Chapter 6
From the River to the Hill: The Life and Death of Jesus

Messenger and Messiah

Genesis and the other narratives in the Bible make up what is called sacred history, that is, God's relations with the world as demonstrated by the vicissitudes of the Jewish people. Unlike ancient secular history – that of Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome and Egypt – it allowed the calculation of first things. Other sacred literatures described various acts of creation, but the Bible gave a succession of life-spans right back to the first man which, when added up, gave the date when God breathed life into his nostrils. And he lived nine hundred and thirty years. Others lived longer. That was before the Flood. Thereafter lives were of a more usual length. In the seventeenth century Bishop Ussher of Trinity College, Dublin, calculated the biblical creation to have occurred four thousand and four years prior to the birth of Jesus. His sum was only four years out. A medieval monk on whose arithmetic he relied is said to have made the error which put him wrong. As a result, the birth of Jesus is now usually given as 4 B.C., and not as 1 A.D.

As said before, it is St Paul who links Jesus with Genesis, calling him the Second Adam. Paul's letters are believed to be the earliest writings in the New Testament, although traditionally they appear after the four gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. He says very little about the life of Jesus, whom he did not know. It is the death and resurrection that matter to him, but for their soteriological significance, not in their concrete details.

For these, and for the facts of Jesus' life, we have to read the gospels. The first three, by Matthew, Mark and Luke are called synoptic because, albeit with sometimes notable differences, they present the story from the same viewpoint and use much the same material. The fourth gospel, St John's, has a much loftier viewpoint and much unique material. In Buddhist terms, it approximates to a Mahayana scripture, the synoptics being more of a kind with the Pali Canon. This, however, is not to say that John writes in 'the grand style'.

He has plenty of plain biographical material, presented with pace and telling detail; but he has a mystical dimension as well.

The shortest and, as generally held, the earliest of the four gospels is St Mark's. It opens not with the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary, nor with the birth of Jesus, but with the appearance of John the Baptist in the Judean wilderness, calling on people to repent for the remission of sins. Among those who went into the river Jordan for the symbolic cleansing was Jesus of Nazareth, who at this time, according to some authorities, was a disciple of John's; certainly he had the highest regard for him, and said, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, that no greater man had been born of woman.

John is described by St Luke as related to Jesus, and his senior by a few months. The narrative seems to have the intention of subordinating him to Jesus, even in the womb. Western artists have delighted in showing them together as children, with Jesus on his mother's knee and blessing the other child, who looks up to him from below, wearing a pelt and carrying a little cross, prophetic of his own career and Jesus' fate. The evangelists say that he saw himself as preparing the way for Jesus, and quote the prophet Isaiah in support. About the age of thirty he came out of the desert to the river Jordan where he preached 'a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'. Great numbers of people came out to hear him and to go through the ritual, whose form will recall to Buddhists the idea of *sotapatti*, stream-entry, and it may be that there is some remote relation between the two. John's message was fierce and uncomplimentary, to say the least. The very penitents who came to hear him he called a 'brood of vipers'. The power of his preaching is evidenced by the fact that some of those who came were from among the hated tax-collectors and soldiers, whom he exhorted not to exploit or brutalize the people.

It was a time of expectation, as Luke says, and there was great longing for the Messiah, the Anointed One, who would save the people by driving out the idolatrous Romans, and rule in accordance with the law of God. There were those who thought that John himself might be the Messiah, but he said that someone mightier than he was coming. He does not precisely say that Jesus is the Messiah, but his words are full of praise, which is reciprocated in Jesus' description of John's supreme greatness.

For all these fine words, however, there are indications in the texts that all was not harmony, at least between the followers of the two. The subordination of John is now seen by scholars as partisan piety, and there is to this day a sect in the Middle East who follow his way and who consider Jesus the lesser figure.

John evidently had tremendous spiritual power, judging by his effect on Jesus. Upon receiving the baptism he experienced a sort of theophany, in which

'he saw the heavens opened and the spirit descending upon him like a dove', and heard a voice saying 'Thou art my beloved son; with thee I am well pleased.' Then the Spirit, in Mark's words, 'immediately drove him out into the wilderness'. There he remained and fasted forty days, and was troubled by visits from Satan, who tempted him in various ways, though not sexually. Milton was conscious of this, and in *Paradise Regained* has a devil propose it. Belial, 'the dissolutest spirit that fell', advises Satan to 'set women in his eye and in his walk', and he will fall as other men before, even 'wisest Solomon'. But Satan will have none of it:

> *... What woman will you find,*
> *Tho' of this age the wonder and the fame,*
> *On whom his leisure will vouchsafe an eye*
> *Of fond desire? ...*

Some modern writers have not been convinced by this or similar arguments and have cast Mary of Magdala in the role of lover or even wife to Jesus. There were women in his entourage later and clearly devoted to him, but the biographical and epistolary literature that arose directly from his life and teachings have no suggestion of particular closeness to any of them, unless it be to Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus.

Soon after the baptism of Jesus, John was arrested by Herod, tetrarch of Galilee, whom he had attacked for marrying the wife of his brother Philip, another satellite of the Romans. It was then that Jesus began preaching, and at first his message was, like John's, a call to repentance. He seems however to have had a reaction against the austerity of his mentor, acquiring indeed a reputation as a drinker (Matt. 11, 19), and one of the earliest miracles recorded of him was the changing of water into wine at a wedding feast in Cana. This event is of interest in another way, for although he is traditionally imagined as a poor man preaching to the poor, the gospels invariably show him being entertained in prosperous homes.

Family and Followers

The first book of the New Testament, the gospel according to Matthew, opens with a genealogy tracing a line of descent from the patriarch Abraham through King David to 'Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born'. The gospel of Luke extends the genealogy back to Adam. The two lines do not agree in all particulars, even as to the father of Joseph, who is Jacob in one and Heli in the other. But as Joseph was not believed to have been Jesus' father, it is strange that his genealogy should have been thought necessary, while Mary's ancestry is ignored. The New Testament is full of problems and they start at the very beginning.

The title 'Son of God' is an ancient term of honor in the Torah, but is believed to have peculiar theological significance as applied to Jesus. It affirms his divinity. Being the divine Son of God, he had to have a divine conception; and a virgin of Nazareth in Galilee was chosen by God to receive the child in her womb without the agency of a man. As in the Eden story there is no consultation. The angel Gabriel appears and tells her that the Holy Spirit will descend upon her and she will conceive and bear a son, whom she will call Jesus. As with Adam and Eve total obedience is expected and Mary gives it. In all this, her husband-to-be, Joseph, seems to be disregarded; he is faced with the prospect of marrying a bride already pregnant. Being a decent man, he is unwilling to embarrass Mary, and resolves to put her quietly away. Then he in turn has an angelic visitation, this time in a dream, reassuring him that the child is of God and not of another man.

The birth of Jesus took place in Bethlehem near Jerusalem, whither Joseph and Mary had gone to register in a census conducted by the Roman rulers of the land. Among those who came to pay him honor were some Persian magi, wise men though rather unworldly, for they told the suspicious King Herod that they had come to worship the new king of the Jews. Taking no chances, Herod had all the male children under two years of age killed whom he could find in the region around Bethlehem. Fortunately Joseph had been warned by an angel in another dream, and had fled with his young family to Egypt, where he remained until the death of Herod. Returning then to his homeland he took them to live in Nazareth.

Between this and his appearance before John the Baptist very little is known of Jesus' life. These are the so-called Hidden Years about which all sorts of conjectures have been made, with a sojourn in India well to the fore. There is nothing in the sources that throws light on this long middle part of his life.

The known career of Jesus lasted three years according to St John and only one according to the synoptics. First there was the choosing of the

disciples, the brothers Simon and Andrew, fishermen, and Levi the tax-collector, among them. The group closest to him numbered twelve, and Judas who betrayed him was one of them; but there were many others, seventy being mentioned at one time as going out to preach the word.

The leader of the disciples was Simon, renamed Peter, the Rock. He was a married man who left wife and home to follow Jesus. The gospels show more interest in him than in any of the other apostles, including Judas. Sometimes his relations with Jesus verge on the absurd, as when he tries to walk on water to meet his Master, who is approaching Peter's boat in that way, and has to rescue him, rebuking him for lack of faith. It happens soon after his appointment as leader, and holder of the keys of heaven. On another occasion Jesus administers a harsher rebuke. He has been foretelling his death and resurrection, and Peter's protest exasperates him so much that he calls the mystified man a devil, a hindrance to him, and 'not on the side of God but of men' (Matt. 16, 21ff). When Jesus is arrested and taken into custody, Peter swings from provocative violence, cutting off the ear of the High Priest's servant, to abject cowardice, denying with curses that he ever knew 'the Galilean'. And like the other disciples, apart from John, he is conspicuous by his absence at the Crucifixion.

By the time of the events recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, Peter seems to have grown in authority and power. But the story of Ananias and Saphira shows him exercising them in a less than sympathetic manner. This couple sold a piece of property and kept some of the proceeds for themselves, at a time when believers were turning from private ownership and holding everything in common. Ananias seems to have been economical both with the money and the truth, for Peter accused him of lying and not to men but to God. He dropped dead, 'and great fear came upon all who heard of it'. Three hours later his wife Saphira came on the scene, not knowing what had happened. Peter asked how much the land had been sold for. She answered 'The amount my husband brought.' He chided her even more fiercely than he had Ananias, and she too dropped dead, and a second great chill of fear passed through all who heard of it. This, so early in the life of the Church, is the first instance of a Christian – here the first Pope, of course – exercising power to the detriment of other believers. To the narrator the fear is as noteworthy as the power. Together, tragically, they form a seminal moment in ecclesiastical history.

Apart from Peter, most of the disciples play little part in the action of the gospels. The great exception is of course Judas, the Devadatta of the Christian story. He comes to prominence in the last few days of Jesus' life. But before dealing with him and that momentous period we must try to understand why the life and teachings of Jesus have been so important, not only for the West but for much of the world beside.

The Public Career of Jesus

St Augustine said he would not be a believer but for the miracles worked by Jesus. Martin Luther on the other hand dismissed them as of small account. We must not look to them for the universal element in Jesus' career, although they are the most striking. But there were many miracle-workers among the Jews of that time who, as a people, enjoyed great fame in the ancient world for their thaumaturgy talents. And as the New Testament makes clear, there were many who needed their services. It was a very disturbed society, what with the polytheistic Romans ruling, sectarian bitterness rife, the Messiah fervently expected, and a universal belief in demonic possession. Jesus was pre-eminently a healer, working through power and faith. This faith is reminiscent of the Buddhist *saddha*: not so much the theological virtue as confidence in the benefactor's power. Where it was lacking, as in his home village of Nazareth when he returned there, 'he could do no mighty work'(Mark. 6, 1-6). But on several occasions he is said to have gone beyond the scope of faith in any conventional sense and to have restored the dead to life, most famously his friend Lazarus, who had been in the tomb for several days. Other powers attributed to him were the aforementioned ability to walk upon the sea and to still tempests.

The miracles make interesting stories, but hardly less interesting is it that, after an initial excitement, people seem to take them in their stride, and go on as if nothing out of the ordinary has happened. This applies to the beneficiaries as well as to the witnesses. When Jesus is brought before the priests, one might have expected the recently revived Lazarus or one of his family to have made an appearance on his behalf, even if it involved some peril. And the greatest miracle of all, Jesus' own resurrection, seems to have made no great impression at the time. Pontius Pilate, the priests, the guards at the tomb, and the people of Jerusalem generally seem even then to have gone on as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

The second great feature of Jesus' career was his preaching, which often took the form of parables. Some of these – the Good Samaritan, The Prodigal Son, the Widow's Mite and others – are among the greatest treasures in the western heritage. It has to be said, however, that not all of them have contributed to the sum of human happiness or virtue. 'Compel them to come in', says the slighted host to his servant in the Parable of the Reluctant Guests (Luke 14, 16-24), a command which echoed a long time in Christian history, being used to justify forced conversions. Masters and servants and the relations between them are a recurrent theme in the parables, so much so that it might not be excessive to describe them as forming an archetype in Jesus' mind.

A number of actual servants figure in the gospels. One is restored to health with 'absent healing' through the faith of his master, a Roman centurion friendly to the Jews (Luke 7, 1-10). Another is a steward in the household of Herod Antipas. His name is given, Chuza, as is that of his wife, Joanna, who is described as a follower of Jesus, and as providing, with other women, the Magdalene among them, for him and the apostles 'out of their means'. This shows how Jesus' influence reached into the high places of society, and was not confined to the poor.

Along with the colorful parables there was also much plain preaching. The most celebrated summation of it is given in Matthew, Chapters 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount. Much of what is best in the western heritage is to be found there, even if it has often been more in aspiration than fulfillment. The Sermon opens with the Beatitudes, a declaration of blessedness upon the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who seek or suffer for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those who suffer on Jesus' account. There follows a reaffirmation of 'the law and the prophets', which he says he has not come to abolish but to fulfill. He does propose a number of amendments: not only he who kills but he who is angry or insulting to his brother will be sent to hell; not only adultery but lustful thought is wrong; and it is better to get rid of an organ that tempts one to sin than to go whole-bodied into hell. (Some people took this counsel quite literally in the early Church. It is reinforced by another text: 'There are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it' (Matt. 19, 12). The great theologian Origen went so far as to castrate himself.)

It is not enough to refrain from swearing falsely – one should not swear at all but only give a simple 'Yes' or 'No'; the equivalence of injury and retaliation intended by 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' is no longer acceptable – instead one should not resist violence but rather turn the other cheek; finally, in this part of the sermon, comes the great injunction to love one's enemies and pray for one's persecutors.

There is much else in the Sermon on the Mount, including the Lord's Prayer. The Sermon may not have been delivered in such continuous form, and it may not all be original with Jesus, but as a collection of potent utterances it has hardly been equalled since the Buddha set the Wheel of Dharma moving in the Deerpark of Isipatana. Familiarity may inevitably have dulled its effect, but it has never ceased to inspire people from the day it was given to the world by Matthew, so much else of whose work is taken up with aspersions on the Jews and a rather pettifogging search for Old Testament prophecies to match with events in the life of Jesus.

If a Buddhist were to have reservations about the Sermon, it would have to be on the reinforcement of its message by the repeated threat of hell – Gehenna, as it is called, after a valley near Jerusalem where the city's waste was burned. Hell figures prominently in the gospels, and indeed one of the parables, that of the Rich Man and the Beggar, is partly set there. It does seem to have been a reality to Jesus, and a much more painful place than Sheol or Hades, as imagined by other Jews and pagans.

The teaching on divorce also strikes one as harsh. In Mark it is absolutely forbidden, the union of Adam and Eve being cited as testimony. Matthew does allow unchastity as a cause; otherwise divorce is but a step towards adultery. Here we touch on an important question in the life of any founder or reformer of religion, the question of experience. Jesus was an unmarried man. One may ask how far was he qualified to pronounce on a state of which he had no experience? What is here called unchastity – *porneia* in the Greek – is only one of the factors destructive of marriage, albeit the one that often makes the strongest impression on the outsider. But there are many others, and to appreciate their seriousness it is desirable if not necessary to have experience of living in the married state. In this area of human relations Jesus was an outsider, a gifted young man talking for once beyond his range, and these words of his have been the cause of much unhappiness down the centuries, especially where the Roman Catholic Church, claiming to speak in his name, has prevailed.

His views on divorce have made him the champion of those who see the family as the basis of society. But according to the gospels he was rather off-hand with his own family, including his mother, saying that true believers were his true family. And in Matthew's tenth chapter he is recorded as saying that he has come to set son against father, and daughter against mother; and that anyone who loves parents or children more than him is not worthy of him.

The Last Week

The gospels have been described as the story of a death preceded by a long introduction. Admirable and intriguing as the message and the miracles are, it is not on them but on the Crucifixion and the Resurrection that Christianity is based. As already said, a good deal of the message was to be found in the older scriptures, and there was no shortage of wonder-workers in that part of the world at that time. The unusual thing is that Christianity arose not so much from anything Jesus said or did as from what is believed to have happened to him: first that he allowed himself to be crucified and then that he was raised from the dead. The last week of his life is introduced by one of the most celebrated of his miracles, the raising of Lazarus, in the village of Bethany near

Jerusalem. When Lazarus had fallen ill Jesus did not at first think his condition to be life-threatening and delayed going to Bethany to see him. When he reached the village he learned that Lazarus had been dead for four days. He was deeply affected by the news. But he ordered that the stone be removed from the tomb, and called on the dead man to come forth, and St John says that he did, still wrapped in his cerements. The event made a great sensation and many people came out from Jerusalem to see the risen man and the miracle-worker, and the priests became alarmed and plotted to have them both killed. Jesus put some distance between himself and them, retiring to a town near the desert until six days before the Passover, when he returned to Bethany and had supper with Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary.

At this meal Judas Iscariot, barely mentioned before, comes into prominence. Martha serves the meal and Mary brings a jar of costly nard and anoints the feet of Jesus, 'and the whole house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment'. Judas is dismayed at the extravagance. He says the ointment might have been sold for 300 denarii and the money given to the poor. Jesus says ' Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. The poor you have always with you, but me you have not always.' No more is heard of Judas until he goes to the priests with his offer of betrayal.

On the morrow Jesus entered Jerusalem amid great rejoicing. He rode upon an ass, probably one of the stately breed used by eastern kings, and the people hailed him as their king, as son of David and as restorer of David's kingdom. The Pharisees thought it all rather unseemly, but he said that if his followers were silent the very stones would cry out. A Greek might have considered this reply, and the royal entry itself, as verging on hybris.

Like the Sophists as portrayed by Plato, the Pharisees in the gospels are an unsympathetic group, forever trying to catch Jesus and the disciples out with their legalistic hair-splitting. They were the anti-establishment sect of Judaism at this time, opposed to the Sadducees, who administered the Temple and inevitably had dealings with the Romans. The Pharisees were not revolutionaries, unlike the Zealots, who looked to gain freedom by force of arms. They were Messianists, which suggests that the crowds who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem were expressing Pharisean sentiments, and it was the excess and not the nature of these that was found offensive.

It has been noted that doctrinally Jesus was close to the Pharisees, especially with regard to their belief in resurrection and in retribution in the afterlife, which the Sadducees rejected. He was comfortable enough with some of them to eat in their homes. A number of the most prominent names in the New Testament are those of Pharisees: Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, Gamaliel and, most important, St Paul.

From the gospels it is easy to form an opinion that the Pharisees were mere sanctimonious busybodies, but some ninety years before the birth of Jesus they gave proof of something more when eight hundred of them were crucified by order of the High Priest.

The Jesus of St John's gospel is a metropolitan figure who has been in and around Jerusalem several times. In the synoptics he is more of a rustic revivalist who comes there only once. In John, the famous cleansing of the Temple takes place on an earlier visit; the synoptics, more dramatically, have it occurring in the last days, soon after the entry. The dealers and money-changers whom he drove away operated there as of right, selling animals and birds for sacrifice and providing ritually clean coins. The attack has traditionally been used by Christians to justify violence in a good cause, but it is not easy to see what good was served by it there and then. The narratives do not tell what the victims of the attack thought or felt, but the priests who administered the Temple were mortally offended, and from that moment Jesus' fate was sealed.

Judas

Now Judas steps into the middle of the stage. There is said to be a church somewhere in Greece dedicated to this man as an agent of redemption, but he has had to wait until more recent times to be regarded as a person in his own right. Nikos Kazantzakis treated him with respect in one of his novels, and Jorge Luis Borges wrote a story in which a theologian comes to believe that Judas was himself the Redeemer. This is a long way from the scene at the end of Dante's *Inferno* in which Lucifer holds Judas in his jaws along with the other supreme exemplars of treachery, Brutus and Cassius.

We know very little about Judas Iscariot, Even his name is uncertain. Most likely it was Ishkerioth, the man of Kerioth, a town in southern Judea; but some authorities derive it from *sicarius*, meaning one who carries a dagger: that is, a fanatical nationalist, an assassin. This would mean that Jesus had two political extremists, or former extremists, among the disciples, for another of them was called Simon the Zealot. The gospels however do not indicate any especial affinity between this man and Judas. If they had, then or previously, a political aim, it is not referred to by the evangelists.

This does not, of course, dispose of the possibility of a political motive on Judas' part nor of there being violent disciples. The only one reported as using a weapon, however, is Peter, who at Jesus' arrest wounded the High Priest's servant. There is no suggestion that Judas is armed when he comes with the arresting party. He identifies Jesus with a kiss, not by pointing a weapon. But if Judas had political ideas, they must have been reinforced by Jesus' entry

into Jerusalem and his apparent acceptance of the titles 'king' and 'restorer of David's kingdom', only to be disappointed in the days following when that enthusiasm was allowed to fade.

A more traditional motive given for his actions is greed. The gospels associate him with money, identifying him as the treasurer of the movement. St John calls him a thief, though he gives no evidence in support. According to St Matthew, Judas received thirty pieces of silver from the priests for his services, a really paltry sum for such an act by the standards of that or any other time. (Thirty pieces of silver was the amount a Jewish slave might claim if his master drew blood in beating him. In Old Testament times it was the price of a foreign slave. Matthew is the only evangelist to give this figure, and in his usual way he brings in a quotation from the Old Testament, a verse from the prophet Jeremiah, mentioning thirty pieces of silver as 'the price of him on whom a price had been set'.) If greed was Judas' motive surely St Paul would have referred to it when he wrote that the love of money is the root of all evil.

St Matthew tells that when the priests delivered Jesus to the Roman governor, Judas was stricken with remorse and brought back the money, saying, 'I have sinned in betraying innocent blood.' The priests answered, 'What is that to us? See to it yourself'. He threw down the money and went out and killed himself, the first victim of that chain of events called the Passion, so far as the record tells.

So far as the record tells: but we cannot be sure of having the whole story. It can seem, as commentators have said, that something is going on behind the scenes, of which the evangelists are not fully aware; as if some other people, based in and around Jerusalem, are involved apart from the known disciples. There is the man who supplies the ass for the triumphal entry; the young man who flees the scene of the arrest; even the two so-called thieves crucified with Jesus can be drawn into this scenario. The word used of them, *lestai*, is said to be that used by the authorities to describe enemies of the regime – brigands, terrorists, the sort of term always employed to degrade a patriotic struggle. John says they were crucified 'one on either side and Jesus between them', as if the Roman authorities were making a definite point. Luke is the only one who gives their words, having one of them say 'Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us'; and the words may be read as an appeal to someone he knows already. And of course there is Barabbas, also called a *lestes*, who had taken part in an uprising in the city, and was released under the Passover amnesty when the Roman governor asked the mob to choose between this man and Jesus.

All sorts of theories are possible, but the fact remains that a number of men died in those days, and Judas was the first, and he died by his own hand. This gives a desperate pathos to his story. Terrible as the crucifixion was, it has

a glamor, spreading from the central cross to the other two and out into history. The traitor's end has only one redeeming feature, the pain of his remorse. We have to hope it weighed heavily in the karmic balance.

Death and Thereafter

Rejected by his own people and scourged by the Romans, Jesus dragged his cross through the streets of Jerusalem and out to a hill where, according to tradition, Adam's skull was buried. The Koran denies that he really was crucified, but its docetic view is unconvincing. One would have to believe that the four evangelists were indulging sadistic fantasies to accept the story of Jesus' last hours as some sort of illusion. For a Buddhist the question is why such a man should have suffered so much. Atonement and redemption have no part in the Buddhist view of things. If there was no fall, there was nothing to atone for and no one to be redeemed. A Buddhist is constrained to ask whether Jesus' sufferings were not the effect of ripening karma from his present or a previous life, consequential rather than purposive or accidental suffering. But if we confine ourselves to the gospel narratives we find a concrete explanation for it. He offended the temple authorities by attacking the traders and money-changers; the priests at his trial believed he had uttered blasphemy; and Pilate thought he was a threat to the Roman order, even if only an indirect one, because the mob was being stirred up to fury against him at a time when the population of Jerusalem was swollen by thousands of outsiders who had come to celebrate Passover.

It was Roman custom to break the legs of the crucified to hasten death. When the soldiers came to the central cross they found Jesus already dead. Then two of his followers, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, leading citizens, sought permission from the governor to remove the body and bury it. The Sabbath, beginning at sunset, was almost upon them, so they laid the body in a nearby tomb, and closed the entrance with a stone.

Between that evening and the morning after the Sabbath, Christians believe that the greatest of all miracles took place. On that morning a number of Jesus' female followers came with fresh spices to the tomb and found it open and empty of the body. A young man in a white robe was sitting there. He told them that Jesus was risen and on his way to Galilee; they were to tell the apostles. The women fled in fear and told no one. (This is St Mark's version. The young man in the tomb recalls the young man who fled from the scene when Jesus was arrested. The other evangelists have more elaborate accounts of the event.)

Jesus is believed to have ascended into heaven forty days later, and in the meantime, to have appeared in various places to his followers, though not,

so far as is told, to his mother. One of the apostles, Thomas, was unconvinced by the Resurrection story. Tradition has it that he made up for his lack of faith by voyaging to distant India and establishing the Church there.

The story of 'Doubting Thomas' is found only in St John. There is in fact no unanimity in the gospels about the events surrounding the Resurrection, the Ascension or the events between. The stories have given rise to all sorts of speculations. One has no wish to add to them here. It is all too easy to turn a miracle into a coincidence and a mystery into a puzzle. The Resurrection has meant too much to Christians for one to contribute to the trend. Even so, the story has features which leave one not so much in a state of wonder as of perplexity. Much the same may be said of the preceding life and death. What is a Buddhist to make of it all?