

LIVING JESUS: LEARNING THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL,
Luke Timothy Johnson, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1999). ISBN 0-06-064283, Paper, \$15.

We are awash with a multitude of spiritualities. However, in his Preface, Luke Timothy Johnson says what is called “spirituality” these days is often “too far removed from traditional Christian faith.” On the other end of the spectrum, “...much of what is written about Jesus [is] too little concerned with the transformation of human freedom.” This is a book on spirituality, but not the kind that would cast aside what is learned and has been passed on by the believing community. Johnson writes about encountering the person of Jesus---not as an inspirational figure from the past, but as the “resurrected Lord in the present.” He wants, he says, to show how such an encounter can take place and he proposes the positive contribution the New Testament can play in this encounter.

Johnson starts his exploration by asking the basic faith question: Do we think Jesus is alive or dead? How we answer that question makes all the difference. If we answer, “Dead,” then there are various ways we might relate to him and learn about him. But we cannot expect to learn *from* him. To confess that Jesus is alive, is not merely to cherish his memory and be inspired by him, but to believe he is actively present, confronting and instructing us. In other words, if Jesus is alive his story continues, and we have an opportunity to make it our own story.

The author is critical of those who take a solely historical approach, who see Christianity as a way of life that is based merely on social principles and ideals, or who search the past to discover what was uniquely revelatory about Jesus but still fail to consider as normative what the Christian community professed about him. Johnson does not want to do a historical study of the dead Jesus, but to propose a way of “learning” the living Jesus that is “appropriate to faith” (P.11). Thus, he begins with the resurrection and faces head on the questions that surround it. He asks, “In what sense is Jesus alive?” Our faith does not just hold him alive as a memory, moral example or through his teachings. The New Testament shows strong conviction that Jesus is alive through the Spirit and that he continues to occur in others in the present. Through his resurrection and the Spirit, Jesus, Johnson concludes, shares God’s own capacity to be immediately present to us.

The first half of the book addresses questions about Jesus’ resurrection and his continued embodiment as a life-giving spirit. Believers recognize his presence in the assembly, the biblical texts, the sacraments, the lives of the saints and in the “little ones of the earth.” It is in and through these settings that we come to “learn”

Jesus. (“Disciple,” in Greek, means “learner.”) Like the original disciples, we are involved in a process of coming to “learn” Jesus, of getting to know him, as we get to know other living people. This process involves trust, respect, attentiveness, mediation, silence, time, patience, suffering and creative fidelity. Creativity is important for we are not loyal to how a person used to be as to how a person is now.

The community is an important place for this learning process to take place. The community’s understanding of Jesus is rooted in its sacred texts. These texts help shape our present experience of the risen Lord. Johnson spends the next part of the book looking at the New Testament’s witness to Jesus. He reminds us that none of these writings tells us everything; but taken together they are reliable testaments to the person of Jesus.

Johnson begins his study of the New Testament with the Book of Revelation, then goes on to the letters, gospels and Acts. He shows how distinct the designation of Jesus is in each text and points to how his relationship to believers then and now is indicted by each of the authors. Towards the end of each textual study, he asks the central question of his book: what does the learning of Jesus mean in this sacred text? For example, after his exposition of Mark’s gospel he says, “To ‘learn Jesus’ in this Gospel is not to confuse the present power of the resurrected Jesus with a realized kingdom in which one deserves a place of authority and privilege. It is instead to learn how to be little and weak, a servant who in the pattern of Jesus gives one’s life as a ransom for others.” (page 143)

For whom is this book written? Well, I can tell you those who I know who have recently read and liked it. A married couple, who are both well educated in the faith and active in their parish, said they found it rich spiritual reading. A study group meets weekly to discuss the book’s implications for their faith life in their parish community. The members of my Dominican community have been passing the book around in our household with recommendation that it is a very good book for preachers. I would agree.

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