
Jesus and the Samaritan Woman

The Variable Geometry of Communication

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The present meditation is the result of a feeling of wonder. I am engaged in teaching and research in practical theology, and more specifically in the vast domain of communication, which I have practised and still practise in the form of written journalism and television production. Together with my associates on the committee and on the staff of the WCC Department of Communication I am much exercised by the question of the theological significance and operational import of this concept which specifically designates their service. What, in fact, is communication? That is their peremptory, urgent question.

One day — when? why? how? all of them unanswerable and unimportant questions — a feeling of wonder welled up. Re-reading the account of the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, the author was amazed to hear in the venerable text of the fourth chapter of the fourth gospel, one, two, nay a dozen forceful and relevant statements about communication. The author accordingly tried to express his wonder in writing, in the hope that the reader, too, would be prompted to wonder.

The author has not thought it useful to reproduce the text of the gospel itself. The reader should therefore read it for himself in his own Bible. On the other hand, he does think it useful to stress that this commentary is not a methodical exposition of the passage. The specialists of such exegesis, from Calvin to Bultmann, have been drawn upon, but not replaced. This commentary is the “appropriation” of a text. I have made my own the multiple questions and answers which the narrative contains and which it brings to life in the mind and heart of a reader.

Have communication, my dominant concern, and what Bultmann calls his personal “pre-comprehension”, played too great a part in my reading? The reader of this meditation must judge. He should know, however, that I have no illusions. As a westerner, of the Reformed church, I am not

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unaware that I express myself within the circumscribed domain of my own limits. But while I have no illusions, I am not without hope. I know that my readers, by becoming readers of the gospel itself, will discover there still more questions and answers, which will complete and correct those they are about to read here.

In this way the process of appropriation by which a text of the past becomes once again living speech for today, will continue to go forward to the utmost advantage of Christian witness.

1. Perverted communication, or poisoning

Jesus goes away. He deliberately chooses to depart, to leave Jerusalem and to go to Galilee through Samaria. He decides on this when he learns that "the Pharisees had heard that he was making and baptizing more disciples than John". "Although", the evangelist notes, "Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples."

Jesus departs because in Jerusalem communication about him has been perverted. This is what happens once information is falsified. Public rumour has alerted the Pharisees to the success of Jesus and his disciples. Now rumour is a capricious and unpredictable creature, who utters and transmits true and false indifferently. It is always important to check her statements. The Pharisees apparently had not yet got round to doing so. They "had heard". The rumours were enough to alarm them and prompt Jesus to make off. For the benefit of his readers, the evangelist does what Jesus did not do for the benefit of the Pharisees: he corrects a mistake. Undoubtedly Jesus' disciples are baptizing more people than John; it should be noted, however, that Jesus himself did not baptize.

Information is falsified once it contains that mixture of true and false which is so easy to concoct if the aim is to manipulate opinion, which is so difficult for the historian or journalist to unravel, and from which it is so hard for its victim to extricate himself. The facts referred to by the evangelist are too little known for objective judgment on the substance of the case to be possible. The fact that Jesus decides to depart is sufficient, however, to indicate that the situation is serious. In Jerusalem a poisonous propaganda campaign is afoot against him, and is developing. Was it defamatory, slanderous? We don't know exactly. What is certain is that the information was adulterated, communication perverted.

In a case of that kind two attitudes are possible, either to face it out or to break off. Jesus breaks off for the moment. If one chooses to face it out, one states one's case, rectifies, if necessary takes legal action. One publishes "communiqués" for the purpose in fact of restoring the perverted "communication", so as to be able to appeal from ill-informed to better-informed opinion. We can imagine the terms in which such a communiqué might have been phrased: "The apostolic college points out that John baptizes with water and that Jesus baptizes with the Spirit. The analogy between these two operations does not justify any confusion between them. They must be carefully distinguished."

Occasionally Jesus does not hesitate to use communiqués, at times chosen by himself. Luke tells us that some Pharisees came to advise him to

leave Jerusalem because Herod was determined to kill him. This time Jesus decides to face it out, stay where he is and risk it. And he published this resounding communiqué: "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem'" (Luke 13: 32-33).

On occasion, then, when he chooses, Jesus publishes the communiqué that fits the circumstances. "I call a cat a cat, and Rolet a rogue," says Boileau. Jesus calls a cat a cat and Herod a fox. For all to know, he openly declares his intentions and his programme, including his imminent death which Herod desires and will obtain.

The episode narrated by Luke happened during Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem. That reported by John in his fourth chapter, on the contrary, is located at the start of his ministry. So there is a time for everything. A time to withdraw, and a time to face it out. A time to be silent, and a time to speak. When information is falsified and communication perverted, one must observe which time it is, and choose accordingly. The choice can only be made in relation to a history, an itinerary, a movement, and their purpose.

Here Jesus chooses to break off, to keep silent, to withdraw into himself and to withdraw to another place. He will choose confrontation later, when the time has come. For the moment, he breaks off. When information is falsified, communication is perverted. But it is not enough to state one's case, to rectify, to publish communiqués, or even to take legal action, in short to correct falsified information, for communication to be restored. For whereas it is sufficient for information to be false or even merely tendentious for communication to be perverted, it is not at all sufficient for information to be harmonious and sound. Even if the Pharisees had been correctly informed, they would nonetheless have rejected that genuine information. For information is never independent of the opinion people have of it.

To know is not to understand. There are people who know everything about everything, but understand absolutely nothing. Harmonious and healthy communication between people presupposes not only common knowledge but also common understanding of that knowledge. To inform is always to interpret reality, and interpretation always involves the difficult business of overcoming divergences of understanding.

Jesus withdraws from Jerusalem because he knows that the most honest, complete and exact information about him will not prevent his finding himself sooner or later in the centre of a merciless conflict of interpretation. To know is not to understand. Hans Conzelmann has well said that Jesus' adversaries "have been rightly informed. But they err because they think that with this knowledge they can pass judgment on Jesus' real nature."¹

¹ *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament*, trans. J. Bowden, London, S.C.M. Press, 1969, p. 338.

When the moment comes, Jesus will return and face it out. At the moment of his trial, poisonous allegation will reach its peak. Adulterated information in which truth and falsehood are inextricably combined, will entangle him like a net its prey. Perverted communication will finally lead to death, the death of the cross.

2. Everyday communication, or personal relations

Jesus is passing through Samaria. About midday he halts at Jacob's well. And the evangelist is going to bring us into another dimension of communication. After the public aspect of rumour, news, poisonous allegation and conflicting interpretations, we now see the private aspect of communication. By the side of Jacob's well, a relation between two persons will be established. They are not acquainted; they have never met. From the first moment they will identify one another; but only in part. Their relation at first will take the form of that everyday banal, down-to-earth communication which we all practise day after day in countless ways.

Jesus is tired; Jerusalem is already thirty miles or so away. He sits down, alone, on the edge of the well. His disciples have gone to the town in search of food. A Samaritan woman arrives to draw water. Jesus has no means of quenching his thirst, whereas she has a bucket. So he says to her: "Give me a drink." He says it more or less as we say: "Excuse me, could you tell me the way to the station?", or, at a bus stop: "Excuse me, could you let me have some change?"

Personal relations begin here on the level of everyday communication, that of commonplace utilitarian exchanges. Most often, personal relations remain on this level and everyday communication remains superficial. It sometimes happens, however, that relations become more intense, deeper, acquire more character, and then communication assumes the substantial character of interpersonal encounter, genuine meeting face to face. Experience shows that the solidest, strongest and deepest communication can deteriorate and be vulgarized to such an extent that it is no more than a superficial, merely functional communication. Behind their everyday masks, friends, or husbands and wives, may in fact hide, retreat, while their deep personal relationship wastes away and dies.

The contrary can also happen: the most commonplace communication may expand to become suddenly firm and substantial. That clearly is what happens in the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

The question of questions in this respect is to know why. Why does this metamorphosis of communication occur? On what conditions will superficial encounter be transformed into one of substance?

Encounter with others can be described and analysed laterally by recourse to all the means of inquiry that the human mind has contrived. And experimental psychological, sociological and psycho-sociological research does in fact provide illuminating information on the subject. We shall have occasion later to observe this. Even here we may note forthwith that encounter with others obviously requires a certain capacity for attention. The Samaritan woman is attentive. We shall see how she at once perceives the obstacle that comes between her and Jesus, namely, the fact that

he is Jewish while she is not, and how, too, her astonishment itself makes her susceptible to encounter with others. Capacity for attention, sensitivity — these from the first are the obvious conditions needed for meeting others. The psychologist Carl Rogers in recommending the practice of “empathy” no doubt intends in this sense to promote encounter with others, for what it involves is respect for the other’s internal frame of reference and care not to impose on him a different one from outside, while feeling the feelings which are his.

Jesus would have been a bad Rogerian, however. The gospel conversations, in fact, notably those reported by John and even more especially those with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, testify that he accomplishes only two-thirds of Rogers’ programme. He practises empathy. He perceives and respects the internal frame of reference of those to whom he is speaking. On the other hand, he does not submit to Rogers’ third precept, which is that of non-directedness. On the contrary, he does direct the attention of his interlocutors authoritatively towards a new horizon of their existence, towards a possibility offered them to live differently. Jesus does not hold out to Narcissus a mirror to enable him to be even more self-regarding. He offers him an icon, that is to say an original image expressing the invitation and demand for an unheard-of metamorphosis. He is not concerned to enable the old Adam to function better or less badly, but to bring about the emergence of a new Adam.

Lateral description and analysis of encounter with others are illuminating. It is doubtful, however, whether they are sufficient to account for what in the last resort can only be known from within, in the very act by which one human being makes himself effectively present to another. The reality of a presence to a large extent escapes our descriptive and analytical grasp.

So much so that it seems to us, as it does to Gabriel Marcel, that we cannot speak of it except in terms of “presence as a mystery”.² In that philosophical meditation, which he describes as “meta-sociological” and which outlines “a metaphysics of hospitality”, Gabriel Marcel emphasizes the difference of register that separates object and presence: “The fact is that the notion of the *object*, as such, is linked in our minds with a whole set of possible practical operations... that can be taught and that can thus be regarded as generally communicable. But these do not apply, in any sense at all, to the notion of the *presence* as such. It would be quite chimerical to hope to instruct somebody in the art of *making his presence felt* ...”³

Gabriel Marcel refers to the simple direct experience familiar to everyone. “We can, for instance, have a very strong feeling that somebody who is sitting in the same room as ourselves, sitting quite near us, someone whom we can look at and listen to and whom we could touch ... was not really *present* there, that his *presence* did not make itself felt... Between ourselves and him a kind of physical, but merely physical, communication is

²*The Mystery of Being*, Vol. 1, Reflection and Mystery, trans. G. S. Fraser, London, 1950, pp. 197-219.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 205-206.

possible... One might say that what we have with this person... is communication without communion: unreal communication, in a word. He understands what I say to him, but he does not understand *me*.”⁴ These words we exchange, which link us and yet separate us, have the effect of making me a stranger to myself. “The opposite phenomenon, however, can also take place. When somebody’s presence does really make itself felt, it can refresh my inner being; it reveals me to myself, it makes me more fully myself than I should be if I were not exposed to its impact.”⁵

There is a mystery and not merely a problem of presence, because “the very act by which we incline ourselves towards a presence is essentially different from that through which we grasp an object... a presence is something which can only be welcomed or rebuffed; but it is obvious that, between the two notions of... welcoming and seizing, there is a fundamental difference... of attitude.”⁶

No doubt the poetic mode is what best enables this mystery of presence to be expressed. And the biblical tradition is indeed rich in evocative poetical passages well fitted to awaken and renew the sense of that mystery of presence which the most commonplace everyday encounter can suddenly awaken in us. For biblical tradition witnesses to the encounter which forms the basis of the theological doctrine of humanity: that of the living God who in the covenant gives us our identity by speaking to us, by making his presence known, by postulating through the “I” which he utters, the identity of a “thou” to greet him and respond. Jacob’s wrestling with the angel in Genesis 22 is no doubt the most fascinating, typical and most pregnant with meaning of all these great poetical texts. So we shall ask a Jew to conclude this section of our meditation: “For those who stand in it (sc. love) and behold in it, human beings emerge from their entanglement in busy-ness; and the good and the evil, the clever and the foolish, the beautiful and the ugly, one after another become actual and a You for them; that is, liberated, emerging into a unique confrontation.”⁷

3. Impossible communication, or the walls of separation

Those who live in love “see face to face”, the good and the bad, the Jew and the Samaritan. That is the case with Jesus; he sees the Samaritan woman face to face, “standing out distinctly from the universal bustle and confusion”, and says to her: “Give me a drink.” Charles Dodd marvels at this ease, “the ease with which Jesus broke down the wall of partition which the hatred of centuries had erected between Jew and Samaritan”.⁸

Walls of separation do in fact exist between people, walls so thick and high as constantly to make communication impossible. Between men and women, between generations, between nations, these walls rise and rise again as soon as they are destroyed. Scarcely had the Siegfried and

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

⁵ *Idem.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 207-208.

⁷ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York, Charles Scribners, 1970, p. 66 — slightly altered.

⁸ *The Gospel of St John*, London, 1904, p. 133.

Maginot lines been dismantled after the Second World War than the Berlin wall was built. Not only do the walls make communication impossible, but what is more dramatic, they mark it out as undesirable. Refusal to communicate with others is one of the reasons, not really avowable and rarely admitted, but powerful and obvious, which one may have for identifying oneself as a specific person and worthy of respect. I do not communicate, therefore I exist.

In this case, between Jesus the Jew and the woman of Samaria, the walls of separation are high and thick. Ethical, cultural, religious, they are solid, and the Samaritan knows it. Hence her surprise: "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" For the less informed reader the evangelist (or a gloss) points out "for Jews have no dealings with Samaritans". And for readers who might be inclined to minimize the importance of this, Bultmann for his part points out that for the narrator and his public it was clear "that Jesus' request for water signified an abandonment of the Jewish viewpoint",⁹ but that that question had become unimportant for John: "Its place is taken by the characteristic question of Johannine dualism, whether Jesus' gift is of the earth or of God. Beside this, the question of the Jews and the Samaritans fades into insignificance... The old distinction between Jews and Samaritans had lost its force in the light of the revelation which confronts man in Jesus."¹⁰

The distinction had lost its force, the wall has become insignificant for the narrator. But for the primitive community the distinction was fundamental, and the wall insuperable, so much so that, according to Matthew, Jesus sends the twelve on the mission with the injunction: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (10: 5). Luke, too, notes that Jesus, coming from Galilee to Jerusalem for the last time, sends messengers to a village of the Samaritans, "but the people would not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem" (9: 53). This shows just how provocative the parable of the good Samaritan was which Luke reports in the next chapter, deliberately provocative on Jesus' part. To hold up the example of a Samaritan as fulfilling the divine will better than a priest and a Levite of the house of Israel, was in fact deliberately to put a stick of dynamite in the wall of separation.

Jesus' action consists in destroying the wall of separation, in raising the age-old ban, in making communication possible between people separated by their ethnic, cultural and religious traditions. Like all the New Testament writers each in their own way, John testifies to what it is in no way exaggerated to call a revolution, and a radical one at that. The author of the Letter to the Ephesians, for instance, testifies to this with incomparable force when he says of Christ: "He is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility" (2: 14).

In commenting this text, Charles Masson quotes a sentence of the *Letter to Aristaeas* which illustrates not only the height and thickness of the

⁹*The Gospel of John*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1971, p. 178.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 179.

wall of separation, but also and above all the satisfaction and sense of security which it procures: "Our wise legislator enclosed us with impenetrable fences and iron walls, so that we might not mix at all with any of the other nations, keeping ourselves pure in body and soul."¹¹

This if ever is the place to acknowledge that *corruptio optimi pessima*, the worst corruption is that of the best things. For the wisdom of the legislator is wholly contained in the statement of the commandment of love, a living emanation of the living God. And love, far from raising walls of separation, works on the contrary to destroy them, so that every one, freed from the universal confusion, may see the neighbour in humanity face to face.

"Give me a drink." "How is it that you, a Jew, asks a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" The two speakers by the side of Jacob's well have a collective history behind them, and it is easy to imagine how heavily it weighed on them.

They also have a personal history behind them. We do not know that of the Samaritan woman, though we hear something of it subsequently. As for that of Jesus, it has already assumed the form of a combat. The ease, peaceful or polemical, with which he passes through or overturns walls of separation, identifies him as one who has taken the measure of persons and things in the accomplishment of his mission. That mission is the combat he is pursuing, of light against darkness, truth against error and falsehood, sincerity against hypocrisy. It consists in giving a voice to those who have no voice, in making clear what is confused, in promoting true human relationships, in denouncing idols and bringing to light God's icons in this world. He establishes communication between people as a new covenant, by promoting in them the new humanity, freed from the baleful power of separation and possessed by the beneficent power of reconciliation and peace.

4. Verbal communication, or language and speech

Everything begins here — we must briefly note, because the narrative does not prompt one to linger over it — by what nowadays is usually called "non-verbal communication". The Samaritan woman at once identifies Jesus as a Jew. Non-verbal communication always precedes and constantly accompanies verbal communication. How does she immediately identify him? The evangelist is not interested in the question. From the very first words — "Give me a drink" — the language and accent probably gave her unmistakable clues. Even before that his clothes had no doubt marked him out, and that indefinable something which enables one, for instance, in the streets of Geneva to distinguish a Frenchman from a Swiss in nine cases out of ten. The attention focused nowadays on non-verbal communication undoubtedly presents an interpretative key to the gospel narratives which has so far been too little used. The gospels contain gestures, actions and various signs which precede, accompany and confirm the express statements, or which, on the contrary, weaken or invalidate them. "They preach and do not practise." That is how Jesus' terrible imprecations against the

¹¹ *L'épître aux Ephésiens*, Neuchâtel, Delachaux et Niestlé, 1952, p. 165.

Pharisees begin (Matt. 23: 3). Contradiction between verbal and non-verbal communication deserves condemnation, because it is deceitful; its name is hypocrisy.

But now Jesus and the Samaritan woman have begun their conversation. They have moved from non-verbal to verbal communication. They are speaking to one another by means of language.

Language nowadays has become the topic of an essential scientific, philosophical, theological debate, on which what understanding we have of communication between human beings depends. Jesus says: "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink', you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." If you knew the gift of God... Language itself in the Old Testament was understood to be a gift from God. We read in Genesis: "So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air and brought them to the man to see what he would call them... The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air and to every beast of the field..." (2: 19-20). Man received the power to name the creatures and the gift of developing language, that universe of signs which ensures his mastery over the creation and constitutes the chief instrument of communication between persons.

Language today is the focus of a group of positive sciences with ever-widening fields and ever more varied methods: linguistics, sciences of natural languages, semiology, science of signs, logic, science of artificial languages. And these various disciplines are established on the basis of methodological decisions the importance of which is considerable for our understanding of communication. I have dealt with this at greater length in *Quand je parlerais les langues des hommes ou le service de la communication* ("If I speak in the tongues of men" or "The service of communication")¹² and from this I resume the essential, that is to say two main axes. The system of signs is treated in linguistics as an autonomous, anonymous, self-supporting phenomenon. As a result, the personal speaker is thrust aside, put in parenthesis, or even eliminated. Lévi-Strauss, who employs structural analysis in linguistics and ethnology, unceremoniously dismisses the personal subject to the cloakroom: "Structuralism puts man back into nature... and makes it possible to prescind from the personal subject, an intolerable spoiled child who has held the stage too long..."¹³ That is the first axis. The second is that the system of signs in linguistics tends to minimize historical understanding by making the state of a system and not change the prime object to be investigated and understood; this means the primacy of synchrony over diachrony.

These two axes, which may be acceptable within certain limits from the point of view of method, cannot be philosophically justified without resort to quite illegitimate means. Paul Ricoeur shrewdly observes that in Lévi-Strauss' field of research they are more adequate than in other fields: "In the domain of early totemism, we are dealing with myths which are weak in

¹²Geneva, Labor et Fides, 1975.

¹³*L'homme nu*, Paris, Seuil, 1951, p. 570.

semantics and strong in syntax, which lend themselves very well to structural analysis"; on the other hand, and that is what interests us here, "in the domain of the ancient Middle East... the mythical basis lends itself more to an interpretation of contents, because the syntactic organization is weak, and correlation with the natural and social classifications is very flexible; the semantic wealth on the other hand is so great that their deep meaning could survive and come to form part of new contexts..."¹⁴

Examination of the texts shows quite plainly that in reading gospel testimonies it is necessary to give priority to "an interpretation of contents". A personal subject expresses himself here, and does so "with authority, and not as the scribes" (Matt.7: 29). He expresses himself personally, and does so in terms of change: something new is announced, proclaimed, attested.

"You have heard that it was said to the men of old... but I say to you...." This solemn declaration, uttered five times in the fifth chapter of Matthew's gospel, makes clear both the personal subject who is speaking and the change which his words attest and bring about. The upshot, as regards reading these texts, is that two lines of inquiry are unmistakably the most appropriate: the person speaking is more important than the language to which he has recourse, and historical change, or diachrony, is more important than the stability of structures, or synchrony.

Perhaps even more than Matthew, John makes this choice of method indispensable. "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink', you would have asked ..." The whole point is to know who is speaking here, who this subject is who in such a strange way is claiming the attention and trust of the woman he is addressing. It is emphatically a case of knowing who is speaking, and also of knowing whether he can effectively claim to bring something different and greater than the men of old: "Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this well?" Jesus answers unambiguously: Jacob our father and his well leave you thirsty, but "whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst". The subject speaking and the change he produces are both in the foreground. "Ego eimi" : "I am": the Christ of the fourth gospel often utters these two words. He will use them in a moment in reply to the categorical statement of the Samaritan woman. She tells him: "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes he will show us all things." And he answers: "Ego eimi, o lalôn soi": "I who speak to you am he."

Martin Buber has shown in an unforgettable way in *I and Thou*, that Jewish tradition is preeminently a personalizing one, by which a people emerging slowly and with difficulty from all the anonymous cultural, linguistic, mythological, religious and political systems of reference which form the social fabric of nations, arrived at the point of saying, before the face of God, I, Thou and We. And this tradition gave a place of equal importance to memory as to hope, that is to say, to those meaningful historical events on the occasion of which the people of God advanced a stage further towards personal identity: the Exodus, the Exile, the Return. In this

¹⁴"Langage et parole", in *Exégèse et herméneutique*, Paris, Seuil, 1971, p. 309.

tradition, the advance and historical character of the human person impose a specific reading of the texts which bear witness to it and express it.

That does not mean that linguistics will be purely and simply excluded from the method employed. Here, too, Ricoeur has said the essential: "The structural point of view must be incorporated into interpretation in one way or another." In fact, and we shall have to return to this with reference to water and the Spirit, "the same symbols, such as water, and fire, can mean anything and everything... It is always as an ordered polysemy in a dominant structure that a symbol means something."¹⁵

The science of language will, however, remain secondary in comparison with interpretation of speech. Hermeneutics will prevail over linguistics. The fact of making a statement will preserve priority over the fact of utterance. For the logos "bears the weight of meaning, of communication, of expression. I aim at something in reality, I address someone, and at the same time I manifest my own intention, that which constitutes me a speaking subject." In every case it is a matter of effecting once more "the passage from language, a system of signs, to speech, the actual occurrence of discourse".¹⁶

Someone is there, speaking to me, speaking to us. We are not dealing with a text, except in a subordinate way, but with a person. The text is only the sign of a presence to which it points, to which it bears witness, which it attests and signifies. A presence without which it is nothing more than "a purple shroud in which the dead gods sleep" (Renan).

Someone is there, speaking to me, speaking to us and opening to us not a new science suited to grasping new objects, but new knowledge of a kind that can open to us the relation which establishes and restores what is human. A presence which is certainly declaring something, but whose statements are only meaningful because of the presence.

5. Communication in dialogue, or personal encounter with others

Verbal communication, at once "system of signs" and "occurrence of discourse", began between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. It takes the form of a dialogue. The conversation, as we have already noted, is not of the Rogerian type: Jesus does not seek to hold up a mirror, but rather an icon, to the woman he is talking to. His intention is not in fact therapeutic but soteriological.

The dialogue which ensues is not of the Socratic type either. Socratic dialogue is epistemological and pedagogical. In its kind, as Plato fashioned it, it remains an unsurpassable model. It has been less well done, often much less well done, in certain philosophical or catechetical traditions, when dialogue became the rhetorical form of intellectual dogmatism. It has never been better done. That dialogue in which master and disciple jointly engage opens to them the possibility of attaining knowledge. It is the way of ways to bring man further towards truth, in accord with the famous precept: "Know thyself."

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 308.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

In the gospel of John knowledge (gnosis) is accomplished in "what we usually, clumsily, call the 'communion' of the Shepherd with his sheep, or of the Son with his Father".¹⁷ the knowledge of a unique and revealing destiny which gives us the opportunity to attain knowledge of God, of the world and of ourselves.

As a soteriological dialogue, dialogue with Christ is the decisive moment of an encounter with another (must we say with the wholly other?) who opens out a new horizon to us. And because it constitutes the decisive moment of an interpersonal encounter, dialogue with Christ brings the two characteristics of all authentic dialogue to maximum intensity.

In the first place its characteristic as confrontation. Jesus and the Samaritan clash, and do so harshly. In his commentary on the fourth gospel Calvin brings out its harshness very clearly, whereas other commentators, over-impressed by the pastoral aspect of the scene, tend to blur it. "You ask me for a drink, me a Samaritan?" For Calvin, she "jeers at Christ by speaking like this, as if she were saying: What! Is it licit to ask me for a drink, since you people regard us as so ungodly?"¹⁸ And later, when she asks him whether he thinks himself greater than Jacob, "she is jeering and gibing at him. She understood perfectly well that Christ was speaking metaphorically, but she retorts sarcastically with a contrary figure as though she were saying that he is promising more than he can accomplish."¹⁹ Later still, when she asks him to give her the water he offers, so she will no longer have to come to the well for water, "there is no doubt that this woman knows quite well that Christ is speaking of spiritual water, but because she despises him, she considers all his promises futile."²⁰ Mockery and scorn: the dialogue has begun, the confrontation is under way.

Jesus for his part attacks her openly: on the respect due to Jacob, one of the patriarchs, which he declares out of date; on her marital status which he discloses; on salvation which "comes from the Jews". True dialogue is confrontation, here a radical one.

And because it is confrontation, true dialogue produces change; that is its second characteristic. It changes those who engage in it. Genuine dialogue can lead neither to a facile consensus nor to one-way proclamation, nor to conciliatory syncretism, nor to intransigent orthodoxy. True dialogue leads to the indeterminate. The partners change each other and only the end of their confrontation shows where their dialogue has led. The Samaritan woman will emerge from this dialogue changed. The narrative will emphasize this. Jesus, too, will emerge changed. The disciples will be surprised. They had left him tired, hungry, thirsty; they find him strengthened, his thirst quenched, fed. Jesus' dialogue with his contemporaries in the long run will bring radical changes; it will be crucifying.

People tend to contrast proclamation and dialogue. That is a superficial and illusory antithesis. The WCC Uppsala Assembly rightly said: "A

¹⁷Pierre Bonnard, "Connaître Dieu selon le quatrième évangile et la gnose hellénistique", *Cahiers bibliques de Foi et Vie*, No. 3, 1965, pp. 489-490.

¹⁸*Commentaires du Nouveau Testament*, Geneva, Labor et Fides, 1968, Vol. 2, p. 102.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 105.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 106.

Christian's dialogue with another implies neither a denial of the uniqueness of Christ, but rather that a genuinely Christian approach to others must be human, personal, relevant and humble... Each meets and challenges the other... As Christians we believe that Christ speaks in this dialogue, revealing himself to those who do not know him and correcting the limited and distorted knowledge of those who do."²¹

That is well said, but it is not enough. For what has to be clearly realized is that everything is at stake here in terms of being, not of having. Christians do not "have" the truth, because truth does not belong to the order of possession. Jesus never said "I have the truth". What he said is quite different: "I am the truth" (John 14: 6). "Christ does not bring truths which one can acquire; he is the truth. He uncovers the human condition and reveals man to himself."²² Truth is of the order of being.

6. Poetic communication, or symbolic expression

The whole first part of the dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is centred on water: the water of the well which Jesus asks for and the living water which he offers her. According to whether one regards the Samaritan as mocking and scornful (Calvin), or ignorant and superstitious (Loisy), one will think that she does not want to understand, or on the contrary that she quite simply cannot understand, that Jesus is speaking of water in a symbolic sense.

Even if the reader of the Gospel of John wished to, he could not make any mistake: water is the symbol of the Spirit. That is made perfectly clear three chapters later when Jesus, back in Jerusalem again for the feast of Tabernacles, chooses the most solemn day of the festivities, the last, which is a day of libations, to proclaim in the Temple: "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink, and let him who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water' ". And so that no one will fail to understand, the evangelist notes: "Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (7: 37-39).

The symbolic meaning opens a domain of expression and interpretation which transforms, as equally inadequate, both the literal and material and the magic and sacred meaning. The Samaritan woman appears at first, whether slyly or stupidly, to understand that Jesus is still talking about the water of the well, literally and materially, whereas that is quite obviously no longer the case: "Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep; where do you get that living water?" And then, after the ritual allusion to Joseph, she seems to go to the other extreme and express "the naïve idea of a marvellous elixir"²³, which Jesus whom she now regards as a magician, could provide for her: "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw."

²¹ *The Uppsala Report 1968*, ed. N. Goodall, Geneva, WCC, 1969, p. 29.

²² Claude Molla, *Le quatrième évangile*, Geneva, Labor et Fides, 1977, p. 190.

²³ Alfred Loisy, *Le quatrième évangile*, Paris, 1903, p. 352.

Symbolic expression, the essential form of poetic communication, makes the whole creation, water and fire, air and earth, sing to the glory of God the creator and saviour. The material sense is transfigured, and the sacred sense, which in its way is materialist, is transcended: the symbol comes to life again where the idol dies. "... to the mind straining onward from Thing to Spirit, like St John, water becomes the expression of eternal life; and he exalts the well of water, 'springing up into everlasting life', above the venerated well of Jacob."²⁴

Even now we can say of the water what Jesus will say later to the Samaritan woman about the sacred mountains of Garizim and Jerusalem: "The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father... God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." There are no longer any sacred places: neither mountains nor springs. There are no longer any sacred times: the Sabbath is for us, not we for the sabbath. Jesus profanes Jacob's well and the Temple of Jerusalem, holy water and holy days. Materialisms, whether religious or dialectical, reify and ossify the creation. Here, however, the creation is set free and begins to sing again. Everything can once more become a symbol of the living god in the land of the living. Nothing is sacred any more, but everything can be sanctified.

Undoubtedly the baptism of water still bears that archetypal symbolic meaning which refers to the original chaos and to embryonic life. But the baptism of the Spirit operates in a different symbolic register, to which Jesus has recourse both by Jacob's well and on the last day of the feast of tabernacles. Water quenches thirst, satisfies man's thirst. "In this passage and in other similar ones," Calvin comments, "mention is made of the strength and secret vigour by which the Spirit restores life in us, maintains and perfects it."²⁵ "Christ", he continues, "willed to contrast water with this need and lack of all kinds of benefits for which the whole human race urgently yearns." Are we to say, then, that we are satisfied even now, and our thirst finally quenched? No, for Christ's grace "does not cease to flow, until the incorruptible life which has begun in us, is accomplished in every way." To describe this state, Calvin employs this admirable formula: "And so the faithful are thirsty all their lives, and may even experience very burning thirst, yet they abound in life-giving sap, because however little grace they may have received, it gives them continual vigour, so that they never wither entirely. Consequently, satisfaction is not opposed to desire, but only to dryness."

"The water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life," Jesus says of those who quench their thirst from him. And so the gift of the Spirit opens up an interior spring in us. That spring makes us independent of external sources of water. Within us a spring wells up and the inexhaustible Spirit constantly renews it.

²⁴G. Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. J. E. Turner, London, 1938, p. 60.

²⁵*Op. cit.*, p. 104.

Between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, everything began with the ambiguous dialogue about the water of the well, symbol of the Spirit. The ambiguity, polysemy, inherent in symbolic language, cannot be reduced by recourse to another language. For whereas the sign, in its linguistic use, names and designates, the symbol, in its hermeneutical use, points to and suggests.

We are here, in fact, on the verge of what can no longer or cannot yet be put into words. What Illich has very well said regarding the relation between people of different cultures applies even more to the relation between God and men: "To understand a being, we must learn not so much his words as his silences."²⁶ Someone who endeavours to listen to God's silence may receive a word of God. But that word, illuminating and life-giving, gives man no hold on God: it does not objectify. It is indicative and suggestive; it does not name and designate.

The upper limit of the domain of discourse is the ineffable. There the luminous and transfiguring power of God's love unfolds. Paul, though given to many words, knew just as well as John that the moment comes at this frontier of language when one must stop: "I heard", he tells us, "things that cannot be told, which man may not utter" (2 Cor 12: 4).

Between the unspeakable and the ineffable extends the limited domain of words. In that domain, lyric symbols point to and suggest what cannot be said.

7. Existential communication, or disclosure of man

The Samaritan woman does not, does not want to, or cannot understand what Jesus is talking about when he offers her living water. Or does she not want to appear to understand? Anything is always possible in such cases.

Be that as it may, Jesus changes the subject suddenly, abruptly, bluntly, with no beating about the bush. It is possible to discourse and debate endlessly about linguistics and hermeneutics, sign and symbol, water and its multiple meanings, Jacob and God. It can be done without involvement in the exchange, by setting oneself up as a spectator, holding back, never expressing what one has in mind, in one's heart of hearts. It may be that one has very little within one anyway, and so takes pleasure in intellectual games without roots in existence or consequences in life.

Words in that case, having been emptied, ring hollow. There is nothing in them, neither experience nor hope. One might as well rather say nothing than sink into rhetorical inauthenticity. When Jesus appears, the moment always comes, soon comes, when the futility of such chatter becomes intolerable. The moment comes when existential communication is established.

Enough talk of God. Let us now talk about you: "Go, call your husband, and come here." Jesus changes the subject and therefore his language. The speech about God pointed and suggested. The words addressed to the woman name and designate. Moreover they are suddenly imperative.

The woman replies with equal frankness: "I have no husband." Then Jesus continues: "You are right in saying 'I have no husband', for you have had five husbands, and he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly." The woman said to him: "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet."

Those who like allegory are free to speculate about the Samaritan woman's five husbands and to identify them as the five divinities which the pagan colonists in Samaria brought with them according to 2 Kings 17: 29-33. We shall leave them to their speculations. For just as symbol is both extremely rich and strictly limited, so allegory is both unlimited and poor. For in the sphere of allegory, everything is in everything and vice versa. Bultmann at all events is quite definite: "The evangelist does not use allegorization but rather symbolic representation as his main literary device."²⁷

What is the significance of this brief dialogue on the Samaritan woman's marital situation? Surely not a judgment on her "bad conduct". But rather three things essentially: a demonstration of omniscience, the disclosure of the human being and her becoming aware of the restlessness within her and of the aberrations of her longing for life.

Bultmann entitles this paragraph of his commentary "The Revelation as the Disclosure of Man's Being". That is the main statement here. Jesus' imperative prescription is first of all "a means of demonstrating his own omniscience".²⁸ But for the evangelist there is much more; it is a case of attesting that "the revelation is for man the disclosure of his own life".²⁹ "Man is made aware of the unrest of his life", man becomes aware of the restlessness which drives him from one apparent satisfaction to another, until he quenches his thirst by drinking the living water. The Samaritan woman has a stormy past, and her present is unsatisfying. By becoming aware of the restless state, will she herself perhaps discover the aberrations her desire to live have produced in her life? The fact that Jesus has shown her the truth about her situation is going to lead her to wonder whether he is not the Revealer. For when we become aware of our true nature, the Revealer can be recognized. In fact, "the attainment of knowledge of God and knowledge of self are part of the same process".³⁰

Existential communication is the decisive moment in the disclosure of the human being. The Samaritan woman is disclosed in the course of this dialogue, just as the Good Samaritan of the parable is disclosed in the course of his encounter with the injured man by the roadside on the way from Jerusalem to Jericho. For her, the meeting with Christ is the opportunity for him to show himself to be an unwitting accomplisher of God's merciful will. Similarly, the two who passed by before him but did not stop are disclosed: the priest and the Levite, both servants of God, were shown up instantly as inauthentic servants, hypocrites. As Camus described unforgettably in *The Fall*: his unhappy hero can never forgive himself for having

²⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 188.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

³⁰ *Idem.*

passed by and done nothing in the middle of the night when a man threw himself into the Seine.

John, who in a moment will tell us that "God is Spirit", will also tell us in the First of his Letters that "God is love". Jesus' omniscience, his lightning intuition, his capacity for discernment, his divinatory power, his gift of second sight, are in him a manifestation of love. The attention he devotes to the other person, the look he gives him or her, the experienced ear he lends, are certainly devoid of indulgence; John had already noted (2: 25) that he "needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man".

Now such knowledge of the human heart is the result of the generous insight of love, not of an inquisitorial power of condemnation. It does not aim at "obliging people to fear God as judge", but to persuade them to recognize him as source of authentic love, and as love itself. Faith does not awaken a sense of guilt, but an awareness of responsibility, which is quite different.

A biographer of St Francis of Assisi has said that he obtained extreme sacrifices from people with the air of someone offering them a kingdom. That is like the gospel: the existential communication which it brings about is the opportunity offered man to pass from death to life.

8. Theological communication, or the manifestation of God

We have spoken enough of God, Jesus intimates to the Samaritan woman. Let us speak of you now: "Go, call your husband, and come here." Now it is she who changes the subject: "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our father worshipped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." Enough talk of me. Now let us talk about God. The Samaritan woman is right: one must not linger too long over the disclosure of man's being. Soon one runs the risk of confining oneself and taking pleasure in what Bonhoeffer bitinglly called "the secrets known to a man's valet, that is ... the range of his intimate life, from prayer to his sexual life" which "have become the hunting-ground of modern pastoral workers".³¹

So let us now speak of God. Does God communicate himself? Can we reckon with a real communication of God himself? Can we really expect a strictly theological communication which is something quite other than a human discourse about God, worked out and uttered either by licensed theologians, who after all are only human beings, or by specialists in religious studies, whose learning testifies to their obvious knowledge, but also to the assumptions and limits of the culture to which they belong? The Samaritan woman, apparently, has no doubts that God communicates himself. At all events she does not deny it. She asks another question, about the place where such a communication occurs: is it Mount Garizim or Jerusalem?

Does God communicate himself? Where does he communicate himself? On a mountain? In my conscience? Through the text of the sacred

book? By the instrumentality of the infallible magisterium of a religious community?

Jesus' answer is in total contradiction to the prevailing ideas of his age and also to those of the modern age on the matter. "I know, says the Samaritan woman, that Messiah is coming." The evangelist, who employs the Semitic word "Messiah", translates into Greek for his readers: "He who is called Christ." So a Messiah is to come and "when he comes, he will show us all things". Jesus tells her: "I who speak to you am he."

The place of the communication: "I who speak to you am he"

God does in fact communicate himself. We can in fact reckon on a real communication of God himself, a strictly theological communication. And that communication is not accomplished, or only in a subsidiary way, either on a mountain, or in my conscience, or in a book, or by the instrumentality of a magisterium, fallible or infallible. It is accomplished in a person, the person at once historical and eschatological of the Messiah. "I who speak to you am he." In his previous answer, Jesus had just disqualified Jerusalem as well as Mount Garizim as places of God's communication: "The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth ... God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

He speaks with authority, assured in his statements, radically desacralizing the religious, cultural, political values in which the identity of his own nation is rooted. He speaks like someone with the competence and mandate to open up a new vista of truth, hope and faith to his nation and to all nations. His authority and assurance are those of a messiah, of the Messiah. But is this really the way in which God communicates himself?

"Messianism is a crime against humanity." This indictment, no less radical, comes from Mr Andras Hegedus, former Hungarian premier and as such a signatory of the 1955 Warsaw Pact. Under this resounding headline in *Le Monde* of 4 August 1980, Mr Hegedus described the two chief empires which at present share the political hegemony of the world, and denounced "this kind of messianism" which consists in believing oneself to be charged with "saving the world, which justifies almost any crime". *Almost* any crime? No doubt, as our age well knows, the qualifying "almost" is not needed: it does happen that through wanting — or claiming to want — to save the world, people put themselves in a situation of committing every conceivable crime without exception.

Messianism of that sort is not and cannot be the place of God's communication. On this point Christians and non-Christians will have no hesitation in agreeing. Nevertheless, Christians will still have to be able to demonstrate that another kind exists. For if it is evident, as we shall see, that the messianism of Jesus of Nazareth was not of that type, it is by no means evident that it has never been, and perhaps still is, that of the churches which claim to be his. Church history amply proves that to profess faith in Jesus as Saviour and as sole Saviour of the world, is to bear within oneself a redoubtable potentiality for being hood-winked into taking false messianism for true.

For a different messianism does in fact exist, an authentic place of authentic communication of God. The Semitic form "Messiah" is only used twice in the New Testament, here in the passage we are considering, and at the beginning of the same gospel (1: 41). The Semitic form is therefore deliberately used here, in order to signify a continuity but even more a contrast between its Jewish use and the use the nascent Church made of the Greek form, "Christ".

"We have found the Messiah," Andrew says to his brother, Simon Peter, at the beginning of the gospel narrative. And the evangelist even there at once explains by translating: "Which means Christ" (1: 41). And who is this Messiah? He of whom Philip, who like Andrew and Peter comes from Bethsaida, will say to Nathaniel the following day: "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (1: 45). On these two occasions, for Nathaniel first through a third party, then for the Samaritan woman directly, "Jesus discloses himself as the fulfiller of the expectation of the Jews and the Samaritans".³²

Now this fulfilment is such that it amounts to a metamorphosis. Jesus is and is not the expected Messiah. He is not so in the sense in which the figure of the Messiah, combining three great roles of priest, prophet and above all king, is that of a king who is earthly yet eternal, eternal yet earthly. Such a monarchy differs quantitatively, by its importance, extension and power, from ordinary monarchies, but does not differ qualitatively. In that sense, Jesus is not the awaited Messiah. For in fact he bears within him and brings with him an absolute qualitative difference. Soon, during a new journey in Galilee, after the great gathering of the people at which he performs the multiplication of the loaves, those present will say to one another: "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world! Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself" (6: 14-15).

The fulfilment and metamorphosis of messianism are now clear. Before Pilate, Jesus will express the meaning of this refusal of royalty, of a certain kind of royalty. "Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate asks. "My kingship is not of this world," Jesus replies (18: 33, 36). Jesus does not say, and the distinction is important: "My kingship is not *in* this world", but "is not *of* this world". Though exercised in this world, his kingship does not emanate from this world. It is qualitatively quite different from that of Herod, Pilate, Caesar. The metamorphosis has been accomplished. Jesus has no power, whether religious, legislative, executive or judicial. He has no political power and does not want any. But though without power, he is not without authority. On the contrary, and this is precisely the point, he is endowed with supreme authority, in the world and for the world. He exercises the ultimate, unsurpassable authority of love, such as is expressed in the celebrated Suffering Servant songs of the prophet Isaiah. The figures of the Messiah and the Servant unite, blend, merge in him.

And so the fulfilment and metamorphosis of messianism are completed in the narrative of Jesus' crucifixion. The metamorphosis is so radical that Jesus manifestly avoided using the title of Messiah, as bearing too many associations out of keeping with his own understanding of himself.

No doubt he preferred to use the title "Son of man", and the primitive Church that of "Lord" (the actual title of Caesar, the Roman emperor!). Paradoxically, however, it is the title of Messiah, in its Greek form, Christ, which ultimately prevailed, for ever.

Nature of the communication: the epiphany of Christ

The transformed messianism constitutes the authentic place of the authentic communication of God. That communication takes place in a person. "I who speak to you am he." As for the nature of theological communication, it takes the form of manifestation: in Jesus the Christ, God is manifested. In the prologue of his gospel, John presents Jesus as the one who, having dwelt among us, manifested the glory of God: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld this glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (1: 14). John, therefore, in presenting him who was to come, "makes him not only come and go, but also 'dwell among us'. The 'dwelling' is made vivid in narrative form, as an epiphany of the *theios aner* (divine man). Thus John supplements the incarnation christology with an epiphany christology."³³

Manifestation, epiphany: such is the nature of theological communication. What does this mean? It means that if perchance you feel the need to "prove" God, to yourself or to others, the best way to do it will not consist in working out an objectifying demonstration, which may very well simply lead to the manufacture of an idol. It will no doubt be to discern the signs of God's manifestation. If you are attentive, you will no doubt meet on your way two signs, or two "proofs": adoration, and the human face.

According to some commentators belonging to the Orthodox tradition, those are in fact the "proofs" that must be considered. It is well to listen to Orthodox commentators in dealing with the gospel of John, with which their tradition has deep affinities. So much so that, contrary to the prevailing view of western Protestant theology, Paul Evdokimov maintains that "the fourth gospel is perhaps more historical, more of the 'flesh' in the Semitic sense of the term than the Synoptics, for it deciphers more deeply all the manifestations of the Word made flesh"³⁴

Paul Evdokimov unhesitatingly affirms: "The existence of God is proved by adoration, not by proofs. That is the liturgical and iconographical argument. It is reached by a leap into manifest evidence, into Pascalian certainty."³⁵

Do we wish to "prove" God? Let us adore. Let us be among those worshippers of whom Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman, those "true worshippers who worship in spirit and truth". In this way God will be mani-

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

³⁴ *L'art de l'icône, théologie de la beauté*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1970, p. 93.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

fested in the world. And men and women who prefer, in the splendid expression of Jacques Brel, "those who give to those who explain", will be placed in the presence of what the apostle Paul calls a "demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor 2: 4), and not of a rhetorical display. Those innumerable men and women attest, openly or secretly, that "the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom 8: 19).

Do we want to "prove" God? Then let us adore. No, some will say, God is manifested by action, not by worship. To be sure, action flows from worship, otherwise adoration is merely psychological illusion and social alienation. And certainly Jesus warns us to be on our guard in this respect: "Not every one who says to me 'Lord, Lord', shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 7: 21). We undoubtedly stand in constant need of such a warning. But those people, especially among Protestants, who think that praise is a luxury, would do well to reread an author who is hardly likely to be suspected of succumbing to the spell of liturgical pageantry or mystical effusions, Karl Barth: "It is our office to praise God ... The community's ministry of witness has to fill a yawning gulf in the life of the world. What is more worthy or urgent for any man than to praise God? But the great majority of men seem not, or not yet, to do this. The community does, not reproaching others for their failure, nor of course posturing before them, but provisionally, in their place, anticipating what in the light of the consummation will one day be the work of all creation."³⁶

Adoration first of all. And then, the human face. Since Moses it has been known that the human face can become a manifestation of God. For the Book of Exodus tells us that when he came down from Mount Sinai carrying the two tables of the law, "Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God" (34: 29).

In our time, Olivier Clément in *Le visage intérieur* maintains that "the 'ultimate proof' of God for the woman and man of today is undoubtedly the human face when it is stripped of shams and lights up with a different light. When it begins to become an icon."³⁷

When the human countenance begins to be an icon, it becomes a manifestation of God, the "ultimate proof of God". This thesis deserves all the more serious attention as we now belong to a civilization of visual images, having passed, to use McLuhan's terms, from the Gutenberg to the Marconi galaxy.

For Olivier Clément, in fact, the icon (in the traditional Orthodox sense of sacred picture) "presents us the truth of the face, the truth which we glimpse when we see a sleeping child, or in moments of intense and silent trust of friendship or love".³⁸ The icon-like human face then becomes — in his forceful and beautiful phrase — an "epiphany of transcendence".³⁹

³⁶*Church Dogmatics*. Vol. IX, Part 3, Second half, para 72: The Holy Spirit and the Sending of the Christian Community, Edinburgh, T.&T. Clark, 1962, p. 865.

³⁷Paris, 1978, pp. 63-64.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 54.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 59.

The icon of Christ above all others is an epiphany of transcendence. But the action of the Spirit who is symbolized by the living water offered by Jesus to the Samaritan woman, makes every human face a potential icon: "Henceforward the Spirit is the secret, interior God who comes into us by the innermost centre, not as a face but a revealer of faces, not the holy Face but the holiness of every human face."⁴⁰

Every human face can become an epiphany of transcendence, a Christ-figure, a manifestation of God. Moses did not know that his face had become radiant because he had spoken with God. Those whom Christ gathers together according to the prophecy of the last judgment in Matthew 25, were unaware until they suddenly discover with astonishment, that they have or have not been a manifestation of God for their companions in life.

No one knows how the human condition is deciphered on her or his own face by the gaze of other people. What each can know is that what is at stake in our existence is the disfigurement or transfiguration of our own face. And what we can learn, by allowing the Spirit to work within us, is to look at the faces of others with eyes which reveal the icon of which they are unwittingly the bearers.

The face of a child or an old man, more than others, often allows the icon to break through by lighting up with "a different light" from that of the shams which do not yet mask them, or from which they are already freed. In a famous passage of *Terre des Hommes*, Saint-Exupéry tells how, walking down the corridor of a train at night, he was arrested by the face of a sleeping child: "What an adorable face... like a golden fruit... a musician's face, Mozart as a child." But already Saint-Exupéry senses that "Mozart is doomed": that transfigured face will be disfigured in this world, crushed by the "world's stamp-mill". "What disturbs me is Mozart murdered more or less in each of these human beings. Only the Spirit if it breathes on the clay, can create man."

In our civilization of the visual image, our sight is constantly put to the test. Do we recognize in the faces which we see on our television screens the icons of which for a fleeting moment they are unwittingly the bearers? Or do we see ourselves in them, as in a mirror?

We must look closely at these faces which day by day fleetingly fill our screens and invite our discernment. For it sometimes happens that suddenly the icon stands out, and God is manifested. We must watch closely so that the icon is seen as a manifestation of God, and does not degenerate into an idol.

Adoration, and the human face, are therefore two manifestations, two "proofs" of God. The reader will perhaps be astonished that a Reformed theological writer has not yet mentioned, and did not mention first of all, under the heading of manifestations of God, the word of God itself, the fundamental form of divine manifestation, that word of which the fourth evangelist speaks so majestically in his prologue.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 81.

We have not for a single moment lost sight of that preeminent manifestation of God in Jesus Christ. After all, the worship in spirit and in truth of the God who is Spirit, requires at its core this silent domain of attentive and loving hearing of the revealed word. Before becoming verbal utterance, invocation, prayer, praise, supplication, adoration, is hearing, listening to, knowing the word. And it is that word itself which makes possible and effective the recognition of the manifestation of God on the human face. For such recognition can only occur through and in the love which the word reveals and prescribes.

It will be remembered, too, that John calls "word" (logos) what Paul calls image (ikôn): Christ is "image of God" for Paul (2 Cor. 4: 4; Col. 1: 15), as he is the "word" in the prologue of the gospel of John. But with John that designation, more than that of image with Paul, assumes the value of a christological title: "the Logos is thought of a priori as a person... The statement 'Jesus is the Logos' is... meant literally, as a direct description of the [person] of Jesus."⁴¹ Adoration, the recognition of the icon of God in the human face, both occur on the basis and in the light of the encounter with the word, that is to say, with the actual person of Jesus Christ.

To confess Jesus as Saviour, and as sole Saviour of the world, we have recognized, is to bear in oneself the awesome potentiality of intolerance, fanaticism and crime. That is why it is important to draw the distinction both in theory and in practice, between true and false messianism. We have drawn the distinction in regard to messianism considered as a place of God's communication; we must now do so in regard to the communication of God considered in his own nature, which is the christological manifestation. Are worship in spirit and truth and the human face understood as an epiphany of transcendence, bound up with the uniqueness of Christ? If they are, does this not mean that the risk of intolerance and fanaticism reappears? And if they are not, is that uniqueness not destroyed?

Nothing of the sort. For in this matter we do not pass from the general to the particular, but on the contrary from the particular, from the unique, to the universal. General ideas on the conjugal relation give no one a real knowledge of conjugal love. Only those with living experience of a unique strong and intense conjugal relationship acquire such knowledge and hence are able to recognize, identify and discern conjugal love wherever it is manifested and whatever its forms.

So it is with the uniqueness of revelation and the universality of the manifestation of God. On this point as on so many others, Paul Ricoeur has perceived and expressed the essential: "The uniqueness of revelation and the universality of the manifestation reinforce one another. It is because I receive as a word worthy of belief that the Word has dwelt amongst us that at the same time and in the same breath I come to have trust in the universal manifestation of being."⁴²

All human faces become an epiphany of transcendence. Through Christ.

⁴¹Conzelmann, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

⁴²Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, p. 318.

9. Narrative communication, or Christian witness

Now the disciples return to the well from the town. Scarcely are they back when the Samaritan woman herself returns there, leaving her water jar. Once there she tells the people: "Come, see a man who has told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?"

The communication of the gospel can and must take various forms, and does in fact do so. It takes the form of teaching, according to Matthew: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (28: 19), of preaching according to Mark: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (16: 16), of witness according to Luke: "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1: 8).

Some, the Protestants, stress preaching, whether in its general, missionary sense (*Verkündigung*, proclamation), or in its particular sense, in worship (*Predigt*, the sermon). Others, the Orthodox, underline the importance of adoration, as we have seen with Paul Evdokimov, and speak of the "liturgy as communication of the gospel".⁴³

Independently of confessional distinctions and differences, all the churches today are questioning themselves about the communication of the gospel and about the methods of their apostolate. This necessary inquiry produces extremely different answers as a result of the gospel itself, first of all, for, as Bultmann commenting the dialogue of Jesus and the disciples on the sower and the harvester has shown, the gospel imposes its own special requirements in this respect: "Moreover just as Jesus' activity is not governed by the laws which apply to other human activity, so too the activity of those whom he sends is not governed by the laws of earthly harvesting. Their activity, too, has its own law, and it contradicts 'sound commonsense', for it is an eschatological event."⁴⁴

It is not only a matter of communicating a liberating message by the use of various methods assumed to be neutral and innocent, ranging ever more widely from group dynamics to the Pope's Easter Sunday blessing *urbi et orbi* in St Peter's Square broadcast worldwide on radio and television. It is a matter of communicating this liberating message in ways which are themselves liberating. Now while all means of communication may of course be employed, it cannot ever be taken for granted that they will be used in conformity with the liberating gospel itself.

That is why, and it will surprise no one, the present inquiry about the communication of the gospel receives such extremely different answers. For those answers are worked out and employed, not only in relation to the gospel itself and its intrinsic logic, but also in relation to their place of origin, to the context in which those who formulate them and put them into practice actually live. Some, for example, will take the view that the communication of the gospel is invalid unless accompanied by active participation in the struggles for political liberation which are being waged today by

⁴³Boris Bobrinskoy, in *Communion et communication*, Geneva, Labor et Fides, 1978, pp. 75-80.

⁴⁴*Op. cit.*, pp. 195-196.

the oppressed. Others on the contrary think that such "politicization" of the Church alters so seriously the communication of the gospel as to evacuate it of meaning, and that the very way in which the gospel is communicated should serve to liberate our contemporaries from the diabolical primacy of political powers which have themselves become a religion, a false religion.

Contradictions of this kind are frequent today and we are not going to solve them here! However, by examining how the Samaritan woman communicated the gospel we shall perhaps receive some fruitful enlightenment.

"Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" The Samaritan woman tells what had happened to her. She testifies to it. She invites her hearers to come and see for themselves this surprising man who has deciphered her existence. She challenges them by asking them to pronounce themselves on Jesus' identity.

The content of the communication of the gospel consists here in costly personal witness, and its form is a challenging narrative. In these two respects this communication constitutes a fundamental model to which necessarily every conceivable form of Christian witness has to be referred.

The Samaritan woman does not proclaim anything. She relates and questions. She does not teach. Calvin congratulates her on this: to those who would blame her for speaking too promptly and for overstepping the mark, he replies: "She would have acted inconsiderately if she had usurped the office of teaching; but now, since she only wishes to awaken the people of the town to hear the Christ speak, we do not say that having forgotten herself she goes further than she should. She simply serves as a trumpet or bell to make others come to Christ."⁴⁵

She does not preach or teach. She narrates, tells about herself, "without hesitating to relate the miseries and blots on her life". There is no question, of course, of suggesting here that all communication of the gospel must imitate this model, or that everyone at every twist and turn has a duty to speak about himself. The Christian movements which advocated such imitation and overvalued personal narrative witness (such as the Oxford Groups, and then Moral Rearmament) certainly produced some fine fruits, but also wrought some regrettable havoc and reduced the gospel to the dimension of a subjective experience.

On the other hand, what must be realized and which is patently evident in the narrative which John gives us of the return of the Samaritan woman to her people, is that the communication of the gospel is not in the first place a doctrine or a liturgy, but a history.

In this respect we must dissociate ourselves from Bultmann's comment on Jesus' declaration to the disciples: "Lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest." This vision of the future goes beyond what can be observed here and now (the wheat is still unripe) and gives us a presentiment of what we can hope for (the time of harvest is already in sight). It makes us able to interpret our condition in terms of preparation,

development, expectation and fulfilment. Nothing of the sort is the case, according to Bultmann: "In the eschatological event there is no preparation and no development; everything depends on the present moment of decision; what comes after or later does not come into view."⁴⁶

In reality, the communication of the gospel always involves personal witness, explicit or implicit, that is to say the existential involvement of the messengers of the gospel in the actual communication itself. It also always involves, expressly or not, a narrative dimension, because the gospel enters history and does so as an agent of change. Our personal history and our collective history are an integral part of our witness.

As a narrative communication, Christian witness will "not hesitate to tell of the miseries and blots" on the history of the Church and its members, otherwise no one will pay it any attention. And then, just as the Samaritans came to verify for themselves from Christ what the woman had narrated, our contemporaries for their part will perhaps want to verify what we say of Christ. When they do so, and appropriate the gospel in their turn, a change occurs. Having come to see whether he was not perhaps the Christ, the Samaritans were convinced: "We know, they say, that this is indeed the Saviour of the world." They acknowledge him, but give him a new name: Saviour, not Messiah. A purifying interpretation of his identity emerges. History takes a step forward, a new narrative begins.

10. Our daily bread and the fields white for harvest, or the secret and horizon of communication

Jesus met the Samaritan woman by the side of Jacob's well. By turns the conversation between them has been commonplace and existential, non-verbal and verbal, impossible and decisive. Speech-occurrence, real utterance, has vivified their language's system of signs. Through the confrontation of dialogue, disclosure of the human being, and symbolic expression, God has been manifested: "The hour is coming and now is", of the epiphany of Christ. And the Samaritan woman is suddenly transformed into a witness practising narrative communication, while the Samaritans, hearing her, appropriate her testimony. They verify it from Jesus himself. They make it their own: Jesus, Messiah, Christ, they now confess him to be the Saviour of the world.

We in turn have met and listened to Jesus and the Samaritan woman through the textual intermediary of the gospel of John. Their encounter was difficult yet fruitful. Ours with them has also been difficult: how can we be sure of understanding, interpreting and truly appropriating so rich a dialogue? Nevertheless for us, too, it has been extremely fruitful: how can we not learn from such a dialogue, what is the place and nature of God's manifestation? How can we not be changed ourselves, disclosed and involved in the narrative communication of Christian witness?

In conclusion it remains for us to speak of the secret and horizon of communication, our daily bread and the fields white for harvest.

⁴⁶*Op. cit.*, p. 199.

Everything began at the side of the well with the misunderstanding about water. And everything finishes there with the misunderstanding about bread. When they return from the town, the disciples urge Jesus to eat. He refuses: "I have food to eat of which you do not know." They mistake his meaning, just as the Samaritan woman had done, by taking the symbol in its material sense. Then Jesus explains: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work."

Such is Jesus' secret food, his daily bread, and ours. And that too is the secret of communication. In this world of the poisonous intoxication of crowds, of the walls of separation which divide peoples, of the superficiality of human relations, of the ambiguity of language, the future of communication between human beings belongs to those who do the will of God.

Immediate success is not for them, but ultimate success is. For the keys to communication are held by those who in their heart of hearts have devoted themselves to love. Here and now they have the daily bread for food, and the spring of living water to quench their thirst.

On the horizon here and now it is given to them to see the fields white for harvest. They pray and work, wait and hope. For they know that the time of maturation prepares that of fulfilment. They know that communication is only for a time, and that a day will come when communication will be no more, for it will be the time of communion.