

“What have you discovered so far about this companionship, starting from the Beginning Day?”

“TRACES OF THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE”

10. The experience of the divine

by Luigi Giussani*

“You cannot understand now. When the Spirit of Truth comes He will lead you to the complete truth.”¹ The apostles had happened upon an exceptional, fascinating, and profoundly persuasive reality and accepted it, but they were not completely aware of what it was. They retained the words and respected them, but they measured them according to their own conception of things, without envisioning their hidden content. They reiterated definitions He gave of Himself without exactly understanding the mystery.

Saint Paul made a lucid analogy. An animal is aware of the presence of man and reacts to his behaviour and actions. And yet it does not grasp the reality that those actions convey. It remains at the margins of the reality that man represents: it “does not understand.” An animal lacks the means to fathom the depths of thought and love and the tools to understand the message of another world because it lacks a human spirit. That is why it is a stranger even as it curls up at a man’s feet or rubs against his legs or licks his hand: it does not share in human nature. And in the same way, concludes Saint Paul, “the depths of God can only be known by the Spirit of God.”² Only one who possesses the Spirit has truly encountered Christ. As Saint Paul writes, “unless you possessed the Spirit of God you would not belong to Him,”³ that is, you would be a stranger to Him, incapable of capturing His intimate makeup, His secret nature, of becoming familiar with His mystery.

Without the event of His Spirit, Christ can come across as a great man, an exceptional figure, unclassifiable by any standard; perhaps a strange figure who can persuade simple people irresistibly of their expectations, stimulate those with a passion for justice, threaten the structures that perpetuate the status quo: Christ was all these to His contemporaries. Or else He may appear so great as to become a moving or dramatic mythical figure, and this is perhaps the perception that characterizes our world’s skeptical despair. Without the event of His Spirit, however, a person—whether an apostle or ourselves—remains in the dark, on the threshold of these perspectives.

Without the event of the Spirit, Christ remains an enigmatic mysterious face for the human person; simply another voice that stands out in the chorus of voices, to remind us of our painful human expectancy. However, the interpretative key is still harboured within the »

¹ See John 16:12-13.

² 1 Corinthians 2:11.

³ Romans 8:9.

* Source: *The Journey to Truth Is an Experience*, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal 2006, pp. 69-70.

» ambiguous limits of the heart and the melancholic boundaries of human thought.

Thus Christ would be a new object to confront, a fresh risk to run blindly, and not a *new* criterion, *another* light, finally, a *new* answer. All life that is conscious, aware, cries out to us that our life's meaning here on earth is beyond our horizons.

And so the encounter with Christ would be confined to the narrow bounds of the purely human experience and vision of reality—our culture—and condemned to oblivion, lost in the enigma of being and destiny, unfreed from its powerless, "unredeemed" state.