

# THE CHRIST OF HISTORY

## THE EVERYMAN-CHRIST

The need to "make sense" out of our sufferings and actions is deeply human. Apparently men every where and time have sensed themselves as pilgrims looking for a way to really live in this world. In the language of the poet, EVERYMAN quests after some light, way, truth, door. More or less awarely, he searches for a bread or word of life. He dwells in hope that some tomorrow will bring a delivering power, an illuminating story, some saving event, a final blessedness. When that day comes, so he dreams, then surely in some way the essence of life and the living of it will be different. All peoples have forged signs and symbols of this human characteristic. For the Hebrews of old, one such image was the coming "anointed one," the Messiah, translated into the Greek as the Christ.

This Messianic hope of EVERYMAN is born out of his experience of the limitations of existence. His encounter with the unknowns, ambiguities, sufferings and deaths of this world discloses his insecurity. This primordial anxiety breeds the Messiah image. Watch him, as he is thrown up against his finitude, become a seeker after some truth which will overcome the unbearable incomprehensibles of life. Watch him search, however subtly, for the justification which will alleviate his sense of insignificance. Watch him relentlessly strive for a peace which will somehow blot out his lucid awareness of the tragic dimension of life. One senses in this spectacle a creature vainly striving to rise above his creaturely limits. Finding his givenness burdensome beyond bearing, he dreams of discovering some other kind of a world. Indeed he already has a different world for he literally exists in his present hopes about the future. Thereby he escapes his actual life in the Now. His very meaning is his anticipation that some tomorrow will render his situation quite different. On that day the ultimate key will come clear; the final excuse for his existence will emerge and true contentment will bathe his being. Then shall he truly live, so he imagines, delivered from this present world of uncertainty, unfulfillment and anxiety. Such a life-quest is an experience, I submit, that all of us are quite privy to. Men dwell sometimes very explicitly, most times quite vaguely, in great expectations of that which will relieve them of the necessity of living their given life in the present situation. This great hope, whatever its form, is the CHRIST OF EVERYMAN.

## THE JESUS OF NAZARETH

The New Testament age opens with the Jews, like EVERYMAN, expecting the Christ. Of course, they were doing so out of their concrete historical memory. The Christ-quest is always tied to specific life situations. It was into this particular Jewish yearning, around the beginning of the first century, that one Jesus intruded. It might have been, in an abstract sense, Herman of Hebronville or Jones of Smithville. But it was not. It was this fellow Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee. Very little detail is directly known about this man. But as all of us do, he lived a life and died a death. It was to be sure, *his* life that he lived and *his* death that he died. This is most important for it was in the midst of these very definite historical occurrences, as they disturbed the hopes of Israel, that the New Testament happening of Christ took place.

Perhaps the core of the issue could be put something like this: a very specific man lived a very specific life and for that very specific life, died a very specific death. Somehow in these concretions the deeps of human existence became exposed. A man got born, lived his life, and experienced death even as you and I. Yet there was a plus. Not a metaphysical plus; but what might be termed a plus in specifics. I mean he lived a life essentially like that of anyone else, save he seemed to *really* live his. However one chooses to account for it: special mutations of genes,

unusual neurotic tendencies, peculiar environmental influences, unique occurrences of lucidity—is all quite beside my concern at the moment. Here was one who apparently not only lived, but *lived* his living. He appropriated his life as an unqualified gift and bore it as a significant mission. The *givenness* of creaturely living appeared to him to be the very meaning of it. Indeed he kept saying that what everyone is looking for it very much AT HAND.

EVERYMAN, here in Jewish guise, was understandably disconcerted by the style of this unknown and everyday stranger. The very point is that Jesus collided with the lives of all he encountered. He invaded, broke into, penetrated their worlds, leaving them painfully unsettled. To the proud he seemed humble and they were threatened. If men hated life, he loved it. To those who hung desperately onto living, he appeared nonchalant about it all. If they thought of life as detachment, he was utterly involved. If their living was a bondage, he was too obviously free. Where men were other-directed, he was independent. When they were confidently self-determining, he seemed lost in loyalties. To conservatives he was manifestly revolutionary; he impressed the radicals as a reactionary. Obviously, the life of such a human being would be in jeopardy. When men's lives are audited to the quick, either they must re-do their lives, or destroy the occasion of the audit. Jesus was executed.

Death comes to all men. So it had to come in some fashion to Jesus of Nazareth. The specifics are what concern us. A life that was in some way *really* lived, drove men to destroy it. Let this be said again. Precisely because his living somehow exhibited the way life actually is, men felt he had to be removed. Rulers saw him as a danger to society. The hierarchy feared him as a menace to religion. The strange irony here uncovers a tragic inversion in human history. There is yet another important concretion. The man of Galilee embraced death as he embraced life. Call it the slaughter of the innocent or the miscarriage of justice; call it murder or mistake; call it social expediency or the intervention of fate; however, and whatever, he took unto himself his death without malice as a part of the givenness of his life. Not that he sought death. But when it came, and as it came, he died it as significant. In consequence, there was a compounding of disturbance. His dying as his living, was disquieting.

In some such fashion did the life and death of an unknown, Jesus of Nazareth, protrude into the history and the hope of Israel, and therefore into the life of EVERYMAN. But this is not yet the end, nor even the finally important aspect of the tale.

## THE JESUS-CHRIST-EVENT

In the midst of the happenings surrounding Jesus, some individuals were seized by a radically new possibility for living in this world. Incredible as it was to the many, a few actually raised the question of Christ in connection with Jesus. This moves us to the heart of the matter. To really hear this question is to sense an absolutely unbelievable twist in the Christ symbol. The very life-image of the Jews, their very existence, their very history was cut to the marrow by the question: Is Jesus the Christ? Quite understandably they reacted to it as scandalous. Because it was a scandal, crucial decisions had to be made. Here are the keys to the New Testament Christ-happening: scandal and decision.

The scandal is clearly manifest in the broad picture. The EVERYMAN-CHRIST for the Jews was concretized in the anticipated coming of a mighty king or cosmic figure who would fulfill the corporate dreams of Israel. Patently, such a figure Jesus was not. He came a helpless babe in a feeding trough. He left a pitiful personage on the state gallows. This have to do with Messiah? How ridiculous! Indeed, in the light of the sacred hopes, it was blasphemous.

Now the offense of the Jew is the offense of EVERYMAN. The question about Jesus insinuates an unmitigated revolution in human self-perception. The distressing implication is that life is not in the future, it is in the present; it is not in some other circumstances, it is in those at hand; it is not to be sought after, it is already given. Obviously this cuts across the notions to which every man has attached his being. The one who seeks to escape his present situation as meaningless must certainly be outraged by the hint that the final meaning is to receive that very situation. Those who look to tomorrow to solve the riddle of living will surely feel affronted before the intimation that the ultimate solution is living the Now. This is the elemental scandal in the Jesus question.

The point needs to be underlined. If the self-understanding which broke into history surrounding the living and dying of one, Jesus, is to be designated by the term "Christ," then very evidently a radical eruption has occurred in history through a complete inversion of the Christ symbol. This is not just an addition to or an alteration of. The total image of life is disputed. In truth, it is literally turned upside down. That is, the scandal is cataclysmic and universal. Concisely, what we shall call the JESUS-CHRIST mortally assaults the EVERYMAN-CHRIST.

The JESUS-CHRIST fronts man with the awareness that there is no messiah and never will be one, and furthermore, that this very reality is the Messiah. This must not, however, be understood as an intellectual abstraction. It is rather a happening, that meets men in the midst of their living. Indeed the fronting is experienced as death itself. For to receive the JESUS-CHRIST is to put an end to my Christ quest; it is to surrender my very life stance; it means that I must die to my very self. Or better still, my self must die. The threat of the JESUS-CHRIST is now unmasked as the threat of death. The scandal, as experienced, is that I must choose to die.

The drama of this deciding unto death permeates the New Testament. This is certainly to be expected. For decision is a rudimentary component of the New Testament Christ happening and a necessary consequence of the Christ offense. Those seized by the scandal of the Jesus question could not avoid an answer. One way or the other they had to decide. Life decisions are always compelled by the disturbance of life modes. But the choice was not apprehended as just *another* choice. It was understood as the *elemental* one and this, precisely because of the above scandal was the ultimate assault upon the world of EVERYMAN. In short, the great and final divide of all human decisions is located in the strange New Testament question: Is Jesus the Christ?

The response demanded and the only one that could be demanded was a simple yea or nay. There is no possible third option;—no middle ground; no perhaps. Not even a delay is thinkable. For not to decide here is still to decide. At any other point, several alternatives, in principle at least, are offered. Such is not the case here. The scandal is either embraced or it is rejected. Though repudiation has a thousand faces, yes, a thousand times a thousand times, all are but some form of re-entrenchment in the EVERYMAN-CHRIST. This extreme dimension becomes clearer when one remembers that for the New Testament people the Christ decision was transparently an election for or against life itself. The negative answer was at bottom a rejection of human existence as it is constituted. The acknowledgment of the scandal, on the other hand, is a full and free affirmation of the significance of the creaturehood of man. When the human situation is nakedly exposed there are but two choices: to affirm life or to negate it.

Perhaps it appears incredible that such fathomless depths of man and history are caught up in so very concrete a decision. Yet this is exactly the way things are in this dimension of existence. As the search for meaning is always concrete, so necessarily is the offense to this meaning historically rooted. And therefore, the ensuing decision must likewise be grounded in the very particular. Though, at base, the New Testament men were de-

cidating about their own stance and destiny, yet because Jesus was the occasion of the question, externally it took the form of deciding about him: Is Jesus the Christ? What do you say? Is your CHRIST, JESUS-CHRIST? or the EVERYMAN-CHRIST?

One final concern before the summation. The JESUS-CHRIST-EVENT has been depicted at one and the same time as both death and life. This draws together the entire twist. It is unmistakably plain that the early Christians conceived of and experienced this happening as the very fullness of life. They sensed after themselves as the blind who now see, as the deaf who have been given to hear, the bound set free, the maimed made whole, the dead men who are alive. The death involved in encompassing the scandal was discovered to be life itself. There is no addition here, no subtle way out. Any addendum would be a cancellation of the event. The choice to give up our illusions and false hopes and hiding places is the death of choosing the scandal. This very death is life, they insisted. To die is to live. To use their figures, it is like being born all over again. It is like the healing of a mortal illness. It is like being forgiven a big lie at the heart of our being. It is like a resurrection from a tomb.

The dying to the life-quest becomes itself the very bread of life. Surrender of the demand for final truth becomes quite the truth about things. Capitulation to the secret that there is no way out, becomes the very door and way to being. This is the end of the road of self-understanding. There is no beyond it. There is no need. For one can now freely live in his negations, learn in his perpetual ignorance and walk in all his given creatureliness. In brief, the decision to die is at the same time an election to life. The JESUS-CHRIST is life abundant. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be.

Now to the recapitulation: the JESUS-CHRIST is an historical event. It is a radical revolution in the interior history of men proceeding from an absolute reversal in human self-understanding. Originally occasioned by Jesus of Nazareth, it is first of all the experience of an offense. This offense is grounded in an actual disaffirmation of our creaturely phantasms which issues in a new possibility of living our bestowed existence as a great benefaction. It is secondly, the decision to receive the offense and embrace the ensuing possibility as our own. This entails a dying to ourselves as defined by our mirages, which very death is experienced as the very life we were mistakenly searching for. Such is the radical transfiguration of the JESUS-CHRIST-EVENT.

The early Christians' pronouncement of it contained an inseparable promise and demand. The demand is to die. That this very dying is life, is the promise.

## THE CHRISTIAN STORY

Our task is not finished. Any serious dialogue on the Christ symbol must of necessity consider the Christian story, so-called. In and through the JESUS-CHRIST-EVENT an historical community broke into time. The church and the event are actually but two sides of one historical occurrence. Those to whom the event happened constituted the church. Like every historical people the church forged a life-apologue or meaning story by which it communicated to itself and to others that the event which created it was rooted in ultimacy. What we have termed the Christian story became therefore, along with the event and the church, an integral component of the total historical complex.

The cosmic tale has a universal and definitive agency. Both the social body and the comprising individuals are contingent upon it. As insinuated above, it is the vehicle by which the interior history is transcendently grounded, comprehensively appropriated and significantly communicated. To say it again, it freights the universal dimension to self-understandings and life missions. In fact, all intentional being and doing, all self-conscious existence is finally interwoven with one or another cosmic-meaning drama.

Such stories are conspicuously penetrated by the relative and arbitrary: not in their inner meaning but in their form. Yet once the story is devised, there is a certain absolute quality about even the form. In principle, the detail could have been quite different at its creation. And any time thereafter, its basic intent

can be expressed in other ways. But once the original dramaturgy is complete, that production is the prototype. It remains prototypical as long as the historical community remains. The early Christians formulated their classical tale out of the relative stuff of their specific Hebrew memory, the unique world views of their time, and whatever figures emerged from the collective unconscious. It was a work of expansive conception and consummate artistry. Through it the church continued to grasp for themselves and transmit to others the finality of what had occurred in their midst. This is to say, it endured as irreplaceable.

The story is a strange metamorphic tale of two symbols: the cross and the empty tomb. These basic New Testament emblems pervade the drama from the beginning to the end. The truth of the matter is they play the stellar role. Uncommon and fantastic as it may sound, the leading character of the Christian story is none other than the biform symbol, cross and open sepulcher, indicating and embodying the reality of the crucifixion that is resurrection, the death that is life. To say it another way, the principle player is the meaning-word that man may dare to be fully human, living freely among the uncertainties, ambiguities and anxieties of creaturehood, in gratitude, concern and creativity. The hero, in brief, is not Jesus, but the JESUS-CHRIST-EVENT.

In brief synopsis, the story develops as a dramatic extravaganza in three sweeping acts executed on two stage levels. It opens on the upper stage representing the cosmic, universal, transcendent dimension of life. It moves next to the historical, temporal, human level on the lower stage. Finally, in the third act the movement returns once more to the cosmic gallery. Each of the three acts is a spectacle in itself. Yet all are bound together into one majestic movement by two transitional scenes between the acts.

The time and place of act one is the beginning of the beginnings. Exciting awesomeness is the overarching mood. The JESUS-CHRIST-EVENT, disguised as a most curious lamb which is alive though dead, is the principle figure on stage. Here, before the foundations of the world, a slain lamb is sitting very much alive on the very throne of thrones alongside the creator. Indeed the lamb is portrayed as the creator himself calling all things into being. Without him no thing that comes to be comes to be. Passing to the third and final act of the play, the scene is very much the same. It is again on the cosmic level with the slain lamb occupying stage center. The difference is that it is now the ending of the endings. All things have passed away. The lamb, alive-while-dead, is once more seated on the throne. This time he is playing the role of the unconditional judge presiding over the finale of history. In sober awe all things come forth to account and no thing is judged save by the judgment of the lamb.

Embracing the middle act are the two transitional scenes. Their theatric function is that of getting the lamb on and off the historical stage where the second act is performed. The entrance into temporality of the JESUS-CHRIST-EVENT figure cannot of course be like any other entry. Heralded by angelic hosts, he arrives born of a virgin. If the play were being composed today the advent might well have been by way of a space rocket fired out of nowhere. In this case, the lamb imagery conceivably would be replaced by that of a strange little creature from beyond the time-space continuum. The important point is that the cosmic figure invades history on a mighty mission. When the mission is accomplished he departs the temporal, not, of course, as others do, but through ascending in an effulgence of glory again to the upper level.

In the second act, the interest is in the cosmic mission. The central character is still the JESUS-CHRIST-EVENT. Camouflaged in the first and last act as the slain lamb, it is here disguised as a man. In this double concealment the cosmic figure submits to the ordeal of finitude. He meets and straightforwardly engages the twin forces of death and the devil: that is, the temptation to illusion and the anxiety of creatureliness which drives us into the clutches of illusion. He engages the forces of EVERYMAN-CHRIST and destroys their power by boldly with-

standing their subtlest wiles. He enters the very den of death and emerges from the grave the unchallenged conqueror. In a mighty invasion, the JESUS-CHRIST-EVENT has overcome the hosts of the foe on the plains of history, pushed to the fortified place and bound the strong man, leading humanity forth from its bondage and slavery unto the glorious freedom of life. The sign and power of the cross and empty tomb are engraved for all time upon the fact of history. Cosmic permission to live has been epiphanied. Mission accomplished, the lamb returns to that realm from whence he came, the manifest victor to rule as sovereign lord and only judge forever and forever. What a play!

It must be underscored that this drama is in no sense a web of metaphysical statements. Nor is it an aggregate of religious doctrines to be believed. It is a story. Its task is to hold before the reader, in a comprehensive, precise, and constraining fashion the stance of life. One is moved therefore, not to ask whether the dramatic images correspond to "objective realities," but whether the life meaning they embody corresponds to the way life comes to us as persons.

When it is received as the truth-story it is, the axial point is quite plain. Though the point is singular it peradventure ought to be put several ways. First of all, the JESUS-CHRIST is presented not as just a way of life, but the final and only way. The story announces both the cosmic permission and the cosmic requirement to live after this style. Second, it is clear in the play that the JESUS-CHRIST is the way real life has always been from the very beginning of human existence, and will always be to the very ending. Third, the JESUS-CHRIST is a removal of the false veils we have drawn over life as it is. It is in no wise a superimposition upon life. The transfiguration is a restoration, not a novelty. Lastly, the JESUS-CHRIST tells us nothing we do not somehow know. The meaning of being human is that we were constituted to be human. This is what we were given to be. This alone shall be our judge.

The compendium is this: the JESUS-CHRIST IS LORD in every sense of the word. Every man, it is plain, bows his knee to some life image. Before one or another self-understanding under the general canopy of the EVERYMAN-CHRIST, he utters the submissive word: My Lord. The early church was quite clear about this. She was also transparent concerning the location of her own obeisance and confession of allegiance. Her earliest creedal formula: JESUS-CHRIST IS LORD, is an abbreviation of the whole cosmic tale. It is at once a subjective decision and an objective state of affairs. The story of the cosmic Christ: his pre- and post-existence, his virgin birth and ascension to heaven, his historical life, death and resurrection, are all signs and symbols of this lordship.

In all of this the primitive church was calling upon herself and all men everywhere, to live boldly in the JESUS-CHRIST, confidently sure that this is the way things are, ever have been and ever will be. There is but one objective, everlasting unchanging life truth, namely, the living of life as a gift is the meaning of living life. Put it liturgically: the JESUS-CHRIST IS LORD.

### **THE ESCHATOLOGICAL HERO**

Intimately related to the Christian story yet not synonymous with it, is still another component of the Christ construct. It is the image created by the primitive Christians of a hero of faith or a cultic exemplar. The hero was first etched upon the common memory of the community. In time he became universally public as the central literary figure in the Four Gospels. One must not be misled here. This cultic man is not Jesus of Nazareth. Nor is he the cosmic figure sketched above. Neither is he simply a representation of what we have termed the JESUS-CHRIST happening. One must rather say that the Christian paragon is a masterful artistic combination of them all.

Every historical community has its cultic figures. They are the models of the corporate self-understanding in the collective imagination. Such representations inform the liturgical dramas through which the group recollects who it is. They are the

"universal" categories which provide the everyday common sense. They are the generalized other in the conscience that prompts and judges action. They are the master signs through which the active and passive emotions are usefully illuminated. In sum: the archetypal persons are the keys of concretion in the corporate worship dramas, the corporate life styles and the corporate practical wisdoms.

It is most understandable then, that the early church was inspired to create such a hero. His paradoxical nature has already been indicated. He eats and weeps and experiences deep struggles of the spirit. Yet he also withers trees with a glance, does disappearing feats and quite actually rises from the grave on page twenty-five or so of the record. Succinctly, the Christian hero is the JESUS-CHRIST-EVENT embodied at the same time in both the temporal Jesus and the cosmic lamb.

This complex of paradoxes needs a closer look. To begin with, the hero is a man of this world, plus or minus nothing. He was born and he died. In between, he is portrayed as experiencing life's gamut of joys and sorrows, failures and successes, knowns and unknowns. Furthermore, he struggles, as humans must, to assume his posture toward his creatureliness. The stance he embodies, however, is not that of the EVERYMAN. He elects to live entirely within the JESUS-CHRIST faith, deciding and acting only in the style of the death that is life. The Christian prototype, to employ a formula, is in the first instance, the historical-JESUS-CHRIST-man.

The other pole of the hero's individuality is likewise a fusion. In this case, the ingredients, like those in the Christian story, are the cosmic dimension and the JESUS-CHRIST-EVENT. This is the figure that stills storms, turns water to wine, casts out demons, and raises up dead men. He signifies the wholly other, the utterly absolute, being in itself. Use any symbol of ultimacy, the beginning and the end, the first and the last, he is it. At the same moment, he is the JESUS-CHRIST-EVENT that takes place in time. His own death and resurrection are presented as the master sign. The wonders he performs and the oracles he utters are likewise symbols of the Christ happening. Actually, his total existence is an unbroken nexus of signs pointing to crucifixion that is the resurrection. In terms of our schemata, the archetypal hero is the cosmic-JESUS-CHRIST-figure as well as the historical-JESUS-CHRIST-man.

The picture is still not complete. The whole emerges only after the polarities in the two formulae are totally amalgamated into one. A diagrammatic statement of this amalgamation would look something like this: the cosmic-historical-JESUS-CHRIST-man-figure. Authentic human existence and ultimate cosmic significance coalesce in the JESUS-CHRIST EVENT. Here is the bare skeleton on which was shaped the most remarkable personality in the literature of any people. The paradoxes are made to completely cohere in the characterization of that strange personage who moves through the New Testament Gospels. It is a work of consummate artistry. In one paragraph, he moves from the very human business of dispersing crowds and enjoying a moment alone to his stroll across the lake. Wonder-filling as this is, the reader is not surprised. There is no jarring. The player is exactly in character, so to speak.

In literary flesh and blood, the gospel hero is first and last a man of mission. Being and doing are consolidated in him. His single-minded vocation is exhibited in a two fold activity of living life genuinely, authentically—as a man of faith in the midst of the world—and announcing to all others the possibility of such living. This is patent in both poles of his individualization: cosmic and historical. To use our earlier figure, he walks freely out across the anxious, uncertain, ambiguous waters of life. At the same time, he beckons others to do likewise. On the temporal side, the same pattern is discernible. With utter intentionality, the hero lives as the free man. He humbly opens himself to what is given; gratefully receives himself in what is given; and benevolently involves himself on behalf of what is given. He is liberated to be thankful for life; to love this world of neighbors; to be

directed toward the future. This is to say, he is free to live life. And while he is busy living, he simultaneously declares to those about who have ears to hear the good news that they too can live in the freedom of the JESUS-CHRIST-EVENT.

Within the cultus, the name of the hero came to be Jesus Christ. This is frequently abbreviated just to Christ. And sometimes, perhaps most of the time, he is simply called Jesus. This is the Jesus of piety. To caution once more, he is not Jesus of Nazareth, but rather the Jesus of the holy literature, the Jesus of the liturgical experience, the Jesus of the common life. As such he is the most vividly alive, the most finally significant, the most always present personality in the existence of the cultus. There are, of course, a host of other companions who live in the collective memory. Jesus Christ is the primordial one. The many titles bestowed upon him are indicative of this: Lord of Lords, King of Kings, Son of Man, Son of God. No designation or mark of honor is too high or high enough to articulate his status for the people who bear his name. This raises a question about the adequacy of the term "cultic hero." The representational Jesus very obviously is the cultic or prototypal figure of the people who live in the CHRIST-EVENT. Yet the church knew him to be more: not just the cultic hero but the final or eschatological hero. That is, he represents the way things are for all men. He is the paragon of man as Man.

This eschatological hero is then the portraiture of what human living actually is. He is an unqualified delineation of the human style of life. He is a model of faith-filled living. A model is a design of the way things are. It is a construct of the manner in which things are understood to function. In dealing with subjects rather than objects, as in the case at hand, where the model is a personage, perhaps the "exemplar" would be a more fitting term. The Christ hero is a model or exemplar of what is going on where unmitigated human living is taking place.

The terms "ideal" and "example" have been intentionally avoided for fear of distracting connotations. To be sure, since a model is necessarily a totally unbroken and unfragmented representation, it might be labeled "ideal." But it is not ideal in the sense of disclosing some ought-world of precepts and virtues through which we can escape our humanity. It is not ideal in the sense of some moral goal toward which men strive for the sake of meaning and significance. All this would be merely a subtle form of the EVERYMAN-CHRIST, that builds illusions about the human situation in seeking for truth, perfection and peace.

The Jesus model is the JESUS-CHRIST made flesh. It is a dramaturgical embodiment of that life stance or posture. To follow in the steps of the representational Jesus is not to imitate his words or reproduce his deeds. It is to be and do as a free man in our concretion as he depicted this stance in the concretions of his role. It is to walk out across the uncertain, ambiguous, anxious deeps of my life in gratitude, humility and compassion, with the sure confidence that this very walking is the meaning of life. The Exemplar is an ever present indicative word in the memory of a people, that to live is to live in the Christ event, and an ever present imperative word that continually calls them to it. In this sense it guides their thoughts and deeds, their words and feelings. It is the context in which and out of which they forge their concrete actions.

The New Testament writers think of their Jesus hero as the pioneer who blazes the way; the elder brother who goes on before; the first fruit of a mighty harvest to be reaped. The followers then see themselves as the second wave of explorers, the younger brother, the latter harvest, yet as embodying the same life, traveling on the same way, participating in the same mission. As he lived his life as the meaning of his life, and announced the cosmic permission for all men thus to live, so the church understands that she can and must go and do likewise. As Luther said, the Christians are to be little Christs.

—Joseph W. Mathews, for the  
Corporate Ministry of the  
Christian Faith-and-Life Community