

Who Is Jesus Now? Maxims and Surprises

DAVID F. FORD*

This article is a very personal attempt, within the horizon opened up by the Prologue of the Gospel of John and the past century of Christian theology, to articulate seven maxims in answer to the question, Who is Jesus now? The maxims focus on the Gospel story, analogical thought and imagination, living before the face of Jesus, covenantal commitment, being sent as Jesus was sent, reconciliation, and continuing surprises. Key references are to the Gospel of John, Hans Frei, Frances Young, Richard Hays, David Tracy, Denise Levertov, and Jean Vanier, and to ecumenism and Scriptural Reasoning, which relates to all the maxims.

This article is an attempt, provoked by an invitation to lecture on the life, teachings, and impact of Jesus, to distill my response, both personally and academically, to the question that has gripped me more than any other: *Who is Jesus now?*² The essay's main task is to summarize the key insights and judgments that I have arrived at over many years, as a student, teacher, and writer of theology, and as a follower of Jesus. It is a very personal article, bearing the marks of my own theological concentrations, and not trying to give all the arguments and supporting material (some of those are in the works referred to). Think of the maxims as something like the theological DNA of Jesus as I have come to understand him. They are offered not

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* David F. Ford OBE is Regius Professor of Divinity Emeritus at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of Selwyn College. He is founding director of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme, and cofounder of the Society for Scriptural Reasoning. This essay originated as the McDonald Lectures, delivered in April 2018 at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, while he served as the Alonzo L. McDonald Family Professor on the Life and Teachings of Jesus and Their Impact on Culture. The two lectures are available online at <https://vimeo.com/265025104> and <https://vimeo.com/267434761>.

as a neat, conclusive package, but as something readers might find helpful to think with, however they themselves understand and relate to Jesus.

*Who Is Jesus in the Twenty-First Century?
Two Contexts for the Question*

So, who is Jesus in the twenty-first century? While considering the seven maxims I will offer, readers might bear in mind two contexts for them.

1. Prologue of John

The first is the Prologue of the Gospel of John. This is, deservedly, perhaps the most influential short theological text in the history of Christianity. Among many other things, it sets an unsurpassable horizon within which to consider Jesus, that of God and all reality. The scope of theology is, as Thomas Aquinas says, God and everything in relation to God, all things *sub ratione Dei*, embracing all scripture, all creation, all people, all spheres of life, all knowledge and culture, all religions. Here, at the opening of John's Gospel, God is seen as free to express fully who God is, in full self-giving as a particular human being, and as doing so in Jesus, the Word become flesh. The life and light, the glory, grace, and truth in Jesus, are seen as divine, superabundant, and as given freely: "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:16). This is a surprise, it is news, only to be known through trusting (or not trusting) testimony, and, as is said later in John, through being led further into all the truth (John 16:13).

Before this Prologue nobody, so far as we know, had written theology like this. The author daringly draws on both scripture and some of the richest symbols and concepts of his Hellenistic civilization to try to do justice to who Jesus is. And it is quite clear in what follows that the "who" question is the utterly central one. It comes in the first verse after the Prologue: "Who are you?" That is addressed to John the Baptist, but John's multiple negatives, "I am not . . . I am not . . . No!" clear the way for his testimony to who Jesus is, followed later in the chapter by an avalanche of titles for Jesus. The first words of Jesus to his first disciples are, "What are you looking for?" (1:38—*ti zêteite*: "What are you seeking?" "What do you desire?") By the time of his arrest, following chapter after chapter in which the central focus has been on who Jesus is, this has become a repeated, "Whom are

you looking for?” (18:4–8), and then, climactically, the resurrected Jesus asks Mary Magdalene the same question, “Whom are you looking for?” (20:15), and calls her by name. This is the most dramatic “who to who” encounter in a Gospel that especially emphasizes the category of “who,” above all in its series of “I am” sayings by Jesus.

The question about the person of Jesus, who Jesus is, was the central issue in the theological discussions and disputes in the early centuries of the Christian church, and down the centuries its core importance has persisted. I want to take all that history for granted now, and leap to the past hundred years as the second context for the seven maxims to come.

2. *Christian Theology 1918–2018*

The most educational thing I have done as a theologian since my student days has been, through a period of over twenty years, to edit three editions of a textbook, *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*.¹ This is the second context. Doing a textbook makes sure one stretches to cover things beyond one’s own particular knowledge and interests. Besides grappling with the theologies produced in Europe and North America by Catholics and Protestants, I had to ask, What about Asia, Africa, South America? And what about Pentecostalism, Eastern Orthodoxy, ecumenical theologies? I was also led into many areas of “theology and . . .”—the natural and social sciences, film, prayer, spirituality, pastoral practice, the visual arts, music, and more; into feminist, black, and postcolonial theologies; into Christian engagements with Buddhism, Judaism, Islam; and so much more (though if I were to do a fourth edition now it would be very different from the third).

Through all that, one of my main conclusions is that the past century has been the most fruitful in the whole history of Christian theology, and that this extraordinary generativity is still continuing. There are many elements in this, including the new voices in theology. The most obvious in my lifetime have been women’s voices, and I cannot imagine my own theological career without them—Janet Soskice as my closest colleague in Cambridge for twenty-four years; editing the third edition of *The Modern Theologians* with the Quaker theologian

¹ Third edition: David F. Ford and Rachel Muers, eds., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2005).

Rachel Muers; my wife Deborah becoming an Anglican priest, and co-authoring with her and others the most unusual book I have ever been part of, *Wording a Radiance*;² the large number of fine interpreters of the Gospel of John, including a colleague while in Candler School of Theology, Susan Hylen; and the person who, through her combination of biblical and patristic scholarship, her engagement with a full range of current theological and cultural issues, her profound preaching and poetry, her prophetic theology on disability (rooted in being mother of a severely disabled son), and her friendship for over forty years, has been for me perhaps the most significant living theological conversation partner and coauthor: Frances Young.³

And, at the heart of this amazing fruitfulness in the past century's theology, has been Jesus. I think there has been no century like it either in scholarship on Jesus or in the theological thinking about him in Christology, trinitarian theology, soteriology, theological anthropology, spirituality, discipleship, ethics, politics, and other areas. The challenge of John's Gospel to be led further and further into the truth and into the implications of who Jesus is, within a horizon of God and all reality, has been taken up as never before. So the context for what follows is that horizon, as opened up by John, as taken much further by later thinkers, and culminating in the extraordinary blossoming of the past century.

Seven Maxims

1. Jesus Is Incarnate, Crucified, and Risen

The story of his life, death, and resurrection is the main way of knowing who Jesus is. This should be fairly obvious from the Gospels. Whatever their differences from each other, all four testify to who he is by telling about what he said and did, his encounters and conflicts, his passion, crucifixion, and resurrection. Trusting that core testimony has generally been intrinsic to being a Christian, though of course that trust can coexist with a wide variety of particular conclusions after scholarly cross-examination.

² Daniel W. Hardy, Deborah Hardy Ford, David F. Ford and Peter Ochs, *Wording a Radiance: Parting Conversations on God and the Church* (London: SCM, 2010).

³ See especially her theological magnum opus, Frances M. Young, *God's Presence: A Contemporary Recapitulation of Early Christianity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

There are many ways into this trust, and also, of course, many ways of losing it, but here I am not concerned with exploring those ways. In other words, the difference between the logic of coming to faith and the logic of that faith itself is significant. Important though the first logic is, not least in the whole field of apologetics, this is not my concern here. I am concentrating on the second logic, and focusing on its key question: Who is Jesus?

My main point is that for the New Testament, and for the vast majority of the world's Christians, the chief way of answering that question is to affirm some version of this story, as I do. That affirmation can be endlessly examined, debated, and reflected upon; it can be represented and improvised upon in music, hymns, and songs, and in art, symbols, architecture, and stained glass; it can be inhabited through liturgies and practices of prayer and meditation, and by following the cycle of the church year through Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday; but inextricable from all of them is the testimony embodied in that story of Jesus.

For me, four massive theological reinforcements and illuminations of the narrative way into who Jesus is have been through the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Hans Frei, Karl Barth, and Frances Young.

The first theological book to grip me (as a teenager) was Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, in which he shows positively how incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection come together, both in knowing who Jesus is and in a full life of discipleship that recognizes the utter goodness of creation affirmed through the incarnation, the radical judgment delivered through the crucifixion on all that goes wrong, and the profound transformation realized through the resurrection.

Perhaps the most important single book on Jesus for me has been *The Identity of Jesus Christ* by Hans Frei, backed up by Frei's other works such as *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* and *Types of Christian Theology*.⁴ I consider Frei the most significant North American theologian of the twentieth century. His achievement is multiple. First, he shows how the genre of the Gospels is mainly realistic narrative, in which the message is conveyed through characters and events in

⁴ Hans W. Frei: *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974); *The Identity of Jesus Christ*, expanded and updated ed. (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2013); *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992).

interaction over time, and this is not to be confused either with the history that might be discerned behind the text or with some meaning separable from the cumulative narrative. Second, the unique, unsubstitutable identity of Jesus is primarily rendered through this cumulative story. Third, the resurrection, in which God acts and Jesus appears, signifies the ongoing presence of Jesus, as God is present. Fourth, this understanding of biblical narrative accords with the primacy of the “plain sense” over allegorical or other senses in mainstream Jewish and Christian interpretation of scripture, but was largely eclipsed in post-Reformation academic reading, especially that of historical critics. Fifth, the plain sense of a realistic narrative rendering of the identity of Jesus can act as the key criterion for a typology of modern Christian theologies. In fact, I did use Frei’s typology to map the last century’s theologies in the introduction to each edition of *The Modern Theologians*, and, wrestling with that huge variety of material, found it far more illuminating than any other form of categorization.

Hans Frei thought that Karl Barth understood the realistic narrative plain sense of biblical narrative, and I wrote a doctoral dissertation that supported that conclusion.⁵ The climax of Barth’s christological thinking is in his doctrine of reconciliation in volume IV of the *Church Dogmatics*.⁶ In IV.1 he moves through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus from the standpoint of the initiative of God the Father, to which our response is faith; in IV.2 he moves through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus from the standpoint of the exaltation of Jesus the Son, to which our response is love; and in IV.3 he moves through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus from the standpoint of Spirit-led prophetic involvement in history, to which our response is hope. Each of these movements is intrinsically connected with doctrines of sin, salvation, the church, and Christian life. In other words, that core Gospel narrative pattern, through which the identity of Jesus is rendered, has become the key to one of the most profound and sustained explorations of the Gospel in Christian theology.

Four decades of conversation with Frances Young have shaped my understanding of these matters in ways too numerous to mention, and it has been reassuring that she is a member in good standing of

⁵ David F. Ford, *Barth and God’s Story: Biblical Narrative and the Theological Method of Karl Barth in the Church Dogmatics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1981; repr. Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.1, 2, 3* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009).

the “guilds” of both New Testament and patristic scholars. On the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus I think especially of her magisterial opening chapter of the *Cambridge History of Christianity*, surveying the scholarship of recent centuries up to the present, and risking conclusions that support my first maxim.

2. *Christian Imagination Is Figural and Analogical*

On this second maxim, two reliable guides here have been Richard Hays and David Tracy. In *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*,⁷ Hays shows how deeply and richly each of the four Gospels is figurally related to the narratives, characters, and thought patterns of Israel’s scriptures. In Tracy’s now classic work, *The Analogical Imagination*,⁸ he takes a far wider canvas, the whole of Christian theology up to the twentieth century, and shows how fundamental analogical thinking is to it.

Just as Jesus is only understood in line with the Gospels if we recognize the multiple intertextual relationships between their accounts of him and their own scriptures, so those of us who follow Jesus can only be faithful to him in our own thought, imagination, prayer, and action if we figure ourselves into an ongoing drama in which he is the main character. Our lives need to be continually reimaged in dialogue with the teachings, patterns, encounters, and relationships of his, and our actions informed by thinking analogically and imaginatively about his story.

As I work on a theological commentary on the Gospel of John, I am especially fascinated by John’s use of what I have come to think of as his “capacious *as*.” Time and again he uses an “. . . as . . . so . . .” or “. . . just as . . .” construction in order to invite us to use our analogical imaginations—or, to put it in more theological and Johannine terms, in order to be led into further truth, and inspired to act, by the Spirit.

Sometimes the emphasis is more on the truth—“Just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (John 5:26); “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father” (10:14–15). Sometimes the emphasis is more on action in analogy to

⁷ Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2016).

⁸ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1981).

that of Jesus—“So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (13:14–15); “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (13:34). John tells the story of Jesus in such a way as to encourage continual rereading, and continual reading alongside other scriptures (I think alongside the Synoptic Gospels as well as Jewish scriptures), so as to make sure that when we come to figure ourselves into the ongoing drama, we really know who it is we are following, and have imaginations well formed and exercised in order to improvise analogically in line with how, for example, he washed feet and loved his friends.

3. *We Live Before the Face of Jesus*

When Frances Young and I spent five years coauthoring *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians*,⁹ two of the verses that for us became hermeneutical keys for Paul’s letter were the following:

3:18—And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

4:6—For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

I later spent over ten years on what, in David Tracy’s phrase, might be called a “journey of intensification” exploring the implications of those verses. This exploration resulted in a monograph, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*.¹⁰ The questions pursued in that book are ones that are never finally answered, because they are at the heart of an ongoing, living relationship, like asking what it means to live before the face of one’s parent, spouse, brother, sister, or friend. What does it mean to live in faith before the face of one who is both

⁹ Frances M. Young and David F. Ford, *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1988; repr. Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

¹⁰ David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

known through testimonies that tell of many of his face-to-face encounters and relationships, and is believed, because of his resurrection and ascension, to face all people as God faces them, in limitless, free, and loving relationship? If we have “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” shining in our hearts, what sort of worship, what sort of community, what sort of ethics and politics, what sort of artistic and cultural creativity, might be inspired in us? How might we follow the gaze of one who looks in compassion on our world, and calls us to love as he loves? What practices, both personal and communal, can sustain living faithfully in trust and love before the face of Jesus, orienting us in hope toward a future in which this face-to-face is ultimate—“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12)?

Such a face-to-face approach is, of course, only one way of evoking and trying to do justice to living in the presence of one who is both divine and human, but it combines several advantages: it is richly scriptural and incarnational; it resonates experientially in ordinary life, and culturally through literature, drama, dance, cinema, television, photography, and the visual arts; and it connects with diverse modern philosophies that emphasize I-Thou encounter, relationship to the Other, responsibility before the face of the other, and similar themes. The face-to-face also gives priority neither to the level of systematic overview nor to that of individual interiority, but to the level of interpersonal relationships, that of people and events in interaction over time—which is the level of most of the Bible, and also most novels, fairy stories, histories, plays, films, and television serials. In other words, living before the face of Jesus gives priority to the level that is primary for ordinary human life, and especially for imagining, experiencing, and relating in love.

4. Commitment to Jesus Is Covenantal

I do not know of any more convincing or radical statement of this fourth maxim than in the Methodist Covenant Service, to which Frances Young introduced me many years ago in the context of a course we cotaught in the Centre for Black and White Christian Partnership at the University of Birmingham. I was not prepared for the power of that service. It irrevocably planted in me the centrality of covenantal relationships for Christians as well as for Jews. Since then, I have come to appreciate more and more the importance of covenantal

relations for Muslims, and (in various analogous forms) for other religious traditions, and also for many spheres of society such as marriage and family life, law, economics, and politics.

The ministry of Jesus was initiated through baptism and culminated in what, according to Luke, Jesus calls “the new covenant in my blood,” initiating the celebration of the Lord’s Supper—or Holy Communion, or eucharist, or mass. For all the immense diversity among Christians of ways of understanding and practicing baptism and eucharist, both are generally seen as ways in which the centrality of covenantal bonding, both between God and the people of Israel, and among the people of Israel themselves, is adopted by followers of Jesus in Jesus-centered ways. Commitment to Jesus, through baptism and through sharing in the eucharist, is deeply covenantal, with mutual bonding in love, with both God and each other, at its heart. And the scope of covenantal bonding extends back to the covenant of God with Abraham, promising blessing to all families on earth, and even further back to the covenant with Noah, which extends to “every living creature” and to “the earth” (Gen. 9:8–17).

So commitment to Jesus is intrinsically covenantal, and can embrace the intensity and intimacy of friendship with Jesus and with each other in the community of his followers, together with the extensity of God’s love for all people and the whole of creation.

5. Followers of Jesus Are Sent as He Was Sent

The final capacious *as* of John’s Gospel is when Jesus commissioned his followers, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” and then breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:21–22). That “as . . . so . . .” sets up a double dynamic of needing to understand more and more deeply who Jesus is and how he was sent, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to improvise analogically in the Spirit in order to carry on the drama of loving that he began.

How was Jesus sent? In Johannine terms, Jesus’ ministry was, as seen in John’s opening chapter, first to gather a community of disciples, or learners, and that learning community is now a diverse global one, marked by unprecedented theological creativity. The next thing Jesus does is to begin to do a series of signs: changing a large amount of water into wine, healing, feeding, calling Lazarus out of his tomb. The rationale Jesus gives is that he has come so that people “may have life, and have it abundantly” (10:10). So, to be sent as Jesus was sent is to be part of that community of learners and at the same time to

do life-giving signs. And the signs are not just for his own community, they are about abundant life for all—whoever was at the wedding, whoever turned up as part of the five thousand needing food. His identity as the one who gives life is underlined by “I am . . .” sayings such as “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25) and “I am the way, the truth and the life” (14:6).

One of the best church initiatives I have ever seen close up has been my experience over the past three years as part a group writing the Church of England’s vision for education, with a special concern for shaping the mission of the new Church of England Foundation for Educational Leadership. The Church of England has about a million pupils in its state-funded church schools, and is also extensively involved with other state-funded, as well as private independent, schools. Inspired by John’s Gospel, and by what we had seen happening in one school after another, our group decided that our schools should seek to be signs of abundant life for all, both Christians and others. The strapline for the vision, “Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good,” sums up simply what, in one area of life after another, is the complex and creative challenge of following Jesus. What are the life-giving signs that we are sent to help create in our various settings, largely for the good of those beyond the church?

But Jesus is also sent into darkness, conflict, evil, suffering, and death. What does it mean to be sent into darkness like him? On the one hand, we have to deal with the darkness we meet in ourselves, in the church, and in the rest of the world. But, on the other hand, there is something unique about what Jesus did on the cross, something done for us in love that is inseparable from who he is and what his continuing presence means. Denise Levertov, in an extraordinary poem meditating on chapter 20 of the *Revelations of Divine Love* by Mother Julian of Norwich, engages with this mystery of him being both one with God and with us all in the worst that can happen. Here it is:

On a Theme from Julian’s Chapter XX

Denise Levertov

Six hours outstretched in the sun, yes,
hot wood, the nails, blood trickling
into the eyes, yes—

but the thieves on their neighbor crosses
 survived till after the soldiers
 had come to fracture their legs, or longer.
 Why single out the agony? What's
 a mere six hours?
 Torture then, torture now,
 the same, the pain's the same,
 immemorial branding iron, electric prod.
 Hasn't a child
 dazed in the hospital ward they reserve
 for the most abused, known worse?
 The air we're breathing,
 these very clouds, ephemeral billows
 languid upon the sky's
 moody ocean, we share
 with women and men who've held out
 days and weeks on the rack—
 and in the ancient dust of the world
 what particles
 of the long tormented,
 what ashes.
 But Julian's lucid spirit leapt
 to the difference:
 perceived why no awe could measure
 that brief day's endless length,
 why among all the tortured
 One only is "King of Grief."
The oneing, she saw, *the oneing*
with the Godhead opened Him utterly
 to the pain of all minds, all bodies
 —sands of the sea, of the desert—
 from first beginning
 to last day. The great wonder is
 that the human cells of His flesh and bone
 didn't explode
 when utmost Imagination rose
 in that flood of knowledge. Unique
 in agony, Infinite strength, Incarnate,
 empowered Him to endure
 inside of history,
 through those hours when He took to Himself

the sum total of anguish and drank
even the lees of that cup:

within the mesh of the web, Himself
woven within it, yet seeing it,
seeing it whole. *Every sorrow and desolation*
*He saw, and sorrowed in kinship.*¹¹

Given that kinship yet uniqueness, what are the implications for us being sent as Jesus was? In John's Gospel, the forthright, named, public figure who embodies this is Peter, who in John 21 comes through the darkness of his own denial of Jesus into a confession of love, a calling to feed Jesus' sheep, and a prediction that he would later be taken where he did not wish to go, and would glorify God by his death. Martin Luther saw being taken "where you do not wish to go" (John 21:18) as exemplary for disciples of Jesus; and Henri Nouwen, in his sermon at my own graduation, left the whole class with that text. It is a sobering challenge to any desire to be in control or autonomous, to notions of self-fulfilment, or to trying to plan a career. Love may have other ideas for us!

But there is also the other figure in John 21, who is even more radically identified with love, to the extent that he is anonymous, and simply called "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Peter saw him following them and said to Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!" (John 21:21–22). That not only encourages a healthy agnosticism about anyone's future in relation to Jesus, it also contains one of John's most important words, *menein*, here translated "remain," elsewhere as "abide," "stay," "endure," "continue," "wait for," "dwell," "live." But where is the disciple Jesus loved living at this point? According to John 19, he is living with the mother of Jesus, also anonymous in this Gospel (and I think both are anonymous for the same reason—so that any of us can, figurally and analogically, identify with them).

My last two maxims will be connected with an interpretation of John 19 that I heard from Jean Vanier.¹² He is the founder of the International Federation of L'Arche Communities, in which people

¹¹ *The Collected Poems of Denise Levertov* (New York: New Directions Press, 2013) 769–770.

¹² I draw here on a previous address of mine: David F. Ford, 2017, "The Future of Theology at a Public University," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 1 (2017). <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v38i1.1807>

with and without serious learning disabilities live together in family-like households. There are around 150 L'Arche communities worldwide, and other similar communities inspired by L'Arche. He has also written a profound commentary on the Gospel of John. When he was awarded the Templeton Prize a couple of years ago, my wife and I were guests at a celebration of it, and I asked him how he now understood chapter 19—the story of the passion and crucifixion of Jesus. He gripped my arm as he spoke, and this is, more or less, what he said:

At the beginning of that chapter, Jesus is humiliated—he is flogged, a crown of thorns is pressed into his head, he is mocked, and slapped in the face.

The people with learning disabilities in our communities have been humiliated too. They have been seen as of no worth, having no dignity. They have been marginal to what other people really value and center their lives on: knowledge, education and work; sex, marriage, family life and friendship; health, sport and beauty; and power, wealth and fame.

Then Jesus is nailed to the cross, and what does he do from there? When he sees his mother and the disciple he loved at the foot of the cross, he says to his mother, “Woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” Then John says that the disciple took her into his home. So, out of the depths of humiliation Jesus creates a community.

“At the heart, the root, of this community,” said Vanier, “is the humiliated one.”

It is no accident that Vanier loves Howard Thurman's book written out of the depths of the black experience in the United States, *Jesus and the Disinherited*,¹³ which also has that core insight into Jesus and humiliation.

I see the L'Arche communities, and the writings of Jean Vanier and of others associated with him, including Henri Nouwen, Frances Young (a close friend of Vanier—she first introduced me to him), Vanier's remarkable sister, Thérèse Vanier, and Christian Salenson, as prophetic for our century, above all in gently but insistently facing us

¹³ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1976).

with that question: *Who is really central to our families, groups, communities, nations, civilizations, churches?*

6. *Jesus Desires Reconciling Communities*

I mean by this sixth maxim that Jesus desires communities that both themselves embody reconciliation across differences and divisions and also help to enable reconciliation in the rest of the world.

The theological climax of the Gospel of John—and therefore of the four canonical Gospels, if, as I would argue (along with many others, such as Jörg Frey¹⁴) John is read as their theological climax—is the prayer of Jesus at the end of the Farewell Discourses in John 17. In this, which I find the most profound theological chapter in the Bible, the desire of Jesus is for radical, ultimate reconciliation with God and with other people, in communities of love that are also signs of reconciliation beyond themselves: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20–21).

Jean Vanier, in his commentary, “Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John,”¹⁵ calls this “the summit of love.” The Farewell Discourses of John 13–17 lead up to this summit in stages.

First, there is the foot washing in John 13. In writing my still-unfinished commentary on John over the past fifteen years, one of my strongest impressions has been recognizing the unparalleled level of imperative authority this action carries in John. To quote from the conclusion in the current draft of the commentary on John 13:1–21:¹⁶

It is worth noting the ways in which John’s account cumulatively amounts to saying, *This is of the utmost importance*. No other instruction in the Gospel of John has anything like this weight of emphasis:

¹⁴ Jörg Frey, *Von Jesus zur neutestamentlichen Theologie* Kleine Schriften II, ed. Benjamin Schliesser (= Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 368) (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

¹⁵ Jean Vanier, *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 2004).

¹⁶ Words in bold are taken from John 13:1–21.

- *The timing is climactic*: it is not only the major festival of Pass-over but also the **hour**, the time of the culminating events of the Gospel, and key players in those events are woven into the story of the foot washing—Judas, Peter, the disciple Jesus loved, and the other disciples.
- As the first act Jesus does immediately after we have been told that **he loved them to the end**, it is clearly intended to be understood as *an exemplary act of love*, with feet being washed by **the hands** into which **the Father had given all things**. No action could have higher authority.
- The action points to the fundamental theme of *participation in Jesus*, having a “**share with me**,” and combines the one-to-one with mutual service in the community.
- *Jesus explicitly claims authority* as “**Teacher and Lord . . . for that is what I am** [*eimi*],” and that echo of the repeated “**I am**” [*ego eimi*] in John’s Gospel is reinforced later in verse 19: “. . . **so that . . . you may believe that I am he** [*ego eimi*].” Thus the foot washing is twice associated with this Gospel’s distinctive way of affirming the divinity of Jesus.
- There is *an explicit command* directly flowing from the claim to authority: “**So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.**” The **you ought** [*humeis opheilete*] is very strong, implying what is owed to each other.
- Jesus says he is giving *an example to be followed*, and setting a challenge to improvise further, inspired by what he has done: “**you also should do as I have done to you.**” This is the capacious Johannine *as*, which elsewhere too opens the way for creativity in thought, imagination, and action. “**Example**” does not imply exact repetition, but rather suggests the possibility of continual variations, in innumerable other situations, in the spirit of what Jesus has done.
- The significance is further intensified by the formula, “**very truly, I tell you . . .**,” which is repeated later in v. 20, the final, summary statement of the section. The theme here in v. 16 is greatness, closely allied to importance, power, authority, and God: “**Servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.**” God’s power and authority are surprisingly different from most conceptions, and *their truth is revealed in slave-like service*, done in love.

- *There is even a beatitude*,¹⁷ the first of only two in John. This one is about the basic connection of knowing and doing: “**If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.**”¹⁸
- *The authority of scripture* is also invoked—“**it is to fulfill the scripture . . .**”
- Finally, after the divine “**I am,**” and introduced by the second “**Very truly, I tell you . . .**,” comes a culminating statement about receiving or welcoming, which is one of the key actions in this Gospel:¹⁹ “**Whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.**” Receiving, or welcoming, Jesus, his Father, whoever they send, and whatever they give, might be a summary of the main purpose of this Gospel, expressed elsewhere through the language of believing/trusting, mutual indwelling/abiding, and mutual love. So this final, emphatic intensification of the imperative of foot washing integrates it with the dynamics of mutual receptivity that are at the heart of the Gospel. *The tender, touching act of washing each other’s feet is a sign of welcoming each other in love.*

This action leads into Jesus giving “a new commandment” to love as he has loved (13:34). Later, in a further wave of teaching on this, Jesus connects it directly with him laying down his life for his friends, and calls his disciples no longer servants but friends (John 15:12–17). From my reading of history and in my own experience, where situations of deep division and conflict have been overcome in ways that bring long-term peace, usually some people from both sides have been willing to risk making daring friendships across the divisions.

¹⁷ When the foot washing and the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3–12) are read alongside each other they are mutually illuminating, especially the first three: “**Blessed are the poor in spirit . . . Blessed are those who mourn . . . Blessed are the meek/gentle . . .**”

¹⁸ The second is about the connection of seeing and believing: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (20:29).

¹⁹ The Greek verb is *lambanein*, which can mean “receive,” “welcome,” “accept,” “take,” “put on,” and more. Like many other key words in John, it can be used in quite ordinary ways, but can also go to the heart of John’s message, as in 1:12, 16; 3:11, 32, 33; 5:43; 10:18; 12:48; 14:17; 20:22. These are about receiving Jesus himself, grace upon grace, vital testimony, the Father’s command, the word of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. In John 13 *lambanein* is first used of Jesus putting on a **towel**, and later his **robe**; next about receiving people, Jesus, and his Father; and then about Judas receiving bread from Jesus.

But even friendship is not the summit of love. This is pointed to in the prayer of John 17. In the twentieth century this was at the heart of the inspiration of those who began and sustained the Christian ecumenical movement. My extravagant hope and prayer is that it might be possible in this century to accomplish in the interreligious sphere something analogous to what was achieved in the intra-Christian sphere in the twentieth century by the ecumenical movement and related developments such as the Second Vatican Council. For all their inadequacies and incompleteness, they accomplished something astonishing and unprecedented in history. They changed communities with hundreds of millions of members from alienation, confrontation, and sometimes conflict to conversation and sometimes collaboration, and enabled innumerable friendships. I know how deeply grateful I, a Dublin Anglican and member of a 3 percent Protestant minority in the Republic of Ireland, have been for the transformation in the ecology of relations between Catholics and Protestants in my home city, and also for my best friend being a Catholic. The ecumenical movement has been accompanied by all sorts of joint declarations, agreements, and covenants on all levels, and also by many friendships. Might we not have a comparable movement of reconciliation and friendship among religions in our century? I consider this to be not only desirable but urgent, and that not only is it possible but that the moment is actually ripe for it. This leads directly into my final maxim.

7. Jesus Continues to Spring Surprises

The category of surprise has become increasingly important to me. Jesus is very surprising. He embodies a God of surprises in a contingent world in which it is wise to be continually on the watch for fresh surprises. If the followers of Jesus, into whom his Spirit has been breathed, are sent as he was sent, then we are sent to spring surprises in his name, in line with who Jesus is.

Jean Vanier's L'Arche communities have that quality of surprise, what Micheal O'Siadhail's poem on Jean Vanier, "Admiral of Arks," calls "a kind of upside-downness,"²⁰ and Christian Salenson (whom I find the best French interpreter of L'Arche) calls *bouleversante*

²⁰ Micheal O'Siadhail, "Admiral of Arks" in *Collected Poems* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2018), 580.

fragilité—“shocking, deeply moving weakness; fragility that turns you upside-down.”²¹

I want to illustrate this final maxim mainly with one of the greatest surprises of my own life as a follower of Jesus, an academic, and participant in interfaith engagement. It is a surprise that has been ongoing, one unexpected element following another down to the present, and, no doubt, with more to come.

It began in the early 1990s when I was on sabbatical from Cambridge at the Princeton Center of Theological Inquiry, whose director was Dan Hardy; one of the other scholars there was the Jewish philosopher Peter Ochs. Peter invited Dan Hardy and me to take part in meetings of the Textual Reasoning group of Jewish text scholars, philosophers, and theologians that used to meet as a fringe group at the American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting.²²

The first surprise was the sheer intensity, frankness, and liveliness of those meetings (not always typical of AAR sessions!). They engaged with the Tanakh (the Jewish Bible), the Talmud, and a range of modern Jewish thinkers such as Cohen, Levinas, and Rosenzweig, and argued with no holds barred, and an enormous range of reference, about one disputed question after another—together with considerable humor.

Before long, some of us Christians on the fringe of this Jewish fringe gathering joined with some of the Textual Reasoners to form what we called Scriptural Reasoning; and then, perhaps more surprisingly, we were joined by some Muslims, led by Basit Koshul (now a professor of humanities at Lahore University of Management Science in Pakistan, and still very much part of Scriptural Reasoning). We began a slow process of working out how best to engage with

²¹ Christian Salenson, *Bouleversante Fragilité. L'Arche à l'épreuve du handicap* (Bruyères-le-Châtel: Nouvelle Cité, 2016).

²² For more on Scriptural Reasoning, see Nicholas Adams, “Scriptural Reasoning and Interfaith Hermeneutics” in David Cheetham, Ulrich Winkler, Oddbjørn Leirvik and Judith Gruber, eds., *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe: Between Texts and People* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2011); David F. Ford and C. C. Pecknold, eds., *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2006); David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2007); Peter Ochs, “The Possibilities and Limits of Interreligious Dialogue,” in R. Scott Appleby, Atalia Omer, and David Little, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015); Peter Ochs and William Stacy Johnson, eds., *Crisis, Call, and Leadership in the Abrahamic Traditions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

the Tanakh, the Bible, and the Qur'an alongside each other. A fairly simple pattern emerged of small groups, usually less than twelve, with short extracts of each scripture about a chosen theme on the table, and intensive discussion of them one after another, together with the chance to interrelate them. In larger gatherings, where we divided up into study groups, we usually also had plenary sessions where all present could discuss issues arising from the groups, and reflect on the evolving character of the practice.

Perhaps one should not be too surprised at the surprises that constantly happened in the groups. Each of the three scriptures, the Tanakh, the Bible, and the Qur'an, is a rich, complex text with multiple dimensions of meaning, with long traditions of interpretation and application, and with extensive current debates, so there is an enormous amount to be brought into mutual engagement. In previous centuries it has been very rare indeed for members of each tradition to be able to gather in settings not under the hegemony of one or the other in order to study and discuss freely together, so when this does happen today there can be unprecedented interplay between them. In a Scriptural Reasoning session, one is sometimes aware that this may well be the first time in history that these particular texts from the three scriptures have been brought into engagement with each other by people who identify with the three traditions. Some scholars have occasionally had the competence to bring all three together, but that is a very different thing from live discussion among people immersed in one or other of the texts as members of one or other of these three religious traditions.

Surprises of many sorts have continued to happen through Scriptural Reasoning. There has been the geographical spread beyond its US and UK origins to embrace continental Europe (especially the Netherlands and Germany), China, Israel, Egypt, Oman, Russia, Kenya, Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Australia, and elsewhere. It has been taken up and developed in distinctive ways in various places.

Of these, perhaps the greatest surprise has been in China, where Scriptural Reasoning has been done in a Chinese way.²³ Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist texts are studied alongside Jewish, Christian, and Muslim ones; the strong Confucian tradition of close textual

²³ On "Scriptural Reasoning with Chinese Characteristics," and in particular the work of Yang Huilin, see Chloë Starr, *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016), chapter 9.

reading and interpretation, accompanied by courteous conversation, has been especially important, and it has also given a sort of lingua franca to Chinese Scriptural Reasoners. There has been a new disciplinary setting for Scriptural Reasoning alongside theology and the study of religion, that of comparative literature, through the work of Yang Huilin of Renmin University of Beijing, and it has also been brought into engagement there with the practice of comparative theology, as developed by Francis Clooney of Harvard. It should be especially important to learn from Chinese experience in developing the practice in India. An initiative is about to begin there at Dev Sanskriti Vishwavidyalaya (DSVV) University in Haridwar. Professor Nicholas Adams of the University of Birmingham, who has also been active in Scriptural Reasoning in China, is involved in this—he and his university will be in collaboration with DSVV University on the scholarly and research aspects of the Indian initiative.

There has also been the unexpected spread of Scriptural Reasoning to other settings beyond the academy. It has been happening in schools (it is now part of the Oxford and Cambridge Syllabus of Religious Studies A-Level qualifications in schools in the UK²⁴); hospitals (it is part of officially required training in intercultural relationships for hospital staff in some Israeli hospitals, led by Dr. Miriam Feldmann-Kaye, and is now also happening in some British hospitals); local congregations of different religions (this is probably the most widespread form of all); leadership programs (the Faith in Leadership organization has been a pioneer in this, both nationally within the UK and internationally); and peacebuilding initiatives of many sorts (for example, the 2018 Emerging Peacemakers Forum, sponsored by the Grand Imam of Al Azhar University in Egypt and the Archbishop of Canterbury). Other venues have included prisons, a range of civil society contexts, Catholic and Anglican religious orders, and business and financial services settings. Scriptural Reasoning has also been taken on board by seminaries that want to train their students in forms of engagement with other religious traditions. There is also Rose Castle, in Cumbria, UK, which has become the UK hub for

²⁴ See “David Ford and Peter Ochs on The Scriptural Reasoning Movement,” chapters 21 and 22, *The Panpsychist Philosophy Podcast*, August 12 and 13, 2018, <http://thepanpsychist.com/dct-audiobook/chapter22-p1> and <http://thepanpsychist.com/dct-audiobook/chapter22-p2>.

Scriptural Reasoning beyond the academy and host of the Scriptural Reasoning website.²⁵

But the most satisfying surprises have been what I call the “multiple deepenings” that Scriptural Reasoning at its best has enabled. The obvious deepenings are in better understanding both of the texts of one’s own tradition and the texts of other traditions. Beyond that, Scriptural Reasoning can stimulate deeper commitment to the peace, harmony, and common good of a community or society, deeper understanding of areas of both agreement and (just as important) ongoing disagreement, and a deepening of relationships in conversation, collaboration, and even friendship across deep differences. Through those deepenings, Scriptural Reasoning has also been a considerable theological surprise. There has been an ongoing theological fruitfulness.

To explore with others the meanings of our respective traditions through our scriptures, especially when participants are rooted deeply in their own traditions of understanding and practice, is to find that, in unforeseen ways, one is enabled to go deeper into many theological questions. For example, listening to how Muslims, Jews, Confucians, Buddhists, fellow Christians, and others respond to biblical testimonies to Jesus Christ is to be reminded how central to the New Testament are stories of encountering Jesus, with each meeting distinctive, and many of them surprising. The surprises continue to happen as these texts are read together. As a Christian they have helped me appreciate somewhat more fully one particular way in which my faith claims to be universally relevant and true: through this living person, Jesus Christ, being divinely free to encounter each person. It can happen anonymously (as in Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats, when those who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited those in prison are surprised to be told they did these things to Jesus—Matt. 25:31–46), through scripture, sacraments, preaching, other people, the arts, dreams, events, academic fields, religious traditions of many sorts, and innumerable other modes. If, as the Prologue of the Gospel of John says, Jesus is the Word of God through whom all things were made, then he can relate to people through all things—all those already mentioned, and more—but a text, which is composed of words,

²⁵ See the Rose Castle Foundation, <https://rosecastle.foundation/> and Scriptural Reasoning, <https://scripturalreasoning.org>.

does seem an especially appropriate means. If divine truth is primarily identified as a particular person, who is free to relate in an infinity of particular ways with each other person and with whole families, groups, communities, and civilizations, then no one has an overview of those interactive particularities, and everyone needs to be alert for ever-fresh encounters, humbly open to what is given next, especially through reading scripture. And there are analogous Jewish, Muslim, Confucian, Buddhist, Daoist, and Hindu ways of understanding and encouraging such humility and openness.

And surely there are more surprises to come, often from surprising sources. The teaching of Jesus about the future often sounds this note. Scriptural Reasoning, at its best, can therefore be seen by Christians as one anticipation of the divine future in which there will be an encounter with Jesus that is unimaginable in advance. I am writing this just after returning from China, still savoring a Scriptural Reasoning session in Renmin University, and the outbursts of laughter that seemed like a taste of heaven.

Conclusion

Scriptural Reasoning also relates to all the other maxims I have proposed: a new community of readers and set of intertexts around the Gospels, leading into fresh analogical imagining and thinking (1 and 2); new conversational face-to-face settings that can lead into collaboration, long-term covenantal relationships, and friendships (3 and 4); one sign of abundant life for all, which can be seen as an ordinary practice of reconciliation, bringing together members of groups that have many differences, and between which there have often been misunderstandings, tensions, and conflicts (5 and 6).

But neither Scriptural Reasoning nor following Jesus should be seen as primarily instrumental, done for the sake of something else. They are best done first of all for their own sake—as Jews say, *l'shma*: literally, for the sake of the Name, for God's sake. In John 17, Jesus twice refers (rather puzzlingly) to “your name that you have given me” (17:11, 12), and concludes the prayer, “I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (17:26). The name is the core indicator of who Jesus is, who God is, who we are; and this “who-to-who-to-who” relationship is the ultimate mystery of love.