

# Jerusalem 1966

by Gunnel Vallquist

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To come here for three days seemed rather meaningless beforehand. But since the itinerary included this visit, I did not want to miss it. It would at least be a preparation for the *real* journey one is always hoping for, with unbounded time at one's disposal. Then there were other reserves: it's no good hoping to penetrate the religious reality which lies below, behind, especially in so short a time; everything that obscures and blocks this – the tourists, the petty commerce, the local colour of the East, the apparatus of rival devotions – all this asserts itself in a much more clamant way.

No contact with the religious reality – that was a foregone conclusion. But man proposes, God disposes. I could hardly imagine a more brutal contact with this reality. I passed those three days in solitude, with the Gospels and Jerusalem. I had little idea that so charged a current would pass between these two poles.

Nevertheless, with every year that passes I am more and more seized by fear as I listen to the lamentations of Holy Week. 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, return to the Lord your God.' And I know that Jerusalem, which once meant the people of Juda, the synagogue, now means the Church, Christianity, divided, heir not only of the promise but of the betrayal.

I knew it, and yet I did not expect this. One can experience such truths everywhere, in Rome, Stockholm, in every church, at every point of the globe. But everything converges here, this is the burning centre. Nowhere else do Christians come up against each other as they do here, nowhere else are they compelled to rub shoulders as they do here. Nowhere else is it so impossible to forget, even for a moment, that the others exist. One cannot help coming up against them at the Sepulchre, Golgotha.

There, as everywhere else, each ecclesial group tries of course to put up walls, barriers that enclose and exclude, to behave as masters of the vineyard – at least as far as is possible. But no one is master here merely by wishing to be so, be he pope or patriarch. There is only one master, and the vineyard is the garden where his power has rolled away the stone, where it has broken the seal of authority, abolished the frontiers between life and death, between God and ourselves.

A tomb, sealed with a thousand and one seals put there by clerics of every allegiance down the ages – isn't that the Church, Christianity?

Truth to tell we have neglected nothing that could achieve this end. Every ecclesial community which strives to 'possess' Christ, to 'box in' the Holy Spirit – always at the expense of others – puts its own seal on the stone. We are the true heirs, the legitimate sons, the faithful stewards. We alone. The others are usurpers, heretics, enthusiasts, courtesans of Babylon . . . one could prolong the list indefinitely; consult the confession of faith of your Church and examine the vocabulary that lies at your disposal as 'orthodox'.

Who, however, could stand the reading of the Gospels here, in Jerusalem? Or rather, how do we stand it? What blindness, what selective deafness has made it possible for these words to be read, preached day after day, year after year, down the centuries, without *a single one* of these depositaries of the 'good news', not one that I know of, being stopped short as he goes up to the altar of the Lord, without being sent staggering as if struck by lightning, so that the offerings, the Ritual or even the Book of Books fall from his hands – without rushing away, seized with horror and panic, *so as first to be reconciled with his brother?* With the other communities, with our brothers, baptised into the death and resurrection of Christ, with these brothers of Christ, sinners like us, who, like us, live in a single hope: that of being saved by his death and resurrection. We are brothers in Christ – and we cannot adore him together, we cannot break bread with them and drink from the same chalice in memory of him. How can we thus dare to do it separately? Are we eating and drinking our own damnation?

Who could stand reading the Gospels in Jerusalem? 'We are the true heirs, the legitimate sons' – it is really to us that the parable of the prodigal son is addressed, this child who was sure of nothing, but whose brother was that much more sure. *He* was the true heir, he thought – and of course at the expense of the other. Just like us. 'We are the faithful stewards' – not one jot, not one tittle of the Law passes, as long as we administer it – but what becomes of the Good News? We have not wasted a single talent of the deposit of faith, every one is carefully dug into the earth, and the Symbols are there to give us an exact inventory. We do not deviate one inch – it's very simple: there could be no more faithful stewards than we. Besides which, since we speak of stewards, we have always heeded one good counsel of our Saviour in person: we make friends with the Mammon of iniquity. For when we have rendered to God what is God's – and the amount is clearly indicated to us – there remains a substantial sum to render to Caesar, to the king, the queen, the State, and above all else, to public opinion. This latter tribute has always been scrupulously paid.

This was the Gospel text my first day in Jerusalem: Jesus drives out the sellers from the Temple, Oh, if only he could repeat his gesture! Drive us all out, break down the walls, roll away the stone and compel us all to start from scratch, stripped of our fine, guaran-

teed assurance, of our petty sense of lawful ownership, of the strait-jacket of traditions. Traditions: we are forced to live according to laws promulgated a thousand years ago, five hundred years ago, martial laws, manifestos – everything has petrified since, and we stubbornly drag this weight behind us; this we call fidelity. How can we stand reading our bible, or, what is worse, how can we dare to pronounce from our pulpits the words we know so well: ‘This people honours me with its lips . . . In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrine the precepts of men. You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men . . . You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition!’ We claim that it is not precepts of men that we observe – but didn’t those to whom Jesus spoke make the same claim? What is certain is that it is our precepts which prevent us, have always prevented us – as a *community* – from obeying the one absolute commandment, that of loving.

We fail in charity, we elude the most elementary demand of love, under the pretext of not deviating from the truth. Questions of faith are important – but are they ever so important as to justify a want of charity? The faith which Christ demands of us is faith in him, who is the Truth; not faith in truths. Then by what authority do we go on to attach so much importance to teaching about the pope, grace, justification by faith and works, the certainty of salvation, transubstantiation, to the extent of placing them before the clearly expressed will and wish of Christ: ‘that they be perfectly one, and that the world know that you have sent me and that I have loved them as you love me’.

The Word, the word which every church tries to make its own *good*, thereby doing itself *evil* and harm – of what deafness are we capable? The Word who became flesh, here, in this very country, who, of his own free will came to this desert the colour of blood, this wild desert where the man who goes from Jerusalem to Jericho falls into the hands of brigands. The Word who became flesh and who comes down to meet us in the desert, who transforms the desert into the promised land, who makes water flow from the sterile rock. Delivering himself into the hands of brigands in our place. On our behalf – but haven’t we ourselves become the brigands?

What are we making of the body of Christ which is the Church? We crucify it every day, here, in this very place, and everywhere, diligently, conscientiously, obstinately maintaining the divisions which the evil spirit, our enemy, sowed in the hearts of our ancestors hundreds of years ago, and which we deem it necessary to perpetuate, in a deathly loyalty. Isn’t this the blindness of blindnesses, that of which the blindness of the Synagogue is but a pale figure? And yet we believe in Christ. We acknowledge that his word binds us, we do know that charity, love, is greater than all the virtues, greater than truth itself. Nevertheless we go on, not out of disobedience to Christ,

not out of hate for his word, but – like Judah perhaps – out of the conviction that this is how we *must* act, in his name and in order to serve him. Whatever may be the texts which ground this conviction, it is certainly not the Gospel of Jesus Christ – for there it is written in continuous letters of fire, through the multiplicity of episodes and details, that the one thing that counts is love, and that he who claims to love God but does not love his brothers is a liar. The sin here consists not in failing to put charity into practice – one does not succeed in this, but one can confess it and with the grace of forgiveness start again – but rather in not even realising that this love binds us at the *collective*, denominational level, at the level of ecclesial communities.

What is so frightening is our passivity. Even when we realise that division is a mistake, a sin, we remain fatalistic: we can only pray and hope that the theologians will reach agreement, that the leaders of the Church will find a solution. But is this an attitude worthy of the people of God? God speaks to us in the Church, but also in our conscience; he speaks first and foremost to our conscience. What is this premiss of impotence, this acceptance of the state of a minor which leads us to wait upon what others will one day do? How deep is our consciousness of being the sheep of a flock and nothing more? Perhaps so deep that we are ready to follow any bewitching pied piper who plays a sectarian tune on his fife, which we are likely to take for a hymn, or for a triumphal march.

Supposing, however, we stop short, supposing we read the Gospels yet once more, afresh, forgetting all the commentaries and all the elusive explanations the churches give us? Supposing we discover *what is there*, the terrible condemnations with which they strike our collective egoism, our self-assurance, our inertia, our hypocrisy. Discover the appalling fidelity with which we have in Christ's name copied and preserved those very mistakes, sins and deviations against which the entire teaching of Christ rose up. Supposing we read the Gospels not only in an individualistic perspective, as a code to which everyone must adhere in his private Christian life, but in a collective perspective, as a message addressed to *our community* exactly in the way it was addressed to the Jewish community, which was no less convinced than we – and for reasons scarcely less substantial – that it was definitely on the right side, *qua* community.

Dare we go on? Go on tearing apart the body of Christ who is the Church, rubbing salt in the wounds, stopping them from healing over, keeping open all the infective sores that eat up the organism? *Can we do this?* Won't a wail of pain, cries of protest arise from all these narrow enclosures, these reception camps into which we are herded, these tombs sealed by our ecclesial communities? We, the anonymous people – and, of course, a large number of our priests – we no longer want to continue, we refuse to acquiesce in this

mutilation of a living body, we demand the ending of division. We know that nothing will be improved by this or that Christian jumping over the wall and simply exchanging one enclosure for another; the curse of division will continue as long as the enclosures continue and as long as there are guards to watch over our tombs and their sealed doors.

If we become aware of all this and if we take the consequences of such an awakening, then we shall perhaps yet feel the breath of that Spirit passing over us which rolled away the stone of the Tomb and made life spring out again. All this despite the fact that we have reclined in the shadow of the tomb for five hundred or a thousand years: from the moment we began to exclude each other from the community, or to separate ourselves from it – only to find in its place the common curse of division.

The promise of this new life comes to me from the liturgy, on this third day in Jerusalem, a promise which does something to alleviate the terrifying burden if the insight, and breaks, a fine ray of the dawn, in the night of death:

‘I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations will know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes . . . For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land . . . you shall be clean from all uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh . . . You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers; and you shall be my people, and I shall be your God.’

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