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Jesus' Way of Being Human: A Challenge to Authentic Human Unfolding through Inter-relationships

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Abstract: It could be said that God became a man so that humans may become truly human. Jesus' life and his message answer the fundamental human unfolding through interrelationships. After analyzing Jesus' insights into the mystery of humans, the author goes on to study self-emptying love as the heart of human inter-relationship. To encounter Jesus means to encounter the meaning of one's own human existence. The human quest for meaning ends in him because he is discovered as the beginning and the end of one's life, the Alpha and the Omega. Jesus reveals the mystery of humans more than the mystery of God because he reveals God's dream for humans and for the human society by living God's way of living an authentic human life. The most striking quality of his life was that no one was excluded from his love. His was an all-inclusive, self-emptying love. Jesus revealed that humans can become truly humans by encountering God as their loving Abba, other humans as brothers and sisters and by relating to nature as manifesting the presence of God. When humans encounter everything and everyone as a theophany, they will recognize the value of their lives and they will reach out with self-emptying love to those who suffer various kinds of discrimination and de-humanization. They will stand against the anti-kingdom forces and suffer the consequences of their stand. Indeed, their 'costly discipleship' will bring meaning to their lives.

Keywords: self-emptying love, inter-relationships, theophany, agapeic love.

One of the most fascinating and challenging revelations of Jesus during his earthly life was about humans and what they could become. This he did through his life and message. Jesus Christ is often proclaimed as the one who revealed God to us. Of course, in a unique way he revealed God, because he was God who became man. But more than revealing who God is, he revealed the identity of humans and their God-given capacity to unfold themselves as humans. It could be said that God became a man so that humans may become truly human. Jesus' life and his message answer the fundamental questions humans ask about themselves: "What is my identity as a human being or who am I?" and "What is the meaning of human existence?"

1. Jesus' Insight into Mystery of Humans

Jesus was born into an ordinary working class family. Probably following the traditional profession of his family he trained himself to be a carpenter. Everybody knew him as a carpenter's son (Mk 6:2-3). He knew the struggles of a family that had to earn its daily bread through hard work and toil. He also knew the difficulties of those who were not hired for work for a day or two and what that would mean for a family that depended on the only wage-earner of that family. Almost thirty years of his life he lived as an ordinary Jew without any special education or a privileged position that would mark him out as someone special or unique either in his style of living or in his way of dealing with others. He was very much a part of the Jewish society of his time. He shared the religious and secular ideas of his time. He was not expected to be someone different from any of his contemporaries who eked out a living through working in the vineyards or skilled labourers like him in Galilee, a relatively poor region of Palestine. So in all matters of daily life he was very much like anyone of them, an ordinary Jew of the Galilean countryside. But there was something unique about him which was not a part of the religious consciousness of his contemporaries. This was not noticed at all by his fellow humans. That something that set him apart from his contemporaries was his experience of being constantly drawn to that Ultimate Love whom everybody called God.

Jesus' intimate relationship with God grew according to his psycho-physical growth. Even as a boy he felt so drawn to this Love. He was taken hold of by that Supreme Love. He could not but express this love which was spontaneously arising in him except by invoking this God as 'Abba'. Probably he did not reveal this intimate relationship with God and his way of addressing him as Abba until at a later time in his life. Such a way of addressing God would have alienated his own relatives and friends from him, because it would have been considered by them as an unorthodox and unacceptable way of addressing God, who was believed to be absolutely transcendent. In spite of this belief in God's absolute transcendence, the Hebrew bible, which Jesus and contemporaries were familiar with, narrated also that their God was so close to his people like a loving father who carries his child on his hips and dandles him on his knees (Hos 11:5f) or that he was more caring and loving than a mother who cares for her child (Is 49:15). Jesus' God-experience was like that of a child who experiences a deep, affectionate and reassuring love and care of his loving parent. In this love of his Abba, he saw himself, other humans and the entire world.

He 'grew in wisdom' (Lk 2:52) about the entire reality around him and grew in his intimate relationship with his 'Abba'. Probably during his baptism at the Jordan he was given an extraordinary inner experience of being loved by God, whom he habitually turned to as his Abba. In this transforming experience he saw himself as well as everything and everyone enveloped and bathed in that ineffable Love. The evangelists narrate this integral experience of Jesus in terms of a theophany (Mt 3:16; Mk 1:10-11; Lk 3:21-22; Joh 1:32) in which the Spirit of God descended on him in the form of a dove and the voice from heaven affirmed Jesus as the 'beloved Son' of God.

By baptizing people in the Jordan, John, the Baptist, prepared the people whom the Jewish society considered 'sinners' for a new way of ordering their lives in communion with God that would change their lives and their society. These were considered 'sinners' because they were economically poor, ritually impure and socially outcasts. They were captives of their given identity by those who claimed themselves to be guardians of the social and religious order. The rich and the powerful who wielded both religious and secular

power determined who should be at the centre of society and who should be at the periphery. The 'lowly' had no dignified place in the society that was ruled by those who were 'proud in their heart', 'mighty on their thrones' and 'rich' with material possessions. But all were captives of some force or the other. Either they were slaves of their own illusory identities or captives of the identity given by society and religion. They were all so crippled by a paralysis of mind and heart that they could not move forward in their self-realization as humans in the way intended by God. They were 'blind' to their own God-given possibilities to become what they are called to become. They needed someone to liberate them from this captivity, open their eyes to see themselves and their possibilities clearly, to remove the paralysis of their mind and heart acquired through centuries of accumulated impositions of rules and regulations and through the oppressive systems and structures. It was in this situation that Jesus emerges out of the Jordan with a new vision about his identity and an awareness that he was commissioned to proclaim that new order of society of God's rule., to "release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Lk 4:18).

Jesus felt empowered by God's Spirit to see humans, their society, and the entire creation from God's point of view and make the people aware that God's reign is within them and amidst them to be recognized, accepted and celebrated. He became aware that God's reign began with him and that he was the agent of establishing the Kingdom. He saw that both the poor and the rich, the so-called holy people and the so-called sinners, the ritually pure and the impure, the law-abiding and the law-breakers were all in need of liberation. They all needed to become authentically human as his Abba intended them to be. He felt urged, anointed and appointed to bring the good news of this liberation to those who were captives of their own selves, of their dehumanizing society, of the world of their making, of the religion of their ritual practices. He knew for certain that they were captives of a God of their own religious systems. This God of religion was for the temple, the Sabbath, laws and the status quo. He knew that this was not the real God whom he had been experiencing throughout his life and more intensely and deeply at the moment of his baptism at the Jordan. For this God of Jesus, humans were more

important than Sabbath, laws, temple and the status quo. For this God moral purity was more important than ritual purity because “there is nothing outside a person that going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile (Mk 7:15). For his God humans were more important than religious systems and structures which were meant to help humans to relate to God.¹ Jesus stood against such religious structures and their leaders when he found that the religion itself had become a hindrance to human unfolding instead of enhancing it. His Abba is the God of unconditional love and forgiveness, who wants all humans to experience wholeness of life through a loving relationship with him and with fellow-humans and with the entire creation.

Leaving the banks of the Jordan, Jesus broke the boundaries of his own self-understanding as the member of the family he was born into and as the member of the society he belonged to.² This society had given him an identity as it would give to anyone belonging to that society based on one’s family and the trade one practiced. This is evident from the fact that the people were astonished at Jesus’ new identity after his baptism in the Jordan as he went about preaching about the coming of God’s reign. They asked, “Is he not Joseph’s son?” (Lk 4:22b) or “Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands! Is he not this carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” (Mk 6: 2b-3). They could not categorize him. He did not fit into their system of identifying persons based on their birth and positions. Usually people accept and internalize the identity given to them by society without daring to question it. Their self-understanding is determined by what other people think about them. They become captives of such assigned identities! But Jesus’ Abba-experience was such that he crossed both the boundaries of his family and his society and proclaimed that only in accepting God’s plan for humans expressed in the metaphor of the ‘Kingdom of God’ or “God’s reign’ humans can authentically become humans!

In his experience of God as his Abba he discovered the meaning of the mystery of his own human existence as the one who was empowered to bring about God’s kingdom. In the discovery of his authentic self in relation to God, other humans and the entire creation

he discovered the meaning of every human existence. He was certain that humans could unfold themselves to the maximum if they could share his Abba-experience. Once they experienced God as the beginning and end of their lives, they would find meaning for their lives. They would experience his unconditional love and forgiveness. They would see everything permeated by his presence. Everything would be a theophany! They would see everyone as their brother or sister born in the same womb of God, belonging to a net-work of relationships. No one could be excluded from this communion. There would be no high or low among humans, no high caste or low caste or outcast! No discrimination whatsoever! No Jew or Gentile, male or female, old or young. All form one household of God belonging to one another as God's children.. Each one would expand the space of his heart and mind to embrace everyone and everything as God would do. Jesus discovered that humans are humans only to the extent that they consciously and freely relate with other humans and love everyone unconditionally as God would do, including enemies and those who persecute them (Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27). He discovered that the human vocation was to become 'perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect' (cfr Mt 5: 48) because this Father does not exclude anyone but includes all without any discrimination.

Jesus knew for certain that structures and systems, ideologies and practices, whether they are religious or secular, are designed to oppress humans and are sinful and as such must be denounced and removed. He was prepared to give up his life for this mission of prophetically denouncing those sinful structures of dehumanization found in the society of his time and positively announcing the values of the Kingdom that would usher in a world of right human inter-relationships and communion. He lived and proclaimed that human life would become meaningful only to the extent one gives one's life for others in love.

2. Self-Emptying Love: The Heart of Human Inter-relationship

Jesus valued every human life because he experienced his Abba as an anthropocentric God. God's concern was for humans and their unfolding as humans in relation to him and to the world he had

created. The whole of nature was a scripture for humans to understand every creature as a manifestation of God's presence so that humans could raise their minds and hearts to God and relate to him and everything and everyone through him. In his teaching through parables, symbols and metaphors Jesus used things of ordinary life to show the inter-relations that exist between God, humans and the world. The lilies of the field, fig trees and vineyards, birds of the air and fish of the sea, serpents and scorpions, sheep and goats, foxes and horses, mountains and mustard seeds, barns and beds, stones and streets, pearls and treasures, light and salt, bread and wine etc., were transformed into effective symbols of communicating certain insights into the mysteries of God's relation to humans, human relationship among themselves and the values of the Kingdom..

Jesus recognized that humans lose the meaning of their lives when they freely alienate themselves from their own selves, their God, other humans and nature. When humans choose to alienate themselves from God, the origin and end of their lives, in order to be independent from God, they seek to become absolute masters of their lives. They try to be 'autonomous' or a law unto themselves. Independent of God they seek to be independent of other humans. They see others as a hindrance to their advancement in life. They devise means to suppress and oppress others. They create systems and structures of dehumanization. Alienated from God and other humans their thoughts and actions vitiate the entire human society. Injustice, oppression, war and violence, sickness of body and mind, corrupt practices and discrimination and dehumanization result from the selfishness and egoism of some who have no 'fear of God and regard for humans'. They create a world of evil beyond human control. Anyone born into this situation is affected by it. Not only human society but the entire creation is affected by this situation of evil, and humans end their lives by encountering a meaningless death.

Jesus, through his life and message reverses this process of humans' degradation as humans and their tragic end in a meaningless death.. As the Mystery of God in history and in the world, he transformed both history and the entire creation. As a man, through his free, intimate, personal and unique relation to God as Abba, he showed that humans become truly humans to the extent that they relate to God because they are created for this life of communion

with God. From his intimate and loving union with God, he realized that humans must live a life of self-emptying love for one another, practising justice, making peace with all, forgiving and reconciling people and living an authentic fellowship with everyone as one's own brother or sister. He formed a community of disciples who would share his God-experience and live these values and belong to a new society of God's dream which he called the Kingdom of God. By establishing this community he broke the power of the world of sin. And he entrusted this small community with the task of proclaiming the good news that it was possible for human beings to experience wholeness and liberation through him and by belonging to the Kingdom.

It was clear to Jesus that the source of every human existence was the infinite love of his Abba. Human life would be meaningless if one were not open to acknowledge and accept this unconditional love which flows into all humans both individually and collectively. Jesus knew for certain that the response to this infinite love is possible only through humans' self-emptying love for one another. So his great love commandment includes both love of God and love of one's neighbour. In fact, Jesus combined the two love commandments of the Old Testament (Deut 6:4-5 and Lev 19:18) into one all inclusive commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind (Mt 22:37) and You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Mt 22:39). This one commandment is the 'great commandment' as it is the basis of all other commandments. It includes all the others. Therefore, according to this commandment, we love God by loving our neighbour.³

Humans can unfold themselves as humans to the extent that they are able to respond to God's love by loving other humans as God would love, that is, unconditionally. This love is not a sentiment but an active and effective love towards those in need. The New Testament calls this love *agape*. Agapeic love expresses itself in doing good to others in need without any thought of one's own advantage. In a society of Jesus' vision which he called 'the Kingdom of God' authentic love would express itself in relating with everyone as brothers and sisters and reaching out to everyone in need, whatever that need be. The greatest need of any human being is the need to be recognized, accepted and respected as a person. But in a society that is hierarchically structured humans are not recognized and respected

for what they are as human persons but because of their belongingness to a high class or low class, to a particular ethnic group or a gender or because of their position of power. In this scheme of things a large majority will be condemned to live on the periphery of society without any recognition or acceptance because they do not belong to any 'respectable class or caste'. To reach out to those in need of recovering their God-given dignity as humans would mean that one should confront the situation of structural sin of oppression, injustice and dehumanization and suffer the consequences of standing for the values of the Kingdom. In fact, Jesus was killed for standing for the cause of a God who loves humans and opposes everything that prevents human unfolding.

Jesus revealed that human life is meaningful not by what one has or what one achieves but by what one gives in self-emptying love. This was the heart of his teaching and preaching. He lived this ideal to the very end of his life. Even at the cost of his life he stood against the rich and the powerful, the religious leaders and the scholars of his time, because of their blindness which prevented their seeing their true selves as those called to be the members of the Kingdom of God because he loved them. His table-fellowship with the poor, the marginalized, the outcasts and the so-called sinners revealed that in authentic love there are no 'insiders' or 'outsiders', no 'we' or 'they'. There is only one family with God as the loving parent and all his children as brothers and sisters. Wherever humans reach out to one another in self-emptying love, God's kingdom becomes a reality, human life becomes meaningful and Jesus is alive!

3. Conclusion

To encounter Jesus means to encounter the meaning of one's own human existence. The human quest for meaning ends in him because he is discovered as the beginning and the end of one's life, the Alpha and the Omega. Jesus reveals the mystery of humans more than the mystery of God because he reveals God's dream for humans and for human society by living God's way of living an authentic human life. The most striking quality of his life was that no one was excluded from his love. His was an all-inclusive, self-emptying love. Jesus revealed that humans can become truly humans by

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Notes

1. Cfr. J. Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads*, London: SCM Press, 1978, pp.204-209
2. J.Parappally, "Jesus, the Boundary-Breaker: The Revelation of What it Means to be Human," in A. Amaladass & R. Rocha, (eds.), *Crossing the Borders: Essays in Honour of FrancisX D'Sa on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, Chennai: Satyanilaym Publ., 2001, pp.243-254
3. G.Soures-Prabhu, "The Synoptic Love-Commandment: The Dimensions of Love in the Teaching of Jesus," *Jeevadhara*, 13/74 (1983), pp.85-103.

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