

The Crucifixion

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The story of the crucifixion is easily the best-known and most frequently remembered event recorded in the New Testament. Even the nativity stories, despite their familiarity, tend to be trotted out only once a year. But the death of Jesus, quite apart from the special significance attached to Good Friday, is recalled to our minds by every cross we see, by every Communion service we attend, by a large number of evangelistic sermons and books, and by the personal testimony of all who have found peace with God. Other things can be put aside or neglected for a time, but there is no getting away from the cross, the heart of Christianity.

The central place which the cross occupies in the Christian life is no accident, and believers are usually prompt to point out its significance — on the cross the Son of God became sin for us, paying the debt we owe to God, satisfying the demands of His law and justice, bringing reconciliation to those who were dead in trespasses and sins and giving us an entry by His sacrifice into the holy of holies, into the presence of God Himself. This interpretation, the so-called "penal substitutionary theory" of the atonement, has certainly met with considerable opposition from those who find such an idea immoral or barbaric, but experience has shown that it alone has the power to change men's lives. When Paul went to Corinth, he knew what the objections would be, yet he determined to know nothing among them but Christ, and Christ crucified (I Corinthians 2:2).

Paul's reasons for such behaviour are clear enough. His business as an apostle was to preach the wisdom and the power of God, not the logic or the convenience of men. It is a point which is easily forgotten, especially when the preacher is so often constrained to preach on politics, social welfare, family life and other more "relevant" topics. The message of Scripture on this score is plain enough — relevance is the cross, and its saving message "to all who are called". The Church is not a body of well-intentioned people seeking to do good. It is a motley collection of the weak, the foolish, the despised and the rejected — men and women whom the world does not want, but who have found their peace and their glory in the calling of Jesus Christ.

Today we are in desperate need of a renewed emphasis on the Atonement. It may be that some ears have grown dull with hearing, though experience suggests that such ears are more likely to belong to the preacher than to members of the congregation. Sin is not a popular subject; forgiveness, in today's "adult" climate, even less so. Can we forget the catch phrase from Erich Segal's popular *Love Story* — "love means never having to say you're sorry"? Today we are asked to accept everything, to demand nothing — reconciliation has lost its meaning, because in a loving relationship there should never have been a falling-out in the first place. If God is prepared to forgive us when we do not deserve it, why does He not go one step further and just accept us as we are?

The subtle transition from a gospel of forgiveness to a message of acceptance without qualification is a perversion of the evangelical faith which has crept into more than one pulpit, almost certainly unawares. Yet the atoning work of Christ on the cross does not mean, as the Third Eucharistic Prayer in the Church of England's Alternative Service Book (1980) has it, that "he opened wide his arms for us on the cross". He did nothing of the kind. Jesus'

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arms were outstretched and nailed to the cross as a sign of His human impotence as the sacrificial victim. Christ did not reach down from the cross to receive the world; rather He looked up from the cross to His Father, whose will he was doing and whose wrath he was appeasing. What we experience as free forgiveness comes with the greatest price tag in the world attached to it — the lifeblood of the Son of God.

The importance of this teaching must always be safeguarded against attack, especially when attacks so often come in such subtle ways. Furthermore, we need to remember that although atonement might have been made in other ways, the crucifixion is given to us not merely as a picture to help us understand its cost, but also as a model to guide and direct our spiritual life. Here there is a great mystery which needs to be carefully understood. God knew that only he could provide the sacrifice needed for sin. No sinful human being could make atonement, nor contribute in any way to his own salvation. At the same time, God knew that the way of the cross — death by mortification of the flesh and its desires — was the only way a sinful man could enter into His presence. The Holy Trinity could not receive into their fellowship anyone who had not undergone that process of transformation. We cannot accept the idea of purgatory, but the principle which it enshrines is surely valid. There can be no "cheap grace", no acceptance with God without a root-and-branch change in the life of the believer.

What is wrong with a doctrine of purgatory is that it makes this change a second-stage process, either in this life or in the next. The heart of Protestant objections to it was well-expressed by John Wesley when he said that he took himself to Christ for sanctification as well as for justification. In Wesley's theology, "Christ" in this context can only mean the cross and His atoning work. To put it another way, the New Testament teaches that the cross is both the unique atoning work of Jesus and the means whereby that work is applied to sanctify our lives. In the process of sanctification, the crucifixion of Christ becomes a shared experience, in that the believer, justified by faith, is admitted to the privilege of suffering with Him. (cf II Timothy 2:12).

Paul makes this point on any number of occasions. Writing to the Galatians about justification, he says at the end that he bears in his body the marks of the Lord Jesus (Galatians 6:17). The possibility of a purely spiritual interpretation is excluded by what he says elsewhere, as for example in II Corinthians 4:10, where "the dying of the Lord Jesus" is explicitly related to his own sufferings and persecutions. Nor is this suffering vicarious, though some might interpret the text in this way. All believers are admitted to the fellowship of His sufferings (Philippians 3:10), a

point which is made even more clearly by the apostle Peter (1 Peter 4:13).

Now the call to self-denial in the service of Christ is constantly related to the crucifixion. "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live" (Galatians 2:20). Paul is not speaking here of the atonement only, but of his present life in Christ as well. What a mistake it is to interpret this verse as a sequence of events, justification *followed* by new life. There is that sequence of course, but the crucifixion is present at the heart of each stage of the Christian's pilgrimage, not just at the beginning!

There is obviously a great deal which can be said about mortification, but in view of the link we have established with the crucifixion it seems best to look primarily at the words of Jesus on the cross which have special relevance to this theme. There are two of these, both of them recorded for us only in John's gospel. The first is found in John 19:26-27 — Woman, behold thy son. Son behold thy mother. In these words we sense the pain of renunciation as Jesus tears himself away from his only full relative on earth. Of course there are many hints of this throughout the gospels. One might even say that the evangelists were at pains to distance Jesus from his human family — from his mother in particular. It comes out in the story when he was in the temple at the age of twelve, in the wedding feast at Cana and later on during his ministry (Matthew 12:48-50).

Yet in none of these instances can we really speak of a renunciation. It formed part of the teaching of Jesus (Mark 10:29) but the poignancy of the experience is brought home only on the cross. For not only is Jesus giving up his mother, he is giving his own place in her affections to another. We are accustomed to look at this from Mary's point of view, and say that Jesus was providing her with security in old age, or something of the kind. This is not impossible, but Jesus had half-brothers who could have taken the responsibility without being asked, and the cross was hardly the place to make such a domestic arrangement!

In examining the meaning of this verse, the wider context of Jesus' suffering must be taken as the basic framework for our interpretation. It is *His* pain which we are discussing, not that of the onlookers. Seen in this light, a verse which otherwise is little more than a touching detail becomes a vital challenge to every believer. How many of us are prepared to put God before family? Of course, our families are a responsibility which we cannot neglect; Jesus does not leave Mary without support. But how many of us would be prepared to share our families in this way, to commit our loved ones to the care of others, even for a short time? Are we so attached to our human relations that they come before our calling in the sight of God?

The question needs to be faced with great urgency today. Many Christians have responded to the pressures put on the nuclear family in modern society by trying to reinforce the blood-tie. Marriage enrichment, family development and the like are becoming increasingly popular, even to the point where the impression is given that it is right and proper for a believer to seek fulfilment in these things. Yet how can the transitory ever offer satisfaction? The man or woman who puts parents, spouse or children before Christ is bound to lose them. There are already enough spinsters around who "sacrificed everything for mother" and are now left with nothing. Will we produce a generation of widows in the same position, with no word of comfort to guide them because they have never learned the basic principles of renunciation?

The second word from the cross is "I thirst" (John 19:28). Here again various interpretations have been suggested, but the "naturalistic" ones, eg that vinegar would help

soothe the pain and *speed up death* are both trivial and excluded by the reference to Psalm 69:21, where no such idea is entertained. In Psalm 69 the writer is speaking of the depths of degradation to which his sufferings have driven him. Those on whom he might have leaned for support have turned on him, offering only vinegar and gall. The thirst of Jesus signifies yet another aspect of his suffering, the bitterness of rejection. It is a theme which is frequent in the Scriptures, from Isaiah 53:3 to John 1:11. Jesus himself rebuked the Jews for their refusal to accept him and his teaching, and we find a similar rejection in the ministry of Paul who was turned out of the synagogues and opposed even within some of the churches he had founded.

All this is familiar enough. What is perhaps less often realised is that both Jesus and Paul suffered pain in being rejected. The Son of God did not come to strangers. He came to his own, and it was they who refused to receive Him. Again, we know that rejection formed part of the teaching of Jesus. He prophesied that his message would bring a sword which would divide families and friends (Matthew 10:34). Yet only on the cross did he himself experience that ultimate rejection of which he had spoken. His disciples deserted Him. His nation acquiesced in His crucifixion, even to the point of begging the Roman authorities to put him to death in spite of Pilate's declaration of His innocence.

The way of the cross is the way of rejection by men. We are blessed when men revile us and persecute us, saying all kinds of false things against us for His sake (Matthew 5:11). Sadly, it is all too true that the comfortable Western church is attacked by the world not falsely, but justly, for having perverted its message and lost its first love.

The churches bend over backwards to please, to attract the unbeliever, to demonstrate how Christians too are concerned with the issues which disturb the world. When courageous people like Mary Whitehouse stand out against the prevailing trends in society, it is all too often the church authorities who attack them, along with the secular media! The bitterness of rejection can often be felt most keenly within the visible household of faith. The agony of Christ may well be shared by His disciples in this respect as in others.

This being said, there is one danger which must be avoided. Jesus told His disciples that they must take up their cross in order to follow Him (Matthew 16:24). What does this mean? Some have thought that a believer should seek out a cross, as a burden to be borne. Others have regarded every setback, misfortune or illness as a cross sent to them by God. Many have derived a perverse sense of satisfaction, even pride, from the pains they have endured supposedly for the cause of Christ.

What should be said about this? First, taking up the cross is a *commitment*. When the Crusaders pledged themselves to fight, they "took the cross". When the sign of the cross is given in baptism, it is given as a reminder of the commitment expected of the newly baptised. Second, to take up the cross is to prepare oneself for the suffering which will come as we *follow* Him. The second part of Christ's command is indispensable, because it balances the first part. Suffering is never an end in itself. The crucifixion was grounded in obedience — not my will, but thy will be done — and consummated in the glory of the resurrection. The Christian believer must follow his Lord in this as in everything else. To exalt the one aspect out of its context is to court disaster. The crucifixion is central, but in the life of Jesus it lasted only three hours. Obedience on the other hand is eternal, as is the resurrection glory, which will be revealed in us when the sufferings of the present time are over (Romans 8:18).