belonged to the Qumran Community remains a matter of conjecture, although there are sufficient similarities to merit serious consideration. What we do know is that he challenged his compatriots, especially influential Jews, to pursue radical transformation through jettisoning godless ways and demonstrating acts of repentance, justice and good works (cf Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.116-119; Matt 3.1-10/Mark 1.1-6/Luke 3.1-9; Matt 11.2-19/Luke 7.18-35; Matt 14 1.1-12/Mark 6.14-29/Luke 9.7-9; Matt 16.13-23/Mark 8.27-33/Luke 9.18-22; Matt 21.23-27/Mark 11.27-33/Luke 20.1-8). This demanding and unpalatable agenda was injected with urgency, compulsion and verve through being framed within an apocalyptic timetable in which God was soon to intervene in history and call his people to account. John’s sphere of ministry appears to have been the arid approaches to the river Jordan, although we must assume additional activity in populated areas in order to disseminate his message. Converts to John’s programme of reform underwent an immersion or baptism to symbolise cleansing, renewal and, quite possibly, a new Exodus or ‘crossing over’ from captivity into freedom, from judgement to blessing, from death into life.

Loving God through waging ‘Holy War’ (Freedom-fighters; sources: NT, Josephus)

All of the options considered so far have been concerned in one way or another with personal purity and the individual’s relationship with God as moderated through the covenant and Torah. However, there were zealous Jews who turned to violence. Convinced that the kingdom of God was neither a spiritual dimension in this life nor a celestial one in the next, but a concrete reality in the present, they sought to overthrow their oppressors through insurrection in order to re-establish the rule of God as in the halcyon days of David and Solomon. The author of Acts alerts us to Theudas and Judas the Galilean (Acts 5.36-37) whilst Josephus mentions many others of various persuasions spanning 60 years or so, including Judas, son of Hezekiah, who, taking advantage of the political instability following the death of Herod the Great (4 BCE), mounted an armed uprising in Sepphoris that was subsequently quashed decisively by Rome with devastating repercussions. Two thousand insurgents were crucified within sight of Nazareth and, quite probably, living memory of Jesus (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.56 & 75).

If space permitted, we could go into greater detail about each of these, but hopefully sufficient has been said to illustrate the range of religious expression falling within the Jewish matrix of first century Palestine. What does God seek from his people? That they should love him with all their heart, soul and might (Deut 6.4-5). And how should such love manifest itself? Through ...

Obeying Torah (Pharisees)
Ritual Observance (Sadducees)

Communal Living/Rule (Essenes)
Monasticism (Dead Sea community)
Moral Renewal (John the Baptizer)
Waging Holy War (Freedom-fighters)

At this juncture, it would be easy to make an erroneous deduction, namely that most if not all Galileans of Jewish extract or sympathy would have belonged to one of these denominations or practised one of these approaches. That would be comparable to surveying the principal political parties of this nation before concluding that most of us were card-carrying members of one or the other. Clearly, we're not. So also in first-century Galilee, the constraints of subsistence living afforded little opportunity for overt religious observance. Instead, Jewish identity had to find expression through rituals and practices that could be accommodated within the challenges of meeting basic human needs as well as the demands of taxation, tithes, tribute and other non-negotiable outgoings.

It helps to remember that Galilee, along with the rest of Palestine, had been part of the Roman empire since 63 BCE when the Hasmonean dynasty of kings and priests that had returned Judea and Galilee to Jewish rule following the vanquishing of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 160s BCE, was overthrown. Herod the Great, a Jew by birth, ruled the entire region in the name of the Emperor from 40 – 4 BCE, when, on his death, Caesar Augustus divided Palestine between Herod's three remaining sons with Herod Antipas inheriting Galilee. This meant in effect that inhabitants were subject to three separate regimes each demanding its dues: tribute to Caesar; levies to Herod; tithes, taxes and offerings to the priests and Temple-state, a vestige of the Hasmonean era (cf Matt 17.24). Not surprisingly, these oppressive measures caused considerable hardship whilst fuelling discontent and hope-filled expectation of a better future.

Although established trade routes passed through the region (one from Galilean Tiberias to Phoenician Ptolemais passed through Sepphoris, population 8,000-10,000), the majority of the population of Galilee worked on the land as tenant farmers or day labourers, eking out a peasant existence on large estates. Nazareth, the place of Jesus' upbringing, was a village of no more than 400-500 persons in the first century. As Nathanael captures in his much-quoted retort. 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' (John 1.46), its only claim to fame was ordinariness. Prior to Emperor Constantine's conversion in the fourth century, there are no references to it outside of the gospels and writings dependent upon them. This is all the more surprising given its proximity to cosmopolitan Sepphoris, barely four miles' away.

From what we can gather, principally from archaeological research, Nazareth's economy was agrarian, its demography peasant class and its culture predominantly Jewish. Most if its inhabitants will have endured a subsistence existence, struggling to meet basic human needs after satisfying the demands of those making claim upon their lives – victims of what Walter Wink describes as a 'domination system' from which they could not escape and over which they exerted little if any power of self-determination. For all that they resided in the land promised by God to their forebears, it must have left more like exile in Babylon or captivity in Egypt.

This was the socio-economic climate in which Jesus lived. At some juncture, however (cf Luke 3.23), Jesus extricated himself from these conditions and, presumably, from his responsibilities within the family and community, to identify with John the Baptizer and, quite possibly, to become a disciple (cf Mark 2.18/Matt 9.14/Luke 5.33; Mark 6.29/Matt 14.12; Luke 7.18; 11.1; John 1.35, 37; 3.25). The reasons

for this must be deduced from what we are able to construct of John's movement, which Paul Hollenbach characterises in this way:

John the Baptizer originates as a wilderness character who emerges as a prophet in populated places, proclaiming to powerful sinners a prophetic-apocalyptic message of imminent doom on them because of their impurity and injustice, and calling upon them to come to the Jordan and be baptised as a sign of their repentance and a pledge of their renewed faithfulness to God. (*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol 3, p 894)

Hollenbach highlights an important dimension of John's ministry often overlooked, namely that his uncompromising message of repentance and transformation was aimed especially at influential Jews who exploited their less-fortunate compatriots. There can be little doubt that 'brood of vipers' (Matt 3.7/Luke 3.7) is not a generic term embracing all and sundry, but a specific reference to unscrupulous Jewish leaders, including members of the priestly aristocracy and ruling classes (cf Mark 11.27-33/Matt 21.23-27/Luke 20.1-8). Further, John's criticism of Herod Antipas may well have extended beyond an adulterous marriage with his brother Philip's wife Herodias, an immoral and illegal act not without politico-economic ramifications, to focus on his leadership and exercising of authority over fellow-Jews (cf Luke 3.19). This should alert us to the possibility that John's groundswell of popular support may have owed as much to his oracles of condemnation and immanent judgement of the powerful as it did to reawakening the consciences of the masses. Interestingly, Josephus identifies his potential for insurrection as the reason why Herod had him executed:

Now, when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late. (*Antiquities* 18.118)

Jesus, however, was more than a supporter, he was initiated into John's movement - suggesting he counted himself amongst those in need of repentance as he embraced the Baptizer's programme of inner transformation, outward renewal and social reform. It also suggests that he initially adopted John's apocalyptic timetable in which the present is framed as a time of reparation for past wrongs and preparation for the immanent crisis of God's sovereign intervention to call people to account and administer justice.

However, at some point they parted company. Whether or not this was precipitated by John's arrest and execution (cf Mark 1.14/Matt 4.12), it is clear that Jesus was no longer able to inhabit his mentor's worldview and, in particular, his analysis of how God related to the present. John, as we have noted, interpreted 'now' as an interim period characterized by penitential privation, thoroughgoing restoration and fearful expectation. Within such a scenario, God's 'presence' is experienced as an absence characterised by the prospect of imminent return (Luke 3.7-9, 16-17/Matt 3.7-12). By contrast, Jesus goes back to Galilee with a radically different vision - an embodiment of faith that proved popular and life-giving among many of his compatriots, especially those with little access to or interest in the range of Jewish options outlined above. It is an approach that comes into focus when we turn to the tradition in which Jesus is remembered as being asked about the heart of his faith:

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that [Jesus] answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”’ (Mark 12.28-30//Matt 22.34-38; Luke 10.25-26; cf Deut 6.4-5)

As we have seen, nothing unusual here – he recites the *Shema*; but Jesus goes on to quote from Leviticus 19.18:

The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.’ (Mark 12.31//Matt 22.39; Luke 10.27)

Now, many of us have become so familiar with this juxtaposition that we have lost sight of its profundity and pioneering quality. Nowhere else in all extant Jewish literature which pre-dates Jesus do we find Deuteronomy 6.4-5 and Leviticus 19.18 linked in this way. Equally, the conceptual association of loving God and loving one’s neighbour is original. And, although no scholarly consensus has emerged over how Jesus understood the relationship between these two commands, it seems highly likely, especially in the context of other expressions of Jewish faith surveyed previously, that in forging this link Jesus is disclosing how his love of God was manifested, namely through love of neighbour.

It seems, then, that for Jesus, loving God and loving human beings converge. What is more, this pairing of Deuteronomy 6.4-5 and Leviticus 19.18 does not appear arbitrary, but suggests he was conversant with the rules of scriptural interpretation (*middoth*) coined by the celebrated scholar Hillel who flourished during Jesus’ childhood years (*Tosepta Sanhedrin* 7.11), namely *gězêrâ šâwâ* (‘equal ordinance/statute’) where texts containing a common word or phrase are associated for the purposes of mutual interpretation.

But who is my neighbour? For the author of Leviticus, chapter 19, who a few verses later enjoins us separately to love the alien as ourselves (verse 34), the answer must be ‘a fellow member of the cultic community of Israel’ (J P Meier). However, we know from Luke’s linking of Jesus’ double love commandment with the parable of the Good Samaritan that the question was being answered very differently within some early Christian communities (Luke 10.25-37). Whether Jesus would have cast the neighbourly net beyond his fellow Jews is a moot point. There is some evidence that he did as, during the course of his ministry, pastoral encounters with non-Jews caused him to revise his views of among whom the love of God can be practised – but more of that later (eg Mark 7.24-30).

We are, I think, on firmer ground when it comes to enemies, presumably of Jewish extract. A tradition, probably from the Q Source, records Jesus saying ‘love your enemies’ (Luke 6.27/Matt 5.44):

But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. (Luke 6.27)

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. (Matt 5.44)

By any measure this is an extraordinary pronouncement and, again, one that probably originated with Jesus. There are plenty of exhortations to non-retaliation within both Jewish and Graeco-Roman literature (Proverbs 24.29; 20.22; *Letter of Aristeas* 207; 4 Macc 2.14; *Joseph and Aseneth* 23.9), but the

nature of love prescribed in Deuteronomy and Leviticus and, as we shall see, embodied by Jesus is neither passive restraint nor amorous affection. It is an active doing and willing good. John Meier, in his exhaustive study on this subject, characterises Jesus' love of neighbour and enemy in these terms:

To love this 'neighbour' means to will good and do good to him, even if one feels some personal enmity toward him. More specifically, in the immediate context, loving one's fellow Israelite means promoting, protecting, and, if need be, restoring that person's rights, honour, status in the community. (*Marginal Jew*, vol 4, p 492)

Jesus is commanding his disciples to will good and do good to their enemies, no matter how the disciples may feel about them, and no matter whether the enemies remain enemies despite the goodness shown to them. (*Marginal Jew*, vol 4, p 530)

Here, then, in the linking of the love of God with the love of human beings we are, I think, in touch with the generative core of Jesus' faith and, at the same time, the source of his profundity and attractiveness. Jesus manages to root divine encounter in human experience whilst, in the hallowing of relationship, investing the ordinariness of peasant existence with significance and worth. What is more, he appears to have embodied a faith impetus capable of transcending difference and embracing otherness as a measure of faithfulness and devotion. In this way, faith becomes a means of reconciliation (and, indeed, survival) as despised or excluded categories of Jews and, in time, Gentiles come within love's embrace.

Judging from other New Testament sources, Jesus' love incarnationalism was practised within early Christian communities. Consider, for example, the following verses from Romans, chapter 13, in which the apostle exhorts Gentile, God-fearers and, possibly, Jewish believers to embrace the Christian way. He explains how obeying God's law, which for a Pharisee such as Paul was equivalent to loving God, was fulfilled through loving one's neighbour – again, providing the impetus for people drawn from very different backgrounds, social statuses and ethnicities to relate to one another in the spirit of Jesus.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom 13.8-10)

Or again, the practice of loving God through loving one's neighbour appears to have characterised the Johannine community, although significantly it wasn't extended to those holding different views within it, never mind anyone outside of it – suggesting a domestication of Jesus' radical ethic (perhaps for reasons of survival):

We love because he first loved us. Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4.19-21; cf John 13.34-35; 15.12-17)

Finally, in the Letter of James, the author (who may well have been one of Jesus' brothers) passionately advocates that faith in God must find expression through works of love:

You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' ... What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. (James 2.8, 14-17)

What motivated Jesus' love incarnationalism, how it was expressed and what are its implications for the challenges facing us today will be addressed in Part Two which follows.

Part Two

Jesus Applied

By way of recap, we started by identifying the following questions as seminal for our time:

Can faith engender a quality of human being that is not only able to tolerate difference, but be enriched by it?

Can faith relate us to ‘otherness’ in a way that is expansive and integrative?

Can faith be a resource for encounter, reconciliation and mutual enrichment?

Our point of departure was Jesus and our particular concern was whether it is possible to identify in how Jesus has been remembered resonances of an impetus of faith that animated his own human being and, in particular, the way he related to others. We focused on the *Shema*, as providing a lingua franca for Jewish expressions of faith in first century Palestine, and explored the different kinds of behaviour it engendered in terms of how the love of God was expressed, as a means of both contextualizing and highlighting Jesus’ own contribution, which we discovered resided in the innovative linking of the love of God (Deuteronomy 6.4-5) with the love of human beings (Leviticus 19.18).

The first [commandment] is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these. (Mark 12.29-31)

We noted that, elsewhere, Jesus is remembered as extending the reach of this love incarnationalism, as I’ve clumsily described it, to embrace enemies and even Gentiles. In what follows, we will focus on how Jesus went about this before reflecting on what we can learn from his practice. We need to begin, however, by drawing another map which will enable us to locate Jesus not this time in relation to first-century Palestine, but rather to our understanding of what it means to be a human being. I’m aware this is a massive area so here we can do little more than put down one or two markers which will enable us to open up a critical dialogue between how Jesus has been remembered and the contemporary debate around personhood.

There is a long tradition reaching back at least as far as the ancient philosopher Boethius (480-524 CE), given fresh momentum during the Enlightenment, and informing much of contemporary society which defines the self *individualistically*. René Descartes’ (1596-1650) famous diction, ‘cogito ergo sum’ (*Principles of Philosophy* [1644] 1.7; cf ‘Je pense donc je suis’ in *Discourse on Method* [1637]) which can be translated, ‘I think, therefore, I am’, or perhaps more accurately, ‘I am thinking, therefore I exist’, locates the central core of personhood firmly within the thinking capacity of the individual. Thinking is the irreducible essence of what it means ‘to exist’ – for me to be ‘me’ and you to be ‘you’ – and, as such, it informs what can be described as an *oppositional understanding of self* in which the ‘I’ exists independently of everyone and everything else.

This approach to personhood orientates us to otherness – that is, to other people, entities or anything that is not ‘me’ – in what Martin Buber (1878-1965) described as an ‘I–it’ relationship. All that is beyond our thinking subjectivity is alien to us, in as much as it is not an essential part of us, and is open to scrutiny, in the sense that because it is not a part of us we can distance ourselves from it and objectify its existence. Equally, we can choose to deny its existence by ignoring it altogether.

Now I’ve framed this in extreme terms, but it is not difficult to recognise the influence of such an approach to personhood on much of contemporary western culture – from the objectification of knowledge, through the cult of the self to rampant consumerism. Equally, it is not difficult to see how such an approach to human being is going to complicate, if not frustrate altogether, any attempt to build communities where difference is embraced as a strength rather than, at best, tolerated, if not treated with suspicion or rejected altogether.

For within such an understanding of human being, relating to the other – to that which is beyond us, especially if it seems strange, undesirable or threatening – will always be an optional extra. Something that we may choose to do, rather than something that is essential to our very being: If what it means for ‘me’ to be ‘me’ doesn’t entail ‘me’ relating to ‘you’, then ‘I’ will only relate to ‘you’ if I decide that it serves my interests to do so. And often, on the short term, it doesn’t.

Buber, though, describes another way of relating to that which is beyond us and one which opens us up to alternative sources of the self (cf Charles Taylor), characterised by ‘I–thou’ rather than ‘I–it’ relationships. Here we don’t set ourselves apart and objectify everything that is beyond us, but rather see ourselves as belonging within a nexus of relationships which are integral to and constitutive of our human being. This gives rise to a *relationally-constituted sense of personhood* (ie relational ontology) where we need others to be ourselves, because it is only through relating to them that we can become fully human.

This approach is often associated with the twentieth century Scottish philosopher John Macmurray (1891-1976) who in a number of publications (*The Self as Agent* [1957] and *Persons in Relation* [1961]) explores the self as agent. At the heart of the person, Macmurray maintains, is not ‘I think’, but ‘I do’ and in doing we become ourselves in relation to, what he describes as, the Other:

In acting I meet the Other, as support and resistance to my action, and in this meeting lies my existence. Consequently, I am aware of the Other, and of myself as dependent upon and limited by the Other. This awareness is knowledge, for it is awareness of the existence of the Other and of my own existence in dynamic relation with the Other. (*Persons in Relation*, p 209)

Subsequent discussion has questioned whether personhood can be fully accounted for in terms of agency, identifying an additional stable core of the self, a personal integrity which is discrete from our relationships and which enables us to relate freely, intentionally and in a spirit of mutuality, rather than out of necessity or dependence. Yet, even with this qualification, we can readily see how such insights into personhood locate relating to the other as an integral part of human being and not, as in the previous case, as an adjunct to it.

So, mindful of these two theories of the self, we return to Jesus and to what I describe as the heuristics of encounter, namely the insights and practises through which he inhabits love incarnationalism – loving God through loving human beings. Let me outline three: prayer, forgiveness and hospitality.

Prayer

In addition to the *Shema*, Jesus may well have been familiar with another archetypal Jewish prayer, the ‘Eighteen Benedictions’, also known as the *Tefillah* or *Shemoneh Esreh*, which according to a judgement attributed to the influential scholar Gamaliel, likely a contemporary of Jesus (cf Acts 5.34; 22.3), should be recited each day (‘A man should pray the Eighteen [Benedictions] every day’; Mishnah Berakoth 4.3). It is a lengthy formulation which affords a rare insight into first century CE Jewish spirituality – whether or not the actual text, written or oral, filled the airways in the villages of Galilee. Here are some of the petitions:

- I You are praised, O Lord our God and God of our fathers,
 God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob,
 the great, mighty and awe-inspiring God,
 God Supreme, Creator of heaven and earth,
 our Shield and Shield of our fathers,
 our trust in every generation.
 You are praised, O Lord, Shield of Abraham.

- II You are mighty, bringing low the proud;
 powerful, judging the arrogant;
 ever-living, raising up the dead;
 causing the wind to blow and the dew to descend;
 sustaining the living, quickening the dead.
 O cause our salvation to sprout as in the twinkling of an eye.
 You are praised, O Lord, who quickens the dead.

- III Holy are You,
 and awe-inspiring is Your Name;
 and beside You there is no God.
 You are praised, O Lord, the holy God.

- VI Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned against You.
 Blot out and remove our transgressions from before Your sight,
 for Your mercies are manifold.
 You are praised, O Lord, who abundantly pardons.

- VII Look at our affliction, and champion our cause,
 and redeem us for the sake of Your Name.
 You are praised, O Lord, Redeemer of Israel.

- VIII Heal us, O Lord our God, of the pain of our hearts.
 Remove from us grief and sighing,
 and bring healing for our wounds.

You are praised, O Lord, who heals the sick of His people Israel.

- IX Bless, O Lord our God, this year for us,
and let it be good in all the varieties of its produce.
Hasten the year of our redemptive End.
Grant dew and rain upon the face of the earth,
and satiate the world out of the treasuries of Your goodness;
and grant a blessing to the work of our hands.
You are praised, O Lord, who blesses the years.

Clearly, there are many resonances here with what has become known as the Lord's Prayer, which has been preserved in three forms, in Matthew, Luke and the early church order known as the *Didache* or the *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*.

Matthew 6.9b–13

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our
debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of
trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

*For the kingdom and the power and
the glory are yours forever. Amen.*

Luke 11.2b–4

Father,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone
indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time
of trial.

Didache 8

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debt,
as we forgive our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of
trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.

For power and glory are yours forever.

What is key for us here is not whether Jesus actually coined this prayer (although I think he probably did) and, if so, which version is original, but the observation that the Lord's Prayer has been remembered as being characteristic of him – confirming what other gospel traditions imply, namely that Jesus' fundamental orientation in life was one of transcendence. His sense of self, if you will, is 'human being towards otherness'. It seems that Jesus recognises a radical dependence upon the one whom he relates to as *Abba*, Aramaic for 'my Father,' suggesting, perhaps, not so much that Jesus conceived of God as being an actual person, residing in some heavenly domain, but rather reflecting the conviction that God is encountered personally, through 'I-thou' rather than 'I-it' relationships.

What is more, it is from this 'human being towards otherness' that Jesus' identity and vocation seem to flow. Otherwise, it would be difficult to account for what is described as his filial consciousness – his awareness of being personally related to and loved by God. This reaches beyond origin and sustenance to find expression in a life through which Jesus inhabits the role of a son about his father's business – an archetypal persona within Jewish family life. And the business of his father is the substance of his prayer. Here the correlation between the content of the Lord's Prayer and the characteristics of Jesus' ministry should not be overlooked. For what is he remembered for if not amplifying God's presence through hallowing the secular, feeding the hungry, liberating the oppressed and confronting evil. In short, the

realisation of the hopes associated with the in-breaking of God's sovereign rule, as they are articulated in the *Shemoneh Esreh* or *Eighteen Benedictions*.

In this respect, the Lord's Prayer is not a message to God, sent in the expectation that God will find some supernatural means of answering it, but a manifesto of faith for those who wish to participate in the quality of 'human being towards otherness' Jesus embodied personally.

And when this understanding of prayer as dependence, identity and vocation is aligned with Jesus' love incarnationalism, the impetus for his ministry comes into focus as his being towards transcendence engenders a desire to love God, the radical Other, through loving other people radically. More of that in a moment.

Forgiveness

As with 'prayer', we are using the word 'forgiveness' here in an unconventional way, where it has precious little to do with that rather strange transaction embedded in much Christian liturgy which is triggered by saying, sorry. Rather, the background informing Jesus' practice of forgiveness was the Jubilee, as Luke rightly identifies when he provides the following words from Isaiah as the interpretative lens for Jesus' ministry:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4.18-19)*

These verses from Isaiah, chapters 61 and 58, from a time when Jews had already returned from the Babylonian deportation, articulate a longing for liberation – a liberation, it seems, from exile (although, as I say, they were already resident in the so-called promised land), presumably from the barren experiences characterizing life where God is experienced as absent and where oppression in its various manifestations defines existence. Remember, apart from a brief window of self-rule during the second and first centuries prior the Common Era, Palestine remained from the Jewish perspective 'occupied territory', until 1948.

The background to Isaiah's vision of liberation is the Jubilee, described in Leviticus, chapter 25 and Deuteronomy, chapter 15. Every seventh or fiftieth year (both figures are mentioned), God's people were expected to cancel outstanding debts, liberate slaves, reduce profits, return land to its ancestral owners and be generous to those in need. Why? To remind them that they were bound in covenant with the God of forgiveness, who liberated their forebears from thralldom in Egypt and led them into the spacious land of opportunity and blessing. And as God's forgiven people it was incumbent upon them to practice forgiveness.

Now it was they who longed for liberation. For the majority of Galilean Jews of Jesus' time, liberation will have meant freedom from burdensome taxation, corrupt land-owners and, no doubt, foreign rule. But it will have extended beyond this to cover whatever threatened life or stifled human being. Disease is a case in point and one worth exploring in a little detail. To do so, we need to recognise both its

socio-economic impact, as well as the religious matrix within which disease was experienced and interpreted.

It goes without saying there was no state-sponsored healthcare or social security provision in first century Galilee. If you became sick, your status changed dramatically, especially if your condition was considered contagious. No longer able to earn a living or contribute to the common life of the household or community, you became a liability and source of danger, more often than not reduced to eking out a subsistence on the margins of society through begging (cf Mark 10.46). In this context, Jewish purity laws primarily served a pragmatic function – curtailment of social intercourse to reduce the possibility of infection.

Take, for example, skin conditions. Leviticus, chapters 13 and 14, catalogue in considerable detail various symptoms and complaints together with the prescribed level of quarantine or social exclusion for patients. Equally, the protocols for establishing that recovery had taken place and for reintegrating the recovered into the life of the community are specified.

What is conspicuous by its absence, however, is any guidance about how skin diseases should be treated. There is no mention of physicians or medicines; throughout, it is priests who diagnose illness and determine recovery (cf Mark 1.44; Luke 17.14). As such, they acted as custodians of purity with authority to inflict disease and, equally, to perform healing because it was ultimately their judgement, not any underlying condition, which determined the status of the sufferer. And that judgement in some instances would have been equivalent to a death sentence or, equally, a reprieve.

Illness tended to be interpreted theologically rather than medically. God might strike someone down to test faith (Job 2.1-10) or to punish wrongdoing (2 Kings 6.18; Luke 13.1-5; John 9.1-3). Equally, sufferers may be oppressed by evil spirits (Mark 1.21-28; 9.14-29; Luke 13.10-17; cf 1 Samuel 16.14-16; Tobit 6.8) or have brought sickness upon themselves because of their evil ways (Psalm 32.1-4). For this reason, dealing with sin was considered necessary for, even coterminous with, recovery (cf 'No one gets up from his sick-bed until all his sins are forgiven', b Nedarim, 41a; Psalm 32.3-5; 103.1-5; 4Q242; Mark 2.1-12; James 5.13-18). Further, exorcism supplied a demonstrative and, often, the only form of treatment for many conditions, not simply those where possession was suspected (Mark 9.14-29; 9.38; cf 1 Samuel 16.14-23; Tobit 8.1-3; 1QapGen 20; Josephus, *Antiquities* 8.45-9; *War* 7.185; Testament of Solomon, *passim*).

Not surprisingly, God was believed to be the ultimate source of healing (Exodus 15:26; 2 Kings 5:7; Job 5:18) and those able to facilitate it were resourced to do so by God, whether through using the medicinal properties of nature, the therapeutic skill of practitioners (Ecclesiasticus 38.1-15), the efficacious prayers of the faithful or the spiritual anointing of charismatics (2 Kings 2.9-15). For this reason, the overcoming of disease, disability and death became coterminous with salvation or, at least, the outpouring of blessing associated with God's presence:

'Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.' (Isa 35.5-6) 'He [i.e. the Lord] shall release the captives, make the blind see, raise up the do[wn-trodden.] . . . then He will heal the sick, resurrect the dead, and to the Meek announce glad tidings.' (4Q521; trans. *DSSU* 23; also Isa. 26.19; 29.18; 53.5; 61.1-2; Jer. 30.17; 31.7-9; Ezek. 37.12-14; Daniel 21.2; Joel 2.28-32; Micah 7.15; Mal. 4.2; 4 Ezra 7.123; 9.6; 13.50; Jub. 23.29-30; Test. Zeb. 9.8)

Within this matrix, it is not difficult to appreciate the impact on sufferers of being able to mediate healing, whether in the form of curing illness or changing the status of the patient, so that he or she was able to return from exile – quarantine, divine judgement, disempowerment, humiliation, whatever form it took – and resume right-relating within family, community and with respect to God.

Jesus, evidently, established a reputation for being able to do just that and, what is more, interpreted as much as the inauguration of God's sovereign rule: 'But if it is by the Spirit [Luke: finger] of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you' (Matthew 12.28/Luke 11.20; cf Matthew 11.4-5/Luke 7.22-23 in the light of Isaiah 29.18-19; 35.5-6).

However, once we become sensitive to the sources of oppression prevalent in first-century Palestine, we can readily identify in the Gospels dozens of testimonies to how Jesus was remembered as a liberating source of forgiveness. Consider this catalogue which I prepared for another occasion:

- the debilitating, excluding and stigmatising effects of disease overwhelmed;
- destructive, dehumanising and addictive patterns of behaviour broken;
- children told they are teachers;
- women offered back their dignity;
- the uneducated impassioned for learning;
- the hungry invited to feast;
- lonely people given an opportunity to belong;
- sinners extended the privileges of sainthood;
- those fearful of living or dying granted peace;
- the unredeemed time of ordinary people saturated with significance;
- people weighed down with the worries of life inspired with joyful abandon;
- guilt-ridden offenders disturbed from their self-preoccupations;
- victims of broken relationships empowered with reconciling overtures;
- politicians challenged with the truth and justice they were authorized to uphold;
- religious gate-keepers of God's kingdom reminded of their responsibilities;
- complacent Jews called to account;
- trusting Gentiles granted the desires of their hearts.

And central to most, if not all, of these manifestations is reconciliation and the restoration of relationships, as victims experience liberation from estrangement, oppression, disease, isolation, meaninglessness, prejudice, poverty, fear, boredom, worry, shame, brokenness, greed, addiction, exploitation, self-aggrandizement, success, intellectual arrogance, wealth, religiosity or self-centredness. Thereby, highlighting one of Jesus' principle means of embracing the other, namely the practice of forgiveness - challenging oppression, overcoming its exiling effects and restoring right-relating.

Hospitality

For Jews of first century Palestine, food and mealtimes possessed a pronounced sacramental quality. What was eaten, how it was consumed, with whom and when were significant issues and, for this reason, generated considerable controversy. A common conviction, however, was that food constituted a gift from God and, as such, a tangible demonstration of divine generosity and faithfulness.

The Psalmist's words would have been echoed by many: 'The eyes of all look to you [O Lord], and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing' (Psalm 145.14-16).

Underpinning these sentiments was the belief that God created the world to yield an abundant supply of food (Genesis 1.28–31; 2.15–17) and miraculously provided sustenance for the emancipated Hebrews during their wilderness wanderings (Exodus 16), before leading them into a bountiful land of 'milk and honey' (Exodus 3.8; Leviticus 20.24; Deuteronomy 6.3). These convictions established another link, namely between eating and covenant, with food constituting an expression of divine hospitality and shared meals substantiating reconciliation, friendship and mutual commitment (Exodus 24.9-11). Furthermore, as beneficiaries of God's blessings, Jews were expected to extend hospitality not only to their own, but also to foreigners (Genesis 18.1-8).

Something of this outlook in which food circumscribes an economy of grace is captured in the *birkath ha-mazon*, the ancient thanksgiving prayer accompanying meals: 'Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, for you nourish us and the whole world with goodness, grace, kindness, and mercy.' But it was feasting in particular which came to be associated with the blessings of God's presence - whether remembered, experienced or anticipated – and, as such, was regarded as an archetypal embodiment of joyous living.

By contrast, fasting characterized bereavement and penitence – the experience of God's absence embraced by those identifying with the dead through mourning rituals or acknowledging the exiling effects of their sinfulness. In both cases, life is stripped of its graces (food, relationships, employment, comforts) to demonstrate solidarity with the dead or to confront the consequences of transgression. Not surprisingly, the currency of mourning and fasting is readily assimilated within prophetic rhetoric as a means of responding to a community's sense of divine alienation or abandonment, not least during the Babylonian deportation, which makes the following description of covenant renewal on return all the more significant:

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, 'Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.' (Nehemiah 8.9–10)

What is equally striking is the way in which the abundance of food and feasting together come to symbolize a return of God's longed-for and eagerly anticipated blessings. For example, Isaiah envisages a time when God will host a great banquet for his people on mount Zion:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. (Isaiah 25.6–8)

The author of *1 Enoch* (2nd cent BCE – 1st cent CE) looks forward to God's righteous and elect ones being robed in 'garments of glory' as they feast in God's presence: 'The Lord of the Spirits will abide over them; they shall eat and rest and rise with that Son of Man forever and ever' (62.14). Whilst *2 Baruch* (2nd cent CE) captures a vision of the world transformed into a cornucopia of divine munificence: 'And it will happen at that time that the treasury of manna will come down again from on high, and they will eat of it in those years because these are they who will have arrived at the consummation of time' (29.7-8).

Such references help us to appreciate how theologically charged food and table-fellowship had become for many Jews by the onset of the Common Era. One instance of this is attested in the Dead Sea Scrolls and, in particular, the community rules which describe how the 'pure meal of the congregation' stands at the heart of community life at Qumran and was regarded as an oasis of blessing (IQS 5.7–20; 6.14–23; 7.18–21). Participation was restricted to those who had served their probationary period and been judged worthy of belonging to God's elect. To take one's place at the table, therefore, was to experience the privileges of salvation and to anticipate their fulfilment when God's priest and messiah would preside (IQSa 2.17–21).

Another example, as we have already noted, is provided by the Pharisees who, concerned to preserve the covenantal community in a state of uprightness and purity, committed themselves to strict observance of tithing laws and those protocols moderating the preparation of food and its consumption. Amongst other ramifications, this had the effect of restricting table-fellowship to those of similar discipline and this, by implication, led to value judgements being made about who should be considered a faithful Jew and a worthy recipient of God's favour – as a number of the conflict stories in the Gospels attest (Mark 7.1-5).

All this constitutes the background against which we need to interpret Jesus' understanding of food and of shared meals. The Gospels report many occasions when he eats in the company of various groupings. As we would expect, Jesus dines with friends and disciples, but possibly also with debating-partners and enemies. Even more surprisingly, he offers hospitality to those considered unworthy company, as well as to vast crowds. In the light of what we know of the Qumraners and the Pharisees, Jesus' indiscriminate practice of eating with all and sundry is itself insightful, suggesting that he saw meals as a source of inclusion rather than exclusion. This clearly caused controversy:

And as he sat at dinner in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were also sitting with Jesus and his disciples - for there were many who followed him. When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?' When Jesus heard this, he said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.' (Mark 2.15–17; Matthew 9.9–13/Luke 5.27–32; also Matthew 11.19/Luke 7.34; Luke 15.1–2)

The issue at stake here is probably one of purity, with Jesus purposefully celebrating the purity of all God's people through his open-tabled commensality and, by implication, challenging any attempt to limit access to God's blessings on the basis of ritual status, moral rectitude or any other grounds

This daring initiative is confirmed by his readiness to eat with 'sinners', an epithet which presumably denotes the value judgement of one group upon another. The attitude of Pharisees towards those refusing to observe their tithing and purity regulations is one possible scenario (J D G Dunn).

Another more radical one is that 'sinner' is being used here in a quasi-technical sense to refer to Jews who willingly committed sin and transgressed the commandments whilst refusing to repent (E P Sanders). If this latter proposal is correct, then Jesus welcomed to his table not only ordinary Jews who lacked the opportunity or inclination to embrace the strictures of movements such as the Pharisees, but also those who were morally bankrupt and depraved.

The significance of who Jesus was willing to eat with is further underlined by the strategic role fulfilled by meals within his ministry. We only need to juxtapose the image of feasting in God's company as an expression of messianic or eschatological expectation with Jesus' convictions concerning the in-breaking of God's sovereign dispensation of salvation to recognize their function.

In truth, he could hardly have chosen a more potent vehicle for communicating his message. If God is present then the people must rejoice. If God's presence yields blessing then fasting gives way to feasting. And if God's forgiveness is prevenient then all must be welcomed and invited to take their place.

Within Jesus' ministry, meals take on a pronounced proleptic complexion, transporting the future into the present whilst drawing the present into the future as sacred hunger, temporarily sated, revives and yearns more deeply for consummation:

Quite outside the context of what became known as 'the last supper,' the practice of fellowship at meals within Jesus' movement in its formative period forged a link with the kingdom, such that the promise of God's final disclosure on behalf of his people was as ardently and carelessly anticipated as the next dinner [. . .] Within Jesus' movement, the bread which sustains us and the wine which rejoices us are taken as a foretaste and a warrant of the kingdom which transforms us. (B D Chilton)

For Jesus, the inclusiveness of his table-fellowship, in conjunction with the highly symbolic and sacramental nature of eating, drinking and communing together, embodied essential characteristics of God's vision for humanity - reconciliation and peace, generosity and abundance, trust and openness, equality and justice, belonging and mutual obligation, worship and joy - and enabled others to tangibly participate in that vision. In this way, they become potent expressions of divine forgiveness as Jesus, in God's name, extends hospitality.

Furthermore, by rooting divine encounter within human experience at the table, Jesus purposefully establishes another means of access to God and context where love incarnationalism can be practised. Through doing so, he may even have been attempting to establish, as Bruce Chilton has suggested, an alternative 'altar', not mediated by religious professionals nor restricted to the pure nor requiring bloodletting and sacrifice; but one open to all and sundry whatever their condition.

And if this included unrepentant Jews who wilfully disobeyed God's commandments, Jesus was, in effect, challenging the very existence of the Temple and its soteriological significance. A deduction which, perhaps, is confirmed by his symbolic actions of cleansing and judgement within the Temple (Mark 11.15-19), as well as by the so-called mountain-moving logion, 'Truly I tell you, if you say to this mountain, "Be taken up and thrown into the sea," and if you do not doubt in your heart, but believe that what you say will come to pass, it will be done for you' (Mark 11.23). There can be little doubt that the

mountain in question is the Temple mount; according to Jesus, faith overthrows such centralizing of divine presence and power.

Conclusion

It is now time to draw together the various lines of inquiry we have been exploring to see whether we have managed to address the three questions posed at the outset, namely

Can faith engender a quality of human being that is not only able to tolerate difference, but be enriched by it?

Can faith relate us to 'otherness' in a way that is expansive and integrative?

Can faith be a resource for encounter, reconciliation and mutual enrichment?

It seem to me that some progress has been made. Firstly, we have identified in Jesus' love incarnationalism a form of faith which is both wholly secular and wholly sacred.

'The first [commandment] is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.'

It is wholly secular in the sense that it is embedded in authentic human being; it is wholly sacred in the sense that it exposes us to encountering the other through personal relationships. I suspect there is a temptation for us here to collapse the first commandment into the second by assuming Jesus understood the fulfilment of the former to be exhausted through the fulfilment of the latter – thereby producing an enlightened humanitarianism without any recourse to transcendence.

To do so, however, would be to fail to account for one vital consideration, namely how Jesus was able to love not only the lovely and loveable (which, on a good day, most of us can muster), but also the unlovely and unlovable. What impetus drove him to love diseased, damaged and depraved people, many of whom evidently exploited his graciousness? Why did he risk infection, violence and destitution? What caused him to seek out such company and to share his life with them – quite probably at the expense of his own kith and kin? And how was he able encounter among them something of worth?

To my mind, Jesus' capacity for love discloses a transcendence which is especially pronounced in the way he is remembered as loving those whom there was no reason to love. More than that, those whom there was every reason not to love. How do we account for this? Can it all be put down to his compassion or moral outrage? That seems to me improbable. Here, of course, we can do no more than surmise, but is it not possible that, through his radical and evolving programme of love incarnationalism, Jesus encountered amongst the most unlikely of characters a presence that expanded and enriched his own human being? Could it be that through his willingness to love the other in the form of undesirable, antisocial and threatening nobodies he encountered love as transcendence, animating a quality of human being that so embodied love's essence as to be thought, by some, to be coterminous with it.

At this juncture, I am aware of reaching the limits of language, but let me offer one more attempt to express the inexpressible. What I'm proposing is that Jesus' radically openness engendered a quality of human being that was not only informed by the others he encountered but also the Other whom he encountered in their company, namely the ultimate source of human being, the transcendence that is love.

This prospect fits well with the relationally-constituted model of personhood introduced at the outset in that it recognises Jesus to be no less a product of the nexus of relationships and encounters constituting existence than the rest of us. Equally, Jesus demonstrates how faith can be an impetus for loving not only those who socially define us - family, friends, colleagues and so forth - but also those who, at one level, have nothing to do with us - the genuinely other 'others' - and yet, at a more profound level, can enrich us immeasurably. What is more, Jesus holds before us the intriguing possibility that through this wholly extravagant practice we gain access to resources capable of transcending difference, overwhelming division and drawing us into a greater integrity.

Now when Christian communities (or anyone else for that matter) embody this impetus of faith, giving expression to what I have inadequately described as love incarnationalism, they are, to my mind, probing the vortex of religion and bearing witness to a way of being human that is, I suspect, our only hope if the crises impressing themselves upon the human race with ever increasing urgency are to averted; and, equally, if we are to find in difference a source of life rather than a cause for hatred, division and death.