

Session 2

The Church of the New Testament: 33CE to 110CE

I want to begin by saying something about **Tradition**.

Tradition means - literally - handing on; it is what the Church has done, over the centuries, with that first message about Jesus which was preached by his first followers. As Catholics, we use the word Tradition to signify something trustworthy because the message has not just been handed on from generation to generation: it has been reflected upon, prayed and preached - it has touched peoples' hearts.

When the Church relies on its authority, it does so on the basis of two things: Scripture and Tradition. In other words, the Church's message isn't 'You have to believe this *because we say so*', but 'We call on you to believe this *because this is what is contained in Scripture and what has been handed down to us since the time of Jesus*'. The Church often appeals to **universality** when speaking authoritatively: What is being taught has been believed by Catholic Christians *everywhere* and *always*.

So what *is* it that has been handed on to us?

Meaning

The first thing to grasp is the importance of questions: we have the *message* handed down to us from the time of the apostles in the form of Scripture (the writings of the New Testament), and we have Tradition (the process of *handing on* from generation to generation). But what does it *mean*?

The question of **meaning** arises in every generation as fresh minds and hearts hear the gospel handed down to them and seek to make sense of it in their own minds, hearts and lives. It is the questions which shape and refine the message as it is handed on.

It is important to understand that this isn't a process of *more things being revealed to us by God*: the revelation is full and complete in the life and death of the person Jesus and in the coming of the Holy Spirit¹. The Church *grows in understanding* as it prays, reflects on and lives the message of the Gospel; questions are the essential part of the process because it is through questions that we come to understand what matters, what has been given to us, and what it means.

So it is through **questions** that we will navigate the first centuries of the early Church in which some of the key understandings of Catholic faith were formed.

¹ Dei Verbum (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation) n.4

Uncertainty

It is easy to assume that when Jesus died certain things were clear to his followers:

- that Jesus was special, perhaps the Son of God or even God
- that his death, and the things he had done, had meaning

But take a look at the gospel accounts of what happened when Jesus died. Mark, for example, says:

There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem²

So, here we are, looking at a text. What do we notice?

Perhaps we notice that there is no mention of **men**: we have already heard that ‘All of them [the disciples] deserted him and fled’³ and that even Peter, the *Rock*, denied Jesus three times⁴. The other gospels attest to the same things.

But do we notice that Mary, the mother of Jesus, isn’t there? Matthew⁵ agrees with Mark and doesn’t mention Jesus’ mother. Luke, like the other synoptic authors, doesn’t mention her:

But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.⁶

Perhaps there is room for the men here, but Luke doesn’t mention them.

Only John mentions the mother of Jesus, and gives us the beautiful account which we all remember:

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son’. Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother’. And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.⁷

² Mk 15:40-41

³ Mk 14:50

⁴ Mk 14:66-72

⁵ Mt 27:55-56

⁶ Lk 23:49

⁷ Jn 19:25-27

So here we have Mary standing at the foot of the cross together with one male disciple - who is never named in John's gospel⁸.

But already the questions begin:

- who, exactly, among his followers, was there to witness Jesus' death?
- did they stand *near* or *at a distance*? So what could they have seen and heard

This is a simple though, perhaps to some, surprising example of the fact that the gospel texts **don't agree with one another**.

Perhaps we can accept that fact; perhaps, at times, it doesn't seem significant. But - as the Church would learn in the years that followed - there were occasions when the disagreements could certainly matter.

The First Questions

There are two ways we could begin trying to understand the first questions of the early Church:

- we could try to put ourselves in their shoes and imagine how they might have felt
- we can examine what the earliest writings of the New Testament tell us

The first approach is one we might use in prayer and meditation, and it's an excellent way to develop our faith and understanding.

We will, however, keep to the written sources which witness what was going on in the first Christian communities and the questions they were facing.

It may seem surprising, but the writings of the New Testament are not simply accounts of what had happened, or teachings, or descriptions of the future, as some imagine⁹: these texts are responses to what the first Christians were experiencing; the questions and struggles they experienced.

That is why the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are different from one another: not just that they were written in different places and at different times and relied on sources which differed. They were also written for different communities with different needs and different questions.

So, for example, the gospel according to Matthew was written for a community largely composed of Jewish Christians¹⁰, possibly based in Antioch in Syria. They had been shocked by the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and wondered if this was a sign that the world was coming to its end - as many early Christians believed.

⁸ Indeed, he is mentioned specifically only six times in the gospel, the first being at the Last Supper (13:23-25). Perhaps he is already the unnamed disciple, one of the first two to follow Jesus (1:35-42) even before the call of Simon Peter and so having a certain precedence over him

⁹ This is the problem of *fundamentalism*, which claims to take the writings 'as they are' but, in fact, misunderstands the nature of the texts themselves

¹⁰ These were people who continued to practice their faith as Jews, and attended synagogue, yet who believed that Jesus was the awaited Messiah

The gospel according to John, which is very different, seems to have been written for a community (or communities!) which had set itself apart from Judaism, perhaps having been rejected by more orthodox Jewish communities. Strongly influenced by Greek culture, yet still deeply understanding its Jewish roots, this community also profoundly believed that they were living in the end-times¹¹.

The letters - for example those of Paul - were written to specific communities and respond to specific questions including, of course, whether the death of Jesus marked the beginning of the end-times and what that meant for the living-out of Christian life, though they responded to many other day-to-day questions too.

Just as for us, the early Christians had many questions. We will, however, stick to just a few because they are ones which echo through the centuries that follow:

- who was Jesus?
- what did Jesus teach us about God?
- what do we mean when we speak of **salvation**?

Who was Jesus?

Just as today, if we look at the written sources, the question of *who* Jesus was can have many answers¹²:

- he was the Messiah, come to free the Jewish people and fulfil God's Promise
- he was a prophet sent to call people to turn back to God
- he was the one, sent by God to heal us all
- he was God's Presence among us

All of the texts of the New Testament seek to answer the question, but **why was this a question?**

At a distance of two thousand years, we can miss the point because it can seem obvious to us: it is the **resurrection** or, rather, the disciples' *experience* of the risen Christ.

The risen Christ was an experience they could not put into words - it could not be described: Jesus had not simply *come back to life*, like Lazarus brought back from the dead. The risen Jesus was the same Jesus the disciples had known *and yet utterly different*, utterly other. So the descriptions of him try to tell what they experienced:

- Jesus could enter a room when it was closed
- he appeared in his wounded body, not as a ghost¹³, and they could touch him
- he spoke to them and, when he finally left them, he gave his Spirit in their hearts

¹¹ Having experienced persecution and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. John's gospel comes from the same communities in which the letters of John, which may be a little earlier, and the book of Revelation which seems to date from around the same time as the gospel

¹² These are, put simply, the messages of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John

¹³ This point is very important. It finds later expression in the figure of the 'lamb that was slain, dead yet alive' in the book of Revelation, and is central to later thinking about the nature of Christ

Something changed profoundly for the disciples: before this experience they were frightened and didn't understand; afterwards they were courageous and outspoken - even to the point of death - and their understanding of Jesus had transformed.

It is in the light of the resurrection that the gospels were written, that Paul and others preached the risen Christ to the world, that the Church was born. So, in a very real sense, the resurrection *makes manifest* who Jesus was, who *we* are, and God's Will for us (in other words, our salvation).

What did Jesus teach us about God?

Perhaps it is John who gives us the clearest description of what the risen Jesus teaches us about God: that God is **LOVE** and that Jesus *makes manifest* God's love for us, and so brings us to salvation.

But the same gospel goes much further:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.¹⁴

John's gospel says something unthinkable: that Jesus, the man his disciples had known and lived with, was the Son of God who was *with* God and **was** God. It was their experience of the risen Christ that showed them; without that experience Jesus would have been forgotten, or only remembered as a wise teacher, and Christianity would either never have been born or would have been yet another philosophy - a teaching about how to live well.

But if Jesus was both *with* God and **was himself** God, then what did that say about God? The Jewish people had always believed that God was One¹⁵ - could that still be true? And if Jesus was God, then what did that mean about the man his disciples had known and lived with? And if Jesus was God *and man*, then what was he bringing to the world - just a message, or was it something radially deeper?

These are the questions which begin to develop and shape the teaching of the Church in the centuries that follow.

¹⁴ Jn 1:1-5. The text goes on to describe Jesus himself as 'the Word [who] became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth' (1:14)

¹⁵ It is the core of the *Shema* (see Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

What do we mean by Salvation?

Like much of what we will explore, the question of salvation is - in fact - dependent on and shaped by other questions, the first of which is this: Who are *we*?

Whereas other questions turn towards God, this question turns towards *us*.

The story of Mary being visited by God's angel¹⁶ speaks, perhaps, for us all: who are we that God should choose to come to us?

The experience of the risen Christ shows us, as John understood, that we are profoundly **loved** by God; that God acts to rescue us from the state of our lives.

Each of the New Testament authors understands salvation in his own way:

- the synoptic gospels understand salvation as the fulfilment of God's Promise given in the writings of the Old Testament: God rescues his people just as he rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt
- the Johannine tradition¹⁷ has a much more universal understanding of salvation: all of creation is caught up
- Paul's letters include the theme that salvation is a 'making right', an atonement, for the sins of humanity¹⁸

It is good to think about a whole wealth of understandings being reflected throughout the New Testament and being highlighted in particular texts, rather than thinking of these understandings as being exclusive of one another: we are the people, called together to live the new life made manifest in the risen Jesus, and thus called to salvation, to the fulfilment of God's Promise, and to the hope of humanity since the dawn of creation.¹⁹

The End of Times

One further theme was central among the questions of the early Church. The response to it came, rather than through a deeper understanding, by the simple passage of time: many early Christians believed that Jesus brought with him the end of times - that the fulfilment of God's Promise would mean the end of this world and the coming of the next. We see this theme reflected in the letters of Paul²⁰, which are among the earliest Christian writings, but it seems that after the apostolic period (ending around 110CE) the realisation that the world *hadn't ended* came gradually towards a new understanding of the meaning

¹⁶ Lk 1:26-38. It is echoed in the story of Mary's visit to Elizabeth (Lk 1:39-56)

¹⁷ as we find it in John's gospel, the letters of John, and in the book of Revelation

¹⁸ Paul's letters include many themes concerning salvation

¹⁹ It is interesting that Christians went back through the Jewish literature (what we now call the Old Testament) to understand what we now call the 'History of Salvation', and to our roots as creatures made in goodness who fall short of God's Will for humanity (the themes of the first book of the Bible: Genesis)

²⁰ See, for example, Paul's letters to the Thessalonians in which he speaks about the Coming of the Lord (1 Thess 4:13-18) and warns against idleness among some awaiting that Day (2 Thess 3:6-15)

of God's Promise of salvation. Already, as we enter the time of the early Church Fathers, the 2nd century CE, thinking is directed more towards the ongoing life of the Church, a broadening of the scope of God's call²¹.

The Texts

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

John 20:24-29

Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. They sing a new song:

'You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slaughtered
and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language
and people and nation;
you have made them to be a kingdom and priests
serving our God,
and they will reign on earth.'

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice,

²¹ as more and more non-Jewish people become Christians, largely as a result of the evangelical work of Paul and his co-workers, including Barnabas, Timothy and Titus. It is likely that Luke, said to be the author of the gospel and, probably, of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, was a close follower of Paul.

‘Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honour and glory and blessing!’

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the
earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honour and glory and might
for ever and ever!’

And the four living creatures said, ‘Amen!’ And the elders fell down
and worshipped.

Revelation 5:6-14

Both of these texts were written around the same time and for the same community. Both the gospel of John and the book of Revelation speak of the **Lamb of God**, but in such spectacularly different ways!

What do you feel when you read these two texts together?

Reflection

How do you imagine Jesus to have been? Imagine meeting him for the first time: what would you notice about him? Reading John 1:29-51 may be helpful.

Imagine yourself in Thomas’ shoes, encountering the risen Jesus. What do you think you would notice? What would you feel? Does anything surprise you?

What questions do you have? You could write them down and enjoy discussing your questions (rather than answers!) with others.