

## A Most Surprising God

*Tantum Religio potuit suadere malorum.  
Such evil deeds can religion prompt. (Lucretius)*

In France and Germany there are vast cemeteries containing the mortal remains of those hundreds of thousands of men who died in battle in the two World Wars. Both German and Allied graveyards declare that their dead gave their lives 'Pro Deo et Patria', 'For God and Country'. All who gave their lives deserve our respect, but it cannot be God's will that we should kill one another. Nuclear submarines, built for national security and therefore 'Pro Patria', with enough fire power to obliterate cities and maim millions, have received solemn blessings to assure those who sail in them and operate their missiles that they act 'Pro Deo' as well as 'Pro Patria'. Sin is the refusal to let God be God. This refusal is so deep in us that we even use God's name to justify our selfishness, oppression and destruction and believe that we are acting righteously.

In the last chapter we looked at some basic guidelines to help us distinguish the creative action of God in our lives from the destructive action of evil within us. In this and the following chapters we shall look more closely at this question.

Christ died, rose from the dead and is now Lord of all creation. Our real identity is in him. 'The Spirit of God', St Paul says, 'who lived in Jesus and raised him from the dead, now lives in us,' and so he prays for the Ephesians,

Out of his infinite glory, may he give you the power through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong, so that Christ may live in your hearts through faith, and then, planted in love and built on love, you will with all the saints have

strength to grasp the breadth and the length, the height and the depth; until, knowing the love of Christ, which is beyond all knowledge, you are filled with the utter fullness of God. (Eph. 3:16-19)

Each one of us 'This one work has to do, Let all God's glory through.' But we are all tempted to take God over, 'to be as gods', and to use Christ to justify our own greed, timidity and self-righteousness.

If Christ were to appear in the flesh today, how would we receive him? The rest of this chapter is an imaginative exercise in answer to this question. Although it is written as a bit of light relief after the last heavy chapter, it has a serious purpose, namely to help us see some of the subtle ways in which our 'common sense', respectability and religious conditioning may blind us to the truth of Christ, so that we fail to recognize him living and loving in the men and women of our day. Particular embellishments of the Gospel story included in this exercise are not to be taken seriously. I do not, for example, believe that all bookstalls should be banned from the back of churches! Having read the chapter, I hope you can then take the idea and do some writing of your own on Jesus of the Gospel and his likely reception in your church today.

I imagine that I am a parish priest in Northern Ireland, the place chosen because it reflects something of the fierce religious and political conflicts which divided Palestine in the time of Christ. The parish priest is exasperated by the behaviour of a man in his parish, who has applied to seminaries and religious houses in the U.K. for admission as a candidate for the priesthood. Bishops, and religious superiors from England, Scotland and Wales are now writing to the parish priest asking for a reference for the candidate. The overworked parish priest has been sending a brief reply, declaring the man to be totally unsuited for acceptance. Many have written again asking for a fuller reference. In reply, the parish priest sends out the following circular:

The Presbytery, The Square,  
Portinstorm, Co. Trim.

To Their Excellencies, Graces, Lordships,  
Lord Abbots, Very Reverend Provincials  
of England, Wales and Scotland.

Reverend and Dear Brothers in Christ,

Please forgive me for sending you a circular letter, but I do so in the hope that the few minutes required for its perusal may save Your Reverences time, money and the possible disruption of your seminaries and noviceships.

A young man, Mr E. Manuel, aged 33, and of this parish, has already applied to some of you and may well apply to the rest, for acceptance into your diocese, religious order or congregation. Some of you have asked me to supply a reference. I have replied simply stating that I do not consider him a suitable applicant, as charity and overwork compelled me to be brief. A few of you have asked for a more detailed report. While I appreciate Your Reverences' desire to be fair to this man and to nurture any sign of a priestly vocation, however unlikely, in these times of distressing shortage, I do not, unfortunately, have the leisure for letter writing of the unemployed Mr Manuel. In addition to my heavy parish duties, I have also been asked by His Lordship the Bishop to take over the diocesan marriage tribunal in succession to Mgr Colquhoun, who suffered a coronary two years ago following on a meeting with the same Mr Manuel. I am also without a housekeeper for reasons which I shall explain later.

My personal knowledge of Mr Manuel is limited to a few brief encounters. When I first came to this parish three years ago, Mr Manuel had already left home and he returns only spasmodically, D.G. However, I have spoken at length with people who do know him well, and in particular with the new parish accountant, a bright and ambitious young man, who at one time associated with Mr Manuel.

Manuel's parents (his father died some years ago) first came to the parish over twenty-five years ago. Some say that they had been travelling people, a rumour made the more credible by the subsequent vagrancy of their son, and by his mother, a singularly silent woman, a characteristic not

uncommon among gypsies who are no longer on the road.

Those closest to the family maintain that the deceased Mr Manuel was not, in fact, the father of the child. I am still old-fashioned enough to believe that such facts can be important.

In his early teens, E. Manuel disappeared while on holiday with his parents and was missing for three days. It is, as Your Reverences are no doubt aware, a well known fact that truancy at an early age frequently betokens mental imbalance. On being recovered and questioned, the child maintained that he had been attending to his father's affairs. This could, of course, be explained by his illegitimate birth, which he may have discovered; but some of the relatives have a more sinister interpretation and are convinced he is possessed.

He has no formal education to speak of and was apprenticed to his father, a joiner, at an early age. As a youth he was given to wandering on his own, was strangely silent much of the time, but is also gifted with a fatal fluency and charm of manner, which can easily deceive the unwary, of whom we have more than a fair proportion in this part of the world. Three years ago he gave up his job and took to the road, returning occasionally, sometimes alone, but more often with an unsavoury group of companions who include, besides a few simple-minded folk, some notorious men of violence, extortioners and prostitutes. Again, it is a well established fact that a man can be judged by the friends he keeps. Currently there is a court case pending in which a local farmer is suing Mr Manuel and a local lunatic for the joint destruction of a large herd of pigs. They evidently chased the pigs over a cliff into the sea.

Without formal education in either the sacred or secular sciences, Manuel has set himself up as a religious preacher, making theological assertions about himself and God which would cause alarm even on the western seaboard of the U.S.A.

In the foolishly permissive spirit which has infected some sections of the Church in the last twenty years, a joint meeting of the U.C.M. (Union of Catholic Mothers) and the Knights of St Columba, seeing the influence which Mr Manuel was exercising in some sections of the community, invited him to address them. His address was a salutary warning against such permissiveness, for he assured the assembly that the

criminals and prostitutes would enter the kingdom of heaven before them.

An over-tolerant parish council also invited him to speak, and he was lucky to escape with his life at the end of it. His provocative remarks, suggesting that Protestants and pagans were nearer to God than they were, caused uproar and a very unpleasant scene. I leave it to Your Reverences to judge for yourselves which kind of spirit there must be in a man who can cause such anger and uproar when addressing religiously minded people.

When I first came to the parish, having heard stories of Mr Manuel's doings and wanting to judge for myself, I invited him, but without his companions, to meet some of the local clergy for supper, including Mgr Colquhoun, our leading moralist and president of the diocesan marriage tribunal. On arrival, Mr Manuel was treated with appropriate courtesy by the assembled clergy. Supper had hardly begun when a woman of notorious reputation in the town entered the dining room without as much as a 'by your leave' and proceeded to display her affection in a thoroughly distasteful display of sentimentality and hysteria. The assembled company, as Your Reverences might well imagine, sat in stunned silence. Your Reverences had the impertinence to address me, comparing Manuel then had the impertinence to address me, comparing unfavourably the formal welcome which we, the clergy, accorded with the lady's tearful effusions. He then had the temerity to assure the woman that her sins were forgiven because she believed in him! It was at this point that Mgr Colquhoun departed and later suffered a heart attack. As a result of this gesture of friendliness towards Manuel, I have not only had to take over Mgr Colquhoun's heavy responsibilities, but I have also lost my housekeeper, who, scandalized by the incident, could not be persuaded that I had not invited the lady personally to supper, an invitation never accorded to herself in twenty years' devoted service.

Manuel preaches to the people in the open air, occasionally providing picnics. Although unemployed, he seems able to command limitless quantities of food and, on one occasion at least, drink, too, which he dispenses liberally, so that his meetings are more in the nature of parties rather than religious services. On one occasion he had the impertinence to offer the presbytery some of the food left over. Unable to

believe the food was not stolen property, I passed it on to the Salvation Army as an ecumenical gesture, having first consulted the diocesan moralist.

In his preaching, his fatal fluency and ability to turn a telling phrase does untold damage to the minds of the simple faithful, undermining their religious and moral life, as well as their respect for the authority of the clergy. Although Mr Manuel claims that he has never preached disobedience to the authority of the Church, he can hardly expect the simple faithful to obey with reverence those whom he has labelled 'a brood of vipers' and 'whited sepulchres'. He refers to Almighty God as 'Dad', a Dad who apparently spends his time pursuing the likes of Manuel's friends, the criminals and prostitutes. He also implies that the Sunday obligation is for the benefit of the people rather than to fulfil the prescriptions of law, and he has effected a notable drop in Sunday observance throughout the country.

Politically, in the violent, complicated and delicate situation in which we live, he is bewilderingly naive. He seems to have no understanding of the need for cohesion in the Catholic body if we are to preserve our corporate strength in this trouble-torn land. His so-called teaching ignores the very real differences which separate the Christian denominations in this part of the country, diverts peoples' attention from the hard facts of moral theology and prescriptions of the magisterium, concentrating their attention instead on 'Dad', who seems to love everyone with the possible exception of those of us who are responsible for preaching, teaching and sanctifying the Church!

He claims to have no political affiliations and denounces all forms of violence, whether it be the British army, the I.R.A., or the U.D.A., yet his teaching on 'Dad', far from bringing peace, intensifies the divisions because he threatens every faction. Some suspect that he may, in spite of his protestations, harbour political ambitions, for he is known to meet secretly with some prominent members in every party, a fact which, when it becomes public, will certainly endanger his own and other people's lives. In our delicate political situation, where rash and imprudent words can be as damaging as bombs, Mr Manuel is like a walking arsenal.

Like so many people who claim to work for peace, E.

Manuel is himself of violent temperament. Just recently he created a scene outside the Cathedral, overthrowing the repository and bookstall tables. The matter was, of course, reported to the police and there is a warrant out for his arrest, but he has disappeared for the time being.

Most disturbing of all is the belief that he may, in fact, be possessed. Some of his own relatives do not hesitate to assert this. He has certainly had association with possessed people, both men and women, some of whom are now his permanent followers. He also seems to have some kind of preternatural powers not uncommon among the possessed.

It may be that he will be caught and arrested shortly and there are enough charges against him to keep him out of harm's way for a long time to come, but he has a serpentlike cunning and may well escape the country to continue his troubling elsewhere.

I apologize again to Your Reverences for the length of this letter but, had I not written, some of you, in the present widespread shortage of vocations to the priesthood, might have wasted time and money in encouraging this man, who can seem so plausible at first, but who would have a devastating effect on any seminary or religious house imprudent enough to accept him.

Begging a remembrance in Your Reverences' prayers and assuring you of my own for an increase in worthy vocations to your diocese, order, congregation,

I remain,  
Yours sincerely,  
(P. Simon, DD, Parish Priest of Portinstorm)

While writing this letter and entering into some of the blind spots of P. Simon, I began to recognize a few more of my own.

Because we are all liable to self-deception and tend to use God and Christ to justify and support our own narrow ways of thinking and acting, we need the institutional and the critical elements of the Church as a check to our self-deception, but ultimately it is Christ himself who is our teacher. Christ is mystery. We can never possess the truth of Christ: all we can do is beg to be possessed by him, his truth and his love 'which is beyond all knowledge'. Imaginative contem-

plation on scenes from the Gospel is an invaluable way of coming to recognize Christ today living in our hearts. When he makes his home in us, it is not that we let Jesus into our lives, but rather we surrender our home to him, for he is Lord of all, who loves all that he has created.

The next two chapters offer a few reflections on the life, death and resurrection of Christ, intended to encourage the reader to contemplate Christ of the Gospels imaginatively so that you can meet him in your own way, which is the best and only way for you!

#### *Exercise*

Read one of the Gospels carefully and then write either a letter, article, or short story describing Christ living today, how and by whom he would be welcomed, how and by whom he is likely to be rejected.