2. The Abba-Experience of Jesus and the Vision of Mission as Fostering Relationship

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INTRODUCTION

The understanding of the mystery of God functions as the primary symbol of the whole religious system of Christianity, the ultimate point of reference for understanding our experience, life, the world, and above all, Christian mission. The way in which Christianity experiences God expresses its corporate identity and orients its praxis.

The Christian understanding of God begins with the experience Jesus had of the Father and the Spirit. The focus of the Christian doctrine of God is the experience of God through Jesus Christ in the Spirit. It is basically an experience of relationship - God to us and we to God and to each other. The God we experience in Jesus Christ is a God who can be

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described as other-ward or other-centeredness. The God of Jesus Christ is a God of covenant relationship. The biblical God is not a solitary monad, contemplating God’s own bliss, but an eternal relationship, as manifested in the temporal covenants of creation and grace. As Michael Horton has observed, “The drama that discloses the work of the triune God in history begins in the eternal relationship of the divine persons, executed in the temporal covenants of creation and grace” (2005:66). The covenant union between God and Israel as well as with humanity (Gen 8:20–22) has become a key hermeneutical guide in the understanding not only of Creator-creature relationship, but also in the understanding of life within God as well as the relation between creatures. Covenant is not only an architectonic scheme in Scripture, but also the environment within which the drama of salvation history unfolds. The concept of covenant emphasizes otherness and union, transcendence and immanence and thus discloses the bond between God and the world as well as the bond among creatures. The Incarnation of the Word of God through the Spirit is the continuation of the eternal covenant of the triune God both within and without.

**The Abba Experience of Jesus**

One thing that stands out in all the four gospels is Jesus’ consciousness of an intimate relationship with God, as well as the authority to communicate God’s revelation, because God made God-self known to him as Father (Mt 11:27, par). Likewise, it has been generally accepted that Mk 14:36, “Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I will, but what thou wilt,” is going back to Jesus himself. Similarly, in the fourth gospel Jesus constantly refers to God, as *pater pompas me*, the Father who sent me.

The *abba* experience of Jesus refers to a relationship; the relationship proclaimed and lived out by Jesus. The probability is that he used the word *abba* that expressed intimacy and familiarity; but to his contemporaries this was disrespectful of God, not merely when it is expressly attested, but in all cases, and particularly in addresses to God where the evangelists record him as saying, “Oh, Father,” “My Father,” etc., (Kittel 1965: 606).

In Mt 11:27 and parallel Lk 10:22, Jesus speaks of the Father’s intimate revelation to him and its purpose. Joachim Jeremias has paraphrased Mt 11:27 as, “because only a Father and a Son truly know each other, therefore a son can reveal to others the innermost thoughts of his father” (1965:22). The father-son comparison as an illustration of how revelation is transmitted was familiar in Jesus’ times. For instance, in the third book of Enoch, we have: “Every secret did I reveal to him as a father” (Enoch III 48.C7). Hence, Jeremias claims, Jesus interprets the theme “all things have been transmitted to me by my Father,” with the aid of this everyday experience: “as a father who personally devotes himself to explaining to his son the letter of the Torah, so God has transmitted to me the revelation of himself, and therefore, I alone can pass on to others the real knowledge of God” (Jeremiah 1956: 26).

Therefore, when Jesus spoke of God as “my Father,” he was referring not just to a familiarity and intimacy with God available to anyone, but a unique relationship and a revelation, which was his alone and its purpose, viz., his mission. The Kingdom of God, the core of Jesus’ mission, was the explication and the realization of this revelation and this experience. At the centre of Jesus’ mission stands the experience and revelation of God as the Father. “This one word ‘abba’, if it is understood in its full sense, comprehends the whole message of Gospel,” observes Jeremias (1959: 144).

At the depth of his spirit, Jesus experienced himself as one with that ultimate Reality and in the relationship of a son to the Father. As Bede Griffiths has pointed out, “this experience of relationship, which he expressed in terms of knowing and loving the Father and being known and loved by him, seems to be the unique character of Jesus’ experience of God” (1982:33).
The abba experience of Jesus is so pervasive in all testimonies about him, that in the context of his intimacy with God as Father, nothing could be more natural than to think of Jesus primarily as the Son of God. All the gospels demonstrate how, through his life, his deeds and his words Jesus reveals himself to be the Son of God (Mk 15:39).

Jesus is the Son. The whole force of this word is that it has meaning only in relation to the Father and can be applied only to one person, only in relation to the Father. But at the same time this force makes a formidable demand: lest this word remain a hollow sound, lest it be lost in the multitude of secret names mysteriously communicated to a few intimates, what it expresses has to be lived – Jesus has to show himself forth as the Son he claims to be. His life, in other words, was a living out of his Son-ship and thus revealing the Father. All his words and actions have to be seen in the light of this unique relationship and from the perspective of his having been sent by the Father. Hence, in the next section we examine his ministry.

Jesus’ Ministry

Jesus anchored the new movement that he initiated on love. The very reason of his Incarnation is love (Jn 3:16). The Jesus movement was a concern for the neighbour. (Lk 4:16-20). What was characteristic of Jesus’ mission in the gospels was the revelation of the Father (Jn 1:18; 12:45; 14:9; 17:6,26) and the realization of his reign (Mk 1:14; Mt 4:17; Lk 4:43). Love is at the root of all mission, both within God’s own self and without, manifested first in creation and ultimately in the mission of Jesus Christ. John insists how “He came to his own” (Jn 1:10). The Vatican mission decree, Ad Gentes, describes this in terms of “the fountain-like love of the Father” (n 2). At the end of his ministry Jesus could say: “those who have seen me have seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). How did he accomplish this?

To begin with, Jesus was in continuous relationship with his Father in Spirit manifested through his prayers. We see him praying on different occasions, but more so before any major step in his ministry. Prayer was the expression of his vertical relationship with the Father in the Spirit. This vertical relation flowed into relation with humans.

The absolutizing of the Law, more so, regarding the observance of the Sabbath, ritual purity, punishments, etc., dehumanized the common folk and made them victims of marginalization. These included the poor, the blind, the lame, the leprosy affected, the hungry, those who weep, the sinners, the tax collectors, those possessed by demons, the persecuted, the captives, the weary, the heavy laden, the rabble who knew nothing of the law, the prostitutes, the widows, children, ... The list goes on. Jesus’ experience of God as the intimate parent, abba, does not allow anyone to be excluded from society, as of diminished human worth. Jesus was the Son, and that was a formidable demand. His consistent challenge to attitudes, practices, and structures that arbitrarily tended to restrict or exclude people from society is to be seen in the light of his abba-experience.

The moment Jesus appeared with the message of the kingdom, the moment he brings the Father’s generosity to the poor, forgiveness to sinners, inclusion to the excluded, especially through the oft-repeated table fellowships, Jesus was living the Son-ship. By living the exigencies of the Son he manifested the priority of the wretched and the sinful as well as the precariousness of vested interests. He was the actualization of the goodness of the kingdom and the actualization of the ineffable relationship to God his Father. As the son Jesus was not only the manifestation of who God is, but also “what a life full of God is like” (Borg 1999: 242). In both cases Jesus was an expression of relationship.
The kingdom is not an abstract idea, but a relationship based on the divine Fatherhood/Motherhood whereby all humans will recognize each other as brothers and sisters, which would imply the practice of justice–love. In other words, the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed cannot compromise in any way the dignity of the human person. After healing the leper, affected person Jesus makes sure that he is reinstated in society (Mt 8:4). One way of summarizing the mission of Jesus is to say that it was restoring the dignity of the human person.

His death on the cross was the practical result of his mission, based on his abba-experience. The cross was the supreme manifestation of his love: “No one has greater love than to lay down one’s life for others” (Jn 15:13). The Father who bore witness to him at his baptism (Mt 3:17) and at the time of his transfiguration (Mt 17:5) ratified his ministry by raising him from the dead (Acts 2:24). The Lord who had authorized his disciples to call God as Father (Mt 6:9ff) and thus authorized them to participate in his Son-ship equally authorized them to participate in his mission (Mt 28:16ff).

Thus, Jesus in his whole being and ministry was relationship: relationship to the Father from whom he came and to whom he returned and relationship to his ministry and people. His relationship to the Father grounded him in his mission. Pure obedience to the Father led him to pure openness to mission and to people. As far as Jesus is concerned, this relation was always the same. That is to say, it is the same relation that he had with the Father as the Father’s Word before the Incarnation, and as the Incarnate Word who went about in his ministry, who went about doing good (Acts 10:38). As Hans Urs von Balthasar has pointed out: “For, whether the Son is in the bosom of the Father or treading the path of earth, there can be no doubt that the ‘where’ that determines his state of life is the mission, the work, the will of the Father. In this ‘where’ the Son can always be found, for he is himself the epitome of the paternal mission” (1983:188). In his relationship to the Father he is related to us in so far as the Father has created everything through the Word. Thus, we become sons/daughters of God. Our relationship to one another also hails from this, as manifested in Jesus’ ministry. Due to his relationship to the Father Jesus became self-gift, openness to others. This is what we are called to be. We Christians who have experienced this relationship to the Son and through him to the Father are called to enter into relationship with all.

The Trinity is Relation

The very vestige of the Trinity at the opening of the New Testament revelation is relational. At the baptism of Jesus at the Jordan, he is revealed as “the beloved Son,” while the Holy Spirit descends upon him (Mk 1:9-11; Mt 3:13-17). This scene of the revelation of the identity of Jesus through the descent of the Spirit, and the voice of the Father occurs as Jesus comes up from the water. This in turn links us to the Easter proclamation as well. Hence St. Paul could write that Jesus Christ was “declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom 1:4). Thus, the baptism of Jesus is an anticipation of the Easter proclamation. Every stage of the unfolding of the New Testament Christology is linked with the Spirit who ultimately enables the Son to breathe the Spirit on the disciples and the church (Jn 20:22, Acts 2:1-13). On the other hand, it is the Father who sent the Son (Gal 4:4; Jn 3:16-17) and the Spirit (Gal 4:6) on mission. Hence, the Jordan event gives us an insight into the relational existence of the Trinitarian mystery.

Within the historical order, i.e., within the salvation history, the self-communication of the triune God takes place through a double sending, i.e., of the Son and the Spirit. As Kilian McDonnell points out, the character of this twofold sending is determined by the specificity of the manner of origin (procreation), which manner is constitutive of the Word and the Spirit (2003:199).
Along with the distinction of the mission of the Son and the Spirit there is also a radical relating of the one to the other in so far as the Father sends the Spirit in the name of the Son (Jn 14:26) and the Son sends the Spirit from the Father (Jn 15:26). The source of both is the Father. Luke too describes the mutuality of the Spirit and the Son (Lk 24:49; Acts 2:23).

The being of Jesus Christ can be understood only in relation to God and others. “The reality of Jesus is given in his being-from, being-with, and being-for others” as LaCugna has shown (1993:293). His being is in constant ex-stasy, reaching out. We can understand Jesus only from the way he relates to God and to humans.

The mission of the Son is operative and effective only in the mission of the Spirit (Rom 15:18-19). The Holy Spirit is God’s outreach toward the world, God’s ecstatic, the bridge between God and the world (LaCugna, 1993:297). Christian Duquoc puts it more emphatically: “The Spirit makes the divine communion open to what is not divine. He is the indwelling of God where God is, in a sense, ‘outside Himself.’ The Spirit is, therefore, called ‘love’. He is God’s ‘ecstasy’ directed towards ‘God’s other’, the creature” (1978:121). Thus, the Holy Spirit is a Spirit of communion (Acts 2:8ff).

Not infrequently, the activity of the Spirit is taken note only from the time of the Pentecost. However, he was moving over the void from the beginning (Gen 1:2). Thus, the Spirit is the ever-uniting link. Even as both missions proceed from the Father, both lead back to the Father (Rom 8:15-17; Gal 4:6; Eph 2:18, etc.). Hence, the early authors developed a theology of movement from the Father through Christ in the Spirit to the church and to the world and back to God. By the fourth century we have the liturgical formula “from the Father, through Christ, his Son, in the Spirit, to the Father, blessed Trinity, one God” (LaCugna 1999:201).

Classical theology spoke of perichoresis, introduced by the Eastern theologian John Damascene, to highlight the dynamic intra divine relations. The being of God is this relatedness, love, i.e., the three divine persons are what they are by relation to one another. “Each divine person is irresistibly drawn to the other,” observes Catherine LaCugna (1993:291). This makes God’s nature ecstatic, relational, dynamic and vital. “I came from the Father and I return to the Father” (Jn 16:28). This relation is also a reality of communion like the vine and the branches (Jn 17:21). God is love in terms of the divine originality and initiative of the Father. As Tony Kelly has pointed out, “The absolute oneness of God is concretely realized in a limitless self-communication relationality. God is God by being a communion of mutual self-giving. The Be-ing of God is a life of communion. And the life of God is one of unrestricted, all-embracing love” (1993:158). Quoting Nicholas of Cusa, Kelly comments how God is the enfolding and unfolding of everything that is (1993:158).

Everything is to be given and to be received, as the gift of God,” observes Antony Kelly (2006:60). Hence, John tells us “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son” (1 Jn 4:10). God exists and loves as the absolute “beginning.” Divine love precedes all creation. In the Johannine Gospel we are told how the Son is radically dependent on the Father for his life, action, speech and mission. Everything that Jesus embodies refers back to the Father, the source from which all gifts flow (1 Jn 1:5).

The originating and engendering love of God communicates itself totally to the Father’s Word, the Son, manifested in the sending of the Son into the world as the Father’s self-expressiveness. The intimacy of the Father-Son relationship is expressed by John when he writes: “No one who denies the Son has the Father. He who confesses the Son has the Father also” (1 Jn 2:23). “In this primal experience of divine love the Son is unique self-expression and self-gift of the
Father,” writes Kelly (2006:62). The word that is what God is
became incarnate and entered into relationship with human
history.

Extra Trinitarian Relation

God’s being is love, self-transcendence and thus relation. If
this relation is described as Trinity ad intra, ad extra it is
expressed in creation, since relation is love, it is self-diffusive.
The intra divine perichoresis is not limited to the divine inner
life only but, extends to the one communion of all persons,
divine as well as human (Jn 17:23). The divine perichoresis is an
image of persons in communion, through God’s plan from all
eternity (Eph 1:3-14). Humanity has been made partner in the
divine perichoresis, as LaCugna puts it (1993:274). LaCugna
points out how “There are not two sets of communion - one
among the divine persons, the other among human persons,
with the latter supposed to replicate the former. The one
perichoresis, one mystery of communion includes God and
humanity as beloved partners in the dance” (274). The divine
life reaches beyond itself to the creature.

The first Jewish believers in Jesus Christ saw God in
conformity with the Old Testament understanding of God, in
strict monothestic terms. They believed this God has brought
about the divine reign in the mission of Jesus Christ, God’s
Son. His presence and activity is continued after his
resurrection, through God’s Spirit. Hence there is no doctrine
of the Trinity, but a religious experience of the divine mystery
acting in history in the person of Jesus and in the Holy Spirit.
Reflection on Jesus’ relation to the Father was the beginning of
the doctrine of Trinity. They begin to realize the possibility of
three sorts of relationship with one God.

As Elizabeth Johnson has shown, the symbol of the Trinity
brings out a dynamic relationship within and to the world,
and thus, an inner divine circling around in unimaginable
relation. God’s relatedness to the world in creating, redeeming,
and renewing activity suggests to the Christian mind that God’s
own being is somehow similarly differentiated. Thus, God is
“not an isolated, static, ruling monarch but a relational,
dynamic, tri-personal mystery of love” (E. Johnson 1994:192).
Elsewhere, Johnson argues that the Trinitarian language is the
fundamental attempt to secure an understanding of God as a
profound relation communion (:196). Johnson concludes by
saying that the symbol of Trinity is not a blueprint of the inner
workings of the Godhead, or esoteric information about God.
It is the Christian experience of relationship to God and
indirectly points to God’s relationality to the world as well as
to God’s own mystery (:205).

This Trinitarian relationship and primordial harmony is
manifested in creation with its order amidst the complex and
multiple phenomena of the world and of the human experience.
The sages of the Old Testament, as Corona Mary has shown,
were led by faith and so “what they are interested is in the
inner connections that are manifested in meaningful
relationships” (2006:206). The sages of the Wisdom literature
were concerned with a self-understanding “in terms of
relationship with things, people, and the creation,” writes
James Reese (1981:44). Wisdom in the Old Testament as the
agent of creation is an expression of human beings’ relatedness
with God leading to relatedness among them and with the rest
of the creation. “All things from their very origin in Him are
also relationally connected one with another making a beautiful
concord. Creation shows not only the might of Yahweh, but
quite distinctly, the harmony of relationships brought about
by Sophia,” stresses Corona Mary (:207). The relational nature
of Trinity affirms that to exist is to exist in relationality.

As Denis Edwards has emphasized the theological insight
that God is Persons-in-Relation provides a basis for a vision of
the fundamental reality of the universe as relational (2004:132).
“If the essence of God is relational, if the very foundation of all
being is relational, if everything that is, springs from Persons-
in-Relation, then this points toward an understanding of created reality as “being-in-relation” (Edwards 2004:133).

Insights from Classical Indian Tradition

The Indian ideal of Vasudavana Kudumbakam (all reality is one family) and the Indian perception of reality as Ekam sat, Vipra bahudha vadanti (There is only one Reality, those who perceive it speak of it in different ways) (Rg Veda 1.164.46), also invite us to this relational mode of existence. This Reality, as Raimondo Panikkar would express it, is theandropocosmic, a relationship of the Divine, human and the world. The transcendent Reality, Brahman, is also the immanent Atman (Mand.Up.2.7).

He is the unseen seer, the unheard hearer,
The unthought thinker, the unknown knower,
There is no other seer than he, no other hearer than he,
No other thinker than he, no other knower than he,
He is your atman, the inner controller, the immortal (Brih. Up.3.7.23).

Hence the ultimate ground of being, source of life, subject of consciousness is the transcendent and immanent Reality. The entire realm of reality that appears to be many, is ultimately one. In the deepest awareness of this one-ness with the true Reality, one realizes how he/she is: “Aham brahmaasmi” (I am Brahman) (Brih. Up.1.4.9), the same self in all and all in the Self (Isa.Up.6).

The Bhagavad Gita presents the Cosmic Purusa as the origin of all, the guardian of the ever lasting law (Samatan Dharma), the immortal person (BG 11.8-19). Hinduism stresses the underlying unity of all existence. Equally, there is the awareness of the presence of the divine power in all things, the multiplicity. They are only manifestations of the One Reality, the formless One. They are the ‘names and forms’ of the One Reality, the One without a second. Brahman is the source and end of all existence. “That from which beings are born, that by which when born they live; that into which when dying they enter; that you shall desire to know. That is Brahman” (Taittiriya Up. 3.1).

Orientations for the Church’s Mission

In the relational ontology that we have presented, as manifested in Jesus Christ, every being is being-with-other, even as God’s own existence is in relation to others. The Trinitarian God is ‘en-worlded’ as the relational ground of a cosmos of growing connections and relationships (Kelly 1993: 162).

God is ecstatic to us so that we may be ecstatic to one another and through that ecstatic to God (Mt 25: 40). As LaCugna has argued, “Christian praxis must correspond what we believe to be true about God: that God is personal, that God is ecstatic and fecund love that God’s very nature is to exist toward and for another. The mystery of existence is the mystery of commingling of persons, divine and human, in a common life, within a common household” (1993:383). We have seen how Trinitarian theology is a theology of relationship, as manifested in the mysteries of love, person, relation and communion, as revealed in the mission of the Son and the Spirit. Hence, to be a Christian is to participate in the life of God through Jesus Christ in the Spirit and to live a life in God’s economy (Hunt 2005:178). Such a life, as Anne Hunt insists, “will be characterized by a profound respect for mutuality, relatedness, and reciprocity... It will uphold the essential equality of persons. It will cherish individuality but reject individualism. It will foster inclusiveness, egalitarianism, collaboration and cooperation” (:179).

Latin American theology has shown how the Trinitarian understanding of the ultimate reality tells us that in the beginning is not a single subject, but a communion, within them is total equality, amid mutuality, and respect for difference
Building Solidarity

(Boff 1988:9). For liberation theology such a communion model of ultimate reality carries a political programme, putting an end, in Walter Kaspar’s words, “to a particular political theology that serves as an ideology to justify relations of domination in which an individual or a group tries to impose its ideas of unity and order and its interests to the exclusion of others” (1984:307). Could we not extend what Kaspar has said about political ideology to religious pluralism as well, viz., does not the Trinitarian vision invite us to get rid of any design of any one particular religion to suppress others, but rather work towards mutual relationship and participation in the spirit of complementarity and harmony?

The divine communion is expressed in the presence of the persons to each other, as manifested in the ministry of Jesus. The Son was constantly in the presence of the Father and the Father in the Son, through the Spirit. It was a radical presence and dependence. Radical presence and radical dependence, along with the qualities of reciprocity and immediacy were the qualities of Jesus’ ministry. As Leonard Boff has explained, it is being-in-openness, being-in-transcendence (ecstasy) and being-us (persons in communion) (1988:131). The ministry of Jesus was absolute openness, supreme presence, total immediacy, eternal transcendence and infinite communion. That is what the church is called to be.

Accordingly, the church is an extension of the visible missions expressed in the Son and the Spirit, as that part of the world or moment that is expressly conscious of the universal mystery of relational love at work in the world. “The community of Christian faith deals in words, signs, symbols and sacraments of the Trinitarian mystery. It is part of the ecology of God’s presence, not the totality of it” (Kelly 1993:162). This is all the more important in the Asian/Indian context of religious pluralism, frequently associated with division and violence. As Vatican Second’s declaration on other religions, Nostra Aetate insists, we have a common origin and common destiny (n 2).

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In the face of the human brokenness, violence, and the manifold destruction of the earth, mission based on the Trinitarian relation must lead the church away from doctrinal preoccupations, claims of uniqueness and singularity. The church must become a true imago Dei, an agent of genuine mutuality with radical equality and respect for differences. Relationality becomes the mode of being in the world. Relation is God’s own being and for the church it must be the constitutive mode of being in the world.

Conclusion

Christians individually and collectively are called to an ecstatic life style, i.e., to go out of self in relationship with others. Christian being is ex-sistence, to stand out, to meet others, for the God in whom Christians believe is a God who “exists,” goes out in relationship. The Christian understanding of God is as one who is subsisting relationship (Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica 1.29.4). Though every person, in so far as he/she participates in the Trinitarian creation and thereby in the Trinitarian relationship and communion, only Christians have experienced this Trinitarian relationship in Jesus Christ. This experience is a call for the Christian to reach out to others and to facilitate this relationship and communion. Anthony Kelly reminds us how the Christian virtue of hope is “the inclusion of every one in its scope and the expectation of a vast communion of life in which we all belong to one another in the end. Christian hope implies a limitless overture to an eschatological companionship from which no one is excluded” (2006: xi).

Participating in divine life through baptism is an invitation to enter into the divine economy of the life of Jesus Christ, into the life of the Spirit, into the life of others. We cannot enter into the divine life without entering into the life of others and to be in communion with them. If so, our mission praxis has to be in the mode of relationship that spells out the divine oikonomia in words, actions and attitudes, which will serve the
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REFERENCES


