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## Questions Put To Jesus

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# Gospel Questions, Requests, Taunts and Tests

William Paul Haas  
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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines the living context in which Jesus Christ was subject to a constant stream of questions, requests, pleadings, taunts and tests. Friendly or hostile, sincere or tricky, selfish or compassionate, those approaching Jesus do not fit any simple mold, do not follow any approved procedure, do not always get what they seek, do not always appear to know what they want or even understand Jesus' answers to their enquiries. I am more interested in the give and take, the unprepared dialogue, the inconclusive status of most of these encounters, than in any firm theological conclusions they entail. Theology has its place, but so does the casual superficial excursion through the day to day exchanges that confronted Jesus at every turn in the road. There is a truth worth considering in the confusion and befuddlement of those who encountered Jesus in so many different ways. There is much to be learned about them and about ourselves.

## THE ESSAY

### Gospel Questions: Just Ask

The purpose of this exploration is to leave the reader wondering, as many, if not most of the questioners and petitioners of Jesus were left wondering. And some of us, writers and readers of the Gospel accounts, are left wondering, too: we have our own puzzles and uncertainties which we might recognize in the confusion of those people who appear in the Gospels. Rather than trying to impose a clarity, a finality and precision on the Gospels, which really isn't always there. It is more revealing to consider the living context of God's self-revelation, to examine the confusion of those asking and begging Jesus for healing, for understanding, for preferential treatment or for just simple kindness. Some petitions were posed as traps to catch Jesus off guard or to build a case against him. Friendly or hostile the questioners are often portrayed as just as confused after they asked as they were before they asked. And often Jesus saw more in the questions tossed at him than the questioners did. Thus, the Gospel narratives may be truer to the actual confusion and

befuddlement that surrounded the Son of Man. This state of affairs is more clearly seen when we focus on the variety of the questions, on the questioners themselves and on their reactions to Jesus and focus on the way that Jesus often plays with the questions and questioners for his own mysterious and obscure purposes.

This special focus on seemingly superficial details abstracts from but does not deny the more profound theological implications of all questions and answers exchanged. The questions are shouted, dropped at his feet, made by a secret touch, often simple and straightforward. And they are addressed to him as Lord, Son of David, Son of Man, Teacher, Master or just plain Son. Once, someone unnamed called him simply “Jesus.” Seen together in this examination, superficial as it is, there is a sense of the dynamic Jesus taking praise, petitions, taunting, challenge from all sides everywhere he went. This approach may reveal a truth about the deeper truth worth pausing over. It is the surface we see first.

Also, the large number of crude and unpolished exchanges between Jesus and whoever caught his attention stands as evidence that the Gospel narratives are hardly the fabrications of myth makers. The candidness of the questions and probing reveals an unedited realism that invites the reader to wonder and guess along with the original participants. This is not the stuff of religious fantasy. It is clear when seen together that there were no constraints on what people might think, might ask for and how they might go about getting Jesus’ attention. Some desperate folks had to struggle against the reprimands of those protecting Jesus from intruders; they shouted, grabbed him, even lowered a victim down from the roof in front of him to get his attention. Noteworthy, too, Jesus ended his life facing two questioners, one he ignored and disappointed, the other he satisfied beyond expectations. There is nothing too fanciful or mythical about the conversation on Golgotha.

Other writers, notably John Dear and Timothy Keller, have responded to the constant questioning of Jesus and by him in more thorough ways than I have and with different insights. What we have in common is the sense that something is left unfinished, inviting and perplexing, that draws the reader into the exchanges that Jesus faced every day. This essay is narrowed by the limitations of my own experience, as one who has been questioning Jesus and his questioners since childhood. Now, at the end of my searching, I have chosen to record only some of the dangling odds and ends of my reading of the Gospels before the questioning ends.

Finally, by way of introduction it must be admitted that some liberties have been taken in summarizing or selecting the encounters spoken of in the texts and in the focus on certain nuances and details in the Gospel accounts. This is done for three reasons. First, this exploration is just that: a search for some possible insight which must be teased out of the literature by guesses and assumptions. The focus is on the dynamics of the exchanges between Jesus and his friends and enemies, which occurred constantly during his life. The individuals involved were not necessarily after precise and deep theological truths. They may not have known exactly what it was that they were after. They were suffering, agonizing, frightened, confused, ambitious and, sometimes, hateful adversaries. The second reason for this “once-over-lightly” exploration is to allow the Word of God to speak in the present as if what is read is actually happening. Thus, revelation is seen here as more than a past event, finished once and for all, but as the excitement of an ongoing conversation or even debate in which every glance at the text provokes ever greater wonder and suspicion. If the reader is annoyed by this sketchiness or superficiality, he or she can avoid my distractions by going to the Gospel texts themselves. Lastly, this incomplete treatment might stimulate others to do a better and more complete job.

### Getting Started

A good place to begin is with Mary, the mother of Jesus, who asked many questions and did her share of wondering about what was going on. From the very beginning (Luke, 1: 3-4) she dares to seek an explanation from the angel of how she could conceive a child without having sexual intercourse. “How will this be since I am a virgin?” No apologies for her uncertainty. And the answer that the Holy Spirit would accomplish the impossible left as much unsaid as said. Twelve years later (Luke 2:4) when Mary and Joseph find Jesus in the temple after looking for him for three agonizing days.

Mary, not Joseph his father, asks: “Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.” The tone of painful annoyance is not disguised. Jesus, no less annoyed, answers with a question of his own: “Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s business [in my Father’s house].” The implication being that they should have known better.

Then Luke dares to notice something he could only have learned from Mary and Joseph themselves: “But, they did not understand what he was saying to them.” And if they did not understand at such close range, it cannot be surprising that plenty of other questioners left their encounters a little uncertain, which may in fact be a very blessed state of mind. Luke adds: “But his mother treasured all these things in her heart.” The narrative leaves us wondering, too, as it may well have been intended, that leaving the many lingering questions after the initial questions was part of the strategy of the revelation to be unraveled.

Once again (John 2: 1-11) Mary gets a short answer from her son when, at the marriage feast at Cana, she simply notes that: “They have no more wine.” She does not bother to ask explicitly “Please do something.” And again, Jesus answers with a question of his own: “Dear woman, why do you involve me? My time has not yet come.” Seeing through this feigned refusal she went ahead and directed the servants to do “whatever he says.” She obviously did not agree with her son that his time had not yet come. Six stone jars holding twenty to thirty gallons each comes to a lot of wine, especially for the second time around. And Jesus knew it would take more than a casual gesture to get the job done. Most of the guests at the wedding feast may never have realized where the abundance of wine came from or why the best wine was saved for last. But a few knew.

### The Bitter End

It may seem odd, switching from the joyful wedding feast to a tragedy of his crucifixion, to add to the beginning of this study the very last question and answer session in Jesus’ earthly life; except that, by taking a quick glance at Jesus hanging on the cross, we see something of the power of his love in responding to one of the strangest questions ever put to him. Beneath the sign that proclaimed Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews, the community leaders, the elders, and the soldiers scoffed, taunted and derided Jesus as he hung helplessly between two criminals. His answer to the revelers was “Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” This must have made them even more furious since they could never admit that they were ignorant of anything important. One of the criminals hurled the final challenge to Jesus “Aren’t you the Christ? Save yourself and us.” Jesus let that question go by. The other criminal objected to this insult, and stated boldly: “This man has done nothing wrong.” How this admitted criminal knew Jesus well enough to be convinced of his innocence remains obscure, except that he

could tell from the vehemence of those mocking Jesus that he was hated for a reason, whatever that might be. When he turned to Jesus he addressed him by his personal name “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Whether he had any idea who Jesus really was, much less what his kingdom might be, it was obviously not too important to Jesus who responded to his simple plea saying: “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.” He asked out of the fog of his own confusion: he knew that whatever paradise was, it wasn’t the hatred and agony being endured by him and by Jesus. Jesus answered his plea with perhaps one of his shortest answer to the one of the shortest question ever asked of him.

### The Questioning Begins

John recounts a very different kind of episode (3: 1-21) when Nicodemus, a Pharisee member of the Jewish ruling council, is confused by Jesus’ assertion that, “no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” Nicodemus takes “born again” literally to mean getting back inside his mother’s womb, as Jesus might have guessed he would do. So Jesus is not surprised by Nicodemus’ challenge: “How can a man be born again when he is old?” Jesus spoke of being born again spiritually, not physically, a nuance which was obviously beyond Nicodemus’ reach. By his naïve question Nicodemus stepped into a mystery beyond his wildest expectations, not exactly what he was looking for and perhaps never fully understood.

In chapter 4: 4-43, John reveals another even more provocative exchange when Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman and astonishes her by asking for a drink of water from the well she is using. She begins the conversation with a question: “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” Reminding Jesus that Jews would have nothing to do with Samaritans, not even eat or drink from the same utensils. Jesus turns the question around and suggests that she might ask him for living water if she knew who was asking her for a drink. “With peasant candor she asks him to give her this water so that “I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.” Like Nicodemus, she takes Jesus too literally, as Jesus obviously expected. When his disciples returned they had a question of their own: “Why are you talking with her?” which the evangelist leaves hanging in midair. After Jesus lets the woman know that he, a complete stranger, understands her private life better than she could imagine, she went back to town with the question; “Could this be the Christ?” One question after the other, each leading step by step toward an answer that is as mysterious to us

now as it was to everyone in the actual encounter, including Jesus' apparently dumbfounded disciples. A simple cup of water led to an exploration of the whole divine plan for all mankind, even including Samaritans.

Matthew, 8: 2-4, Mark, I: 40-45 and Luke, 5: 12-16 all record one of the quickest exchanges in Jesus' wanderings. A man "covered with leprosy" fell with his face to the ground and "begged him," "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean. Jesus reached out and touched the man", a dangerous and unheard of gesture, and said simply "I am willing. Be clean."

Jesus ordered him not to tell anyone about the cure, but swept away by the exuberance of the moment, the man didn't pay any attention to Jesus. He got what he asked for and could not wait to tell everyone.

It would seem that no one in the Gospels had moved a greater distance from one question to another than Nathanael, who was also called Bartholomew. (John 1: 46) When he was first told of Jesus of Nazareth by Phillip, he made the wisecrack "Nazareth, can anything good come from there?" A rhetorical question he thought at the time, maybe even comical. Jesus made the remarkable comment as he approached Nathanael "Here is a true Israelite in whom there is nothing false." Nathanael shot back with: "How do you know me?" as if annoyed that a stranger would single him out with such unsolicited flattery. Jesus answered in calm directness: "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Phillip called you." Nathanael realized that God alone was with him in that isolated spiritual communion. Thus, he declared "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." Alas, something good came out of Nazareth after all: someone who knew the secrets of his heart and soul. Not exactly the answer they expected in this brief encounter with a "nobody" from Nazareth who changed his life in about one minute. Jesus teased Nathanael with the suggestion that events more spectacular than this were yet to come.

One day a question came from a most unexpected source, from a man "who was possessed of an evil spirit." (Mark 1: 21-34) He pulled no punches: "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are: the Holy One of God!" Jesus ignored the "question" which really did not seek an answer and showed that he knew the questioner well and demanded "be quiet. Come out of the man." The evil spirit "shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek." That was Jesus' answer to the taunting challenge of the evil one- not to the poor man who was

so abused. The folks standing by asked themselves: “What is this? A new teaching...”

### More Than One Way to Get Jesus’ Attention

One of the most bizarre requests ever, literally dropped at his feet, came in the middle of a crowd listening to Jesus. (Mark 2: 1-12. Also Mark 2 and Luke 5 ) ) Some men wanted Jesus to help their paralytic friend, but they could not get in the front door so they climbed on to the roof of the house and lowered the suffering man down into “ the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.” But Jesus acted as if he missed the point of their stunt, and said for all to hear: “Son, your sins are forgiven.” That, however, was not what they were looking for, neither was it acceptable to the scandalized teachers of the law in the crowd at whom Jesus really directed the challenge. Does the Son of Man have authority on earth to forgive sins? Indeed. So, Jesus faced the original request of the paralytic’s friends: “Get up, take your mat and go home.” On the way home they must have realized that they got more than they asked for. And the teachers of the law were left with plenty to think about.

In one incident a Roman centurion used some Jewish intermediaries for whom he had built a synagogue, to ask Jesus for the cure of his servant. To Jesus he admitted “Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you.” Jesus was “amazed at this” and it would take something special to amaze Jesus. The cured servant was waiting for the centurion when he got home.

Another indirect question came to Jesus (Matthew 11, 2-30) when some disciples of John’s were sent by him to find out for themselves who Jesus was. Straightforward enough they asked “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” Jesus sent them back to John to report to him about the miracles Jesus was working while preaching “to the poor.” Then Jesus turned to the crowd to declare about John: “I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John, yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” Thus Jesus left his hearers with still a larger question. How can we be greater than John, the greatest?

In religious literature it is rare that such a scene of rich sensuality is portrayed without compromise (Luke 7: 36-48) as in the narrative about the sinful



woman who pursued Jesus into the Pharisee's dining hall and "stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them." A shocking, scandalous public display of vulgarity. What did she think she was doing? In the only authentic words she knew she was asking the Son of Man to accept her as she was, loving, inarticulate, spellbound. Jesus got the point if no one else did. His answer was the acceptance of her gift, her tears and kisses "Her many sins have been forgiven, for she has loved much." In the Gospels there are other accounts of a woman, perhaps the same one or several different persons, approaching Jesus in such an intimate and emotional way. In each of these narrations we are left astonished.

### Some Questions Were Meant to Bite

The Pharisees and teachers of the law could not wait to ask Jesus: "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you." (Matthew 12: 38-42) The sick, the blind and crippled often asked Jesus for help - which was a sign of love and compassion for them personally. The Pharisees wanted a sign for the sake of an argument, not for the sake of someone in need. Jesus shows his contempt for their contrivance by directing them to the mysterious goings on in the story of Jonah who spent three days and nights in the belly of a big fish "... so the Son of Man will spend three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." In other words, if they wanted an answer to their first request for a sign they would have to dig for a clue to answer they got from the Son of Man, the truth does not come cheaply. Often it is found in the darkest hiding places.

The storm on Lake Galilee is recounted by three evangelists, Matthew, Luke and Mark who in 4:35 gives a surprisingly detailed picture of Jesus asleep "on a cushion" while the storm raged. The disciple woke him up, as if he needed to be awakened, and asked, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" There is blame in the question, as if maybe he, ever so comfortable, really didn't care. Quite simply without a word of explanation the Son of Man got up and rebuked the wind and told the waves "quiet, be still." Then, as usual, Jesus posed his own question "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" Maybe it was out of faith that they woke Jesus up in the first place. That question, however, did not get asked. There was some blame in His question, too. After all that drama they were still terrified and asked one last question "Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him." Jesus' actions and words left them still puzzled.

## Faith Comes in Many Forms

Few of those who approached Jesus were as formal and reverential as Jairus, one of the synagogue rulers. (Mark 5: 35-43) Falling at the Lord's feet he "pleaded earnestly" for Him to just put his hand on his little dying daughter. Without hesitation Jesus set out with him for his home. But some of Jairus' friends intercepted them with the sad news that the girl had already died. "Why bother the teacher anymore." "Ignoring what they said" Jesus proceeded to the house full of grieving and wailing family "Why all this commotion and wailing?" Jesus asked, as if he didn't know. And they laughed at him. Undaunted he went in to see the child and said gently "Little girl, I say to you, get up." Almost as an afterthought he told the parents to give her something to eat.

Literally, in the midst of this dramatic encounter, a minor five minute drama, just as intense, occurred, in the middle of the big crowd, without anyone noticing it - except Jesus, of course. We can only guess what went through the mind of the pathetic woman who was apparently afraid to ask Jesus directly and so dared to secretly touch his garment as a way of getting help without drawing attention to herself. Maybe she was ashamed of her twelve year malady, bleeding, and her failure to find help anywhere else. But Jesus sensed the draw of her silent pleading. "Who touched my clothes?" His disciples brushed his question off with the obvious counter that we are in the middle of a crowd, what do you expect. But Jesus "kept looking around to see who had done it." He knew the touch was a silent cry for help from someone who was desperate. Trapped, the woman admitted her boldness. With admiration, Jesus sent her off lovingly, healed and unashamed.

It is difficult to figure out exactly what Peter had in mind when he called to Jesus walking out on the Lake, (Matthew 14: 28 32) after Jesus reassured the disciples "Take courage. It is I. Don't be afraid." Apparently not fully satisfied, Peter called out "Lord, if it is you tell me to come to you on the water." If Peter had said "since it is you, I will come" one might detect a certain level of belief. But the "If" is troublesome. "Come," Jesus said without questioning why Peter needed this added assurance. Then Peter lost his nerve when he felt the wind and the waves and began to sink. "Lord, save me" he cried out. The Lord chided Peter: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" The other disciples, sitting contentedly in the boat must have wondered as we might, what is the difference between impetuosity and faith.

Perhaps, real faith takes wild chances and risks failure, and yet faith may also suggest caution and patience.

### Manna: What is This Thing?

John (6:60) leaves us with one of the biggest questions posed in all of sacred scripture. Some people challenged the Lord, when he offered them “food that endures to eternal life, to do for them what the Father did for the people in the desert by giving them Manna, “a true bread from heaven.” The Son of Man did not have to remind these people that the name “manna” means a question; “What is this thing?” a food worth questioning. Without realizing it, they were falling into the same trap that their forefather fell into. They actually rejected the gift of manna as not very satisfying and complained that God did them no great favor. When Jesus suggested that his flesh was real food to be eaten and his blood real drink to be consumed, he was met with the same ancient questioning “This is a hard saying, who can stand it?” So, they walked away, as in ancient times, with an unanswered question dangling in midair forever. The Lord tested his disciples to leave also. They answered with a question of their own “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

It is difficult to believe that sometimes Jesus appeared to be unkind, even cruel, in the way he answered questions and requests. Matthew (15: 21-28) describes an episode where a Canaanite, Greek, Syrian Phoenician woman fell at his feet crying out “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me, my daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.” Jesus had heard such cries before. However, his response was totally unexpected. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel... It is not right to take the children’s food and toss it to the dogs.” Sent only to the few?? Not right to toss food to the dogs?? Is that what Jesus thought of this poor Canaanite? Was she less deserving of help than the Samaritan woman at the well, who had been married five times and was working on number six? Alas, the woman’s courageous persistence and her rejoinder unraveled the mysterious exchange. “Yes Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters table.” The Son of David acknowledged without pause the brilliance of her answer, born of profound humility, helplessness and faith. Even dogs can be grateful, even crumbs can be nourishing. Then, some bystanders must have wondered, did Jesus, by his seemingly cruel rejoinder, deliberately provoke from this desperate soul such a beautiful revelation of faith, as earthy and unpolished as humanly possible. As suggested earlier, contrived religious myths do not generally allow brutal

human suffering to show itself in such a raw and loving kindness, without excessive overlays of meaning.

### Some Strange Ways to Respond

Not long after that encounter, Jesus was asked to heal a man “who was deaf and could hardly talk” by just placing his hand on the man as he might have easily done. (Matthew 15: 30) But Jesus took the man aside from the crowd “and put his fingers into the man’s ears. Then he spit and touched the man’s tongue and looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to the man “Be opened.” The gospel writer leaves us to puzzle about why Jesus went to such dramatic lengths when he worked many miracles without even seeing the one he helped.

Once again Jesus seemed to take a simple request for healing as an opportunity to demonstrate more than just the power to heal. Mark tells the very brief story ( 8:22 ) of some friends who bring a blind man to Jesus to merely touch him, but Jesus takes him aside and “spit on the man’s eyes and put his hands on him and asked the strange question ; “Do you see anything?” As if Jesus was not too sure whether the miracle worked or not. The blind man’s answer was equally baffling: “I see people; they look like trees walking around.” Once more Jesus put his hands on the man’s eyes and his sight was restored. The question lingers, Why the second try; why didn’t the healing power work effectively from the start?

Again, once more Jesus resorted to his own spittle to affect a cure. This time (John 9:1) his disciples saw a blind man and asked Jesus what they thought was a simple question “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” For them, the misfortune of blindness at birth had to be some kind of punishment for somebody’s sin. After Jesus straightened them out on this issue he turned to the blind man, he “spit on the ground, made mud and put it on the man’s eyes. Go, wash in the Pool of Siloam.” The blind man did not ask for a cure: Jesus just took the initiative. So, he did as he was told, went to the public bath to wash and was cured. Once more the question surfaces, Why the extra effort? Did Jesus want the blind man’s first sight to be of the holiness of the earth on which Jesus stood? Or perhaps to provoke the reaction of the Pharisees who were furious with the blind man because he obstinately told the story as it happened, mud and all. After the Pharisees threw the poor man out, Jesus found him and asked him: “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” He answered and said “Who is he, sir, that I may believe in

him?” Jesus answered “You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.” The blind man did indeed see him. He said “I do believe, Lord,” and he worshiped him.” Jesus then added a frightening note: “I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see and those who do see might become blind.” Apparently in Jesus view there were two kinds of sight and two kinds of blindness. The blind man was given both kinds of sight, even though the density of the clay used by Jesus to make his point.

Perhaps the Son of Man wanted the poor deaf mute and the two blind men to feel physically the intensity and intimacy of His power and love. Healing was a gift indeed, but infinitely less earth- shaking than the way the Son of Man entered into their suffering; into the dark and silent world they lived in. That intimacy was the real gift which made the hearing and speech and sight useful symbols of the depth of Jesus’ love. Also, by curing these men in this unique way Jesus was provoking some questions in the minds of those who heard and saw everything, but understood little, like those of us who only see and hear what we want to. It appears that the evangelist intended to leave the bystanders, and we present readers, wondering what Jesus was up to.

### Cries of Agony

One of the most painful scenes in the gospels is that of the boy who suffered from severe convulsions, even when Jesus was in the process of helping him. (Mark 9: 14-29) The boy’s father was desperate after Jesus’ disciples failed to effectively help cure the boy. As a last straw, the father approached Jesus himself with the request “If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” Jesus responded by throwing the man’s question verbatim back to him: “If you can?” As if to say, if you are that uncertain why bother to ask. Jesus was often asked “If you will” and he simply willed to help. Yet, without resentment and displeasure, Jesus led the father to dig more deeply by saying to him “Everything is possible for him who believes.” The man got the point and “immediately exclaimed: ‘I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief.’” One senses his explosion of relief that Jesus would not dismiss the boy’s suffering because of his father’s weak faith. What he lacked in faith he made up for with simple candor about his own helplessness and his compassion for his son’s tragic condition, perhaps brought on by devils. After Jesus commanded the demonic spirit or illness to leave the boy forever, the boy suffered one last convulsion and appeared to be dead until Jesus “took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet and he stood up.”

After all that excitement, Jesus' disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not drive it out?" He replied "This kind can come out only by prayer." The required prayer must have included the father's cry for help through the cloud of his own uncertainty and incomprehension. Jesus did not say no to the desperate man because of his imperfect faith: the father's intense love for his suffering child made up for any lack conviction about what Jesus might be able to do to help him out. It seems that the disciples misjudged the intensity of the father's cry as they also misjudged the blind man whom they thought was being punished for some sin or other.

### Some Dangerous Answers, Some Not So Dangerous

It happened twice that Jesus almost lost his life because the crowd did not like his answers to their questions. John recorded both instances ( 8: 54-59 and 10: 29-33 ) When some Pharisees questioned Jesus' claim to speak as God's representative, Jesus reminded them that if they were true to their father Abraham they would recognize God's representative. What really enraged them was Jesus' bold statement that "before Abraham was born, I am." At the sound of "I am", the sacred name of Yahweh, they picked up stones to kill him, but Jesus slipped away.

Sometime later, (John, 10, 22-39) while in the temple, a crowd of Jews asked the simple question: "If you are the Christ, tell us plainly?" When his answer went beyond what they expected with the claim "I and the Father are one" John adds "Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him." His reply "For which of these [great miracles] do you stone me?" added to their outrage. The final counter blow to their fury came with the unequivocal claim "the Father is in me, and I in the Father." That was the last straw. Still, John notes "again, he escaped their grasp."

A short time later, ( John 11: 1-44 ) his disciples could not understand why Jesus wanted to return to Judea where he was almost stoned to death, especially since they had received word that Jesus' close friend, Lazarus, was seriously ill in Bethany. Jesus seemed to be uninterested but eventually agreed to go saying "our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." but he knew Lazarus was indeed dead. Martha greeted Jesus with an anguished heart "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

Still seeming to avoid their anguish, Jesus replies “Your brother will rise again,” which leaves Martha still looking for the reappearance of her brother here and now. When Mary, Lazarus’ other sister, is brought to the scene Jesus hears again the plea “If you had been he my brother would not have died.” The “if you had been here” implies why weren’t you here when we begged you to come. Finally, in the presence of such pathos and tears, “Jesus wept.” And seeing their unyielding hope he asked to see the body, but Martha warned him as if it were too late to do anything that the body was already smelling rotten. Jesus persisted and had the stone rolled back so he could call. “Lazarus, come out.” and he did. That was the way Jesus answered the pleas of his best friends.

### A Few Quieter Days

On a quieter day one of his disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray as John taught his disciples to pray. According to Luke (11: 1-13) in unvarnished language He said to them “When you pray say: Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us and lead us not into temptation.” On this occasion, Jesus stressed the need to be persistent in prayer, not because God is too busy or too distracted to pay attention, but because the persistence is itself a gift of growth and strength that draws the one praying into closer intimacy with our Father.

Luke also picked up on a brief encounter in which “Someone said to him: Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me”. Jesus quick reaction was “Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?” Then he warned them both about their common danger “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed: a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” His answer suggests that the issue was not simply one of fairness, but of the greed that plagued both brothers. “Watch out! You do not need me to solve your problem.”

### Straight Answers: Some Dodges

Sometimes it seemed that Jesus dodged a question he did not want to answer, at least in the way the questioner expected or wanted him to answer. (Luke 13: 23-30) So, someone asked for a yes-or-no answer “Lord, are only a few

people going to be saved?” But Jesus side-stepped the probe and advised them “Make every effort to enter through the narrow gate, because many I tell you will try to enter and will not be able to.” Then he added “People will come from the east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first and first who will be last.” The questioner was left with a bigger question than the one he asked, namely, how hard are you willing to try? Jesus gave no hints to make it easier to answer.

Mark (10: 17-31) gives an example of a rich Young man who was indeed willing to try to be among the first but failed to meet the exacting test. He asked “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” In a very rare personal insight most likely given directly by Jesus to Mark, the Gospel notes that “Jesus looked at him and loved him” and made him an offer not to be refused: “One thing you lack. Go sell everything and you will have treasure in heaven. Then, come, follow me.” In another candid perception into the struggling young man it is noted that his “face fell. He went away sad.” So close he came and then to stumble. The scripture leaves us wondering if the young man, still loved in some special way by Jesus, might not return someday stronger and more resolute.

### A Mob Scene

Near Samaria ten lepers “... stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice ‘Jesus, Master, have pity on us.’” (Luke, 17:11-19) No human condition called more pathetically for pity than the pitiful state of a leper, pushed at arm’s length from humanity as dangerously dirty and diseased and commonly thought to deserve their punishment for some horrendous sin. Without any gesture or word of healing, Jesus sent them off immediately to show themselves to the priest, apparently so that they might reenter society through the formal door of the temple. Alas, “One of them, when he saw that he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. [as loud as the original plea for help, I guess] He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him - and he was a Samaritan.” Jesus, addressing the bystanders, and us, said “... Was no one found to return and give thanks to God except this foreigner?” “Rise and go” Jesus added, “your faith has made you well.” The other nine was also made well, with or without much faith, but the Samaritan was made well in a deeper spiritual sense what wasn’t as noticeable to anyone but Jesus.

In Matthew (19: 3-12) Jesus encountered a very different kind of group,



Pharisees, not exactly outcasts from the mainstream of the religious community. But they had their own problems and wanted to test how Jesus would handle one of them. “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” Jesus teased them with the comment “Haven’t you read that at the beginning God made them male and female.” Of course they prided themselves for having read every word of Genesis. Then they really put the test to Jesus, “Why then, they asked, did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” They left out the words of their original enquiry “for any and every reason.” Jesus noted that Moses tolerated this because of their hard hearts, or stubbornness. The Pharisees’ omission did not escape Jesus, who replied; “I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.” Neither Moses nor Jesus would put up with “any and every reason.” The apparent severity of this answer unsettled Jesus’ disciples who thought that maybe it would be better not to marry at all, than to have to put up with so much trouble and uncertainty. Jesus suggested briefly to them that not too many men could face the unmarried life unless they did so for God. The trap the Pharisees set for Jesus did not work because Jesus spoke as one who judged Moses himself and who knew well what God intended.

Jesus did not often seem surprised or disappointed by the questions tossed at him, especially questions from his most intimate friends. On one occasion (John 13:36 and 14:1-13) Peter, Thomas and Philip seemed to catch Jesus off guard by the strangeness of their questions. After reassuring his friends of his love for them as he prepared to depart he said: “Where I am going you cannot come.” Peter, typically interjected “Lord, where are you going? Why cannot I follow you now?” Peter was not quite satisfied with Jesus’ obscure suggestion “So that where I am you might also be, and you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas objected with a little simple logic: “Lord we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Thomas, like Nicodemus and others, took Jesus too literally, as if he were going to a place on the map with a road clearly marked. Jesus, however, indicating that he had something else in mind, said that he himself was the way in some deeper spiritual sense. Philip did not appear to fathom Jesus’ words so he added “Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied.” With a question of his own Jesus did not attempt to disguise his disappointment, if not frustration, with the exchange thus far, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” From their questions, it seems that the friends were not as sure of themselves

as Jesus hoped they would be. So, Jesus left them in the fog of their own making, with the loving reassurance, “If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.” Jesus would stick with them despite their obtuseness, knowing that they had a long way to go.

Moreover, Jesus did not appear to be annoyed by occasional petitions for a favor or privilege. He knew human nature too well to be surprised, as when the mother of Zebedee’s sons, James and John, asked Jesus: “Grant that one of these sons of mine might sit at your right hand and the other at your left in your kingdom.” (John 20:20-28) Mark (10: 35-45) tells the story a little differently. The two men themselves, without their mother’s intervention, asked Jesus quite bluntly, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask.” What else could Jesus say to such a boldly unlimited request but, what exactly do you want? Both accounts follow the same logic of a question answering a question: “You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I am to drink?” They answered without hesitation “We can.” as if they had any idea what Jesus was actually referring to. They must have been disappointed by Jesus’ final answer that they will indeed drink of the cup but the privileged positions they sought at his right and left hand were “not for me to grant.” Sooner or later they might discover what it was that Jesus was hinting at, and the reward would be quite unexpected.

One day something happened on the way to or leaving Jericho. Matthew (20: 29) saw it differently from Mark (10:46 -52) and Luke. One person or maybe two shouted to the Son of David loudly enough that the bystanders tried ineffectively to silence him or them. It was loud enough to stop Jesus in his tracks, who asked that the blind person (s) be brought to him so he could ask “What do you want me to do for you?” “Lord, I (we) want to see” With compassion, Jesus “touched their eyes (if there were two blind men) and said to the single person (if only one) ‘your faith has healed you.’” Jesus did not resort to any such means as spit or mud to affect a cure as he did on other occasions. The minor confusion in the details of the story do not obscure the immediacy and generosity of Jesus response to the aggressive tactics of the blind seeking help. Seeing Jesus and the rest of the world for the first time, he or they followed him without necessarily knowing where.

Occasionally Jesus responds to a person who did not ask for anything, as with Zaccheus, a despised tax collector, who only wanted to get a glimpse of Jesus, perhaps out of mere curiosity. (Luke 19: 1-10) Being a short man he figured

he could see Jesus best by climbing a sycamore tree. Little did he expect that Jesus would spot him up in the tree and call him down and invite himself to Zaccheus' house for dinner. The crowd was not too happy with Jesus or the tax collector but that did not dampen the surprise and excitement of Zaccheus who on the spot promised to set all things right with those whom he had cheated in his lucrative tax collection. Jesus said to him, and apparently to the crowd as well "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost." A question is left for the reader to ponder, could this son of Abraham be an Ishmaelite, doubly despised because of his heritage and his occupation?

Peter had a talent for coming up with the most unexpected and candid questions to Jesus. (Luke 12:41- 56) After Jesus encouraged his "little flock" not to be afraid of what was coming. "Dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning" he explained his thought further with a parable about dutiful servants. Peter could not suppress his dissatisfaction and challenged Jesus "Lord, are you telling this parable to us, or to everyone?" Peter did not anticipate the answer that the parable was addressed to everyone who was wise and faithful enough to pay attention. "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded: and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." Be ready, and you won't be sorry. So, Peter, perhaps disappointed with the vagueness of the response, had to spend some time wrestling with that answer as he waited to discover what eventually would be asked of him. Even at the trial of Jesus, Peter was not yet ready: he was afraid to admit that he even knew Jesus.

### Some Serious Challenges

When Jesus entered the temple on one occasion he drew the attention of the entire temple leadership, chief priests, teachers of the law, and elders (Matthew 21: 23- 27). Being men of authority their challenge was quite direct "By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?" Jesus replied "I will ask you one question. If you answer me I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism- where did it come from? Was it from heaven or was it from men?" After discussing among themselves the horns of the dilemma Jesus proposed, and being afraid to take either alternative, they answered "we don't know." Jesus responded "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." If they could not or would not admit to themselves and others the truth about John witness, they were not

about to admit the truth about Jesus which was staring them in the face. So, Jesus left them to figure it out.

The Sadducees were a troubled lot, thinking that there would be no resurrection. Looking for a little light or to confirm their own opinions they put to Jesus the challenging question ( Matthew 22: 34-40 ) “ Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother.” And to complicate the test, they asked whose wife the widow would be after she dies if there were seven brothers and they all failed to produce a child. Taking the question as it was proposed Jesus answered firmly and simply to the point: “You are in error because you do not know the scripture or the power of God. At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage: they will be like angels in heaven” Directing them to the scriptures Jesus added that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is “... not the God of the dead but of the living.” As long as the Sadducees staid bound up in their own puzzlements, they would never see that the key to the truth lay outside themselves. Jesus’ answer was an invitation to them to keep searching.

Matthew continues the narrative (34-40) “Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law tested Jesus with this question; “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” One gets the sense that the Jewish leaders competed with each other to find out where Jesus was coming from.

His questioners could not have been surprised with Jesus’ text-book answer: “love God with everything you have and love your neighbor as yourself.” “Well said, teacher” the expert replied almost condescendingly, “you are right...” Jesus acknowledged that the man had answered wisely to his response with the comment, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” Matthew concludes that from then on no one dared to ask him any more questions. Why did they back off - because they were afraid to be humiliated by the simplicity of Jesus’ responses? We are left to guess why?

Sometimes Jesus asked his own questions to get a discussion going as when he and his disciples were admiring the impressive structure of the Temple and he suggested that “ No one stone here will be left on another: everyone will be thrown down.” (Mark 13: 1-32) Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him

privately “Tell us, when these things will happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?” In the longest answer to a single question in the Gospels Jesus spelled out the need for each person to stay calm, keep focused and not to panic at the many catastrophes that will occur. “Watch out, that no one deceives you.” He concluded: “Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth; this generation will not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” Then he drew a veil over the admonition to be on guard with the strange suggestion “But no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son but only the Father.” Thus it would seem that the Son of Man was left with the same unanswered question “When will these things happen?” And we the readers, two thousand years later, stay vigilant, wondering whether we are sure what it is we are looking for: some cosmic event or a profound spiritual transformation.

### Conclusion

The conclusion to this probing is that there is no conclusion - except to keep probing. The seeds of faith may well contain the seeds of wondering, questioning and even pious guessing. There might even be a certain joy in the unfinished business of walking up and down the same streets with Jesus, - Mary, Nicodemus, Peter and the others, Bartimeus, Zaccheus, Nathaniel, the woman from Samaria, the Canaanite woman and the women from off the streets. There is more to firm faith than being sure of everything: it is also faithful to accept what is still disturbing and perplexing. The narrative of Jesus on earth is full of encounters begun and ended in confusion and uncertainty, and who can read the Gospels and overlook the invitation to encounter Jesus as those in this life time did. Without a dogmatic editor to spare us the raw edges of reality.

One last reflection: behind this present effort lies a deep and growing conviction that the Sacred Scriptures, from the Book of Genesis onward, can be viewed as an invitation to learn from a masterful teacher, who already knows more about the one approaching him than the student knows about him or herself or about the teacher and his designs. While drawing us out of ourselves, we become aware of our deeper selves at the same pace that we begin to see the cleverness of the teacher. What is revealed in the sacred

writings is the teacher, not only the teaching. Even in the confusing narrative of Genesis, God the teacher is allowing and drawing primitive man to explore his own crude notions of divinity until he discovers his own foolishness at the same time that man discovers the ineffable simplicity of the Being Who is Who He Is. God educates, that is, in the fundamental sense of that term, educes from within man the capacity for truth that is never satisfied this side of time. The teacher does not write the truth on some cosmic blackboard, which the student copies frantically and memorizes, but the teacher teases out of the soul its capacity to wonder and to be amazed. Words help, somewhat, but they are only the instruments that lead the docile pupil into a deeper silence in which God and man have less and less to say about what remains to be realized and embraced. Like Mary, his mother, each day we go back home, keeping all these things in our hearts - wondering.