

# WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

Conversations with  
Jesus in the Gospels

LEO GAFNEY



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## INTRODUCTION

The gospels are so rich in meaning that we must meditate and pray over them phrase by phrase. This book focuses on brief encounters between Jesus and another person or small group. Someone asks a question and Jesus responds, or the reverse. Jesus considers the person with whom he speaks, the circumstances, his own views, and his mission. One person asks to be cured; John the Baptist asks if Jesus is the one who is to come; Jesus asks Peter what people are saying about him. In these and many other encounters, Jesus' replies, his questions, and his comments will engage and perhaps surprise us.

We should place ourselves in the story. In one curious incident, Jesus calls to his disciples from the shore, telling them to fish from the other side of the boat. Did he have some special knowledge? Or perhaps he saw a school of fish. What might this mean to us? Perhaps there are times when we should try something different.

We should also be alert to the presence of God in these encounters. Jesus' thoughts, captured in his words and

exchanges, bring new perspectives. Like his parables and like the Beatitudes, his exchanges with people give us glimpses into that mysterious world that he inhabits with the Father.

In this book, I have offered examples from Scripture and from the lives of Christians to suggest different ways in which we might respond to the gospels. Jesus continues speaking to us. He is fully divine but also human beyond our expectations.

And how are we to respond to Jesus when we encounter him? We must realize that each encounter is personal and also communal. God reaches out to us every day, in every part of our lives. Jesus is our guide and our connection to God—that mystery deep within and also far beyond us. Prayer and meditation help because they open the door to the Spirit who gives the light and the warmth we need in our encounters with God.

This book is arranged for use on a weekly basis. The Scripture verses that start each chapter can help focus the mind, and a weekly practice is suggested at the conclusion of each chapter.



## PART I

# JESUS ASKS A QUESTION

*Jesus asked questions not to gain information or guidance. He asked questions so that people would stop and think. As Christians, we attach ourselves to Christ. And as we read and pray over the gospel passages, he asks you and me the same questions. “Who do you say that I am?” “What do you want me to do for you?” “Where is your faith?” So it is that Jesus speaks to us, across the centuries and languages and circumstances. And he waits for us to respond.*

*In these gospel situations we consider how Jesus immerses himself in the lives of those around him and at the same time lifts them with him to the life he shares with the Father. We also consider how some exemplary Christians responded, how Jesus changed them, and how they can help us answer Jesus’ questions.*

# Coming of Age

*“Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.”...“Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”*

[ LUKE 2:48-49 ]

Just before this exchange we read that the family had traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover feast, as they did every year, and that Jesus at this time was twelve. Those who are parents or have had charge of children know what it is like to lose a child, even for a short time. We feel “great anxiety,” just as Jesus’ mother says. We panic and our imaginations run wild, considering what might have happened. For most of us the loss is brief; we are united again, and we are happy together.

And so it is easy to transfer Jesus’ situation to today’s world and consider what happened. Imagine an outing with families traveling in three or four buses. The group gets together for the trip home. There are extended families and parents talking with friends. Parents of a child board different buses; each assumes that the child is with the other; he has been with them for the whole trip. After several hours the

buses come to a rest stop and the discovery is made. “Where is he?” the parents ask one another, and their concerns grow. Of course, they must go back.

But in the story, as Luke describes it, it was only “after three days,” that they found Jesus in the temple. Imagine the first nightfall not finding him. What do they think and fear? We know from Jesus’ own stories that there were robbers in and around Jerusalem—although he would not have had much to be stolen. There was also the Roman army, which like any army had the good and the bad. We know this from the way they are portrayed in the gospels and the way they treated Jesus in his final hours. Where did Jesus stay; what did he eat? It does seem that the culture of Israel at that time was welcoming and caring, and people often slept outdoors. And at Passover time the population of Jerusalem swelled to four or five times its normal size. Jesus undoubtedly found friendly people. And although only twelve, he would have been nearing adult status.

In any case, Jesus did survive the three days. He did much more than survive. Perhaps it was a “coming of age” experience—in part to find his independence and freedom, but, more important, to encounter God.

We read that they found Jesus in the temple among the elders, asking them questions. Jesus wanted to understand how God works among his people. Perhaps he asked about the words of Isaiah, “he was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity.” We know from Jesus’ life and teaching that he had compassion for those in need and expected his own life to end early with suffering and death.

Perhaps he asked the elders about the Passover prayers and observance of the Shabbat.



Blessed are You, God our God, King of the universe, who makes a distinction between sacred and profane, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations, between the seventh day and the six workdays. [ SHABBAT BLESSING PRAYER ]

We know that Jesus observed the prayers and customs of his people, but he also created controversy when he healed on the Sabbath. The story also says that those around him in the temple were amazed at his answers. Perhaps Mary and Joseph were also amazed; but they were anxious. The gospel tells us that he went back to Nazareth and was obedient to them.

### **THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE**

St. Francis of Assisi recognized God's call while coming of age. Francis celebrated life with his friends, as young people often do—having fun, drinking, and partying. Then he wanted to be a knight and spent a great deal of his father's money on a suit of armor. Finally, he had several dreams and visions:

“Where are you going?”

“To Apulia, to become a knight.”

“Now tell me, Francis, which of the two would be of greater advantage to you, the master or the servant?”

“The master!”

“Why then do you leave the master for the sake of the servant, the prince for the vassal?”

While at prayer, Francis also heard a voice saying, “Francis, repair my church.” He thought the instruction was to rebuild a nearby abandoned church building. But gradually he came to understand that repair was needed for the whole church, the people more than the buildings. The institutional church in many ways did not reflect what Christ had taught and lived.

Francis chose poverty as the center of his life and worship. He and his followers were to own nothing—no extra clothes, no money, not even books. He, like many before and since, found that “things” did not provide freedom and security. Rather, the desire and need for things enslaves us. It is because, once we begin wanting and needing, we always want more. Francis’s independence and freedom took root in his soul because he did not want things or need money.

Jesus, staying behind in Jerusalem, was exercising a degree of independence from his parents. How many “coming of age” stories have we read? There may be some special event—war, work, love, and even family disruption—that precipitates the initial separation from family. That separation may be one of real distance; or it may be psychological. Young people must begin to find their own way. Each of us has at some time, or through a number of experiences, separated ourselves from our parents. It is part of life.

When we leave home, the culture and safety of our early life produces both anxiety and exhilaration. We may come closer to God, or we may wander. Like Jesus, we are likely to come home—perhaps many times—to those we love. Like Jesus, we will also go out on our own, taking with us the love of our home life.

## **REFLECTION**

In our personal growth and as Christians, we might “come of age” more than once during our lives. At the end of the story we have been considering—of Jesus when he was twelve—the gospel says that he “increased in wisdom and in years.” This is not just pious talk. Jesus did grow in his understanding of God’s work in his life—and so should we. Consider as you read this, your age, your commitments, your work or studies. In what ways is God calling on you to come of age, to grow, once more? Only you know the answer. God is not asking the impossible. But God wants you to let the knowledge and example of his image, Christ our Lord, live more fully in your mind and heart. He left home; he questioned the teachers in the temple. What questions are you asking about the next steps in your life?

## **WEEKLY PRACTICE**

Picture Jesus talking with his mother. Consider how Jesus learned and came of age by taking on new responsibilities and meeting new people. Each day, write down what God might be calling you to do next. You don’t have to do everything on the list, but pray and listen to the Holy Spirit who may be calling you to come of age one more time.

# To Touch the Lord

*She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you, how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’”*

[ MARK 5:27-31 ]

As the Gospel of Mark moves forward, we get the sense that Jesus is propelled by events but also in control of each situation. The healing described above is folded within a larger story of Jesus raising a girl from death.

But let us reflect on the narrative. When political leaders travel, they surround themselves with security personnel. Even in ancient times access to those in authority was restricted. Depictions of Jesus often show him at some dis-

tance from the others, dressed in white, tall and handsome, with a well-trimmed beard. Is that what it was like?

Michael Casey suggests a rather different portrait. He surmises that Jesus, as a first-century, Middle-Eastern man approaching middle age, may have been—by our standards—on the short side, balding, perhaps putting on some weight.

As noted above, Jesus did not stand out from the crowd. This is reinforced by the comment and question from his disciples pointing out that Jesus is surrounded by people, and they are constantly touching him. He didn't mind; that was the way life was. People were familiar and comfortable enough with Jesus to point this out: How can you ask who touched you? We are always touching one another.

I recall reading about a sociological study comparing different cultural habits regarding touching. They looked at families picnicking and the number of times they touched one another in an hour. The results were something like: English, ten times; American, twenty-five times; Hispanic, two hundred times. Touching is important to all of us, but more common in some cultures than others.

Anyway, this touch that Jesus noted was more than the common touch of communication or friendship. In Luke's account, Jesus says, "I felt power go out from me."

We are also told that the woman had been afflicted for twelve years and had spent all her money seeking cures, but her condition grew worse. Did she turn to Jesus out of desperation? Perhaps that was part of it, but Jesus told her, as he often did, that her faith had made her well.

The incident and the woman's simplicity remind us of another gospel verse: "Amen, I say to you, unless you be converted and become as little children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). The woman was

perhaps desperate, but something in her had changed; she turned in simplicity to the one in whom she saw goodness and compassion.

## **THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE**

This then reminds us of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, who has become a shining example of the value in doing little things with love, bringing ourselves close to Jesus, touching him in spirit. She also wondered why it was that some were favored or called or cured and why some people went through their whole lives without having heard the name of Jesus. She answered the question herself.

Jesus deigned to teach me this mystery. He set before me the book of nature; I understood how all the flowers He has created are beautiful, how the splendor of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not take away the perfume of the little violet or the delightful simplicity of the daisy. I understood that if all the flowers wanted to be roses, nature would lose her spring-time beauty, and the fields would no longer be decked out with little wild flowers.

St. Thérèse became known as the Little Flower, symbol of simplicity. She learned and taught the value of turning our lives over to God in small ways, one step at a time. She is also well known for her belief that her real mission was to begin with her death. We all believe that this is true for Jesus Christ. His redemptive death brought God's love in a special way. But even with our best efforts to believe, most of us believe that our one chance is here and now, not after death.

But St. Thérèse wrote about herself.

I feel that I am going to my rest...but above all, I feel that my mission is about to begin, my mission of making God loved as I love him, of giving my little way to other souls. If God grants my request, my Heaven will be spent on earth, until the end of the world. Yes, I wish to spend my Heaven in doing good on earth.

We should pray often to have such simple faith and hope in our life, continuing after death. The woman who was cured in the narrative we are considering has only that brief moment in the gospels, but she remains strong in the memory of Christians. With millions who have come before us we believe that we can come close to Jesus, and we will feel his healing power, based in part on that woman's faith.

As Christians we should be willing and able to believe that we will continue to do good even after we die. How does that happen? It happens in many ways. As a parent or teacher or coworker or friend the positive things we do will continue after our lives end. But St. Thérèse meant something more than this. She meant that as part of the body of Christ she would continue to be involved and engaged with the people of this world—through the words she left behind and through her real interventions from beyond. The same will be true of us.

We are connected to one another in Christ; and we will remain connected. Jesus has touched each of us and we can touch others with his love and healing power. We should let others come into our lives and touch us. Healing power may even go out from us without our knowing it.

## **REFLECTION**

The modern world tells us in many ways that we should strive to be noticed, to be different, to stand out. Jesus tells us something else. He blended in with the crowd. He accepted the pushing and shoving of everyday life. Yes, his teaching lifts us close to God. But in living that teaching we are to be in the crowd. In how many ways do you try to stand out, to be special? You are indeed special in God's plan. And we as a people have a special mission; that mission will take us, seamlessly, from this world to the next.

## **WEEKLY PRACTICE**

Try to accept and appreciate the needs of those around you as Christ accepted and was attentive to the woman following him. We often miss those who would like a word of encouragement, a phone call, or a visit. We, through Christ, have more love and energy to share than we know.