In the beginning was the performance; not the word alone, not the deed alone, but both, each indelibly marked with the other forever. He comes as yet unknown into a hamlet of Lower Galilee. He is watched by the cold, hard eyes of peasants living long enough at subsistence level to know exactly where the line is drawn between poverty and destitution. He looks like a beggar, yet his eyes lack the proper cringe, his voice the proper whine, his walk the proper shuffle. He speaks about the rule of God, and they listen as much from curiosity as anything else. They know all about rule and power, about kingdom and empire, but they know it in terms of tax and debt, malnutrition and sickness, agrarian oppression and demonic possession. What, they really want to know, can this kingdom of God do for a lame child, a blind parent, a demented soul screaming its tortured isolation among the graves that mark the edges of the village? Jesus walks with them to the tombs, and, in the silence after the exorcism, the villagers listen once more, but now with curiosity giving way to cupidity, fear, and embarrassment. He is invited, as honor demands, to the home of the village leader. He goes, instead, to stay in the home of the dispossessed woman. Not quite proper, to be sure, but it would he unwise to censure an exorcist, to criticize a magician. The village could yet broker this power to its surroundings, could give this kingdom of God a localization, a place to which others would come for healing, a center with honor and patronage enough for all, even, maybe, for that dispossessed woman herself. But the next day he leaves them, and now they wonder aloud about a divine kingdom with no respect for proper protocols, a kingdom, as he had said, not just for the poor, like themselves, but for the destitute. Others say that the worst and most powerful demons are not found in small villages but in certain cities. Maybe, they say, that was where the exorcised demon went, to Sepphoris or Tiberias, or even Jerusalem, or maybe to Rome itself, where its arrival would hardly be noticed amidst so many others already in residence. But some say nothing at all and ponder the possibility of catching up with Jesus before he gets too far.

Even Jesus himself had not always seen things that way. Earlier he had received John’s baptism and accepted his message of God as the imminent apocalyptic judge. But the Jordan was not just water, and to be baptized in it was to recapitulate the ancient and archetypal passage from imperial bondage to national freedom. Herod Antipas moved swiftly to execute John, there was no apocalyptic consummation, and Jesus, finding his own voice, began to speak of God not as imminent apocalypse hut as present healing. To those first followers from the peasant villages of Lower Galilee who asked how to repay his exorcisms and cures, he gave a simple answer, simple, that is, to understand but hard as death itself to undertake. You are healed healers, he said, so take the Kingdom to others, for I am not its patron and you are not its brokers. It is, was, and always will be available to any who want it. Dress as I do, like a beggar. but do not beg. Bring a miracle and request a table. Those you heal must accept you into their homes.

That ecstatic vision and social program sought to rebuild a society upward from its grass roots but on principles of religious and economic egalitarianism, with free healing brought directly to the peasant homes and free sharing of whatever they had in return. The deliberate conjunction of magic and meal, miracle and table, free compassion and open communality, was a challenge launched not just at Judaism’s strictest purity regulations, or even at the Mediterranean’s patriarchal combination of honor and shame, patronage and clientage, but at civilizations eternal inclination to draw lines, invoke boundaries, establish hierarchies, and maintain discriminations. It did not invite a political revolution but envisaged a social one at the imaginations most dangerous depths. No importance
was given to distinctions of Gentile and Jew, female and male, slave and free, poor and rich. Those
distinctions were hardly even attacked in theory; they were simply ignored in practice.

What would happen to Jesus was probably as predictable as what had happened already to John.
Some form of religiopolitical execution could surely have been expected. What he was saying and
doing was as unacceptable in the first as in the twentieth century, there, here, or anywhere. Still, the
exact sequence of what happened at the end lacks multiple independent accounts, and the death is
surer in its connection to the life than it is in its connection to the preceding few days. It seems clear
that Jesus, confronted, possibly for the first and only time, with the Temples rich magnificence,
symbolically destroyed its perfectly legitimate brokerage function in the name of the unbrokered
kingdom of God. Such an act, if performed in the volatile atmosphere of Passover, a feast that
celebrated Jewish liberation from inaugural imperial oppression, would have been quite enough to
entail crucifixion by religiopolitical agreement. And it is now impossible for us to imagine the offhand
brutality, anonymity, and indifference with which a peasant nobody like Jesus would have been
disposed of.

What could not have been predicted and might not have been expected was that the end was not
the end. Those who had originally experienced divine power through his vision and his example still
continued to do so after his death - in fact, even more so, because now it was no longer confined by
time or place. A prudently neutral Jewish historian reported, at the end of the first century, ‘When
Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him
to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for
him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared. And an
arrogant Roman historian reported that, at the start of the second century, “Christus, the founder of
the name [of Christian], had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the
procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for the moment, only to
break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where
all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue.”

Jesus’ own followers, who had initially fled from the danger and horror of the crucifixion, talked
eventually not just of continued affection or spreading superstition but of resurrection. They tried to
express what they meant by telling, for example, about the journey to Emmaus undertaken by two
Jesus followers, one named and clearly male, one unnamed and probably female. The couple were
leaving Jerusalem in disappointed and dejected sorrow. Jesus joined them on the road and,
unknown and unrecognized, explained how the Hebrew Scriptures should have prepared them for
his fate. Later that evening they invited him to join them for their evening meal, and finally they
recognized him when once again he served the meal to them as of old beside the lake. And then,
only then, they started back to Jerusalem in high spirits. The symbolism is obvious, as is the
metaphoric condensation of the first years of Christian thought and practice into one parabolic

If we ask, however, which of all the words placed on his lips actually go back to the historical Jesus, it
is possible to offer at least a reconstructed inventory. But, as you read them, recall that, in the light
of the preceding paragraphs, these words are not a list to be read. They are not even a sermon to be
preached. They are a score to be played and a program to be enacted.

North Blackburn Vic., pp xixiii.