

CHAPTER ONE

WHO CAN BELIEVE SUCH PROMISES?

Shivadas is a Hindu in a small village in India. He is low-caste. He must get off the path when he sees a man of a higher caste coming. His religion assures him that his humble station is due to previous existences, and he is now paying off his spiritual debts. His hopes are directed to his next incarnation, when he will be higher in caste—provided he accepts his present existence. His son is also in his father's caste. He, too, must get off the path when he sees a member of a higher caste coming. When they go to worship, Shivadas cannot bring his son into the temple. No. About two blocks away, there is set up a small altar, and a low-caste priest will say the prayers.

One day a cousin visits at Shivadas' hut. This cousin has been converted to Christianity. After a long conversation, he leaves. As Shivadas goes through his day, he is drawn to wonder: what if my cousin is right, and the facts about my life here on earth are very different. What if God wants to adopt me as His son—me and my boy. What if He wants to invite me into the temple, even into the sanctuary, the holy place.

What if Shivadas were to enter into a full faith in the gospel message. Notice the change that would take place in his self-image. He would see himself as co-heir with Jesus, and all things would be his. He would see himself sitting at his God's table,

eating his God's very flesh, and drinking his God's very blood, being **breathed into by God himself** who would pour His Spirit on Shivadas. Christ's history would **become his own**. All his guilt would be washed away by Jesus' dying. His self-image would be filled with a dignity surpassing even the highest caste.

What is the inner experience that would accompany such a **conviction about himself**? Obviously, great joy. His new assurance about himself would fill him with happiness as he entered into a relationship of great intimacy with his creator, a father-son friendship where the father wants to share all he has with his son.

Shivadas would be experiencing the God Jesus reveals to us touching his life. And it would be remarkably good news. And this is the fashion that God's touching *always* takes in our consciousness. He comes to us as remarkably good news. Whether we are beginners or mystics, God's coming to us is always news, and always unexpectedly good news. This is not just the way He comes to unbelievers, or to sinners. No, it is the way He comes into any human life, no matter how far advanced that person may already be.

Notice the **nature of this touching of our heart: it is a promise**. God makes us a **promise**. The promise is about our life. He promises us that our life could be far richer than it is. As this is true of Shivadas, so is this true of the saints themselves. **God's coming draws them into their future, and focuses their attention on what their life could be like**.

It is a glance, a momentary vision of a life we could be living, a vision which **haunts Him until it be realized**. For **He loves us not only as we are, but especially as we will become through His gifts, His self-giving**. The first moving of God in us at any moment is His sharing with us this image that hovers before Him night and day. Our growth in union with God always begins as a union—perhaps brief, fleeting—of imaginations, ours opening up to His and being informed by that incredible future He has decided to realize in us.

He whispers to us a promise. That **promise is the foundation of all His activity within us**. **Into each of our lives** are constantly coming bearers of good news. These take many forms, and they are frequently ignored. But they are there, doing His will, the seeds of His actions within us, seeds that can flower endlessly in our lives.

What are some of the common forms this takes in everyday life? The creed at the liturgy may come alive, and become words meant for me. "God of God." And I am co-heir with Christ. So it's me I am talking about, and suddenly my speaking becomes a hearing. A text from the first reading perhaps, "**Put on the armor of God**." It becomes words spoken, not just in my ear by the lector, but spoken to me from a richer reality than the world I live in. I become **conscious that there is for my defense against pain and evil a divine armor, an armor I do not deserve which I can joyfully clothe myself with**.

It might take the form of a daydream: "What if I am being filled with God's very Spirit?" "What if God does love me as His own child?" "What if my burden really is an easy one?" "What if I were to find out that God Himself is totally committed to me!" They draw me into the future, into a state where my faith would be much more assured. They invite me to a living faith, the experience the saints had, the me that could be made real, the me-filled-with-faith whose image hovers before God night and day until it is effected.

Sometimes an action provokes it: at the Eucharist, the drinking His blood. "What if this is His very blood, and I now knew that in peaceful assurance." An image of myself, my head being held in God's hands as He pours into my mouth this most precious medicine!

It can also be a person. "What if God loves me even more than my mother does, my father, my friend."

In each of them, **God is entering my consciousness, filling me with a promise of what He already sees with such desire**. He seeds my imagination just as Jesus went about as a sower of

images, speaking only in parables. Unlike the philosophers who engaged the minds of their contemporaries, Jesus was working the field of the imagination, offering to his hearers a promise of unexpected good news. The news was about an event that had taken place far off in the heart of reality. A decision had been made in this strange world, a decision that he was revealing to us. In truth, he was, in his very person, the decision, the event.

He does not argue with his hearers. He presents a possibility: "What if God has made a choice and into that choice He has plunged Himself completely, holding back not a drop of His Godhead, and that choice has landed on you, to befriend you, to adopt you as co-heir to His beloved Son."

Jesus offered to their imagination an image of a king, willful and determined, obstinate in getting his way despite all other wills: "I want my banquet hall full!"

In the gospels Jesus imagines Yahweh in various human roles: a fisherman, a judge, a friendly neighbor. He compares Yahwey's action in us to a seed, a pearl, a treasure in the field. That treasure in the field enlarges the finder's vision of himself. It invites him to focus on a future of a joy far greater than he has ever imagined possible. That is how a promise works. We are brought to live in the future.

In certain cases to live in the future is to become unreal. But this is not always so. It depends. A medical student who daydreams during class about a surgical triumph he will someday effect is actually getting farther from that day every moment he wastes. But it would be a strange medical student whose daydreams about his life as a doctor did not motivate him to study and to apply himself, and to survive the failures he would meet during his student days. The future-daydreams Christ draws us into free us to live today more fully. They reveal to us, along with a future which will come about some day, a future which is actually happening now, but at a level hidden from us. In other words, this future-orientation actually leads us deeper into our present reality, and frees us to live more realistically today, more

in touch with the real, as the lives of saints demonstrate.

There is another oddity about a promise. Charlie is at a boarding school. His parents call him two weeks before Christmas: they will not be able to bring him home for Christmas. He will have to stay at the school with all his friends gone, with only one or two foreign students and four or five odd teachers remaining. Charlie's day becomes very painful. Class is awful, boring. His friends are so nasty. Everything irritates him. The day drags on. Life seems meaningless. Studying is impossible. He daydreams away the hours.

On Wednesday, Charlie is called out of class to the phone: a change of plans—they are coming; they will arrive Friday after class. As Charlie leaves the phone booth, nothing has happened yet, in a sense. He still has his classes, and tomorrow is a full day, maybe a few tests. But his experience is already transformed. He does not wait for Friday afternoon to be happy. He is filled with joy. The classes are fine. His friends are so friendly. He likes the teachers. Studying is easy now. He is caught up in an image of Christmas that fills him with anticipation. He may not be nearly this happy when the day actually comes.

It's an odd element in promises: the joy they bring occurs now, even though it is all anticipation, a focus on the future. The treasure in the field is not yet in the safe, nor being spent. The finder covers it up and leaves it in the field, and then goes his way joyfully. And he makes some decisions that would ordinarily be very painful, but his joy transforms his experience. He sells his home. He sells everything he's got, the valuables he has gathered over the years. He separates himself from what was once his fondest possessions, and he does it gladly.

He is not like the rich young man who saw in Jesus' invitation a depressing future, a future without the things he held dear.

The finder is more like Zacchaeus. Jesus' invitation holds out an unexpected promise of salvation. That a prophet should dine at his table. Zacchaeus starts to experience great joy. He has

tripped over the treasure in the field, and it has begun to work within him. "I will give away . . ." That is the heart of **Zacchaeus** that Yahweh saw when He was forming him in his mother's womb: a Zacchaeus filled with humiliation and joy, and emerging from the grip of self-centeredness. Jesus ate with many, but not everyone heard the promise of God in it. Not everyone heard himself called into a future filled with promise. Not everyone experienced the joy, and the freedom to be real, that Zacchaeus felt.

A promise, then, begins to take effect even without any deliverance on it. We don't defer our joy until the promise becomes fleshed out. The promise itself transforms present experience long before we see any actualization of it. To be effective, a promise does not need to be delivered on, but it does require the presence of faith.

If I do not believe the promise, it will have no effect at all. If Charlie has heard his parents make this very same promise before (last Christmas and the one before that), and can recall the awful phone call the morning they were to come and take him (another change of plans), then he will not experience any great change of mood. He will persist in an image of Christmas day that destroys his joy.

Since God is always first coming to us as a promise, and since a promise has an effect only on one who believes it, it is easy to see the central role of faith in the gospel pattern. It is also easy to see how good a test of our faith is our joy. Joy is not put off for the believer. He enters into it now because of the assurance he experiences.

When the suggestion comes to me: "What if I really am the co-heir of Jesus!" this will have no effect upon me unless I believe it. Otherwise the words are dead letters, understood perhaps, but without true life . . . words about which I may be able to speak and think at length, even in ways filled with a certain insight. But only when the hearer opens up to the promise contained within, and believes, only then do the words

come to life within him and germinate into joy. There are many times in life when we hear or read about "treasures in fields," but we don't get up because we know better. Such stories are common: a new soap, a car, a lot in Arizona, a miracle stock. We have a contemptuous name for such schemes: **get-rich-quick**. We have a wisdom: "In this life you get what you pay for"; "you don't get something for nothing." This wisdom can flow over into our hearing of Jesus. He can be easily disbelieved.

What would a full faith be like? If God were to realize His dream in me now, what would my life be like now? If I actually did believe what Jesus promises, what would my life be like?

What would be the inner experience of a person fully convinced that God is determined to share Himself with him? God makes Jesus our justice, our sanctification, our redemption, our wisdom. We have in our literature incidents where people are taken up into events beyond their expectations. So here, the seed that is at work is this reality: Jesus is my wisdom. A wisdom is a contact with all that has meaning, and through his grace, through his Spirit poured into me, I can come to know that Jesus' wisdom is mine, that his justice is mine. It is like a fellow who is given a credit card by a wealthy friend, and told: "Make me happy by using it." He no longer reaches for his cash; he gives up counting his dollars. He develops a new instinct. As he leaves home, he doesn't check to see if he has his money with him, but has only to see whether he has the card. He stops relying on his own justice, his own wealth. When someone says, "You don't have the cash for that car you're wanting to buy," he is not depressed. He doesn't start promising to himself and others that he really does have the cash. This old instinct is gone. In its place, a freedom. "However shallow my credit may be, I have the Lord's, His whole house is backing me; I can draw on Him."

As a person enters fully into the awareness of Christ as God's gift to him, Christ as God's desire for him, he will fill with joy and assurance, and he will develop an instinctive and effective

response to the threat of depression that accompanies any weakness he may encounter within.

One of the central promises is the power to believe. God sees us, in His imagination, growing into a trusting of Him that approaches the trust that Jesus had in Him. This power to trust He desires to impart to us. It is described as a spiritual transformation in our inmost thoughts, feelings, and purposes. We are invaded by a new knowledge of God and a filial love for Him. In this gift God shares with us His divine consciousness; the secrets of His own consciousness are shared with us. It is an intimacy between us that is easy not to believe.

Yahweh is conscious of His own trustworthiness. He knows the full extent of His commitment to fulfill His promises. Sometimes when we promise, we are quite aware that our determination to fulfill is weak. "Let's get together right after the vacation." At other times, we are fully committed; and if someone doubts this, we go to great lengths pleading for trust, trying to get him to see how certain is our determination. "Listen, you can be sure of me on this. If I don't come through, you can write me off forever." And it can be very frustrating when the other person wavers, and is perhaps depressed at what he sees will probably be a failure to deliver. God has this problem with us. We live relatively depressed lives because we find it impossible to take God at His word. But He has a path through this: faith. He can reveal to our inner consciousness His own inner consciousness of His trustworthiness. Jesus experienced this—a certitude about Yahweh's commitment to him. "Do you really believe that if I asked the Father He would not send twelve legions of angels to deliver me?" He knew Yahweh too well to entertain any doubts.

That is the experience He offers to us, an inability to doubt Yahweh's friendship. What is the experience of one who believes so fully? A deep, irremovable joy. In that joy I could now be living, for it has been His will and intense determination to place me there.

Another central area of God's concern for us is a power to love that He desires to fill us with. Many religious are entering into experimental communities. They seek to be surrounded by those who share more closely their common ideals, to be surrounded by people with whom they can interact spontaneously, to be surrounded by likely friends. It is Yahweh's will also that we be surrounded by those we love. To accomplish this, He offers us a most precious gift, a clothing meant for His Son, now to be wrapped around us, the gift of love. It is a power to love others as Christ loves us. It is an energy source for loving which is the same energy source for His own loving. He opens a tap to His own love-energy, the Spirit, and the Spirit becomes available to us. Just as the Spirit filled Jesus with Yahweh's own compassion toward His needy brothers and sisters, so He wants to transform us, raise our sensitivity toward the needs of others.

With the coming of love, a person's life is transformed. The attention shifts outwards, toward others. There comes a certain indifference to the self because the joy of serving one we love in his need takes us out of ourselves.

You meet a woman who was in your class in elementary school thirty years ago. She looks shabby. Her hair is not done, and the clothes are old. Her teeth are not taken care of. Her husband died seven years ago. She mentions a daughter in school. You invite her to lunch, but she has two jobs; and she's on the go all the time. It's sad. It's even somewhat embarrassing. But, as you talk, you notice she's a happy person. It's unexpected.

Later, you mention it to a mutual friend, and she tells you, "She dotes on that daughter of hers. She even gave her a car. A lovely girl, and the mother buys her everything she needs. She dresses her so beautifully."

With the coming of love there comes a very meaningful activity into our lives. We come more easily into contact with the needs of people we love. The entry into action is spontaneous. To see a friend who has a real need that I can fill is to move

into an action that is filled with meaning for me. Moments filled with happiness accompany such service.

In a vision to Julian of Norwich, Jesus said: It is a joy, a bliss, and an endless liking to me that ever I suffered passion for thee. And if I could suffer more, I would suffer more.²

This same experience is what God intends for me, and what He is bringing about in me through His gift of love. It is an image of me intensely joyous and involved, in humble unself-conscious service in the midst of people I love. I would be reluctant to resent, incapable of refusing to forgive. He will not rest as long as this dream of His is not realized.

In these two gifts—faith and love—we have the core areas of God's activity within us. He is wanting to put in our hearts a desire and a taste for this enlarged living. First, He plants it in our imaginations as a possibility. He seeds us with the promises.

In the liturgy this seeding of the imagination reaches a peak. In addition to the word of God which we hear, we are also confronted with symbolic actions. We drink; we eat. The drinking is of blood, God's blood; the eating, His flesh. Both are symbols of the invasion of our hearts by God's freely given Spirit. We all drink of the same Spirit. It is God's very Spirit that is being offered to us. The imagery also stresses that the Spirit is coming to us as gift, without any purchasing of ours. The Lord fills our mouth with His blood at great cost to Himself. Our part is to drink a liquid sweet to our taste.

It raises questions within our imagination. What if God Himself has such love for me that His very Spirit is not being held back from me? What if this is God's very blood, God's very flesh? What is it like for a human being to know that he is on such intimate terms with his God? It is an image, a promise which, if believed, fills with joy. The liturgy is God's planting His promises in our imagination just as Jesus worked to open his hearers to God's promises by means of parables. Even more, the liturgy, for the believer, is not just a promise of a future event, but is a present encounter with God in deep intimacy. It is a

promise of the life we are being drawn toward and, in the case of the believer, it is an actual encounter with God now. The thrust of the liturgy is one that impels the willing imagination into the risen life. God invites the partaker to let himself be drawn into images where he sees himself already tasting the resurrection, sitting at table with his risen Lord, filled with consolation at the triumph of Christ.

In the images of the risen life we are heading toward, God's seeding reaches its highest point. To fill us with a realization of the future glory that is approaching us is God's goal in all this work on our imaginations. Such a vision will fill our life with intense meaning, just as the vision of nothingness-after-death drove all meaning out of the life of Camus' "stranger." He compared it to a hot, dry desert breeze that was blowing toward him from out of his future, and leveling everything in its path. So, too, the images of the risen life will have the opposite effect, enlarging our present life by the great anticipatory joy that flows into us, freeing us to live fully in a present now open to endless meaningfulness.

At any moment of our day-to-day lives, God is present primarily as one who promises. The promises urge us to consider possible intensities of joy, love, and faith far beyond our imaginings, or our merits. God is sharing His own imaginings with us. He is wanting to unite our wills in one intent: that someday I will be seated at the wedding supper of the Lamb. First of all, He must open our imaginations wide, and fill them with His. His first working on us is always this enlarging of our imagination. Everything that occurs in the dialogue between the human person and his God flows from this opening work of God. The rest of our relationship is determined by what happens in us when God plants those seeds in our imagination. This beginning in the imagination is never finished. In each of us—saint or sinner—God is at work there in the imagination, raising us to larger possibilities of life. This is God always present, always beginning.