

Chapter 4
Pioneering Persons
Jesus, the Christ

In his own person Jesus perfected every important work begun in the lives of Moses, David, and Elijah. In addition, he made his own distinctive contributions to the life of faith.

There was nothing in the external details of his life that would have indicated the uniqueness Jesus was to show. Born in Bethlehem of Judea about 4 B.C., he died some thirty years later in the Holy City of Jerusalem. His parentage was not distinguished; though his father, Joseph the carpenter, traced his lineage to the House of David, nothing else is known of him, and little more of Jesus' mother Mary. Most of Jesus' life was lived in obscurity in Galilee near such nearly anonymous villages as Nazareth, Cana, and Capernaum. His ministry was unbelievably short, at most three years and perhaps as little as eighteen months. We know little of his education; he could read the Scripture and he was on occasion called rabbi, but he never claimed to be trained in the rabbinic schools of Judaism nor in the Hellenistic philosophies of the Roman world; and he did not leave to posterity a single word of his own writing. Yet he lived a life that in the eyes of millions of people seemed to incorporate the presence of God himself.

Jesus accomplished this as he faced some of the same issues raised by the earlier pioneers of Scripture. Moses, for instance, had given the world a new name for God; he had demonstrated God's work as a deliverer of God's people; and he had been instrumental in establishing the covenant between God and Israel. Jesus expanded upon these same issues.

He gave God a new name: Abba, Father, denoting the relationship he felt for God, a relationship so integral to Jesus' life that, when Christians thought of God, the image that came to

their minds was that of Jesus himself; the essence of the Christian faith is that God is doing today in human life what Jesus did in the time of his public ministry in Galilee and Judea. God is no longer only the Yahweh of the Old Testament; he is the one whom Jesus called father and who revealed himself in the ministry of the person whom Christians call their Lord.

Jesus demonstrated more profoundly than did Moses the nature of God as deliverer. He brought forgiveness to the paralytic carried to him on a mat by friends and release to the demoniac of Gerasene; he restored life to the dead daughter of Jairus; and he returned Lazarus, deceased four days, to his sisters Mary and Martha. Contact with Jesus freed persons to be the selves God intended them to be and to experience their own authentic humanity.

Jesus also re-established and perfected the covenant between God and God's people begun in Moses. Moses, reared in the Egyptian court, had used the Hittite treaty, a device familiar to Middle Eastern statesmen, to interpret God's relationship to God's people. Jesus used an even more familiar methodology in establishing God's covenant. He took the loaf and cup from a table and said that he would be with his followers whenever they shared this ordinary meal. No symbol could be more intimate than this one, none open to a greater variety of valid interpretation: Christians came to believe that as bread nourished their bodies, so Christ nourished their lives; that those who take the cup receive the very life-blood of him who gave his life that people might have life; that in receiving bread and cup the outreaching hand is a pledge to live one's life after his pattern. Moses' covenant made through Jesus is an agreement that can be understood by anyone who has sat at table with family and friends and reflected upon the important associations represented there.

The kingdom of piety and justice foreseen by David also came into effect through the ministry of Jesus.

Jesus began his public ministry with the words, "The Kingdom of God is at hand." This announcement meant that the time was close at hand in which God would rule the affairs of this world as a king rules his citizens, and Jesus set about to establish that rule in ways which transcended the limitations of David's kingdom. This new kingdom had a royal head, Jesus himself, and it was not bound to a particular place and time, as David's was, but has been able to

reach out to command the loyalties of people in diverse ages and cultures. Its concept of justice was more encompassing than David's attempts to deliver justice equitably to his citizens. Jesus left a model of justice unsurpassed in the world's annals when he asked his people to love the values God loves and respect other persons as God respects them; such an ethical standard demands that Christ's people give full attention to what God is doing in their lives and to shape their responses appropriately.

Jesus also fulfilled the work that David had begun when he had tried to establish a center for the worship of God's people. David had designated Jerusalem as the holy city and had brought up the ark of the covenant to reside there. The religious center for the Christian life, however, came to be found in what Jesus called "the temple of his body": wherever God is exalted as the vital center of one's life, here is the new center for the worship of God.

The issues that Elijah raised also came to fulfillment in Christ. The thrust of Elijah's ministry had been to call the people to be loyal to the authority of God. Jesus extended this call. In his last words recorded in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." The mind can barely grasp this claim. Authority is exercised daily in home, businesses, government, schools, and churches, wherever human beings are related to one another in the primary institutions of life. But Jesus claims that authority in all these areas belongs to him, and only when it is exercised in a manner consonant with his spirit is it a legitimate use of authority. To translate his meanings into our own concepts, we must say that he is the mayor of the city, the governor of the state, the president of the republic, the chairman of every board of directors, the power in every business enterprise. Against his way of exercising authority, all other use of authority must be judged.

So Jesus summarized, changed, re-directed and transcended the ministries of the other pioneering persons of Scripture.

One came in the area of theology. A theologian's task is to present, in a reasoned and reasonable way, the clearest possible understanding of God. This Jesus did as, employing a series of symbols uniquely his own, in his Lord's Prayer he set forth an unforgettable picture of God. God is our father, the holy one, the king, said Jesus; he is the giver, the forgiver, the deliverer. In presenting this picture of God, he also set forth the religious identity of humankind: we are children of the father, who have been sanctified by the holiness of God, citizens in God's kingdom; we are recipients of God's goodness, the forgiven, the delivered. In just fifty-seven Greek words and even fewer English ones, Jesus joined God and humankind together into a theological system that for simplicity and profundity is unmatched in religious history.

He was a leader of men and women, and people were drawn to him. Peter was a small town entrepreneur, a self-employed fisherman on the Lake of Galilee. Levi, also called Matthew, was a tax collector of Rome. Paul was an educated rabbi with a career in teaching before him; Luke a physician; and the writer of the Gospel of John perhaps the greatest philosopher in contemporary Hellenism. Yet each of these men called Jesus "Master," and they charted the courses of their lives from his.

He was a teacher without peer; more people in diverse cultures have internalized his words than is true of any other teacher in history. To be the author of any one of his parables would be a literary feat of note, but for one person to be the author of all of them is an unimaginable act of literary creation. Yet he did not compose his stories and teachings as literary productions; he did it to effect a change in the inner lives of people; and as Jew, Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Ethiopian, and Asian heard his teaching, their hearts were warmed and their lives were changed.

Jesus was a compassionate human being to whose love beggar, prostitute, leper and tax collector, as well as prophet, rabbi, merchant and householder responded with their own. Even his words of judgment have to be seen in the light of this quality of compassion; knowing the ambiguity of human lives and our indwelling ability to blind ourselves to our most obvious sins and failures, he sharply called us to become the selves God created us to be. His healings also were expressions of his compassion. Reluctant to have his therapeutic activities broadcast throughout Galilee and Judea, he was still moved to take restorative action when the deaf, the dumb, the maimed and the blind stood before him.

Above all, Jesus was a person whose words and actions were of one piece: he did as he said he would do, and he said only that which he would be able to support with the commitment of his life.

He said he was willing to suffer in order to identify with other suffering people, so he gave up his home to relate to the homeless, his reputation to associate with the outcasts and he gave up his life to die beside the criminals. The realization that death was to be the culmination of his ministry came painfully to him. He saw his compatriot John the Baptizer executed at the hand of Herod, and Jesus realized that his own fate could not be far different from John's. Given repeated opportunities to escape his death by avoiding Jerusalem during the passover festival, or by concealing himself on the Mount of Olives from the arresting crowd, or by accepting Pilate's offer of clemency, Jesus resolutely set his face to the cross and trusted that God would use his death to accomplish his own redemptive purposes.

The death was indescribably painful. There was physical pain: the scourging with leather thongs as the execution detail prepared him for the cross, the sharp puncture of nails through his hands under the hammer of the executioner, the wrenching of his body as the soldiers dropped the crossbeam into place, the gasping for life-giving breath as his head sunk lower onto his chest. The physical pain might have been bearable had it not been for the emotional pain of loss of friends and companions at this critical moment: Judas had betrayed him, Peter had denied him, the twelve had deserted him in his hour of greatest need. As he breathed his last, only his enemies - priests and scribes, Pharisees and soldiers – encircled his cross, and they jeered his pain. The spiritual pain was worst of all: where was the God he had served so buoyantly? Golgotha was a long way from Galilee where on lakeshore and hillside, in the synagogues of the Jews and the houses of friends, he had spoken confidently of God. Yet it had to happen, this pain, and Jesus knew that. Only he who had suffered all things that human beings suffer could possibly be their savior, because only then could he comprehend every depth of anguish into which humankind could descend. To witness the suffering of Jesus on his cross is to see not only a human being experiencing the depth of human extremity, but also the very love of God incarnated in this man and participating in every imaginable form of human suffering.

Jesus said also that he would rise from the dead to remain forever with those whom he loved, and he did what he said he would do. His disciples did not understand what he meant, and they were not prepared for what occurred; even under the prodding of many witnesses to his resurrection, they remained uncomprehending. But Jesus, when questioned earlier about the possibility of resurrection, had replied that God had the power to raise the dead if God wished, and the will to do it because God loved all God's people. In the interval after his death, the resurrected Jesus showed himself not as a fleeting memory but as a responding presence; did not recede into a distant past but called his followers to a hopeful future; opened new insights into lifestyles appropriate for every time and place. The living spirit of Jesus Christ remains available to those who are loyal to him and his spirit seeks out those who are not conscious of his near approach. Jesus shared this quality with God as Moses knew him: Jesus did what he said he would do, and in his life there is demonstrated a unique identity of word with deed.

The pioneering actions of Jesus of Nazareth constitute the most important set of events in Scripture. Through his ministry the old ways of Israel were given new life, and new ways of living were made possible. The author of the "Letter to the Hebrews," gathering up the issues to which Jesus addressed

himself, stated the matter once for all: "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."