

# *Lesson 1: Amazed and Afraid*

## PART 1

### OUTLINE: PART 1 (TRACKS 1-4 ON DVD)

#### **I. Both God and Human**

- A. Christ is the privileged door (Chesterton)
- B. The divine humor (Dante's *Divine Comedy*)
- C. "And on that sacred jest/the whole of Christianity doth rest" (Chesterton)
- D. Jesus emerged as a deeply disconcerting and subversive figure

#### **II. Jesus is Lord**

- A. The Incarnation is the central "hinge" of Christianity
- B. The question: "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" (Matt. 16:13)
- C. Buddha, Mohammed and Confucius did not claim to be divine
- D. Jesus compels a choice
- E. Jesus is either God or he is a bad man and a liar; there is no middle ground
- F. "...and they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid" (Mk. 10:32)

## LESSON 1: AMAZED AND AFRAID - PART 1

### *Both God and Human*

Jesus Christ is unique, fully human and fully divine; he is the privileged door by which man can be restored to right relationship with God. Yet the story of God becoming man is not abstract or academic, but is instead bursting with deep mystery, heavenly joy, and rich humor. It is what G. K. Chesterton called “that sacred jest” upon which “the whole of Christianity doth rest.” The Incarnation is at the heart of the divine comedy, as the great Italian poet, Dante Alighieri, put into verse in one of the world’s greatest literary works, the *Divina Commedia*.

The uniqueness of Jesus is captured by the Evangelists in numerous passages in the Gospels. One such passage, which Fr. Barron notes is rarely commented on, is found in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark: “And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid” (Mk. 10:32).

Why the amazement? Why the fear? St. Mark describes several other similar reactions of amazement and fear by the disciples, each the result of divine actions by Jesus, as when he calmed the raging storm on the Sea of Galilee (Mk. 4:40), when he cast out demons (Mk. 5:1-15), when he was transfigured on the mount (Mk. 9:1-6), when he spoke prophetically about his death and Resurrection (Mk. 9:30-32), and when his Resurrection was announced by the angel at the tomb (Mk. 16:1-8). The fear was that of humans in the presence of God, as when Moses and the people were afraid at Mount Sinai amidst the blazing, thundering glory of the Lord (cf., Ex. 3:6; 20:18). The amazement and fear were not due to Jesus being a mere teacher or human leader, but because he was God.

Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius, and other religious founders and leaders did not claim to be God, the Son of God, or divine. They did not say they were the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn. 14:6). Instead, they pointed toward truth, toward a path, toward a way of living. That is quite different from the words and actions of Jesus, who never presented himself as one of many viable options, but as The One. The shocking and singular nature of Jesus’ identity was summarized and articulated adeptly in *Dominus Iesus*, the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith’s August 6, 2000, document on the “unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church”:

*The doctrine of faith must be firmly believed which proclaims that Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary, and he alone, is the Son and the Word of the Father. The Word, which “was in the beginning with God” (Jn 1:2) is the same as he who “became flesh” (Jn 1:14). In Jesus, “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16), “the whole fullness of divinity dwells in bodily form” (Col 2:9). He is the “only begotten Son of the Father, who is in the bosom of the Father” (Jn 1:18), his “beloved Son, in whom we have redemption... In him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him, God was pleased to reconcile all things to himself, on earth and in the heavens, making peace by the blood of his Cross” (Col 1:13-14; 19-20). (par.10)*

It was not by accident or coincidence that Jesus asked his disciples about who they and others thought of him and his identity in “the district of Caesarea Philippi” (Matt. 16:13). A mostly pagan area almost twenty-five miles north of the Sea of Galilee, the region originally named “Panion” or “Panaea” after the Greco-Roman deity Pan, an ancient deity of the natural world. It was eventually renamed by Philip, the son of Herod the Great, in honor of Tiberius Caesar and himself. There at the base of Mount Hermon—which marked the northern border of Israel—water flowed underground and surfaced in a cave at the base of a high limestone cliff. At the time of Christ it was a place of devoted pagan worship (especially to Baal), with niches cut into the cliff holding statues of numerous deities. Pagans believed it marked the spot where the netherworld met the material world. At the top of this cliff stood a temple in honor of Caesar.

It was, in other words, a veritable and visually arresting display of “Who’s Who” among the pagan gods. “Who,” asked Jesus of his disciples, “do men say that the Son of Man is?” After hearing the responses—John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets—Jesus asked the question he asks of every man: “But who do you say that I am?” He stands before the false gods of this world and asks for our decision; he compels a choice. He is either God or a bad man—a liar or a lunatic.

## “Jesus Is Lord!”

*“To confess that Jesus is Lord is distinctive of Christian faith.”*

– *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 202.

The word *kyrios* was used in ancient Greece and the larger Hellenistic world to refer to a superior or someone in authority. It was employed by the Romans for their emperors and was used by some pagans for their gods. While St. Paul’s use of the term for Jesus had an eye toward the pagan world, it was grounded in Jewish tradition and usage. First-century Jews largely refused to pronounce the Hebrew name for God (*Yahweh*), instead substituting other names. The most common substitute was *adonay*, meaning “Lord,” which was translated to *kyrios* in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Scripture used by Greek-speaking Jews living in Egypt, Rome, and other parts of the Mediterranean world.

The term was a favorite of St. Paul, who calls Jesus *Kyrios* some 180 times in his letters. For example:

... IF YOU CONFESS WITH YOUR LIPS THAT JESUS IS LORD AND BELIEVE IN YOUR HEART THAT GOD RAISED HIM FROM THE DEAD, YOU WILL BE SAVED. (ROM. 10:9)

THEREFORE I WANT YOU TO UNDERSTAND THAT NO ONE SPEAKING BY THE SPIRIT OF GOD EVER SAYS “JESUS BE CURSED!” AND NO ONE CAN SAY “JESUS IS LORD” EXCEPT BY THE HOLY SPIRIT. (1 COR. 12:3)

And, from St. Paul’s epistle to the Philippians, a hymn likely used in early Christian worship:

THEREFORE GOD HAS HIGHLY EXALTED HIM AND BESTOWED ON HIM THE NAME WHICH IS ABOVE EVERY NAME, THAT AT THE NAME OF JESUS EVERY KNEE SHOULD BOW, IN HEAVEN AND ON EARTH AND UNDER THE EARTH, AND EVERY TONGUE CONFESS THAT JESUS CHRIST IS LORD, TO THE GLORY OF GOD THE FATHER. (PHIL. 2:9-11)

In another striking passage, from his first letter to the Christians in Corinth, St. Paul rejects any polytheistic understanding of Jesus and the Father—a commonplace belief in the ancient pagan world—instead writing that “yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:5-6). In his book, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Eerdmans, 2003), New Testament scholar

Larry W. Hurtado writes:

*In this astonishingly bold association of Jesus with God, Paul adapts wording from the traditional Jewish confession of God's uniqueness, known as the Shema, from Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord” (Kyrios heis estin [LXX], translating Heb. Yabweh 'echad). (p. 114)*

Jesus, in other words, is one with the Father in such an astounding way that he and the Father are separate persons, yet God is one in nature.

# *Lesson 1: Amazed and Afraid*

## PART 2

### OUTLINE: PART 2 (TRACKS 5-8 ON DVD)

#### **I. The Work of Jesus, the Messiah**

- A. Described in the Torah (Law), Prophets, and Psalms
- B. The Messiah, the Anointed One, called to four tasks (N. T. Wright)
- C. Jesus accomplished the four tasks in the strangest way

#### **II. The First Task: Gathering the Tribes of Israel**

- A. This gathering is for the sake of the world
- B. The Kingdom of God is the call to be gathered and reunited
  - 1. Man is scattered due to sin
  - 2. God desires man to be gathered together into a people
- C. Jesus shepherded the people of Israel, forming the New Israel, the Church

#### **III. The Second Task: Cleansing the Temple of God**

- A. Adam was the first priest; the Garden of Eden was the first temple
  - 1. Adoration is perfect, proper alignment to God
  - 2. Original sin is the adoration of the wrong thing(s)
- B. Israel was a temple, created to teach right praise and to offer sacrifices
  - 1. Sacrifice is the act of giving something of creation back to the Creator
  - 2. The prophets spoke of God's presence leaving the Temple and looked forward to a new and perfect Temple
- C. The cleansing of the Temple by Jesus
  - 1. Not an act of rebellion, but of rebuilding
  - 2. The Temple to be rebuilt, however, was the temple of his body
  - 3. Jesus is the dwelling-place of God, the perfect sacrifice

#### **IV. The Third Task: Dealing with the Enemies of Israel**

- A. The Davidic Warrior
  - 1. Israel was constantly oppressed by other peoples: the Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Philistines, Romans
    - i. This oppression was the result of Israel's sin
    - ii. Liberation from this oppression could come only from God

2. Jesus is a "Davidic Warrior"

- i. The power of God is revealed in a baby in a manger
- ii. The baby Jesus was "behind enemy lines" (C. S. Lewis)

3. Godly humility vs. worldly power

- i. Worldly power: Quirinius, governor of Syria, and Caesar Augustus
- ii. Heavenly power: the True Emperor, Jesus Christ
- iii. The true emperor is not fed, but feeds (the Eucharist)

B. Dealing with the Enemies of Israel: Palm Sunday and Holy Week

1. Jesus took on "all forms of human dysfunction;" the sins of the world
2. He embodied the Sermon on the Mount while on the Cross

C. The Resurrection

1. Completed the first three tasks of the Messiah
2. The only good explanation for the early Christian movement, which logically should have died with Christ Jesus
3. Not a symbol, metaphor, or fable
4. "Shalom, peace:" Jesus shows his wounds to the disciples in the Upper Room

**V. The Fourth Task: Reigning as Lord of the Nations**

A. "Jesus Kyrios" ("Jesus is Lord")

1. Pilate, by putting the sign over the crucified Christ, was, ironically and unwittingly, the first evangelist
2. The words "Jesus is Lord" were fighting words in the first century, leading to direct confrontation with Rome and Caesar

B. However, it was through Rome that Christ and his Church would go out to all the world.

C. "Glad Tidings" was an imperial greeting; the good news (Gospel) was not about Roman rulers, but about the King of Kings

D. The Cross taunts Rome and its successors

## LESSON 1: AMAZED AND AFRAID - PART 2

### *The Tasks of the Messiah*

In the face of numerous false gods, Peter responded, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:15-16). Jesus is the Messiah (*Christós* is Greek for "the Messiah"), the Anointed One. "It became the name proper to Jesus," explains the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "only because he accomplished perfectly the divine mission that 'Christ' signifies" (par. 436). That mission, as Fr. Barron explains, involves four tasks: gathering the tribes of Israel, cleansing the Temple of God, dealing with the enemies of Israel, and reigning as Lord of the nations. Each of these four tasks is described, in varying ways, in the Torah (the Law), the Prophets, and the Psalms. While most first-century Jews would be quite familiar with those tasks, they were surprised, even scandalized, by how Jesus went about fulfilling them.

#### *Gathering the Tribes*

"Save us, O LORD our God," wrote the Psalmist, "and gather us from among the nations, that we may give thanks to thy holy name and glory in thy praise" (Psa. 106:47). "At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD," stated the prophet Jeremiah, "and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem, and they shall no more stubbornly follow their own evil heart" (Jer. 3:17). These are just a few of numerous instances where psalmists and prophets spoke with hope and longing of a future gathering by God of his people and a restoration of the holy city, Jerusalem.

Because of their failure to keep the Law and to observe the commandments, the Israelites had been scattered far and wide by war, persecution, and exile. When the Law was given and the Mosaic covenant established, the people of Israel were warned of the curses that would fall upon them if they strayed from the Torah's precepts and commands. If the Israelites turned away from the covenant, made graven images to worship, and did evil in the sight of God, they would be destroyed, scattered "among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the LORD will drive you" (Deut. 4:23-27; 28:58-68). But what if they repented and came back to God?

AND WHEN ALL THESE THINGS COME UPON YOU, THE BLESSING AND THE CURSE, WHICH I HAVE SET BEFORE YOU, AND YOU CALL THEM TO MIND AMONG ALL THE NATIONS WHERE THE LORD YOUR GOD HAS DRIVEN YOU, AND RETURN TO THE LORD YOUR GOD, YOU AND YOUR CHILDREN, AND OBEY HIS VOICE IN ALL THAT I COMMAND YOU THIS DAY, WITH ALL YOUR HEART AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL; THEN THE LORD YOUR GOD WILL RESTORE YOUR FORTUNES, AND HAVE COMPASSION UPON YOU, AND HE WILL GATHER YOU AGAIN FROM ALL THE PEOPLES WHERE THE LORD YOUR GOD HAS SCATTERED YOU. (DEUT. 30:1-3).

This was, for first-century Jews, a central task of the Messiah: to bring about the gathering and reunification of the people of Israel. When Jesus announced the Kingdom of God, listeners heard a promise of national restoration, Davidic in nature and scope. Jesus, however, went deeper, to the root of the problem: sin. Because of sin, men were alienated from God (removed from the Garden of Eden),

divided amongst themselves (Cain killing his brother Abel), and scattered far and wide (the Tower of Babel). The term sin comes from a German word (*Sünde*) for sundering and division. As Fr. Barron explains in his book, *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Postliberal Catholicism* (Brazos Press, 2007):

*So when Jesus of Nazareth said, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15), he was not calling attention to general, timeless spiritual truths, nor was he urging people to make a decision for God; he was telling his listeners that Yahweh was actively gathering the people of Israel and, indirectly, all people into a new salvific order, and he was insisting that his hearers conform themselves to the new state of affairs. In this gathering, he was implying, the forgiveness of sins—the overcoming of sundering and division—would be realized. In a word, the proclamation of the kingdom was tantamount to an announcement that the Gatherer of Israel had arrived and had commenced his work. (p.72)*

This work was oriented toward the formation of the new Israel, the Church. "So likewise the new Israel which while living in this present age goes in search of a future and abiding city is called the Church of Christ... God gathered together as one," stated the fathers of the Second Vatican Council, "all those who in faith look upon Jesus as the author of salvation and the source of unity and peace, and established them as the Church that for each and all it may be the visible sacrament of this saving unity" (*Lumen Gentium*, 9). In the Church, all the tribes, nations, and peoples of the earth are united in the love of the Father, the life of the Son, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

## *Cleansing the Temple of God*

Adam was the first priest, and the Garden of Eden was the first temple. In the Garden, man and woman enjoyed perfect adoration of God. They were in full harmony and right communion with God, what the Council of Trent described as a "state of holiness and justice." Original sin came about by man's abuse of his freedom, his choosing to adore something (power and prestige) and someone (self) instead of God (cf. CCC, 1707). But the first priest sinned and was evicted from the idyllic temple God had prepared for him.

Israel was also a type of temple, created to praise God, to offer Him sacrifices, and proclaim His name among the nations. King David desired a permanent temple, and his son Solomon eventually built the Temple in Jerusalem, one of the great glories of the ancient world. In the Old Testament the Temple was often referred to as "the house of the Lord." Sometimes, in association with the city of Jerusalem, it was called "Zion" (cf. Psa. 48), which in turn represented the chosen people of God.

The Temple was a barometer of the health of the covenantal relationship between God and the people. Many of the prophets warned that a failure to uphold the Law and the covenant would result in the destruction of the Temple. The prophet Jeremiah declared that having the Temple could not protect the people from the consequences of their sins: "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD'" (Jer. 7:4).

In 587 B.C., the first Temple was finally destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, marking the start of the Exile. During that time the prophet Ezekiel had a vision of a new Temple (Ezek. 40-48). His description hearkened back to the first chapters of Genesis, including references to pure water, creatures in abundance, and unfading trees producing continuous fresh fruit (cf. Gen. 2:10-14). This heavenly Temple, it was commonly believed, would descend from heaven and God would then dwell in the midst of mankind.



Following the exile, the Temple was rebuilt, then damaged, and rebuilt again. Finally, not long before the birth of Christ, Herod built an expansive and stunning Temple—the “second Temple.”

It was there that Jesus was presented by Mary and Joseph and blessed by Simeon (Lk. 2:22-35) and where he, in his youth, spent time talking to the teachers of the Law (Lk. 2:43-50). It was also the setting for the cleansing of the Temple and Jesus’ shocking prophecy: “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up” (Jn. 2:13-22).

Was Jesus, in cleansing the temple, attacking the temple itself? No. And did Jesus, in making his remark, saying he would destroy the temple? No. But, paradoxically, the love of the Son for his Father and his Father’s house did point toward the demise of the Temple in Jerusalem. “This is a prophecy of the Cross,” wrote Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger in *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (Ignatius Press, 2000), “he shows that the destruction of his earthly body will be at the same time the end of the Temple.” Why? Because a new and everlasting Temple was established by the death and Resurrection of the Son of God. “With his Resurrection the new Temple will begin: the living body of Jesus Christ, which will now stand in the sight of God and be the place of all worship,” explains Ratzinger. “Into this body he incorporates men” (p. 43).

The new Temple of God did, in fact, come down from heaven. It dwelt among man (Jn. 1:14). “It” is a man, the Messiah, who is the true Temple, through whom Christians become temples of the Holy Spirit. Through Baptism we become joined to the one Body of Christ, and that Body, the Church, is the “one temple of the Holy Spirit” (CCC, 776, 1197; 1 Cor. 6:19). The destruction of the Temple one generation from the death and Resurrection of Christ was a sign that the beginning of a new era in God’s work of salvation had begun. That era is the age of the Church, which is the seed of the Kingdom established by the Messiah.

### *Dealing with the Enemies of Israel*

The tiny nation of Israel was, with rare exceptions, constantly fighting for survival, oppressed by a seemingly endless number of enemies: Egyptians, Philistines, Babylonians, Assyrians, and, of course, the Romans. Since the Messiah was to gather together the scattered people, he would also have to take on and destroy the ones doing the scattering. He would need to be a warrior, Fr. Barron notes, “who struggles against all the powers of dissolution, antagonism, and violence that have marred his creation. Jesus the warrior gives concrete expression to the righteous anger of God that is apparent on practically every page of the Old Testament” (*The Priority of Christ*, pp. 90-91).

Oppression by enemies and the scattering of the people of Israel were part and parcel of the same failure to keep the commandments. The people had been warned that breaking the covenant would result in being “smitten before your enemies” and ruled by foreigners (Lev. 26:14-17). God alone could liberate from such oppression, and faithful Israelites looked forward to the day when He would do so. What they didn’t expect was how He would bring the fight, engage the enemy, and win the war.

C. S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity* (1952), argued that Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic, or the Son of God. “Now it seems to me obvious that he was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that he was and is God. God has landed on this enemy-occupied world in human form.” And what was the central purpose, Lewis asked, of this divine invasion behind enemy lines? To simply teach? To punish mankind? No, Lewis wrote, Christians “think the main thing he came to earth to do was to suffer and be killed.”

The Gospel of Luke makes a pointed contrast between divine power and worldly power, between the humility of God and the domineering control of rulers such as Herod, the king of Judea; Quirinius, the governor of Syria; and Caesar Augustus, the emperor of Rome (see Lk. 1:5; 2:1-2). St. Luke tells the story of the true Emperor and King, who didn't arrive with the trappings of human glory, but is born in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes. He didn't have a human army, military might, or political connections, but came with a host of angels and a band of shepherds (Lk. 2:8-18), revealing his divine origins and reveling in his earthly existence.

G. K. Chesterton, in the opening lines of "A Word," captured in poetic form the wonder, strangeness, and excitement surrounding the coming of the new Davidic warrior:

*A word came forth in Galilee, a word like to a star;  
It climbed and rang and blessed and burnt wherever brave hearts are;  
A word of sudden secret hope, of trial and increase  
Of wrath and pity fused in fire, and passion kissing peace.  
A star that o'er the caged world beckoned, a sword of flame;  
A star with myriad thunders tongued: a mighty word there came.*

Divine humanity and demonic power met face-to-face when Jesus went into the desert for forty days before beginning his public ministry (Matt. 4:1-11; Mk. 1:12-13; Lk. 4:1-13). The three temptations presented by Satan to Jesus echo some of the essential tests faced (and failed) by the Israelites during forty years in the wilderness, all of them rooted in rebellion against God and the pursuit of self-centered ends.

Satan tempted Jesus to show His power by turning stones into bread (Matt. 4:3-4). This was a temptation of the most base level—to choose bodily needs and pleasure over spiritual nourishment and God's life. Satan next tempted Jesus to reveal His heavenly glory by throwing Himself from the top of the Temple and having angels carry Him to safety (Matt. 4:5-7). Thus the setting moved higher: the target was the ego and the temptation was to seek personal glory over God's will. In the final temptation, the Evil One offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if he fell down and worshipped the fallen angel (Matt. 4:8-10). This took place at the top of a lofty mountain; it was the temptation to choose personal power and dominance over God's power and reign.

Jesus vehemently rejected all three temptations with quotes from the Torah. He knew his kingdom could only be established through suffering and death. He understood that true power comes through love and sacrifice, not fear and coercion. And He knew his glorified body would be revealed and the Kingdom established in rising from the grave, not by avoiding death. His rejection of Satan's overtures showed the heart of the Messiah and Warrior intent on fulfilling the Father's plan of salvation.

## *Reigning as Lord of the Nations*

On the cross, Jesus embodied the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:3). In taking on the sins of the world, Jesus took on all forms of human dysfunction, discord, depravity, and despair. "Without a doubt," wrote the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar in *A Short Primer For Unsettled Laymen* (Ignatius Press, 1985), "at the center of the New Testament there stands the Cross, which receives its interpretation from the Resurrection... Whoever removes the Cross and its interpretation by the New Testament from the center in order to replace it, for example, with the social commitment of Jesus to the oppressed as a new center, no longer stands in

continuity with the apostolic faith. He does not see that God's commitment to the world is most absolute precisely at this point across a chasm" (p. 81).

Christ's Paschal Mystery brought to completion his first three Messianic tasks. Although the Resurrection is beyond human comprehension, it is not symbolic or metaphorical in nature. It "cannot be interpreted as something outside the physical order, and it is impossible not to acknowledge it as an historical fact" (CCC 643). Skeptics have argued the Resurrection was a clever fable or a form of mass delusion. But this simply cannot account for the rise of the early Christian movement and the willingness demonstrated by many of the first Christians to die rather than renounce their belief in the risen Messiah.

How does one explain the sermon given by St. Peter on Pentecost if he had not had a transformative encounter with the risen Lord? The man "Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men," the head apostle told the marveling crowd, "But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it" (Acts 2:23-24). St. Paul addressed the issue directly: "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised." He wrote to the Christians in Corinth: "if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (1 Cor. 15:13-14).

When Pontius Pilate placed the sign over Jesus on the cross—"Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (Jn. 19:19)—he unwittingly became the first evangelist (his wife, according to an ancient tradition, became a disciple of Christ). The irony of the mocking sign, of course, was that it spoke the truth. And when St. Paul described Jesus Christ as "the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:13), he was putting forth fighting words. The first three centuries of Christianity witnessed the spilt blood of many martyrs as Rome often sought to destroy the fledgling Church. But, in another example of divine humor, it would be through Rome that Christ and his Church would go forth to all of the world, proclaiming the good news and glad tidings, "Jesus is Lord!"

## *Dante's Divine Comedy:*

Dante Alighieri (c.1265-1321) was a statesman, the father of the Italian language, and one of the world's finest poets. His *Divina Commedia*, the Divine Comedy, is the finest epic poem in Italian literature and one of the great poems in world literature. Its 14,233 lines are divided into three canticles—*Inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory), and *Paradiso* (Paradise)—which have a combined total of 100 cantos (33 each, with one as a prologue).

In medieval literature, a comedy was not primarily humorous, as in modern comedies, but described a work with a happy ending. The word comedy comes from Greek words meaning happiness (*komos*) and singer (*oidos*), thus referring to a work in which a poet would “sing” about a happy story. As Dante explained in a letter, a comedy “begins with harshness in some things, whereas its matter ends in a good way...”

*The Divine Comedy* describes Dante's journey from hell through purgatory and to paradise, a journey beginning during Holy Week, on the night before Good Friday, and ending on the Wednesday following Easter. The soul of the Roman poet Virgil guides Dante through Hell and on Mt. Purgatory. They are accompanied by Statius, another classical poet, during their ascent of Mt. Purgatory. In the Garden of Eden, Dante meets with Beatrice, who teaches him while guiding him to and through the nine celestial spheres of heaven. The last part of his journey, which culminates in an overwhelming vision of God, is in the company of the mystic St. Bernard.

Beatrice, in Canto VII of *Paradiso*, speaks to Dante about the Incarnation:

*Therefore, for many centuries, men lay in their sick error, till the Word of God chose to descend into the mortal clay. There, moved by His Eternal Love alone, he joined in His own person that other nature that had wandered from its Maker and been cast down.*

In her study of Western literature, *In the Light of Christ* (Ignatius Press, 2006), literary critic, novelist, and poet Lucy Beckett writes that reading Dante's epic poem “is an experience, aesthetic, intellectual and spiritual, like no other.” She also notes, “The Incarnation is for Dante the very heart of revealed truth, to which he refers again and again in the poem” (pp. 197, 198).