

REMEMBER
JESUS
CHRIST

RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES
of FAITH IN OUR TIME

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press

the world” is faith in Jesus Christ: “Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:4-5).

Given our current situation, our first task is to make a great act of faith. “Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33), Jesus told us. He not only overcame the world of his time but the world forever in terms of what is impervious and resistant to the gospel in people. Therefore, we should not be afraid or resign ourselves in any way to the current situation. The recurring prophecies about the inevitable end of the church and of Christianity in a future technological society make us smile. We have a much more authoritative prophecy to hold on to: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Matthew 24:35).

We cannot, however, remain passive; we need to do something to respond in an adequate way to the challenges that faith in Christ is facing in our time. To *re-evangelize* the *post-Christian* world, I believe it is essential that we know what the apostles did to *evangelize* the *pre-Christian* world! The two situations have much in common. And this is what I would now like to try to highlight: What was the first evangelization like? How did faith in Christ overcome the world?

2. *Kērygma* and *Didachē*

All the New Testament authors clearly presuppose their readers’ knowledge of a common tradition (*paradosis*) that goes back to the earthly Jesus. This tradition has two aspects or components: a component called “preaching” or proclamation (*kērygma*) about what God did through Jesus of Nazareth, and a com-

ponent called “teaching” (*didachē*) that presents ethical norms for right conduct on the part of believers.³ Various Pauline letters incorporate this twofold structure, with *kērygma* in the first part and exhortation and practical advice flowing from it in the second part.

Preaching, or *kērygma*, is called “the gospel.”⁴ On the other hand, teaching, or *didachē*, is called the “law,” or the commandment, of Christ that is summed up as charity.⁵ Of these two, it is the first—*kērygma* or gospel—that gives the church its origin. The second—the law or charity—flows from the first and outlines an ideal of moral life for the church; it “forms” the faith of the church. It is his preaching that the apostle refers to when he distinguishes his work as a “father” in the faith in his meetings with the Corinthians from the work of the “teachers” who came after him. He says, “I became your father in Christ Jesus *through the gospel*” (1 Corinthians 4:15, emphasis mine).

Faith like that, then, arises only in the presence of *kērygma* or proclamation. Referring to faith in Christ, the apostle asks, “How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?” (Romans 10:14)—literally “without someone who proclaims the *kērygma* (*chōris kēryssontos*).” Paul concludes, “Faith comes from what is heard” (Romans 10:17), and “what is heard” refers precisely to the “gospel” or *kērygma*.

In his book *Introduction to Christianity*, Pope Benedict XVI, who was a professor of theology at that time, highlighted the profound implications of this fact:

The assertion “faith comes from what is heard” . . . illuminates the fundamental differences between faith and mere

philosophy. . . . In faith the word takes precedence over the thought In philosophy thought precedes the word; it is after all a product of the reflection which one *then* tries to put into words. . . . Faith on the other hand comes to man from the outside. . . . It is . . . not something thought up by myself; it is something said to me, which hits me as something that has not been thought out and could not be thought out and lays an obligation on me.⁶

Faith, then, comes by hearing the preaching of the word. But what exactly is the object of “preaching”? On the lips of Jesus, the good news that is the basis for his parables and from which all his teaching arises is, “The kingdom of God has come upon you!” But what is the content of the preaching by the apostles? The work of God in Jesus of Nazareth! That is true, but there is something even more specific that is the vital nucleus of everything and that, with respect to all else, is like the blade that goes before the plow to break up the soil so that it can turn over the ground and make a furrow in it.

That more specific nucleus is the exclamation “Jesus is Lord!” proclaimed and received in the wonder of a faith *statu nascenti*, that is, in the act of being birthed. The mystery of this word is such that it cannot be said “except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3). By itself, it leads whoever believes in his resurrection into salvation: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).

“Just as the wake of a beautiful ship,” Charles Péguy said, “grows wider and wider until it disappears and loses itself, / But begins with a point, which is the point of the ship itself,”⁷ so

too, I would add that the preaching of the church expands until it constructs an immense doctrinal edifice, but it begins with a point, and this point is the *kérygma*: “Jesus is Lord!”

What Jesus preached—“The kingdom of God is at hand!”—becomes, as the apostles preach it, the exclamation “Jesus is Lord!” However, there is no opposition but rather perfect continuity between the Jesus *who preaches* and the Christ *preached*, because to say “Jesus is Lord!” is the same as saying that the kingdom and sovereignty of God over the world has come to pass in the crucified and risen Jesus.

We need to understand this thoroughly to avoid an unrealistic reconstruction of apostolic preaching. After Pentecost, the apostles did not travel around the world just repeating, “Jesus is Lord!” Instead, what they did whenever they were about to preach the faith in a certain place for the first time was to go straight to the heart of the gospel, proclaiming two facts—Jesus died, Jesus is risen—and proclaiming the reason for each of these facts: He died “for our sins”; he was raised “for our justification” (see 1 Corinthians 15:3; Romans 4:25).

Paul records what he had proclaimed to the Corinthians when he first came to them this way: “Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received. . . . For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). This is what he calls “the gospel.” This is also the core of Peter’s sermons in the Acts of the Apostles: “You killed Jesus of Nazareth; God has raised him and made him Lord and Christ” (see Acts 2:22-36; 3:14-19; 10:39-42).

The proclamation “Jesus is Lord!” is clearly nothing but the conclusion, sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit, of this brief story told in an always lively, new way (even if it is substantially the same), and, at the same time, it summarizes the story and becomes operative in the one who hears it. “Christ Jesus . . . emptied himself . . . and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him . . . [so] that every tongue [will] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Philippians 2:5-11).

The proclamation “Jesus is Lord!” does not, by itself, constitute the entirety of preaching, but it is nevertheless its soul, so to speak, the sun that illuminates it. It establishes a kind of communion with the story of Christ through the “host” of this proclamation, and it makes one think by analogy of the communion that is achieved with Christ’s body through the host of the Eucharist.

To come to faith is the unexpected and wondrous opening of a person’s eyes to this light. Recalling the moment of his conversion, Tertullian describes it as a startling exit from the dark “womb of common ignorance . . . to the one light of Truth!”⁸ It was like the discovery of a new world. The First Letter of Peter describes it as being called “out of the darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9; see Colossians 1:12-29).

3. Rediscovering the *Kērygma*

Let us look at some essential characteristics of *kērygma*. As the exegete Heinrich Schlier has explained so well, it has an assertive and authoritative character—not a conversational or dialectical one. Thus, it does not need to justify itself with philosophical

or apologetic arguments; one accepts it or not—that is all there is to it. It is not something that we may dispose of, because it is *kērygma* that governs everything. It cannot be established by anyone, because it originates in God himself, thus becoming the foundation of existence.⁹ It is prophetic speech in the strongest sense of the term.

Celsus, a pagan in the second century, in fact writes indignantly that Christians act like people who believe without reason. He is affronted that some of them do not wish to discuss the reasons for and against what they believe but keep repeating, “Do not examine, but believe!” and ‘Your faith will save you!’ . . . [and] ‘the wisdom of this life is bad, but . . . foolishness is a good thing.’¹⁰

Celsus (who seems extraordinarily close to proponents of modern relativism here) essentially would like Christians to present their faith in a dialectical manner, thereby submitting it entirely to investigation and debate. Thus, Christian faith could reenter the general framework—acceptable to philosophy as well—of humanity’s effort to understand itself and the world, an effort that always remains provisional and open-ended.

Of course, the refusal by Christians to give proofs and to have discussions did not pertain to the whole path of faith but only to its initial beginning. During this apostolic age, they did not shy away from debate and from “giving reason for the hope that is within them,” even to the Greeks (see 1 Peter 3:15). The apologists in the second and third centuries are also proof of that. Rather, they believed faith cannot spring from that debate but should precede it as a work of the Spirit and not of reason. Rational arguments could, at best, serve as a preparation for faith and, once faith was accepted, demonstrate its “reasonableness.”

Another characteristic of *kērygma*: it has an explosive or germinative character, so to speak. It is more like the seed that becomes a tree than the ripe fruit at the top of the tree that in Christianity is constituted by charity. One does not obtain it by distilling or summarizing tradition, as if it were its marrow. Rather, *kērygma* stands apart or, better, at the beginning of everything. Everything else develops from it, including the four gospels that were written afterwards precisely to illustrate it.

There has been a change concerning this point due to the current situation of the church. To the extent that Christianity is dominant in any given place, and everything is Christian or is regarded as Christian, people are less aware of the importance of the initial choice by which they become Christian. This is all the more the case since baptism is now usually administered to babies, who are not able to make their own choices. What is stressed the most is not so much the initial moment of faith, the miracle of coming to faith, but rather the completeness and orthodoxy of the faith itself.

This situation has a strong bearing on evangelization today. Churches with a strong dogmatic and theological tradition (like the Catholic Church par excellence) risk finding themselves disadvantaged if, beneath the immense heritage of doctrine, laws, and institutions, they do not rediscover that original nucleus that is able to generate faith by itself.

Presenting people today, who often lack any personal knowledge of Christ, with the entire range of doctrine is like putting one of those heavy brocaded mantles worn at one time by the clergy on the shoulders of a baby. We are more prepared by our past to be “shepherds” than to be “fishers” of men, that is, we are better prepared to nourish people who come to church than

to bring new people into the church or to bring back those who have drifted away and live on its margins.

This is one of the reasons why in certain parts of the world so many Catholics abandon the Catholic Church for other Christian settings, often of evangelical and Pentecostal origin. They are attracted by a simple and effective proclamation that puts them in direct contact with Christ and makes them experience the power of his Spirit.

If, on the one hand, we can be glad that these people have rediscovered a living faith, on the other hand, it is sad that they have abandoned their church in order to do so. With all the respect and esteem that we should have for these Christian communities, not all of which are sects (the Catholic Church has been maintaining an ecumenical dialogue with some of them for years—something that would certainly not be done with sects!), we need to say that many of them do not have the means that the Catholic Church has to bring people to perfection in Christian life.

In some cases everything continues to revolve, from start to finish, around initial conversion, the so-called new birth, while for us Catholics—and not just for us—this is only the beginning of Christian life. It should be followed by catechesis and the spiritual development that occurs through self-renunciation, the dark night of faith, the cross, and finally the resurrection. The Catholic Church has a very rich spirituality, innumerable saints, the magisterium, and, above all, the sacraments.

There is a need, therefore, for the basic proclamation to be presented to us clearly and succinctly at least once, not only to the catechumens but to everyone, since the majority of believers today have not gone through the catechumenate. The grace that some of the new ecclesial movements incorporate for the church

today consists precisely in this. Within these movements, adults finally have the opportunity to hear the *kērygma*, renew their baptism, consciously choose Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, and commit themselves actively to the life of the church.

The proclamation of Jesus as Lord should retain its place of honor in all the critical moments of Christian life. The most propitious occasions are perhaps funerals, because in the face of death, people ask themselves questions, their hearts are open, and they are less distracted than at other times. Nothing speaks to people more pointedly about death than the Christian *kērygma*.

There is a story by Franz Kafka that is a powerful religious symbol. It tells of a dying emperor who calls one of his subjects near him. He whispers a message in his ear: "All the obstructing walls have been broken down"¹¹ to make a place for the crowd gathered around him. It is such an important message that he orders the messenger to repeat it back to him. Then he confirms the message with a nod and the messenger quickly sets out. But let us hear the rest of the story from the author:

Now pushing with his right arm, now with his left, he cleaves a way for himself through the throng; if he encounters resistance he points to his breast, where the symbol of the sun glitters; the way is made easier for him than it would be for any other man. But the multitudes are so vast; their numbers have no end. If he could reach the open fields how fast he would fly, and soon doubtless you would hear the welcome hammering of his fists on your door. But instead how vainly does he wear out his strength; still he is only making his way through the chambers of the innermost palace; never will he get to the end of them; and if he

succeeded in that nothing would be gained; he must next fight his way down the stair; and if he succeeded in that nothing would be gained; the courts would still have to be crossed; and after the courts the second outer palace; and so on for thousands of years; and if at last he should burst through the outermost gate—but never, never can that happen—the imperial capital would lie before him, the center of the world, crammed to bursting with its own sediment. Nobody could fight his way through here even with a message from a dead man. But you sit at your window when evening falls and dream it to yourself.¹²

On his deathbed—on the cross—Christ also confided a message to his church. There are still many people at their window who dream of a message like this. The church must never become like that complicated and suffocating palace from which the messenger is unable to exit.

The main obstacle to "racing off" with the word is the division among Christians, "the dividing wall" that Jesus tore down at the moment of his death (see Ephesians 2:14) but that Christians have rebuilt. Other obstacles include the abundance of and confidence in human resources—too many tunics and too many purses that weigh the messenger down (see Luke 10:4). It is the quest for one's own glory that is the most pernicious. There is also an excess of bureaucracy, a clericalism that dulls the incisiveness of the word and makes it seem remote from real life, language that is abstruse and incomprehensible, all constituting an insurmountable obstacle. Excessive human caution and self-protection keep the window shades lowered.

4. Choosing Jesus as Lord Again

We started with the question, “What place does Christ have in modern society?” But we cannot end without asking the same question on a personal level: “What place does Christ have in *my* life?” Let us recall the dialogue between Jesus and his apostles at Caesarea of Philippi: “Who do men say that the Son of man is? . . . But who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:13, 15). The most important thing for Jesus does not seem to be what people think of him but what his closest disciples think of him.

I noted earlier the *objective* reason for the importance of the proclamation of Christ as Lord in the New Testament: it makes the salvific events it recounts present and operative in whoever proclaims them. There is, however, also a *subjective* and existential reason. To say “Jesus is Lord!” means making a genuine decision. It is like saying, “Jesus Christ is ‘my’ Lord; I recognize his rights over me, and I yield the reins of my life to him; I no longer want to live ‘for myself’ but ‘for him who for my sake died and was raised’” (see 2 Corinthians 5:15).

To proclaim Jesus as our Lord means to submit every area of our lives to him and let the gospel permeate everything that we do. It means, to recall a phrase from our esteemed John Paul II, that we need to “open wide the doors to Christ.”¹³

I have sometimes been the guest of some family, and I have seen what happens when the doorbell rings announcing an unexpected visit. The lady of the house hurries to close the doors to the disorderly rooms with unmade beds, so as to guide the guest into the area that is the most welcoming. With Jesus we need to do exactly the opposite: we need to open the “disorderly rooms” in our lives, especially the room of our intentions. . . . For whom

are we laboring, and why do we do what we do? For ourselves or for Christ? For our glory or for Christ’s glory? This is the best way to prepare a cradle this Advent to welcome Christ who comes at Christmas.

1. St. Augustine, “Sermon 295,” 1, *Sermons (273–305A)*, trans. by Edmund Hill, OP, Part 3, vol. 8, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. by John E. Rotelle, OSA (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1994), p. 197.

2. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. from the 6th ed. by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 128–40, 365ff.

3. See Charles Harold Dodd, *History and the Gospel* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938), pp. 36–37.

4. See, for example, Mark 1:1; Romans 15:19; Galatians 1:7.

5. See Galatians 6:2; 1 Corinthians 7:25; John 15:12; 1 John 4:21.

6. Josef Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. by R. J. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), pp. 57–58 (Original: *Einführung in das Christentum* [Munich: Kosel-Verlag GmbH & Co., 1968]).

7. Charles Péguy, “A Vision of Prayer” [“Vision de prière”], in *God Speaks*, intro. and trans. by Julian Green (New York: Pantheon Books, 1945), p. 52.

8. Tertullian, *Apology*, 39, 9 (“ad lucem expavescentes veritatis”), ed. by Robert D. Sider, vol. 2, *Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), p. 61.

9. Heinrich Schlier, *Die Zeit der Kirche [The Time of the Church]* (Freiburg: Herder, 1958), ch. 15.

10. Quoted in Origen, *Against Celsus*, I, 9, trans. by A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 4, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. by Alexander Roberts and

James Donaldson (1885; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), p. 400.

11. Franz Kafka, "An Imperial Message," *The Penguin Complete Short Stories of Franz Kafka*, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir, ed. by Nahum N. Glatzer (London: Allen Lane, 1983), p. 4.

12. Kafka, p. 4.

13. Pope John Paul II, "Homily at the Mass Inaugurating the Pontifical Ministry of John Paul II," *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition (November 2, 1978), p. 12.

Chapter 2

"Do You Believe?"

THE DIVINITY OF CHRIST IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

1. "Unless You Believe That I Am . . ."

One day I was celebrating Mass in a cloistered monastery at Easter time. The gospel passage was from the section in John where Jesus repeatedly states his "I Am": "You will die in your sins unless you believe that I Am. . . . When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I Am. . . . Before Abraham was, I Am" (see John 8:24, 28, 58).

The words "I Am," contrary to all grammar rules, were both written with capitals in the Lectionary. This fact, along with some other more mysterious cause, set off a spark and illuminated this saying within me. It was no longer only Christ who was speaking it two thousand years ago, but the risen and living One who was proclaiming to us again, at that moment, his *Ego Eimi*, "I Am!" The words took on cosmic resonances. It did not involve a mere emotion of faith but was one of those experiences that leave an indelible mark on one's heart even after it has passed.

I have begun with this personal sharing because the theme of this meditation is faith in Christ in John's gospel, and Christ's "I Am" is the ultimate expression of that faith. Modern commentaries on the fourth gospel are unanimous in seeing in Jesus'