

nothing in the whole story; otherwise there would be more to catch our attention. In face of this situation we must ask whether this deathly silence, this constricting stillness surrounding God, is not due to the fact that He wills to be silent because we are not yet in a position in which He can speak to us.

However that may be, we see at once that this is a question affecting our own lives and that we are implicated in this story in a very direct and inescapable way.

As we have said, the story begins with the coming to Jesus of some ecclesiastical dignitaries who ask Him by what authority He performs His acts, and who has given Him this authority. Who are You? How did this question arise?

By His words and acts and manner Jesus had made a powerful impression on these men. He spoke very differently from other preachers. It was said of Him that He spoke with authority and not as the scribes and Pharisees. What was the difference? Did He speak more passionately, or forcefully, or persuasively? Did He know more of the things of God? We do not know. All these things are possible. But they are not the decisive thing.

The decisive thing is this. The preachers (and therefore the scribes and Pharisees) very earnestly declared the will of God in His Law, speaking of the fatherly love with which He seeks us, of His forgiveness and of His covenant with men. Jesus handled the same themes, but in a surprisingly different way. For He did not speak about these things. As He spoke, He entered into the things of God in an active and creative way which changed the whole situation. Thus, when He met a guilty man, He did not preach a sermon or deliver a lecture on the theme that God is a Judge before whom he must perish, but that God is also merciful and will perhaps justify him in grace if he will take up a right attitude to Him. No, He tells such a man directly and authoritatively: "Your sins are forgiven." And as He says this the man knows that his chains fall off, that he can

### 3. The Question of Christ

*The baptism of John, whence was it from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him? But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet.*

*And they answered Jesus, and said, We cannot tell. And he said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things (Matthew 21:25-27).*

THE SO-CALLED "LOVING SAVIOUR," whom we always like to picture as the One who blessed the children, who with infinite patience seeks the lost, and who pardons His sadistic executioners, the so-called loving Saviour here ends a discussion on agitated and important questions of faith by closing the door with a loud bang and leaving his hearers. Is this how a pastoral conversation should end?

There is an almost unbearable tension in this story. It begins with the question: "By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?" This question obviously seems to derive from an honest concern. And yet the conversation closes with the crisp statement of Jesus: "Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things."

Are we not all shocked and rebuffed by this refusal? What are we to say about it? Above all, what did these people do that Jesus dealt so hardly with them? For obviously they must have done something serious.

Many of us complain that God is so dreadfully quiet, and that particularly when dealing with Christ we seem to stand before a closed door. We may even conclude that there is

stand up and go away a new creature. When Jesus speaks we have more than a word; we have an enactment, a creative deed which makes things new. No man can do this. We can see by this what "authority" means in the language of the New Testament.

We have also to consider the way in which He deals with sorrow in the world, with anxiety, sickness and death. Preachers can say that the day of God is coming when all tears shall be wiped away and there shall be no more sorrow or crying. But when Jesus arrives things are different. The lame literally rise up already and begin to walk; the eyes of the blind are opened; the poor are made merry and the oppressed begin to praise. When Jesus arrives the atmosphere is full of intimations of what God will one day do fully and unmistakably. The brightening of the day of God may be seen already on the horizon.

When people see all these things, they are forced to ask Him who He really is and from what source He has this power. In spite of all scepticism, antipathy, or social or philosophical objections, in face of this sensation from Nazareth, they have to say that He is absolutely different from ourselves.

Hence they put the question of His authority. Its meaning is simply this: Jesus of Nazareth, what is really behind you? Are you really different from us?

Undoubtedly there is something different. You have something about you. You have a mysterious power over men and things, and no one can perform the same signs as you.

Thus men press Him throughout the centuries, trying to unlock His secret.

You have kindled a fire on earth, Nazarene. It sweeps round the globe, jumps across the seas and penetrates the most distant continents. Even centuries later it can still do this.

You have power, Jesus of Nazareth. There is no doubt about this, for no man has exerted so much influence. Millions

have been imprisoned, thrown to the lions and executed for you, and have praised you with their dying breath.

There is no doubt that you have power, Jesus of Nazareth — power such as no mortal man possessed. Caesars and dictators have established kingdoms to last forever. They have strengthened their frontiers, raised mighty armies and had themselves extolled as saviours. But all their glory has vanished with the wind. New cultures and kingdoms have arisen, and they, too, have had the mark of their destruction upon them. Their brilliant rise has been inexorably followed by their decline. This is human destiny, and always will be.

But you have remained, Jesus of Nazareth. Yet you had no kingdom of military power. You did not summon the twelve legions of angels to establish your earthly rule. You had a few disciples who at the critical hour in your life failed to understand you and fled.

You died on a gallows in a poor and insignificant country, and world history strode over you. But no — you strode over world history. We still hear your step. The dying on battlefields look up when you come in their last hour. The faces of the guilty brighten when you take off their chains. The anxious and careworn find rest when they hear your voice: "Fear not." In all the poor and despised you traverse the world afresh. Your eternal journeying is in the guise of the poorest.

Yes, you have remained, puzzling Nazarene. You often seem to have been buried. For whole epochs you have been silenced. But you have always come forth from the sealed tomb and caused men to realize that you are the Saviour and the secret Ruler of the world.

Thus men in all ages speak with Jesus, and they finally ask Him: Do you not see how we are tormented by the question who you are and by what authority you do these things.

Who are you, Jesus of Nazareth?

Are you a personality of tremendous evocative power to be able to do all this? Are you a genius at handling men

that you can bind them to you to live and die for you? Are you a clever psychologist, a skilled manipulator of souls, that you exploit the religious needs of men and make yourself indispensable to the generations?

Or — are you the Son of God? Are you the Wholly Other? Are you alone from above, whereas we are all from below? Does God's fatherly heart beat in you when you stoop to the sick and poor? Does God's hand act in yours when you lay it in healing on wounded consciences and diseased bodies? Please tell us, who are you? What is the source of your power? Is it from God or from men?

And now I ask all you who are listening and who read this: Do we not all have to put the same question? For which of us has not Jesus of Nazareth been a problem?

We can put the question as follows. Is Jesus a point in the history of religion? Is He a station in the course of its complicated development? May we not rightly suppose that this point will be finally submerged and surpassed by another, that a new religion will come more suited to the men of our technical age, more modern, more adapted to include the various viewpoints that we should like to see included? Do we not live today in an interval between Christianity and a coming religion, between "the end and the beginning," as Martin Hieronimi once put it?

Or — is Jesus the one who will someday come from the other direction to meet history when it reaches its end? Is He the only one to come to the great host of humanity from the other side? Is He the Son of Man; the King with the sickle and the crown, who on His day will come on the clouds of heaven and will be proclaimed the King of the coming kingdom? If so — we cannot look for another.

Everything depends on the answer to this question. For example, it decides the question what the Christian Church is, whether a religious union or an institution against which the gates of hell shall not prevail. It also decides the question what the Bible is, whether a literary product of antiquarian

value or the book of life with all the consolations of this world and the next.

We can thus imagine how tense were the expressions of those who put the question. Their whole lives rested on this little question. If Jesus answered: "I have my authority from God, I am the meaning of history and on the last day I will come to judge the quick and the dead, as is my due" — they could not go on living as before. For their whole endeavor would be to stand clear with this Christ. Both they and I would have to consider the problem of guilt in our lives very differently. We should have to settle this decisive question. We should have to have a very different attitude to our fellow men; for this Jesus has made them our brothers and committed them to our love. We should have to do our work under His eyes, go to battle under His protection, take His hand in our loneliness and find comfort in Him in our last hour.

In this one question of the Christ all our problems are grounded. This is why such electric tension rests on the story.

How great this tension can be I know from my own pastoral experience with a young believing soldier waiting for death in a hospital. The Roman Catholic priest had been before me, and the soldier had confessed and signified his resolve to become a Roman Catholic. "There must be something about this Christ," he said; he had seen it in his Christian comrades. But a few hours later the whole problem arose afresh. The question of the Christ, so long evaded, would not let him go, and with his last strength he hurled his hot-water bottle at the crucifix on the wall of his sickroom.

Thus the question can even become a physical burden, especially when, as in this case, it has been constantly postponed and arises only in the last hour when there can be no more evasion.

What will Jesus do when men, when you and I, stand

before Him with questioning eyes? Does He not have to say Yes or No, simply for our peace of soul? Instead He answers: "I also will ask you one thing." He puts a counter-question.

Strictly, this is always the practice of Jesus in His pastoral conversations. He is not prepared simply to answer our problems, for example, what is the meaning of our life, whether God or fate is master, or what will happen after death. He refuses to hand us answers to these questions on a platter.

On this occasion He unexpectedly asks: "The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men?"

Why does He ask this apparently irrelevant question which not only jars but also seems to miss the situation of the questioners? The only point of the question is to determine whether the question of the Christ is really of final seriousness for these people. Their seriousness can be judged by their readiness to commit themselves, to adopt a responsible position. On the basis of the counter-question of Jesus they must be ready to commit themselves before God. If they admit that John as the preacher of repentance acted and preached on divine authority, then they accept the fact that they are not right with God, for this is what John the Baptist maintained. They confess: "We who are so respected by men are poor, unhappy creatures; we must repent if God is to be able to use us. We must become new." This is what they must do without any *ifs* or *buts*. It is to this that they must commit themselves.

Or they must be ready to commit themselves before men and to argue that John was a mistaken fanatic and pessimist. But this is dangerous, for the view is so unpopular that it involves the risk of broken heads. They might easily say that John was a fanatic. Jesus would not take it amiss. But if they do say it, they must accept the consequences. Thus Jesus can detect how serious they are. Everything depends on how serious they are, irrespective of the answer.

There is a type of religious questioner, as we see from the case of Nicodemus, who is undoubtedly not serious, who desires only to initiate great discussions of philosophical and religious themes, who revels in the obscurity of these difficult problems, who finds in them an occasion for his own academic display. He has perhaps had philosophical training, and the perspicacity of his arguments and counter-arguments is evident. All this is possible. Yet in no circumstances will the disputant commit himself. He will not decide. He is not willing to be jolted by Jesus from his course. What he says will all be on the non-binding level of the intellect. It must never take on the character of ultimate decision.

We can only note that Jesus never answers this kind of person. He instructs only those who are ready to have ultimate dealings with God. He withholds Himself from mere onlookers or spectators.

There are some things in life which can be known only when we are in earnest and engage in them. War is an example. Possibly the news review in the motion-picture theater might give us a more realistic portrayal of the horrors of war and the terror of bombing. Yet those who have seen the pictures cannot really say that they know what war is. Such knowledge is not to be gained in the comfortable seat of a theater. To know what war is one has to be plunged into the venture of life, into mortal anguish, into anxiety for loved ones, into deadly sorrow. The spectator in the stands may participate inwardly; but as a mere spectator of this bloody and chaotic drama he cannot really know what war is.

We can now see what Jesus is really asking in His counter-question.

Are you prepared ultimately, that is, if you see that I am the Son of God, to change and renew your whole life? Are you prepared seriously and publicly to make your confession before men even though it is unpopular, like the

suggestion that the baptism of John is only human? If so, you will know who I am — but only so! Mere curiosity about Jesus of Nazareth, or pretence of seeking God, is not enough.

Only those who have a right attitude, namely, the attitude of obedience to Christ, can see Him in true perspective. To do this we have to have the experience of Peter at Caesarea Philippi when he has to say: "Thou art the Christ, the son of the living God."

If we are not ready for this final seriousness, we cannot see in Jesus more than the important founder of a religion who is worthy of human recognition, but from whom one may turn after a while to consider the founders of new religions. In countless talks about Christ it has been my experience that what stands between men and Christ is not intellectual arguments but sins. They are not willing to give up this or that. They want reservations and privileges before God. Hence they will not accept Christ as such because of the consequences. But those who want only a non-committal belief in God, which costs nothing, need not be surprised if they sit before an empty stage and miss the decisive question of their lives, the question of Christ. All so-called sympathies with Christianity are worth less than nothing to them. Those who do the will of my Father in heaven will know from whom I have my authority, whether my doctrine is of God and who I am.

We now see how far-reaching are the quiet words of Jesus. Can you not answer the question of who am I? Are you immersing yourself in the dogmas of my divine humanity, Virgin Birth and the like? Instead, do something in my name and for my sake as though I were already in your life. Try to order your life by me. Give a cup of water to the thirsty in my name. Forgive another because I have forgiven you. Surrender to me something to which you cling. Dare to lay bare your soul and become a sinner before me. Dare to let your heart be a den of thieves

before me, however hard it is. Be sure that you will then suddenly think differently of me, and find a very different attitude to me, than you could ever suspect or imagine when you sought me theoretically.

Those who love Him thus, who dare to love Him thus, in advance, will understand the mystery of God, of the Cross, of Christmas, Good Friday and Easter.

Those who love Him thus, so that it purifies their relation to others and shines out in their calling, conversation and bearing; those who in all the changes and chances of life which overthrow others can say: "Yet I am still with Thee"; those who can say: "I am Thy loving child even though Thy face is withdrawn for a moment and the dark curtain of mystery seems to have intervened"; those who love Him with all their heart and soul and strength; those who give themselves to Him and venture all on Him; those who throw themselves down before Him and say: "Do with me as Thou wilt, Nazarene, whoever Thou art, whether Thou art a man or the Son of God, whether Thou art the heart of the Father or an invented dream of human longing, here I am to be tested"; those who love Him thus He will not cast out, nor will they become fools as they hope in Him.

To those who love Him thus He will appear as the one to whom all power is given in heaven and in earth, and they will see Him as the one who has full authority to forgive sins and to break all chains.

And when He appears to me in this way, there will break from my lips a saying which I could never find by religious search, which the questioning Pharisees could not utter, but which precisely the doubting Thomas had to pronounce: "My Lord and my God."