

The True Face of God

***Have no fear, do not let your hands fall limp.
Yahweh your God is there with you.
He will rejoice over you with happy song, he will renew you by his love,
he will dance with shouts of joy for you,***

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Introduction into the God image of Jesus

There is one question that has always occupied me in all my theological searching and pondering over the last 30 years and that question is: *What was Jesus all about?* What did Jesus really bring us? What did he want to communicate to us, share with us, draw us into? The answer is found in two words or phrases Jesus used. They enshrine in a nutshell all he wanted to communicate: first his *image of God* and second *God's dream for his creation*. The first he expressed with the word that he used most often for his God experience, the Aramaic word *ABBA* and the second he expressed with the phrase *Kingdom of God*. Both contain all that Jesus came to reveal and what he regarded as the core of his mission: To tell us who God really is and therefore, who we really are in the eyes of God and secondly, he showed us what God's intention with the whole of creation is about: the Reign of God

In the next two conferences we will talk about the first question: *Who is God in the experience of Jesus?* He himself regarded it as his mission to reveal (1) who God is and (2) to draw us into this intimate union with the Father which he himself experienced as the basis of his whole existence.

All religions have tried in their own way to answer the question who God is. But we as Christians hold that only in Jesus has God fully revealed himself who he is and who he wants to be for us. Only Jesus could say:

No one knows who God is only, the Son who is closest to the Father's heart and to whom the Son wants to reveal him... "I have revealed to them your Name, Father and I will keep on revealing him so that they may have communion with you through their communion with me" (Jn 17:26ff).

To understand the Jewish-Christian Religion and to appreciate its newness we should contrast it with the religions of the ancient world. All religions in the ancient world were based on the principle: *Be good to the gods and the gods will be good to you*. The gods were not really interested in human beings, human beings had to make the first move. Since gods are powerful and we might get easily into their way it was wise to make sure to remain in good relationship with them. Their anger and wrath could be terrible. The basic attitude towards the gods was fear and anxiousness not to offend them. The Old Testament people shared this image of God with their neighbors to a large extent although there occurs a gradual shift in their understanding and experience of God. Jesus was the one who finally communicated to us who God really is and who he wants to be for us.

There has been a shift in the understanding or at least in the focus of our God image. While in the past the stress was highly put on the judge, the lawgiver, the rewarded and punisher even the avenger, since Vatican II the focus has been put back on the real center of Jesus God image: God is love and nothing should obscure this picture in any way. In the words of Pope Benedict:

The world of the Bible presents us with a new image of God in contrast to the image of the surrounding culture... he is creator out of love but most important: God loves human beings, he is in love with them (Deus caritas est).

A first glance at Jesus shows that he was driven by a vision, he was "on fire". There was something burning in him that he could hardly contain. He had to convey it. When he did so, people felt spell-bound and some left everything and seek out his presence (Mc 1:16-28). What was driving him? What attracted people to listening to him and seek his presence? Jesus himself expressed his mission in different images, parables and similes. One of the most vivid and powerful phrases he used is found in Luke 12:49:

I came to throw fire on this earth and how much I desire to see it burning.

This "fire" burning in Jesus was the over-powering experience that God loves this world and human beings unconditionally. Ultimately, it was his image of God whom he saw as compassionate and loving. In contrast to the common image of God in the ancient world Jesus saw God not as a judge, a punisher, a rewarder, a lawgiver and an avenger in whose hands to fall was terrible and deadly.

There is seemingly an evolution in the way of understanding how God revealed himself in history. Our God who in the oldest psalms is still described in images of the God-kings of Egypt and Babylon, a God who throws horses and riders into the sea, who smashes the enemy and their children against the rock, the almighty one, the God of heaven and earth. But this God become in Jesus the one who let his might and power turn into defenseless love. This God shows himself in Jesus as the one who want to save through defenseless love. This God who is shown in the helpless child, who lies in the manger, who is led as a lamb to be slaughter-house and does not open its mouth. It is this powerlessness of defenseless love which overcomes all and triumphs over death. It is this unfathomable mystery of God that he the all powerful, all mighty and absolute Lord wants to save as love. Yes, true love is defenseless; yet, it is its defenselessness that stronger than everything else (Johannes Bours).

God is love... This is how God showed his love for us: he sent his only Son into the world that we might have life through him. This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that he loved us first and sent his Son to be our Savior (1 Jn 4:9).

The fundamental truth that Jesus came to reveal is most succinctly contained in Jn 3:16-17:

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.

Luther called John 3:16-17 " the heart of the Bible - the Gospel in miniature." It is so simple that a child can understand it: yet it condenses the deep and marvelous truths of redemption into these few pungent words. If all the books of the Bible were destroyed except John 3:16-17, anyone anywhere could be saved by believing in this oft-quoted and cherished verse:

**God..... The greatest Lover
So loved ... The greatest degree
The world.... The greatest number
That he gave.... The greatest act
His only Begotten SonThe greatest gift
That whoever..... The greatest simplicity
Believes in Him.....The greatest Person
Should not perish.....The greatest deliverance
But.....The greatest difference
Have.....The greatest certainty
Everlasting life... The greatest possession. (Paul Lee Tan)**

"This is a text I never attempted to preach on, though I have gone around and around it. It is too big. When I have read it, and there is nothing else to say. If we only knew how to read it, so as to produce a sense of it in the ears of the people, there would be nothing to preach about" (G. Campbell Morgan).

The Pope in his first Encyclical, *Deus Caritas est*, turned back to this image without any reservations or qualifying statements.

"God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 Jn 4:16). These words from the *First Letter of John* express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny. ... In acknowledging the centrality of love, Christian faith has retained the core of Israel's faith, while at the same time giving it new depth and breadth.

In a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence, this message is both timely and significant. ...

Most significant in the Encyclical is the remark that God's love is even greater than his justice:

God's passionate love for his people—for humanity—is at the same time a forgiving love. It is so great that it turns God against himself, his love against his justice (*Deus Caritas est* 10).

This shift in the God image has been called the "most revolutionary change in the whole history of religions". With Jesus' God image rose the sun of the unconditionally loving God finally and irrevocably above humanity. He put an end to the time of fear and anxiety concerning God and pushes open the door to a new age which stands under the sign of hope and love. This is to be regarded as the most fundamental achievement of Jesus of Nazareth (E. Biser).

Jesus saw everything from this point of view: God was all loving and had chosen him to transform his creation into its final glory through his unconditional and compassionate love. Jesus had a vivid sense of reality as ultimately gracious and compassionate. This image of God he revealed to us not in abstract terms but in parables and stories like those of the Lost Sheep or the Unbelievable, All-merciful Father (Prodigal Son, Luke 15). Or, in the story of the vineyard owner who paid all of his workers a full day's wage (Matthew 20:1-15). Here the true nature of

God is revealed.

Jesus told us that God is like a close and nurturing parent - not a distant, authoritarian, judgmental sovereign. Our God is one who cares when a child needs food and clothing, understands when a son's or daughter's feelings are hurt, is ready to forgive - even the adult child who stumbles and falls. God is like that, is what Jesus teaches. He is like that kind of father, that kind of mother. Jesus wasn't saying that God is male. He was telling us about the kind of child-parent relationship we are to adopt with God.

In summary we could say: Jesus teaches us three important lessons with regard to the question who God is and who he wants to be for me.

1. God always loves me unconditionally

The greatest mystery of my life is that God loves me in a way no one could ever love me. I am created out of love, held in existence out of love. I am his *only child*.

Young people wanted to know the exact answer. They went to the city center with their microphones and tape recorders and at the railway station they interviewed the passers-by asking them, "What do you think God is like?" In answer to such a question people most of the time become rather embarrassed or evasive. Some began to utter platitudes. But there was a thirteen year old boy who simply said, "I imagine God is a person who has managed to create six billion or more people and loves each one as if he or she were his *only child*."

No matter how I feel, who I am, what I have done, how sinful I may imagine myself to be, how far I am from God, how messed up my life may be, there is one sure reality I can count on: God loves me personally, is concerned for what is best for me, and will never give me up as a hopeless case because he loves me. I can neither reduce this love nor increase it. I can only graciously accept it and find in it the fulfillment of my life, my identity and my joy. I am before him his only child

Don't you understand ! God is running after you day and night as though he has nothing to do but simply to occupy himself with you (Catherine of Sienna).

True love is always unconditional. If I attach conditions to my love, I do not really love you. I am offering an exchange, not a gift. True love is and must always be a free gift. In the words of E. Fromm:

Unconditional love corresponds to one of the deepest longings, not only of the child, but of every human being; on the other hand, to be loved because of one's merits, because one deserves it, always leaves doubts; maybe I did not please the person whom I want to love me, maybe this or that - there is always a fear that love could disappear. Furthermore, "deserved" love easily leaves a bitter feeling that one is not loved for oneself, that one is loved ONLY because one pleases, that one is, in the last analysis, not loved at all but used.

Because of having so many times experienced not unconditional but rather conditional love in their lives, many find it hard to accept the above statement about God's unconditional love for them. They are not sure if God can love them without conditions. They feel rather guilty when

thinking of God and definitely unworthy of such a love. After they have amended their lives through good deeds and penance, then God might love them. They think they have first to make themselves worthy of such a love. The problem is not God's love for me but whether or not I let this love into my life and allow it to change my life. God's love is always there but am I willing to respond to this love? Does my answer find its expression in the great commandment where I am asked to love God with all my heart, with all my soul and with all my strength? (Mk 12:28-34)

My might have to change the order of how we look at us when standing before God: The first fact about me is not that I am a sinner who will be loved and appreciated *if* I fulfill certain requirements. The first and most important reality of my life is that I am a precious being in the eyes of God, I am accepted, appreciated; I am loved, cared for, desired by God as his only child. Here we need a basic correction of focus in our spiritual life.

The principle of improving people's lives as Christians has to be changed. In the past it was mostly the principle of *correction* that would guarantee an improvement in our lives as Christians. This was done basically through *fear* of God in order to get people to obey the laws of God and the Church. The best proof for this approach were the parish missions with their stress on the last four things: *death - judgement - heaven - hell*. The required conversion asks for a shift: from a God who is lawgiver and judge; from a God who rewards and punishes; from a God who is judgmental and demanding.

The principle of improving our Christian life is not *correction* through fear but through *persuasion* by presenting the Christian message in a way that people come to see and experience first of all the fundamental, all determining reality of their lives: that they are loved personally not just collectively. The result should be a deep joy and peace in the Lord and not fear of punishment and hell. The aim of all our spiritual life, of all pastoral planning and activity must be to lead people to the fullness of life (Jn 10:10), to make them authentic, healed, restored, set free in the realization that the most basic fact about them is: they are loved beyond any imagination.

In the eyes of God we are first not sinners who can approach him only with fear and contrite hearts but we are his beloved ones, in whom he delights whenever we turn to him and he thinks of us. We must constantly be on our guard not to mix up the first fundamental reality about our lives that "we are loved when we were still sinners" with number two that we fail to see, accept and respond to his love, that means that we are sinners.

Many people will not be able to see this truth in this life. They will have to die before their eyes will be opened to this basic fact of their existence. The first thing I will realize and see clearly, after having passed into the world beyond death, will be the immensity of God's love for me: how he "knitted me together in my mother's womb" (Ps 139); how he cared for me and loved me in a thousand ways all my life long, in every detail and every second of my life. This realization will fill me with an immense amazement, joy and overwhelming peace.

But this marvelous insight will be followed by a second recognition: looking at my life in the light of this love, the question will pop up: how far did I respond to this love? Did I let it into my life? Did it guide my actions and behavior or was it of no consequence to me? Did I remain indifferent? It is before this love of God for me that I stand judged. God does not have to judge

my life but I will judge myself in the face of this unbelievable love. It is here that I will see clearly what needs to be amended and straightened out. I will have to enter a process of growth in order to outgrow my lack of love in the past and make up for the damage this lack of love has caused in my life with regards to God, my fellow human beings and myself.

What in my earthly life was not Jesus like, even contrary to him, what in no way resembled his image in me will be clearly shown to me when I am standing face to face before the eternal love of God for me. The eyes of the risen Lord will look at me as he did at Peter when he had just betrayed him. And this look of intensive love for me will become the pain that penetrates all my denials of him in my life. This will be God's judgement on me: not meting our punishment and condemnation but rather a process of transformation, my cleansing and my purgatory to the last details. We were created and destined to be transformed into the image and likeness of Jesus in order to participate in his very being, we were called to mature into becoming his brothers and sisters, *to be conformed to the image of his Son (Rom 8:29)*, so that the Father will be able to recognize in us the features of his Son. We can live in the new heaven and earth only if the Father recognizes in us his Son and the Son accepts us as his brothers and sisters as we read in Mt 12:50. Another possibility of eternal life does not exist.

The question I always have to pose to myself: do I live in a way that there is at least something in me that resembles Christ, something the Father can recognize as a trait of his son in me. Everything else will go up in flames as St. Paul tells us. But Paul leaves us with the hope that even if all our life work may go up in flames the person him/herself will still have a chance to be saved:

It will be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each one's life.... If one's life achievement is burnt up, he will suffer loss; the person will be saved, but only as through fire (1Cor 3:14-15).

The fire mentioned is not a punishing or condemning fire but it is ultimately *God's infinite love* which is more cleansing and transforming than any fire can be. It is this fire of love that still can save us even so humanly speaking there may be no hope at all. We should be mindful of the words of Jesus himself who said to his disciples when talking about the rich people and their chance of salvation: *"For human beings it is impossible, but for God not. All things are possible for God" (Mc 10:27).*

In the hour of death we stand with all our guilt and betrayals of Jesus before the immensity of God's love and the deep regret and sorry that hits us in that moment is our judgement, that is the fire that burns. Before the eyes of the loving God we instantly see the depth of all our denials and the lack of love we have shown in our lives and what damage it caused to us and our fellow human beings. In short; we see our sins and to the last details the effects they had. That is our "judgement" we will have to face: the realization of how little I have responded to God's infinite love for me, after all, every "sin" is ultimately against love (G. Lohfink).

The full acceptance of God's unconditional love for me will have major consequences for my conception and comprehension of being a disciple of Jesus. It challenges me to a level of commitment to the divine that is almost unheard of in religious literature. St. Teresa's "though

you damn me, I will love you still” is the peak expression of human selfless love. What is the impact on us when we turn the phrase around: “Were I damnable, you would love me still”? Unconditional love can be met only with absolute love in return.

If God created us in his image and likeness we can find our full identity and final happiness only in becoming like him and acting like him: loving all as he loves all. "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said to him, "You have answered right, do this and life is yours" (Lc 10:27-28).

For those who freely accept God’s unconditional love, their acceptance has enormous consequences. They cannot pay God off, for they are loved by God. They cannot look on others without realizing the mystery of God’s unconditional love for them too. There is no escape from social justice and respect for human dignity and integrity. Even this world of ours, with all its defects, cannot be seen as a place of exile and evil, but rather as God’s beloved creation, crying out to be healed and made just. Our lives cannot be imagined as a time of testing, for we are loved by God; our lives can only be a time of growing and maturing.

This is a vision of a world where God is not to be placated, because God is loving. It is a vision of a world where fear and anxiety before God yield to trust and love. Love that God has for us; love that we have for God. Our behavior flows from that. (A. F. Campbell, *God first love us*)

Jesus mission was to draw each one of us and ultimately all of creation into the love that he himself experienced so overpoweringly and which he wanted to throw into the world. This was the *Name* of God he was sent to reveal and to communicate to us so that we could share in the community he had with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

“I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (Jn 17:26).

The God of Jesus came to communicate is the one who loves me, forgives and heals me and who is compassionately always with me. To know my faith intellectually does not suffice, it needs a knowledge gained through experience. The conversion to this God I call THE conversion of my life: from my head to my heart. One fortunate incident in my life helped me to realize this quite early in my priestly life.

When I was just ordained and had gotten my first assignment in the mission I got to know a Sister who had been working for forty years in a leper colony. Her joyfulness and her compassion with the lepers was something I had never experienced knowing how hard and demanding her work was. One day I asked her, "How is it that you are such a joyful and inspiring person in spite of all the hard and often frustrating work you have to do continuously?" She answered, "Well, Father John, there is a simple answer to this. It took twenty-five years of religious life before the good Lord suddenly showed me how deeply he loved me. One morning I woke up and I knew it with an overwhelming joy: he loves me just as I am. That experience changed my whole life. From that day on I became a different person. And only if you had known me before could you appreciate what a different person I have become. I continue to do the same work but my whole motivation has changed, all I do now is just a response to his immense love.”

I will be grateful to this sister for the rest of my life. For the first time I came to comprehend what spirituality would mean for me: to live out of this love and to respond to it. At that time I adopted for myself a prayer I like to recommend to others as well. I call it my "creed" to be said before I get out of bed in the morning. It follows the basic elements of the God experience of Jesus. Its main content is this:

Lord, I thank you for this new day. I know the most important reality of my life is that you love me and that you look at me this moment with such tenderness and love as no one ever could, I am your only child. You desire to forgive me and to heal me where I want healing so that this day will be a brand-new beginning with "a future full of hope." Whatever I have to face today, one thing I know you will be there with me as my best friend, helping, consoling, strengthening, healing and guiding me. There is absolute nothing I have to be afraid of. All this I know because your Son has told us so.

After this I get up. At times this gives me deep joy and peace but there are times when I just have to hold on to this in faith without any feelings. It needs practise and perseverance to gradually become more and more conscious of such a God "in whom we live and have our being"(Acts 17:28). It is easy to preach such a God image but to live out of it is a challenge and may take a whole life time.

The necessary shift in Christian Spirituality.

How does Christian Spirituality look which is based on the God-image of Jesus? For sure, every spirituality depends totally on the God image that rules our life. We might have been sitting on a box of gold our whole life long while begging by-passers for a small coin in order to survive.

A beggar had been sitting by the side of a road for over thirty years. One day a stranger walked by. "Spare some change?" mumbled the beggar, mechanically holding out his old baseball cap. "I have nothing to give you," said the stranger. Then he asked: "What's that you are sitting on?" "Nothing," replied the beggar. "Just an old box. I have been sitting on it for as long as I can remember." "Ever looked inside?" asked the stranger. "No," said the beggar. "What's the point? There's nothing in there." "Have a look inside," insisted the stranger. The beggar managed to pry open the lid. With astonishment, disbelief, and elation, he saw that the box was filled with gold.

Our spiritual journey may have been blocked for years since we were carried by negative attitudes toward God from early childhood on. If we are afraid of God or see God as an angry father-figure, a suspicious policeman, or a harsh judge, it will be hard to develop enthusiasm, or even an interest, in the journey. These negative images of God, which are implanted in us largely as a result of early religious training, are in fact a legacy of past generations and a pervasive set of religious attitudes that represent a distortion - sometimes a 180-degree distortion - of scriptural and gospel values. This is true for both Protestants and Catholics, although its imprint has been felt particularly vividly in the Catholic Church.

The first attitude is that external acts are more important than internal acts. The term "external acts" refers to rituals or to the exercise of good works such as fasting, almsgiving, and bodily penance. The term "internal acts" refers to the motives out of which these acts emerge. The former can come from pride and self-centeredness as easily as from love of God and respect for others. Jesus' teaching in the gospels is clear: "Clean the inside of the cup first and then worry

about the outside."

The second attitude is that the self initiates all good works and God rewards them. When articulated theologically, this belief comes close to the Pelagian heresy. It brings to mind the image of battling in an arena to placate God for one's sins or to win God's favor, while God sits passively in the bleachers watching the contest. If we do well, it is thumbs up; if we fail, it is thumbs down. The gospel, on the contrary, teaches that God initiates all good deeds through the Inspiration of the Spirit abiding within us, while we listen attentively and put into action what the Spirit suggests.

The third attitude that is an overarching concern about getting to heaven rather than exercising the love of God and neighbor here and now, as strongly emphasized in the preaching of Jesus. This concern was sometimes expressed by efforts to accumulate merits in this life in order to require God, so to speak, to reward us in the next. Thomas Keating illustrates this common attitude as follows: "Following is a caricature of the "good" Catholic gentleman prior to the Second Vatican Council as perceived by the Western Model. He attends Sunday mass faithfully, never eats meat on Friday, contributes generously to the collection every Sunday. He goes to confession and Communion at least once a year and expects that on his death bed a priest will be there with the Last Rites to anoint him so that he can at least get to purgatory and then after a brief detainment, shortened by means of masses offered for the repose of his soul, move on to heaven to be amply rewarded for his exemplary Catholic life. It might never have occurred to this man that it might be a sin to exasperate or dominate his wife, to shout at the children, to underpay his servants and employees, or to disregard the poor just down the street or in his parish. In short, he adheres to the dogmas and observes the externals of the Catholic religion but fails to practice the gospel. The gospel is a life to be lived, not just a set of observances".

Christian Spirituality is based on a God who lives in us and not outside of us. In the words of Saint Paul: the mystery of our life is: *Christ lives in you the glory to come* (Col 1:27). God lives in me: loving me, forgiving me, always with me, deeply concerned with me and my well-being. It is his Spirit dwelling in us who is the dynamic source of inspiration. He is the one who works in us. All we can do, is to consent to his activity in us. The emphasis is on listening and responding to the Spirit rather than we taking the initiative and expecting that God will back our projects up, even though God had little or nothing to do with them.

Therefore, the Christian spiritual path is based on a deepening trust in God, that he lives in me. It is trust that first allows us to take that initial leap in the dark, to encounter God at deeper levels of ourselves. And it is trust that guides the intimate refashioning of our being, the transformation of our pain, woundedness, and unconscious motivation into the person that God intended us to be. I must trust him that everything in my life is geared to lead me to become the person that God intends me to be (Thomas Keating: *Intimacy with God, Attitudes toward God*).

Nothing that happen to me in life be it sickness, misfortune, accidence, breakdown, disappointment, suffering, anxiety comes as punishment from God. Through all this God will lead me to be transformed into the person he wants me to become.

His aim is to transform me from the image in which I was created into the likeness of him who

created me. We were created and destined to be transformed into the image and likeness of Jesus in order to participate in his very being. We were called to become his brothers and sisters, *to be conformed to the image of his Son (Rom 8:29)*, so that the Father will be able to recognize in us the features of his Son. We can live in the new heaven and new earth only if the Father recognizes in us his Son and the Son accepts us as his brothers and sisters, as we read in Mt 12:50. So when I die the Father can recognize in me the image of his son and call me his child.

The Bible has many stories to portray God's transforming actions in our life. In the prophet Jeremiah 18:1-6 we find the story of the potter who forms his clay until he has shaped it into a beautiful vessel. The prophet Malachi in 3:3 refers to gold or silver that has to be refined in the oven. Yahweh himself is the refiner as the text has it: *"He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver."* To this image I heard a beautiful story from a simple African woman, who belonged to a Bible Study group in Ghana:

The women in the group were puzzled by this verse of Malachi and they wondered what this statement meant about the character and nature of God. One of the women offered to find out the process of refining silver and get back to the group at their next Bible Study.

That week, the woman called a silversmith and made an appointment to watch him at work. She didn't mention anything about the reason for her interest beyond her curiosity about the process of refining Silver.

As she watched the silversmith, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest as to burn away all the impurities. The woman thought about God holding us in such a hot spot; then she thought again about the verse that says: *"He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver."* She asked the silversmith if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time the silver was being refined.

The man answered yes, he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed. The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked the silversmith, "How do you know when the silver is fully refined?" He smiled at her and answered, "Oh, that's easy -- when I see my image in it."

The woman in her simple faith remarked to me: "Father John, there may be many lessons in this story to be learnt but for sure it illustrated in a beautiful way how God with intensive care and constant attention refines us through whatever happens to us in life. All this he does with the one intention: that at the end he can recognize his own image in us."

The King and the Poor Girl

The following story of *The King and the Poor Girl* may help us to imagine God's love which he showed to us when he chose to become one with us because as the story tells: It is love's incomprehensible depth not jokingly but earnestly and in truth to become one of the same kind as the beloved.

There was once a king who loved a very poor girl. No one could have forbidden the king

to marry the girl. No one would have dared to say a single word against it, be in the open or in secret. It would have been easy for him to lift up the poor girl into his kingly state. However, in the king's heart arose the fear, whether the girl would be happy in this state of life. In his distress he spoke to no one about it because if he would have done so, every one would have told him: "Your majesty, in marrying her you are doing such a favor to the girl, she will never be able to thank you enough during her whole lifetime". But that would only have aroused the king's anger.

Secretly in his inner heart he pondered anxiously about: whether the girl would ever be so free never to think about what the king wanted to forget: that he was the king and she a poor girl. If this would happen what would then be love's happiness? In such a case, it would have been better if the girl would have remained in her corner, content in her little hut but free in her love and full of joy. Because the king loved the girl so much, there was only one way left for him: as poor beggar to encounter the girl. In doing so his beggar's mantelpiece could not just be camouflage, with which he covered himself but he himself had to become a real beggar, some one like her.

***Because that is love's incomprehensible depth
not jokingly but earnestly and in truth
to become one of the same kind as the beloved.***

God's love is so incomprehensible and marvelous that Paul always had only one prayer for all his converts which he expressed in this way:

I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your heart, living within you as you trust him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love and may you be able to feel and understand, as all God's children should, how long, how wide, how deep and high his love really is; and experience his love for yourselves. (Eph 3:17-19)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- 1. What image of God guides my life and inspires my action? Since 'vision determines behavior' the questions I have to ask are these: Whose vision am I following? Jesus'? My own? Society's?***
- 2. How do I look at myself, my friends and relatives, at institutions, at nature and climate? Is it from the perspective of one who knows that God loves me unconditionally?***
- 3. How deep is my conviction that I am first of all not a sinner but someone who God is in love with, a person he wants to be in company with, someone he treasures and delights in?***

Loves finds a way

**Love finds a way home.
Nothing, but nothing can
restrain its desire to be at
the heart of everything.**

**Into our resentment and
our hate, into the cancer
of our self-neglect**

love finds a way.

**Into our pride and
unbelief,**

into the clots of our
constrains *love finds a way.*

Into our guilt and our shame,
into the paralysis of our fear
love finds a way.

Into our defenses and our
knots, into the scar tissue of

our self-hate *love finds a
way.*

Into our mania and
our make-believe,
down through the tunnels
of our escapes,
love finds a way.

O yes, loves finds a way
in
where love has been
locked out for love is a
fire, love is a blade,
loves breaks open our
hearts
to each other and stays.