

5. The Message of the Synoptic Gospels: St. Matthew, St. Mark and St. Luke.

The New Testament, like the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, was composed in Greek. And the word "testament" (Latin, *testamentum*) is a translation of a Greek term, *diatheke*, which means "covenant." The Old Testament tells of the "old covenant" between God and ancient Israel, and the New Testament is a proclamation of a "new covenant" between God and the "new Israel," which is the Christian Church. The prophets of ancient Israel, as we have seen, looked forward to the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of a new covenant between God and his faithful people. And, according to the New Testament, Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah (or Christ) — the divine-human king in whom the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament have been "summed up, confirmed, and transcended."¹

The new covenant makes salvation available to all who acknowledge Jesus as Christ and Savior and who submit to him as Lord of their lives. In Christ, who "reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature" (Heb 1:3), the divine promise of salvation, first revealed in the Old Testament, is fulfilled. Christ is the incarnate Son of God, "the mediator of ... [the] new covenant" (Heb 9:15), who brings salvation to the world. And by the grace of God, the human race is called to respond to Christ in faith and obedience. Those who so respond are "the heirs of salvation, the covenant people ... the Israel of God, the Church."² Such is the central message of the New Testament.

The Making of the New Testament.

The New Testament contains twenty-seven books: the four gospels of SS. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; the book of Acts, a history of the early Church written by St. Luke; twenty-one letters or "epistles" by St. Paul and other writers; and the Apocalypse or book of Revelation, a vision of the final fulfillment of God's cosmic purpose, attributed to St. John. All of these documents were written in Greek — not classical Greek, but the common Greek (*koine*) of the Hellenistic age. The gospels were composed later than many of the epistles. Most of St. Paul's letters — and perhaps the letters of St. James, St. Peter and St. Jude³ — were written prior to 65 A.D.; whereas the four gospels were composed between 65 and 90 A.D. The book of Acts was detached and treated as a separate book during the second century, when the gospels were "brought together and began to circulate as a fourfold record [of Christ's ministry]."⁴ The letters of St. John and Revelation were written c. 90-95 A.D.

While the apostles and other immediate disciples of Christ still lived, the Bible of the Church was the Greek Old Testament. And the Old Testament revelation was interpreted by the Church in the light of the apostolic message concerning the person and work of Christ. The major events of Christ's life, as well as his teachings, were remembered by the apostles and were incorporated into their preaching during the mid-first century A.D. This oral tradition was "received by the apostles from their Lord and delivered by them in turn to their converts."⁵ In time, the "apostolic tradition" began to be set down in writing — in early collections of the sayings of Jesus, in catechisms used for doctrinal instruction, in liturgical texts employed in the conduct of Christian worship and in letters written by major figures in the apostolic Church. As the apostles began to grow old and die, the Church's need for a written expression of the apostolic witness became more and more apparent. This perceived need gave impetus to the writing of the four gospels and other documents during the latter first century, and led to the collection of the corpus of St. Paul's letters (excluding Hebrews) between 80 and 85 A.D.

In seeking to preserve the apostolic tradition in written form, the Church did not, at first, intend to establish a definitive canon of scripture. But with the late first and early second-century proliferation of Christian and quasi-Christian literature, and with the rise of heretical movements claiming apostolic authority,⁶ many early fathers of the Church began to call for the formation of a canonical collection of "New Testament" scriptures. To be considered as canonical, a document had to pass three tests: (1) it had to have been written by an apostle or by an immediate disciple of an apostle; (2) it had to be recognized as authentic by at least one leading ecclesiastical community in the ancient Church; and (3) it had to be consistent with apostolic doctrine — that is, with the rule of faith preserved in the living tradition of the Church.

During the second and third centuries — largely through the efforts of St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Hippolytus of Rome, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria and Origen — the idea of a New Testament canon was established, but the constitution of that canon was widely disputed. It was agreed that the four gospels, the book of Acts, the letters of St. Paul, 1 Peter and 1 John were canonical; but some leading authorities of the day doubted the canonicity of Hebrews, James, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation. Furthermore, some documents that were ultimately excluded from the New Testament — for example, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Apocalypse of Peter — were accepted as canonical by a few ecclesiastical writers.⁷

By the fourth century, however, the Church had resolved the disputes concerning the constitution of the New Testament, and the process of canonization was brought to completion. In his Paschal Letter of 367, St. Athanasius of Alexandria declared the twenty-seven books of the New Testament as we know it to be "exclusively canonical."⁸ And a synodal decree in conformity with the declaration of St. Athanasius, prompted by the arguments of St. Augustine of Hippo, was issued at Carthage in 397. Thenceforth, the New Testament — as the divinely inspired, written expression of the apostolic witness — was accepted by all Orthodox Christians as a central and normative feature of the holy tradition of the Church.

The Four Gospels.

The first division of the New Testament, as we have seen, contains the four gospels. The English word "gospel" is a modernization of an Old English term meaning "good story" or "good news," which was itself a translation of euaggelion, the Greek word for "glad tidings." The latter term is used throughout the New Testament to designate the "glad tidings" of salvation through Jesus Christ, the "joyful news" proclaimed in the preaching of the apostles and other early disciples of Christ.

The New Testament never uses the term euaggelia, the plural of euaggelion; for there is only one message of salvation. But with the expression of the apostolic message of salvation in written form, those writings which described the major teachings and acts of Christ came to be called euaggelia, or "gospels." Thus, in the New Testament, we find the Gospel according to St. Matthew, according to St. Mark, according to St. Luke and according to St. John — one gospel proclaimed in four distinct books, rooted in one common, apostolic faith. The authors of the gospels "differ from one another in their approaches and expressions, but are united in participating in the tradition of the Church and in making the Church's faith their own. The faith and life of the Church served them as the guiding principle in selecting and arranging their material."⁹

In his book, *The Gospel Image of Christ*, Prof. Veselin Kesich describes "three stages in the growth of the Gospels":

First came the events of Christ's life and works, "the things which have been accomplished among us." The second stage was characterized by the delivery and transmission of these "things" by their "eyewitnesses and ministers of the word." This is the work of the apostles after Christ's resurrection. . . . Finally, the third stage was the writing of the Gospels by the evangelists.¹⁰

Kesich goes on to point out that the ancient Church regarded the first and fourth gospels as the work of the apostles Matthew and John; whereas the second and third gospels were attributed respectively to Mark, a disciple of St. Peter, and to Luke, a Greek-speaking physician who was a close companion of St. Paul.¹¹ According to St. Irenaeus of Lyons (d.c. 200), the Gospel according to St. Mark contains the substance of St. Peter's preaching about Christ, while the Gospel according to St. Luke is an expression of the message of salvation proclaimed by St. Paul.¹² Thus, within the historic life of the Church, the apostolic origin and authority of the four gospels has never been doubted.

St. Mark's gospel was written c. 65 A.D. in Rome. It was apparently intended for an audience of Gentile Christians, although the book contains a number of allusions to the Old Testament. The major purpose of Mark's gospel was to show Jesus as the crucified Messiah, "the fulfiller of the hope of Israel."¹³ The gospels of Matthew and Luke were written in the early seventies of the first century. St. Matthew's gospel was composed in Syrian Antioch, for Jewish Christians, and its central theme is the fulfillment of Israel's messianic

hope in the person and work of Jesus. St. Luke wrote his gospel and the book of Acts as two volumes of a single work, describing the ministry of Jesus and the history of the early Christian community under the leadership of the apostles. Writing in southern Greece primarily for Gentile converts to Christianity, Luke emphasizes the universal significance of the Christian gospel: in Christ, salvation has been made possible not only for Jews but for all mankind. St. John's gospel was written in Ephesus (in Asia Minor) during the late first century (c. 85-90 A.D.). In his gospel, John "tells us who Christ is and what His meaning is for the world, the Church, and the individual."¹⁴

The gospels, then, are written expressions of the apostolic message of salvation through Christ. Several distinct strands of the apostolic tradition are present in the four gospels. The first, second and third gospels seem to be based upon common sources, whereas the Gospel according to St. John is built upon sources not employed by Matthew, Mark and Luke and is rather different from them in structure and content. The latter are known as the synoptic gospels, for "when we put their material side by side in three columns, we notice that the material is arranged in a similar manner, and very often they use the same words to describe events or to record the sayings of Jesus."¹⁵ In the present chapter, we shall discuss the content and theological significance of the three synoptic gospels; and in chapter 6, the theology of the Gospel according to St. John will be examined.

The General Structure of the Synoptic Gospels.

The majority of contemporary biblical scholars are agreed that the earliest of the New Testament gospels is that of St. Mark. It is also widely believed that Mark's gospel was one of the sources utilized in the composition of the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Matthew's gospel contains 1,068 verses, and 500 of these are parallel to 606 out of the 673 verses of Mark. Of the 1,149 verses in Luke, 380 are taken over verbatim from Mark's gospel. Mark contains only 31 verses not duplicated in either Matthew or Luke.

Matthew and Luke also share approximately 250 verses of material not paralleled in Mark; and "sometimes this common material appears in ... practically identical language, while sometimes the verbal divergence is considerable"¹⁶ Most biblical researchers have concluded that the non-Markan material common to Matthew and Luke derives from an early written (but no longer extant) source called "Q" (after the German word *Quelle*, which means "source"). Possibly compiled by St. Matthew prior to the composition of his gospel, Q was a collection of the sayings of Jesus which apparently circulated among Christian communities in ancient Judea, Syria, Asia Minor and Greece.¹⁷ Matthew and Luke, working independently of one another, incorporated the material contained in Q into their respective gospels.

Furthermore, the Gospel of Matthew contains approximately 300 verses not paralleled in the other gospels, while Luke contains some 520 verses peculiar to itself. These blocks of unique material are known as "M" and "L," respectively. The origins of these materials are not known, but many scholars have speculated that M represents traditions about Jesus which were preserved in the churches of Judea, while L is derived from traditions maintained in the church of Caesarea. Whether the traditions behind M and L were oral or written is, at present, an unresolved issue in biblical scholarship.

The synoptic gospels are constructed in biographical form—that is, they present the apostolic message of salvation through an apparently chronological account of the major events in the life of Jesus. But they are not, in fact, complete or scientific biographies of Christ. They tell us very little of the first thirty years of our Lord's life; they do not describe his appearance, education or psychological development. Instead, the synoptics concentrate exclusively upon those aspects of Christ's earthly life that are crucial to the salvation of mankind and the world. They tell us who Jesus was, what he said and what he did — and they seek to explain the sense in which his identity, teachings and works have made our salvation from evil and death a real possibility. As Prof. Kesich puts it:

The Gospels were not meant to provide a literal description, but an image of Jesus, not a photograph, but a portrait of Him. . . . The Gospels have often been compared to an icon, and been called the verbal icon of Christ. This icon or image is not a product of the extraordinary creative talents of the

evangelists, but it comes from the tradition with which they were acquainted, in which they participated, and from which they drew their material.¹⁸

The synoptic gospels, then, are theological interpretations of the earthly ministry of Jesus, written expressions of the apostolic proclamation of salvation. Their ultimate aim is not to present a biographical study of the Lord's life, but to witness to the fulfillment of God's redemptive purpose in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The synoptic gospels describe only two periods in the life of Jesus. Matthew and Luke present substantial blocks of material on the Lord's birth and childhood; and all three synoptics contain extensive accounts of the public ministry of Christ, which, according to tradition, took place during the last three years of his earthly life. Matthew, Mark and Luke are virtually silent concerning the years between the Lord's early childhood and the commencement of his public ministry. The only exception is found in Luke 2:41-51 (telling of the twelve-year-old Jesus' discussions with the rabbis in the Jerusalem Temple). Apart from this story, all we are told is that, as a child, Jesus was strong, filled with wisdom and blessed by the grace of God (Lk 2:40); and that as a young man he advanced in wisdom, grew in physical stature and lived in spiritual harmony with God and in favor with his fellow man (Lk 2:52).

Thus, assuming that Christ was thirty-three years old when he was crucified, as tradition suggests, the synoptics tell us practically nothing of nearly thirty years of our Lord's life. During these "silent years" or "years of preparation," no doubt, the Son of God, in communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, was made ready for his public ministry; but what exactly went on during that time has not been revealed to the world. There are, to be sure, ancient apocryphal writings containing speculations upon the hidden events of Christ's youth and early manhood,⁹ but the historic Church has repeatedly condemned such writings as spiritually dangerous and heretical. From an Orthodox Christian point of view, detailed knowledge of the "silent years" belongs to God alone, and for the purposes of our salvation from the bondage of sin and death, the gospels of Matthew and Luke tell us all we need to know of the early life of Christ.

The Birth and Childhood of Christ.

The Roman empire was in effective control of the Middle East after 63 B.C. By permission of the Romans, Herod the Great (a nominal Jew of Idumaeans descent)²⁰ reigned as "King of the Jews" in Palestine from 37 B.C. until his death in 4 B.C. Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, "the city of David," during the latter days of Herod's kingship²¹ (see Mt 2:1, 19).

Two complementary accounts of the miraculous birth of Christ are contained in Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2. Both Matthew and Luke attest to the virgin birth of Christ. The annunciation of the advent of Christ by the angel Gabriel to Mary, the mother of Jesus, is recorded in Luke 1:26-38; and the Orthodox Church teaches that Mary's voluntary submission to the will of God — her freely willed agreement with the divine plan announced by the angel — was a fundamental and necessary condition of the union of God and man in Christ. "The Incarnation was not only the work of the Father, of His Power and His Spirit; it was also the work of the will and the faith of the Virgin."²² Because of Mary's positive response to the annunciation, our salvation through her Son, Jesus Christ, has become possible. Thus, when the Orthodox Church "shows honor to the Mother of God, it is not just because God chose her but also because she herself chose aright."²³

In the course of time, then, the Virgin Mary "was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 1:18). When Joseph, to whom Mary was engaged, discovered her pregnancy, he "resolved to divorce her quietly."²⁴ But an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to take Mary for his wife, "for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit." The angel also told Joseph that Mary's child would be a son who was to be named "Jesus" (which means "the Lord saves"), "for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:20-21).

Thus, Joseph and Mary were married according to Jewish law. And while the couple was on a journey to Bethlehem (to enroll their names in a census that had been ordered by the Emperor Augustus Caesar), Mary gave birth there to her divinely conceived son (see Lk 2:1-7). Matthew interprets the miraculous conception

and birth of Christ as a fulfilment of the words of the prophet Isaiah: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us)" (Mt 1:22-23; see also Is 7:14).

Matthew and Luke represent two different traditions concerning the immediate aftermath of Christ's nativity. According to Luke, the birth of the Savior was announced by angels to shepherds tending their flocks "out in the field"; and the shepherds, hearing the joyful tidings of the advent of the Messiah, visited the holy family in Bethlehem in order to "see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us" (Lk 2:8-20). Luke goes on to tell us that, at the age of eight days, Christ was circumcised and given the name Jesus, and that, thirty-three days after his circumcision, at a service of purification in the Jerusalem Temple, he was presented to God "according to the custom of the law" (Lk 2:21-27; see also Lv 12; Ex 13:2, 12; Nb 3:13).

The Roman Catholic Church and some Protestant churches hold a yearly festival commemorating the "Presentation of Christ in the Temple" or the "Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary." But in the Orthodox Church, this festival (celebrated on February 2) is known as the "Meeting of Our Lord" — "the meeting, that is, of Christ with his people."²⁵ For at his presentation, as Luke tells us, Jesus' messianic identity was recognized and proclaimed by the holy man Simeon and the prophetess Anna (Lk 2:25-38). "Our Lord, brought to the Temple by His mother and by Joseph, now meets His chosen people in the persons of Simeon the Elder and Ann [or Anna] the Prophetess."²⁶ The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon "that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ" (Lk 2:26). And upon seeing the baby Jesus, Simeon was prompted by the Spirit to cry out, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace . . ." — the famous "Song of Simeon" (Lk 2:29-32), which is sung in the Vespers services of Orthodox churches throughout the world. Simeon also said to Mary, "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also)" (2:34-35). Supporting the witness of Simeon, the prophetess Anna "gave thanks to God, and spoke of ... [Jesus] to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:38).

After his account of the Meeting of Our Lord, Luke states that Joseph and Mary took the child Jesus and "returned into Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth" (2:39).

Matthew's post-nativity narrative stands in significant contrast to the account presented in Luke. Following his description of Christ's birth, Matthew tells us that "wise men" (Magi, or magoi, seers, astrologers, magicians) from the "East" (probably Persia) came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him" (Mt 2:1-2). According to a popular Christian tradition, there were three Magi, and they were not only visionaries but also kings. Herod, who thought of himself as "King of the Jews," and knowing that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, sent the Magi to that city, encouraging them to seek out the newborn child, "that I too may come and worship him" (Mt 2:3-8). Herod's real intention, of course, was to find the Christ and have him killed. Guided by the "Star of Bethlehem," the Magi found the holy family, "and they fell down and worshiped" the Christ-child, offering him gifts of "gold and frankincense and myrrh" (Mt 2:9-11). These gifts, it has been said, symbolize the kingship, the deity and the humanity of Jesus; for in ancient Middle Eastern thought, gold was the substance of kings, incense was an offering to God and myrrh — a cosmetic and medicinal spice — was associated with the human body.

After venerating the infant Jesus, the Magi, warned by God of the dark purposes of Herod, returned to their own country without informing the evil king of the whereabouts of the Messiah. Joseph, too, was warned of Herod's plan, and he fled with Mary and Jesus into Egypt. Herod, "in a furious rage" at having been "tricked by the wise men," had all the male children in the region of Bethlehem "who were two years old or younger" killed. Shortly after this "Massacre of the Innocents,"²⁷ Herod died (in 4 B.C.), and the holy family, like ancient Israel, returned from Egypt to Palestine. Joseph, his wife and his foster child went to live in Nazareth, a small city in the northern district of Galilee (see Mt 2:13-23).

Although the post-nativity accounts of Matthew and Luke are different, they are not necessarily contradictory. It is quite possible that the traditions incorporated in Matthew and Luke have preserved true but partial recollections of the Lord's infancy. It is unlikely that the visit of the Magi took place immediately following the birth of Christ, for the text of Matthew implies that the wise men themselves had calculated the nativity as

occurring up to a year or two prior to their visit (2:7, 16). Thus, these events may well have taken place subsequent to the Meeting of Our Lord in the Temple (Lk 2:21-38), but prior to the holy family's "return to Nazareth," spoken of in Luke 2:39. It is then possible to see the post-nativity accounts of Matthew and Luke as together constituting an icon of Christ's saving mission to both Jews and Gentiles. For the Lukan account stresses that the advent of the Messiah was revealed first to Jews (the shepherds in the field), and in his description of the circumcision and meeting, Luke emphasizes that everything was performed according to the Mosaic law (see Lk 2:39). In contrast to Luke, Matthew's story of the Magi represents Christ's relationship with the Gentile world; and the Magi's worship and adoration of the Lord is a symbol of the Church, the new Israel, in which membership is determined by faith and not by ethnic lineage. Thus, on Christmas Day, the Orthodox Church sings: "O Master who hast risen as a Star out of Jacob, Thou hast filled with joy the watchers of stars [the Magi] ... As the first fruits of the Gentiles were they led unto Thee, and Thou hast openly received them, as they brought Thee acceptable gifts."²⁸

The Gospel of Matthew begins with a detailed genealogy tracing the ancestry of Jesus (1:1-18); and there is also a genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke (3:23-38). These two genealogies differ in many respects, and the divergences between them have never been adequately explained.²⁹ But it is possible to discern the major theological point of these difficult texts. Both genealogies seek to establish the fact that Jesus, through his legal relationship with his foster-father Joseph, was a descendant of King David, upon whom Israel's messianic ideal was in part based.³⁰ The Messiah, according to the Old Testament prophets, was to be a member of the house of David.

Matthew's genealogy traces the ancestry of Jesus back to Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel, thereby emphasizing Christ's relationship with God's chosen people of the old covenant. By contrast, Luke goes back beyond Abraham to Adam, who was, originally, "the son of God" (Lk 3:38). St. Paul, the apostle to whom Luke was a disciple, thought of Christ as the new Adam (see 1 Co 15:22, 45-49) in whom we may be adopted as "sons of God" (see Rm 8:14-17). It is likely that this Pauline teaching lies behind Luke's genealogy, and that Luke's purpose in tracing the ancestry of Christ to Adam is to emphasize the Lord's solidarity with the entire human race and to underline the divine sonship, which is offered to all in Christ.³¹

The genealogies of Christ, then, which are presented in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, proclaim that Jesus is "the Son of David," "the Son of Abraham" and, indeed, "the Son of God."

The Ministry of St. John the Baptist.

While only Matthew and Luke contain narratives dealing with the ancestry, birth and childhood of Jesus, all three synoptic gospels present detailed accounts of the Lord's public ministry. And each account begins with a description of the relationship between the ministry of St. John the Baptist and the mission of Christ.

John the Baptist was a transitional figure in the "salvation history" revealed in the Bible — the last of the old and the first of the new covenant prophets. An ascetic who lived in the wilderness of Judea for many years prior to his public ministry, the synoptics depict him as the prophetic forerunner of Christ, sent by God to prepare the way for the work of Jesus (see Mt 3:1-6; Mk 1:1-6; and Lk 3:1-6). The Jews of Jesus' time expected the prophet Elijah to return to the world prior to the coming of the Messiah, and to announce the advent of "the great and terrible day of the Lord" (see Mt 17:12-13). Thus, in the synoptic gospels, the work of John the Baptist is associated with the end-time mission of Elijah. According to Matthew 3:4 and Mark 3:6, John wore a garment made of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist — the manner of dress attributed to Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8. And Luke tells us that John was sent before Jesus "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Lk 1:17; see also Mt 11:14).

In his preaching (which began in the late twenties of the first century A.D.), John warned of the day of judgment which would precede the advent of the kingdom of God, and he called upon his fellow Jews to repent — that is, to turn away from evil and toward God (see Mt 1:2, 7-10; Mk 1:4; and Lk 3:3, 7-9). In accord with his insistence upon the coming judgment and the need for repentance, John baptized those who were seeking God's forgiveness of their sins (Mt 1:5-6; Mk 1:4-5; and Lk 1:3, 7-14). The gospels do not describe the

exact manner of baptism that John used, nor how it arose. It quite likely "was not introduced by John but was already a familiar custom," and "probably signified a cleansing or purification."³²

John also heralded the coming of the Messiah: "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mk 1:7-8; see also Mt 1:11-12 and Lk 3:15-18). And the synoptics proclaim that Jesus of Nazareth was the divinely promised Messiah expected by John and other pious Jews of those days (see Mt 11:2-19 and 7:8-35).

After the beginning of the public ministry of Christ, John the Baptist was arrested and subsequently executed by order of the son and successor of Herod the Great, Herod Antipas (d. c. 40 A.D.), a grossly immoral man whose evil ways had been publicly denounced by John (see Lk 3:19-20 and Mt 14:1-12).

The Baptism and Temptation of Christ.

Jesus began his public ministry by submitting to baptism at the hands of John the Baptist.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased" (Mk 1:9-11; see also Mt 3:13-17 and Lk 3:21-22).

The baptism of Christ is celebrated by the Orthodox as the Feast of Theophany (January 6). "Theophany" means "manifestation of God/* and Christ's baptism truly is a "manifestation of God" to the world, both in the sense that it marks the beginning of his public ministry, and in a more profound sense, because it represents a revelation of the Holy Trinity. "All three Persons were made manifest together: the Father testified from on high to the divine Sonship of Jesus; the Son received His Father's testimony; and the Spirit was seen in the form of a dove, descending from the Father and resting upon the Son."³³

The baptism of John was, as we have seen, a baptism of repentance. Why, then, was Christ, who is sinless, baptized by John? To this question, the Orthodox Church replies that in becoming human at his incarnation, our Lord "became the New Adam, summing up the whole human race in Himself, just as the first Adam summed up and contained all mankind in himself at the Fall."³⁴ At his baptism, he was cleansed for all men's sins. Identifying himself with our sinful condition and, indeed, with the fallenness of the whole world, Christ has redeemed mankind and the world from the bondage of evil; and his baptism is a sign of that glorious redemption. Christ, then, was baptized not for his own sake but for ours, and for that of the whole cosmic order.³⁵

Following his baptism, Jesus "was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil" (Mt 4:1-11; Mk 1:12-13; Lk 4:1-13). The biblical account of the temptation implies that the Exodus imagery of the Old Testament has received its spiritual recapitulation and fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus. Following her "baptism" in the Red Sea and prior to her entry into the land of Canaan, ancient Israel underwent a forty-year period of testing in the wilderness of Sinai.⁸⁸ Similarly, after his baptism in the Jordan and before the culmination of his redemptive mission, Jesus spent forty days and nights in the wilderness of Judea and was tempted by the devil. Christ, then, and those who are one with him through faith and obedience, constitute the new Israel. And as the old Israel entered into the promised land of Canaan, so would the new Israel enter into the true land of promise — the kingdom of God. The exodus in Christ is "the new Exodus of salvation"³⁷

The temptation of Christ is also a recapitulation of the temptation of Adam and Eve as depicted in Genesis 3. Christ's submission to satanic temptation is a further sign of his assumption of the human condition, of his identification with the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve. And in defeating the devil in the wilderness of Judea, Christ did what Adam had failed to do in the garden of Eden. In the first Adam, mankind was led away

from God by the deceptions of Satan; but in Christ, the new Adam, mankind's bondage to the devil is broken and reconciliation with God is made possible.

The three satanic temptations of Christ³⁸ were attempts to exploit the Lord's humanity and, on that basis, to induce him to either doubt or renounce his divine sonship. Human beings are continually tempted to place their physical needs above their spiritual needs, and to seek miraculous signs that will ease their doubts concerning the existence and goodness of God. Following his fast, the Bible tells us, Jesus was hungry — yet another indication of his true humanity. Approaching the Lord in his hunger, the devil sought to direct Christ's attention to his need for "bread" — that is, to his physical needs — and thus to divert him from his spiritual purpose. Christ, however, proclaimed that the fulness of life sought by mankind is contained not in physical satisfaction but in the revealed Word of God. Thus, the first temptation of Christ teaches us to beware of the spiritual dangers following from "the incontinence of the belly" and other fleshly desires.³⁹

The phrase, "*If you are the Son of God,*" which appears in the first and second temptations, is also significant, for it shows that the devil was trying to generate doubt in the mind of Christ concerning his relationship with God the Father. Satan, quoting Psalm 91, challenged the Lord to quell all doubt by providing miraculous demonstrations of his divine sonship. In refusing to do this, Christ overcame the temptation of doubt, of "tempting" his Father into a spectacular and vain display of supernatural power.⁴⁰ Following the temptation, however, and without Christ asking for it, the Father's abiding love for his Son was manifested supernaturally in the attending angels who were sent to minister to the Savior. This too, according to St. John Chrysostom, is a lesson for those of us who are seeking reconciliation with God: "... we must overcome the devil, not by miracles, but by forbearance and long-suffering, and ... we should do nothing at all for display and vainglory."⁴¹

In the third temptation, the devil made himself out to be God, and he endeavored to use the human desire for wealth, status and power to turn Christ away from his Father. But Christ, commanding the devil to depart, declared that man is to worship and serve God alone. Membership in the kingdom of God rather than the possession and enjoyment of worldly glory should be our primary concern.

Christ's Ministry in Galilee.

After his temptation, Jesus entered fully into the work of his public ministry. The synoptic gospels offer a roughly chronological account of Christ's ministry. The materials on the major teachings and miracles of Christ, however, are arranged in topical rather than chronological order — probably a reflection of the manner in which these materials had been preserved in the oral tradition of the early apostolic community. And furthermore, the synoptics concentrate upon only two phases of the Lord's public ministry: his activity in the region of Galilee, and his final journey through Judea to Jerusalem. But it must be kept in mind, as the Gospel of John makes clear, that during his earthly life, Christ traveled frequently between Galilee and Jerusalem, spending a good deal of time in Judea.⁴²

The Galilean ministry of Christ is described in Matthew 3-18, in Mark 1-9 and in Luke 3-9. Following his baptism and temptation, and some early preaching in Judea and Samaria, Jesus began to attract a following (see Jn 1-4). Indeed, the "Jesus movement" soon overshadowed the ministry of John the Baptist, a fact which the latter humbly accepted as a necessary dimension of the divine plan of redemption (see Jn 3:25-30). After the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus and a number of his disciples returned from Judea to Galilee. He established his headquarters in the city of Capernaum, which was situated on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. As his following continued to grow, Jesus began to travel throughout the region of Galilee, "teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people" (Mt 4:23).

At some point in the Galilean ministry, Jesus chose twelve of his disciples to be his special agents in the propagation of his message. The twelve apostles (from the Greek *apostolos*, meaning "one sent forth") were Christ's closest associates, his personal representatives, upon whom he conferred authority to speak and heal in his name (see Mt 10:1-15; Mk 6:7-13; and Lk 9:1-6). As the twelve sons of Jacob had been the fathers of

the old Israel, so the twelve apostles were to be the fathers of the new Israel, the Church.⁴³ And during the time of Christ's earthly ministry, as his co-workers, they were made ready for the service they were to perform after the Lord's saving mission had been carried out.

Mark summarizes Jesus' preaching on "the gospel of the kingdom" as follows: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15). And in his sermons, parables and conversations on the kingdom of God, Jesus taught what John the Baptist and the other prophets of Israel had taught: that to enter the kingdom of God, one must repent — that is, renounce the world, the flesh and the devil and turn toward God in faith, love and obedience. But unlike the prophets, who proclaimed the divine Word in the name of God, Jesus spoke with authority in his own name: "Truly, truly, I say to you."

Each of the synoptic gospels contains compilations of Christ's teachings on the kingdom of God (see Mt 5-7, 13, 24-25; Mk 4, 13; and Lk 6, 8, 10-19). The teachings of the Lord during his Galilean ministry are summarized in detail in Matthew 13, in a series of parables on the nature and growth of the heavenly kingdom. In these parables, Jesus taught that the kingdom of God is of absolute value and ought to be the object of every man's ultimate concern (Mt 13:44-46); that the kingdom is, even now, present and growing in the world (that is, in the person of Christ and in the historic life of his Church — Mt 13:31-33); that, in order to enter into the growing kingdom, we must live faithfully and obediently in the light of God's revealed Word (Jesus himself — Mt 13:1-23); and that, at the last judgment, those who have not lived according to God's Word will be eternally separated from the abundant life of the Lord's kingdom (Mt 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-52).

Jesus also delivered a number of sermons on the kingdom of God. The so-called "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew 5-7 is actually a compilation of sermons, which the Lord delivered on various occasions, mainly during his ministry in Galilee. The sermon is much too complex to be explained in detail here, and we shall content ourselves with a brief discussion of its overall content and meaning. The sermon begins with the Beatitudes (beattitudo is a Latin word meaning "blessing"), a description of the way of true discipleship, of the character of those who are worthy to be called the people of God (5:1-16). A child of God must be "poor in spirit," that is, aware of his total dependence upon God; he must be "mournful" concerning the sins and sufferings of mankind; he must be "meek" (or humble) before God and before his fellow man; he must "hunger and thirst after righteousness," after the kingdom of God, with his whole being; he must be "merciful" toward others because he knows that God has been merciful to him; he must be "pure in heart," seeking God without submitting to the distractions of the flesh; he must be a "peacemaker," at peace with God and sharing that peace with those around him; and he must be willing to be "persecuted for righteousness' sake," always upholding God's truth and refusing to compromise with the ways of the world. Such a person, Jesus taught, will be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" in his living witness to the glory of God.

Following the Beatitudes, Christ goes on to interpret and apply the divine law revealed to Moses and recorded in the Old Testament (5:17-48). He also describes the nature of true religious piety (6:1-8), and proclaims that the key to human fulfillment is a single minded concern for and devotion to God (6:19-34). He concludes the sermon with instructions on how to live in harmony with God and righteously with mankind, and with warnings concerning the spiritual distractions that can keep us from entering into the kingdom of heaven (7:1-29).

The "Sermon on the Mount" describes the nature of true righteousness and true justice. It reveals the law of the kingdom of God, the principles of order which govern the heavenly city, and reveals how through faith in Christ, and with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, we can strive to live according to that law and grow in grace toward our ultimate union with God. Thus, the "Sermon on the Mount" is a message of inspiration and liberation. But for he who rejects Christ it is also a message of conviction, for only in Christ can we hope to gain access to the kingdom of God. Indeed, it has been said that Christ is our promised land; that he is, in himself, the inauguration of the kingdom of God; that he is "the kingdom in person" (auto-basilea).⁴⁴

The synoptic gospels also report that, during his Galilean ministry (and at other times), Christ performed many healings and other miracles. These spectacular acts were performed as a fulfillment of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament (see Mt 11:2-7; Lk 7:18-23). Thus, Christ healed the sick; he exorcised demons; he walked upon the Sea of Galilee (see 14:22-36); he miraculously fed multitudes of people (see Lk

9:10-17); he resuscitated the dead (see Mt 9:18-26; Mk 5:21-43; Lk 7:11-17, 8:40-56). All of these acts were "signs" of the advent of the kingdom of God in Christ.

During the early days of his ministry, Jesus did not declare himself to be the Messiah, nor did he proclaim his divine son-ship. But his threefold work of preaching, teaching and miracle-working was, in effect, an enacted or performative announcement of his identity. In time, his followers and many of the people of Galilee and Judea began to see in Jesus the fulfillment of Israel's messianic expectations; and they began to hope that, through him, God's people would finally be delivered from the bondage of evil.

But the nature of Jesus' messiahship was misunderstood, even by his apostles. On a journey to the city of Caesarea Philippi,⁴⁵ Jesus asked the twelve, ". . . who do you say that I am?" And Peter, speaking for the apostles, replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." But when, in response to this correct identification, the Lord went on "to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer . . . and be killed, and on the third day be raised," Peter declared, "God forbid, Lord! This shall not happen to you." The Lord then chastised Peter, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men" (see Mt 16:13-28).

Most of the Jews of those days thought of the Messiah as a divinely guided political-military hero who would liberate Israel from Roman domination and restore her earthly power. This political liberation of Israel, it was believed, would set the stage for the conversion of the nations, the final resurrection of the dead, the last judgment and the ultimate redemption of all creation in the kingdom of God. But the prophetic conception of the Messiah as a divine king who would have to suffer and die in order to redeem his people and the world⁴⁶ was, by Jesus' time, repugnant to the Jewish mind. For this reason, and until the final stages of his ministry, Jesus sought to keep his divine and messianic identity secret.⁴⁷

As his public ministry progressed, Jesus inevitably came into conflict with the dominant religious sects of ancient Judaism. The gospels mention two such sects: the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees (or "separated ones") followed the oral law of the Scribes, a school of teachers who sought to apply the general principles of the Torah (or Mosaic code) to every detail of life.⁴⁸ By the time of Christ, this scribal law, which had been developing for several centuries, had grown into a huge body of complicated rules and regulations governing almost every facet of daily existence. The Pharisees, like most of the Jews of that age, were looking for the Messiah and believed in the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees were a small aristocratic and wealthy sect, holding most of the priestly offices and dominating the Sanhedrin (the governing body of the Jews during the second century B.C. through the first century A.D.). Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees rejected scribal law, did not believe in the coming of the Messiah and denied the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. Both the Pharisees and the Sadducees were elitists, contemptuous of the "ignorant and illiterate masses" (the am-ha-arez), the "hated mixed race" of the Samaritans and all Gentiles.⁴⁹ The Pharisees and the Sadducees also had a common interest in preserving the social and political status quo in Palestine, for under Roman rule each of these powerful sects enjoyed prosperity and relative autonomy.

Jesus drew many of his followers from the common people of Galilee and Judea, and while he worked mainly among the Jews, he ministered also to Samaritans and Gentiles (see Lk 17:11-19 and Mt 8:5-13). He frequently criticized the legalism of the Pharisees, and he and his disciples repeatedly violated the scribal law itself (see, for example, Mk 2:1-3:6). The Lord also publicly rebuked the Sadducees for their ignorance of scripture and of the power of God (see Mk 12:18-27). Thus, both the Pharisees and the Sadducees, for their own reasons, came to regard Jesus as a "false Messiah," and both feared that his movement might provoke the Romans into instituting more stringent control over Jewish affairs. This conflict between Jesus and the Jewish religious authorities would reach its climax during his final week in Jerusalem, with his arrest, trial and execution.

The Transfiguration of Christ.

After the beheading of John the Baptist, and following Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of the living God," the Lord began to prepare himself and his apostles for the culminating

events of his earthly life. Taking the apostles Peter, James and John with him, Jesus went to the top of a high mountain (according to tradition, Mount Tabor in Galilee).

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. . . . He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe (Mt 17:1-9; see also Mk 9:2-13 and Lk 9:28-36).

The Orthodox Church celebrates the Transfiguration of Our Lord, one of the twelve great feasts of the Church year, on August 6. From an Orthodox point of view, the transfiguration was "another Theophany"⁵⁰ — a manifestation of Christ's divine sonship and of the trinitarian nature of God. "On Tabor, as at the baptism in the Jordan, the Father speaks from heaven, testifying to the divine Sonship of Christ: and the Spirit is also present, on this occasion not in the likeness of a dove, but under the form of dazzling light, surrounding Christ's person and overshadowing the whole mountain. This dazzling light is the light of the Spirit."⁵¹

The transfiguration of Christ has also played a significant role in the development of the Orthodox doctrine of the deification of man.

The glory which shone from Jesus on Tabor is a glory in which all mankind is called to share. On Mount Tabor we see Christ's human nature . . . filled with splendor, "made godlike" or "deified." What has happened to human nature in Christ can happen also to the humanity of Christ's followers. The Transfiguration, then, reveals to us the full potentiality of our human nature: it shows us the glory which our manhood once possessed and the glory which, by God's grace, it will again recover at the Last Day.⁵²

In revealing his divine glory to Peter, James and John, the Lord was seeking to prepare them for his crucifixion and for "the glory of the resurrection" which lay beyond the cross. The presence of Moses and Elijah, "who both conversed with God on Mount Sinai,"⁵³ was a sign to the apostles that Jesus was the fulfilment of the law and prophecy of the Old Testament. And according to the Lukan account of the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah, as representatives of the law and the prophets, spoke of the Lord's "departure," which was to be accomplished in Jerusalem (Lk 9:30-31). Following the transfiguration, Jesus once again told his apostles of his coming passion, that he was "to be delivered into the hands of men . . . [who would] kill him," but that "on the third day" he would rise from the dead (Mt 17:22-23). But still, the apostles were "greatly distressed" and did not understand him. Only after his resurrection did they begin to grasp the true nature of God's plan of salvation through Christ.

Christ's Journey through Judea to Jerusalem.

Shortly after his transfiguration, Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (Lk 9:51). Matthew and Mark give the impression that the Lord's final journey through Judea to Jerusalem was a brief one (see Mt 19-20 and Mk 10). But Luke's detailed account of the teachings delivered by the Lord on that journey makes it likely that the Judean ministry covered a substantial period of time. And the Gospel of John indicates that the Lord spent at least a few months in Judea prior to his final days in Jerusalem, and that he made more than one visit to the holy city during that time (see Jn 7:1-12:11). During the Judean ministry, as Luke reports, Jesus did some of his most memorable teaching on the nature of true spirituality, on the way of salvation and on the coming of the kingdom of God (see, for example, Lk 10:25-37, 11:1-13, 12:49-59, 13:22-30, 14:7-24, 15:3-32, 16:1-31, 17:20-37 and 18:1-30). Luke also tells us that Jesus' conflict with the Pharisees became more pronounced and heated during the Judean ministry (see 11:14-28, 12:1-12 and 16:14-18).

The last week of Christ's mission to the world began with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (on the first of all Palm Sundays). He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey (Mt 21:1-9), thereby fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah that the Messiah of Israel would reveal himself to be a king, not of war but of peace, by humbly entering the holy city "mounted on an ass" (Zc 9:9). The crowds who welcomed him by spreading their garments and palm

branches before him, shouting "Hosanna!" (which means "save now" in Hebrew), expected this "Son of David" to lead them to victory over their enemies and to reestablish the kingdom of Israel. When, by the end of the week, it was apparent that Jesus was not the kind of Messiah they had expected, the crowds joined the Jewish authorities and the Romans in condemning him to death. It was the time of the yearly Passover festival.

On the Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday nights of that last week, Jesus and his entourage stayed with friends in the town of Bethany on the Mount of Olives, just outside Jerusalem (Lk 21:37-38). On those nights, the Lord instructed his apostles and disciples concerning the time that would intervene between his death and his second coming. These teachings on the movement of history toward "the last days" are compiled in "the Olivet discourse," which appears in Matthew 24-25, Mark 13 and Luke 21. In this discourse, Jesus speaks of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans (which took place in 70 A.D.), the period of chaos and "great tribulation" that will precede the second coming of the Son of Man (the parousia), the last judgment and the final establishment of the kingdom of God. 54

During the last week, Jesus spent each day, from Sunday through Wednesday, in the Jerusalem Temple, teaching the people, healing infirmities and debating with his opponents, the Pharisees and the Sadducees (see, for example, Mt 21-23). He even went so far as to drive the money-changers and the sellers of sacrificial pigeons out of the vestibule of the Temple, declaring that this mercantile activity was depriving the religious services of their spiritual significance (Mk 11:15-9). The Sanhedrin — "the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders" — took the "cleansing of the Temple" as a direct attack upon their leadership, and they became increasingly alarmed at Christ's popularity for fear that their own authority with the people might be undermined. They were also concerned that the excitement generated by Jesus' activities might lead to trouble with the Romans. And thus, the leaders of the Sanhedrin began to seek "a way to destroy him" (Mk 11:18).

The Trial and Death of Christ.

The gospel account of the conspiracy against Jesus and of his eventual arrest, trial and execution is commonly called the "passion narrative" (from the Greek *pathēnē*, used in Acts 1:3 to refer to the suffering of Christ). The synoptic passion narrative (Mt 26-27; Mk 14-15; Lk 22-23) begins with a report of the plot to kill Jesus, hatched by leading members of the Sanhedrin and abetted by the treason of Judas Iscariot, one of the original twelve apostles (see Mt 26:1-5, 14-16). Judas' motives for joining Christ's enemies are not explained fully in any of the four gospels. But it is most probable that Judas' inordinate love of money together with his disillusionment at realizing that Jesus was serious in refusing to be a political-military Messiah left the apostle open to demonic possession. In yielding to the temptations of Satan, Judas became the instrument by which Christ's arrest out of public view was made possible.⁵⁵

The passion narrative continues with a description of the anointing of Christ by a woman of Bethany (see Mt 26:6-13), which is portrayed as a foreshadowing of Christ's impending death and burial. The conspiracy against Jesus and his anointing at Bethany took place on Wednesday during that first Holy Week. On Thursday evening, Christ and his apostles celebrated Passover together for the last time, gathering in the guest room of a house in Jerusalem (see Mk 14:12-16).⁵⁶ During the meal, Christ predicted that one of the apostles would betray him (see Mt 26:20-25). Judas asked him, "Is it I, Master?" and Jesus responded, "You have said so" (Mt 26:25). The other apostles, apparently not comprehending the meaning of this exchange, were perplexed and "began to question one another, which of them it was that would do this" (Lk 22:23). Although the synoptics do not say so, the Gospel of John implies that Judas left the Passover celebration shortly after Christ's words concerning the impending betrayal (Jn 13:21-30).

As the Passover was ending, Jesus performed a set of actions that marked the transcendence of the Jewish Passover celebration by the Christian sacrament of the holy eucharist. Taking bread, Jesus blessed it, broke it and gave it to the apostles, saying, "Take, eat; this is my body" (Mt 26:26). Then he took a cup of wine, blessed it and gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:27-28). The institution of the eucharist, or Lord's supper, is described in all three synoptic gospels (see Mt 26:26-29; Mk 14:22-25; Lk 22:19-20), and it is presupposed in the Gospel of John.⁵⁷ But the earliest New Testament record of the first holy communion is contained in St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (11:23-25), written c. 55 A.D.

Christ's pronouncement to the apostles that his body and blood were given "for you" or "for many" was a Hebraic way of saying "for all."⁵⁸ Christ died for the sins of all, and in his sacrificial death there is forgiveness for all who acknowledge him as Savior and Lord. Just as ancient Israel was delivered from Egypt and from destruction by the body and blood of the Passover lamb, so mankind is delivered from the bondage of sin and death by the body and blood of Christ. For Christ is the true Passover lamb whose death on the cross has taken away the sin of the world. In Christ, and in his eucharistic action, the Passover imagery of the Old Testament is both fulfilled and transcended. With the breaking of Christ's body, and with the pouring out of his blood, a new covenant has been established between God and mankind. As the old covenant was "dedicated with the blood of sacrificed animals," so the new covenant in Christ has been "dedicated with the blood of the beloved Son."⁵⁹

In eating and drinking the consecrated bread and wine of the holy eucharist, Christians partake of the very body and blood of Christ (1 Co 10:16), and both commemorate and participate in the death of the Lord. In this way, Christians become one with Christ, entering into his atoning death and thence into his divine life, which was made manifest in his resurrection. The sacrament of the holy eucharist is the life of the Church, for in the eucharist, the Church is united with Christ, who is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit, and thus the members of his Church enter into the eternal life of the Holy Trinity — they become one with God.

The Trial of Christ. The synoptic passion narrative goes on to tell us that, after the last supper, Christ led his apostles out of Jerusalem to "a place called Gethsemane," a garden or park located on the Mount of Olives (Mt 26:36). On the way, Christ predicted that all the apostles would soon fall away from him. And when Peter protested that he would "never fall away" the Lord said to him, "Truly, I say to you, this very night before the cock crows, you will deny me three times" (see Mt 26:30-35).

Upon reaching Gethsemane, Jesus "took Peter, James, and John, the three who saw His glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, to be witnesses of another glory, the glory of His obedience, manifested at the moment He was facing death."⁶⁰

And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup [of agony] pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt." And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, thy will be done." And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand (Mt 26:36-46; see also Mk 14:32-42 and Lk 22:40-46).

In this passage, Christ's unique relationship with and perfect obedience to his Father is made manifest, as is the inconstancy of his apostles, who were unable to pray and keep watch with the Lord for a single hour.

The account of Christ's agony in Gethsemane sets the stage for his arrest, which is described in Matthew 26:47-56, Mark 14:43-52 and Luke 22:47-53. While the Lord was still speaking to his apostles, Judas arrived, accompanied by Temple police sent by the Sanhedrin. "Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, The one I shall kiss is the man. . . ." And when he came, he went up to him at once, and said, 'Master!' And he kissed him. And they laid hands on him and seized him" (Mk 14:44-46). Thus, with Judas' help, Christ was arrested on Thursday night, at a time when "everybody was busy with the celebration of the Passover." The enemies of Christ were therefore enabled to lay hands upon him without arousing public unrest.⁶¹

Following his arrest, Christ was put on trial before the Sanhedrin and was accused by the high priest, Caiaphas, of the religious crime of blasphemy. Christ's trial before the Sanhedrin was apparently held late Thursday night or during the early hours of Friday morning. After the testimony of several false witnesses

failed to convince the assembled priests, scribes and elders that Jesus was guilty of any serious offense (see Mk 14:55-61), Caiaphas stepped forward and asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" (Mk 14:61) Jesus, who had remained silent when accused by false witnesses, now responded to the question of the high priest, boldly admitting that he was both the Christ and the Son of God (see Mk 14:62). For the Jews of Jesus' time, as Prof. Kesich points out, "the Messiah was to be a human being and was below God. That God has a Son and that Jesus claimed to be this Son of God, for Caiaphas, was 'ultimate impiety.'"⁶² Thus, "the high priest tore his [own] garments [an act signifying the crime of blasphemy], and said, 'Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?' " On this basis, in accordance with the Mosaic code (see Lv 24:16), the Sanhedrin voted to condemn Jesus to death (see Mk 14:63-65).

While the trial before the Sanhedrin was going on, the apostle Peter, as Jesus had prophesied, was in the process of denying his relationship with Christ (see Mt 26:69-75; Mk 14:66-72; Lk 22:54-62). And Judas, apparently appalled by what he had done, committed suicide (Mt 27:3-10).

Some hours after his religious trial (at about 6:00 a.m.), Jesus was taken to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. For although under Jewish law Christ had been condemned to death, the Romans did not allow the Sanhedrin to execute criminals. The Romans would carry out death sentences passed by the Sanhedrin, but only after such sentences were reviewed and confirmed by the Roman authorities themselves. And since the Romans did not consider blasphemy against the God of the Jews to be a crime, the Sanhedrin, to have its way with Jesus, had to convince Pilate that this 'blasphemer' was a threat to Roman political power. Thus, before the governor, the enemies of Jesus accused him of "perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute [pay taxes] to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ a King" (Lk 23:2).

Pilate, however, after speaking briefly with Jesus, was unconvinced that the accused was, in fact, a dangerous criminal (Lk 23:3-4). Learning that the "criminal" was a Galilean, and hoping to avoid trouble with the Jewish authorities, Pilate sent Jesus to be examined by Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch of Galilee, who was visiting Jerusalem for the Passover (Lk 23:5-7). Although Herod treated Jesus with contempt, he, like Pilate, could find no crime in the man (Lk 22:8-12). Thus, when Jesus was brought back to Pilate, the governor announced that he and Herod had concurred in the judgment that Jesus was not guilty of any crimes against the Roman state (Lk 22:13-16).

By that time (early Friday morning), word of Jesus' trial had spread throughout the city, and a crowd began to gather at the governor's residence. Seeking a way to release Jesus over the protests of the Jewish authorities, Pilate appealed to the crowd. It had become customary for the Roman governor to release a prisoner each year at Passover. Pilate offered the crowd a choice between Jesus and Barabbas, an anti-Roman revolutionist who was guilty of murder. But the leaders of the Sanhedrin "stirred up the crowd" against Jesus (perhaps suggesting that his "defeat" was proof that he was a false Messiah), and the crowd, contrary to Pilate's expectations, cried out for the release of Barabbas (see Mt 27:15-21). They also demanded that Jesus be crucified, crucifixion being the method employed by the Romans in the execution of the worst criminals. Seeing that a riot was likely if he resisted the will of the crowd, Pilate gave in and ordered that Barabbas be released and that Christ be scourged and crucified (see Mt 27:22-26). The Gospel of John states that Pilate was also motivated to allow Christ's execution by his fear that the Jewish leaders would depict any leniency to this "King of the Jews" as disloyalty to Caesar (see Jn 19:12-16).

The Crucifixion, Death and Entombment of Christ. Condemned to death, Jesus was then taken away by Pilate's soldiers — along with two criminals who had also been sentenced to death — to "the place called Golgotha (which means the place of the Skull)" (Mk 15:17-22). The Lord was offered "wine mingled with myrrh," but he declined to drink it (Mk 15:23). "It was the custom to give this drink to a condemned man in order to make him less sensitive to pain, for crucifixion caused unbearable pain and suffering. Jesus refused the drink and thus passed through all the suffering while fully conscious."⁶³

Mark tells us that Jesus was crucified at 9:00 a.m. on Good Friday (Mk 15:25). An inscription was placed above his head which read, "This is Jesus the King of the Jews" (Mt 27:37; Mk 15:26; Lk 23:38). The two criminals were crucified along with him, "one on his right and one on his left" (Mk 15:27). Having stripped him of his clothes, Pilate's soldiers "divided his garments among them by casting lots" (see Mt 27:35). And the

soldiers, along with the watching crowd and the leaders of the Sanhedrin, taunted and mocked the crucified Christ, challenging him to show his divine powers by miraculously coming down from the cross (Mt 27:39-43; Mk 15:29-32; Lk 23:35-37). In response to this abuse, Christ prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). The criminals who were crucified with him "also reviled him" (Mk 15:32); but one of them, whether from pity or an awakened sense of Christ's true identity, ceased his mocking and said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom" (Lk 23:42). And to the penitent criminal Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43).

Jesus suffered on the cross for six hours, from 9:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. From 12:00 noon until 3:00 p.m., "there was darkness over all the land" (Mt 27:45; Mk 15:33; Lk 23:44). Shortly before 3:00 p.m., Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46 and Mk 15:34). These words constitute the first verse of Psalm 22, which seems to prophesy the death of the Messiah. This psalm, from a Christian point of view, "sets forth Christ's emotions on the cross" and represents "the suffering He endured through crucifixion."⁶⁴ The psalm speaks of his being scorned, despised and mocked; of his physical sufferings on the cross; and of those who cast lots for his garments during the time of his crucifixion (Ps 22:1, 6-8, 14-18). It then goes on to say that through the suffering of the Messiah, God will deliver the world from evil:

You who fear the Lord, praise him! . . . For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; and he has not hid his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him. . . . The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied. . . . All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations (Ps 22:23-24, 26, 27-28).

In his crucifixion, Christ identified himself with our sinful condition and experienced the absolute abandonment by God which is the ultimate consequence of sin. But in beginning to recite Psalm 22, the Lord was declaring that the promise of redemption contained in the Old Testament song has been fulfilled in him. Summing up the patristic interpretation, Prof. Kesich comments:

. . . Christ had passed through all the sufferings of human beings whose sin separates them from God. The sinner has abandoned God and "loved darkness rather than light" (Jn 3:19). The climax of this estrangement of man from God finds its full expression when Christ cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He speaks these words in the name of humanity, to bring an end to alienation and to turn the face of man toward God, who has been searching for him. In union with God and solidarity with man, Christ turns man toward his God. . . . In his person he represents us, and is praying on our behalf.⁶⁵

Following his quotation of Psalm 22, Jesus exclaimed, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" "And having said this he breathed his last" (Lk 23:46). At Christ's death, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom" (Mk 15:38). The curtain referred to here was a veil separating the Temple sanctuary from the "Holy of Holies," a place beyond the altar symbolizing God's invisible presence. This veil or curtain was a sign of sinful man's alienation from God. By Christ's death, the gospels tell us, this alienation was overcome. Through faith in Christ, we can enter into the very presence of God.⁶⁶

On the evening of Good Friday, with Pilate's permission, a disciple of Jesus by the name of Joseph of Arimathea, a well-to-do and respected member of the Sanhedrin, came and claimed Christ's body. Taking the body down from the cross, Joseph (and other friends of Christ) wrapped the Lord in a linen shroud "and laid him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock" (Mk 15:46). A great stone was rolled against the entrance to the tomb and, at the insistence of the Jewish authorities, the Temple police were sent to guard the burial site "lest his disciples go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has risen from the dead'" (see Mt 27:57-66). With his entombment, the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ had come to an end.

The Resurrection and Ascension of Christ.

The synoptic accounts of the Lord's resurrection are contained in Matthew 28, Mark 16 and Luke 24. Jesus' followers had to postpone his burial rites until after the Sabbath observance (which begins on Friday evening and ends twenty-four hours later). At dawn on the Sunday following Christ's death, Mary Magdalene and a few other women disciples went to his tomb to anoint his body with embalming spices. They were wondering who would roll away the stone at the entrance to the tomb in order that they might go in and minister to their Lord (see Mk 16:1-3).

And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead" (Mt 28:2-7).

Astonished and awestricken at what they had seen and heard, the women ran from the sepulchre to tell the bereaved apostles and other disciples that "Christ is risen from the dead!"

But it was not only the testimony of angels and of the myrrh-bearing women that convinced the apostles and disciples that Jesus' resurrection prophecies had been fulfilled. For the risen Lord himself appeared to many of them during the forty-day period between his resurrection and ascension.⁶⁷ For example, Jesus met the myrrhbearing women as they were leaving his tomb (Mt 28:9-10); and Mary Magdalene was the first of these women to realize that the person before them was indeed the Lord (Mk 16:9). After appearing to the myrrhbearers, on the morning of that first Pascha, Christ manifested himself to the apostle Peter (Lk 24:34). Later on that same day, the Lord appeared to two of his disciples as they walked from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a village about seven miles from the holy city (Lk 24:13-35). On the evening of resurrection day, Christ appeared to the apostles, ate with them, taught them the meaning of his mission and commissioned them to preach his gospel to all nations (Lk 24:36-49; see also Mk 16:14-18). Then, when the apostles returned to Galilee some weeks after the resurrection, Christ met them on a mountain (Mount Tabor?) and proclaimed to them the "great commission" of all true Christians: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:16-20). And forty days after his resurrection, Christ appeared to his apostles in Bethany (near Jerusalem) and, after promising them that they were soon to receive the gift and power of the Holy Spirit (Ac 1:1-11), he ascended into heaven and was exalted to the right hand of God" (see Mk 16:19; Lk 24:50-51; Ac 1:9-11).

Prior to his ascension, Christ had told the apostles that he would be with them always (Mt 28:20), and he had promised them that the Holy Spirit would shortly come upon them (Ac 1:1-11). Ten days after the ascension of the Lord, on the Jewish feast of Pentecost,⁶⁹ the apostles and disciples of Christ were "filled with the Holy Spirit" (see Ac 2). Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the followers of Christ were transformed into the Church, the body of Christ, the apostolic community which was to spread the "good news" of salvation throughout the world. Thus, it has been well said that the day of Pentecost was the birthday of the Christian Church.

According to the synoptic gospels, Jesus of Nazareth was the "Son of David," the Messiah, the Christ. But he was not the Christ expected by the Jews of his time. His purpose was not to reestablish the earthly kingdom of Israel, but to inaugurate (in himself and in his Church) the heavenly kingdom of God. Jesus quite often referred to himself as the "Son of Man." As pointed out in chapter 4, the ancient Jews thought of the Son of Man as a transcendent being whose origin is heavenly rather than earthly.⁷⁰ In applying this title to himself, therefore, Jesus was claiming to be a divine being. The synoptics also speak of Jesus as the "Son of God" and as "Lord," thus underlining the radical theological implications of Christ's "Son of Man" sayings. The divine sonship and

lordship of the Son of Man are revealed in the synoptic accounts of Christ's virgin birth, of the theophany at Christ's baptism, of the transfiguration of Christ, and of Christ's glorious resurrection and ascension. Matthew, Mark and Luke also stress the true humanity of Jesus (for example, in their depictions of his temptation and his passion); but it was Christ's claim to divine sonship that so shocked and scandalized the Sanhedrin at his trial. From a Jewish point of view, the Messiah is a divinely ordained, but not divine, human being.

Another dimension of Jesus' messiahship that was unacceptable to most of his fellow Jews was his submission of himself to suffering and death — to apparent defeat in the eyes of the world. In his predictions of his passion (see Mt 16:21-28, 17:22-23, 20:17-19), and in his undergoing of that passion, Christ the Lord — the divine Son of Man — was revealed to be the "Suffering Servant" of God spoken of by the prophet Isaiah.⁷¹ But again, from a Jewish point of view, the idea that the Messiah should be a sufferer even unto death was outrageous and unacceptable. The Jews of the Hellenistic age expected the Messiah to be a warlike king, a national liberator, a world leader.

The synoptic gospels, then, proclaim a Messiah who is both divine and human and who has suffered and died for the sins of the world. The synoptics also proclaim that this divine-human Christ has, through his death and resurrection, liberated mankind and the world from the tyranny of sin and death. Through faith in Christ as Savior and Lord, and through the gift of the Holy Spirit which comes to all who are "in Christ," man can be reconciled with God and thus restored to a condition of "divine son-ship." For through Christ, in whom human nature has been deified, mankind can "ascend" into the very life and being of the Holy Trinity, into full fellowship and communion with the triune God. Such is the central message of the synoptic gospels. And while this message may constitute a stumbling-block for Jews and many others, it is, for the Christian, the very power and wisdom of God (1 Co 1:24).