

‘THEY HATED ME WITHOUT CAUSE’

By EDWARD MALLY

THE sense of God’s involvement in our history, and of our personal responsibility to him, is so fundamental a religious concept, that whenever that sense is weakened or lost there can be no true religion and no true morality. St. Paul saw that even in the case of the Gentiles. Although outside the sphere of the Jewish revelation, they closed their eyes and ears to the revelation which God makes in his creation and within the hearts of men, and thus culpably exposed themselves to God’s anger. ‘The knowledge of God is clear to their minds; God himself has made it clear to them . . . Thus there is no excuse for them; although they had the knowledge of God, they did not honour him or give thanks to him as God; they became fantastic in their notions, and their senseless hearts grew benighted.’¹ ‘As for the Gentiles, though they have no law to guide them, there are times when they carry out the precepts of the law unbidden, finding in their own natures a rule to guide them, in default of any other rule; and this shows that the obligations of the law are written in their hearts; their conscience utters its own testimony.’²

In our own times, there is no surer sign that men have lost in large measure that sense of God’s closeness, than in the widespread weakening of modern man’s sense of right and wrong, of freedom and responsibility, and in the almost complete secularisation of our morality. Sin and guilt in many cases are considered to be not only outdated notions, but also a source of mental anxiety; moral restrictions are looked upon as a hindrance to the spontaneous unfolding of the personality. In brief, divorced from the God of love and salvation, modern man feels the emptiness of human life weighing heavily upon him.

In attempting to restore the sense of sin as a personal offence against God, nothing can replace a prayerful reading of the Scriptures. For in the Old and New Testament, the revelation of the

¹ Rom 1, 19, 21.

² Rom 2, 14–15.

existence and nature of sin goes hand in hand with God's revelation of himself. In revealing himself as our Saviour, God has revealed us to ourselves as a race of redeemed sinners. This revelation of sin and of its true meaning in God's plan of history was, like God's revelation of himself, made 'in many ways and by many means, through the prophets',¹ and was brought to its term in the life and death of the Incarnate Word of God. The mystery of the redemptive Incarnation is that Christ who is the fullness of God's self-revelation because he 'is the radiance of his Father's splendour, and the full expression of his being'² sums up also the revelation of sin, because he who knew nothing of sin was for our sake made sin.³ Sin, then, will always be a meaningless abstraction for every man who has not believed in the Christ who was given up for our offences.⁴ Christ's life, passion, and death are the only light in which sin appears in its true colours, as the free acquiescence of a creature in the world's hatred for a beneficent and condescending Maker, as the malicious preference of blindness, falsehood, and death, over Light, Truth, and Eternal Life. In the figure of Christ crucified we have the finality of sin laid bare: the destruction and death of God himself. But leading up to that final consummation of Christ's death was the whole conflict which took place during his life between himself and the powers of sin. For, in coming into the world, the Word of God could not but be the judgment of this world. He could not but unleash the conflict that would lead men either to Eternal Life or eternal death. In the presence of Christ, every man must choose definitively either Life or death.

Our purpose in these pages will be to present, in a very brief and incomplete way, certain aspects of sin as an offence against God, as they appear in the letters of St. Paul and in the Gospel according to St. John.

'The Scripture describes all mankind as the prisoners of sin'.⁵

It is the Apostle of the Gentiles who brings out most dramatically the contrast between sin and salvation. 'The Scripture describes all mankind as the prisoners of sin, so that the promised blessing made to Abraham's lineage might on the ground of faith in Jesus Christ be given to those who have faith.' The Gospel, the Church, the New Alliance in Christ's blood – these are the manifestations

¹ Heb 1, 1.

² Heb 1, 3.

³ 2 Cor 5, 21.

⁴ Rom 4, 25.

⁵ Gal 3, 22.

of God's saving justice;¹ they are God's power for the salvation of everyone who has faith.² But St. Paul can only conceive of this saving transformation which God has gratuitously bestowed on man in his Incarnate Son, in terms of its opposite, that is, in reference to the state of slavery into which man had freely plunged himself, and in which he was condemned blindly to dwell. In this view sin is for St. Paul a state of enslavement to evil forces, as best seen in the pagan world of his time.³

The Epistle to the Romans contains many references to this conception of sin as a captive force enslaving man: Jews and Greeks alike are 'under the control of sin'.⁴ 'God has made all men prisoners of disobedience so as to have mercy on them all'.⁵ In baptism 'our former nature has been crucified with him, . . . so that we are the slaves of guilt no longer'.⁶

Moreover, sin is a captive force affecting man from within his being, just as the Spirit which conquers sin from within a man.⁷ Christ's death, on the other hand, is a liberation from the slavery of sin: 'The spiritual principle of life has set me free, in Jesus Christ, from the principle of sin and of death'.⁸

In another series of texts, St. Paul contrasts the death of Christ as reconciliation with God, with sin as a state of enmity with God. 'Enemies of God, we were reconciled to him through his Son's death; reconciled to him, we are surer than ever of finding salvation in his Son's life'.⁹ The transformation effected by union with Christ 'comes from God, who through Christ has reconciled us to himself, and allowed us to minister this reconciliation of his to others. Yes, God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, establishing in our hearts his message of reconciliation, instead of holding men to account for their sins'.¹⁰ Again, Christ has brought peace among men, breaking down the barriers that divided Jews and Gentiles. Alluding to two passages in the prophecy of Isaias,¹¹ St. Paul writes to the Ephesians: 'But now you are in Christ Jesus; now, through the blood of Christ, you have been brought close, you who were once so far away. He is our bond of peace; he has made the two nations one, breaking down the wall that was a barrier between us, the enmity there was between us, in his own mortal nature. He has

¹ Rom 1, 17.

⁴ Rom 3, 9.

⁷ Rom 7, 20-23.

¹⁰ 2 Cor 5, 18-19.

² Rom 1, 16.

⁵ Rom 11, 32.

⁸ Rom 8, 2.

¹¹ Isai 9, 5; 57, 19.

³ Rom 1, 28-32.

⁶ Rom 6, 6.

⁹ Rom 5, 10.

put an end to the law with its decrees, so as to make peace, remaking the two human creatures as one in himself; both sides, united in a single body, he would reconcile to God through his cross, inflicting death, in his own person, upon the feud. So he came, and his message was of peace for you who were far off, peace for those who were near; far off or near, united in the same Spirit, we have access through him to the Father'.¹ The same conception of sin as enmity with God the Father appears in the Epistle to the Colossians: 'It was God's good pleasure to let all completeness dwell in him, and through him to win back all things, whether on earth or in heaven, into union with himself, making peace with them through his blood, shed on the cross. You too were once estranged from him; your minds were alienated from him by a life of sin; but now he has used Christ's natural body to win you back through his death, and so bring you into his presence, holy, and spotless, and unproved'.²

For St. Paul, then, sin has come to mean not an isolated offence against God, nor a series of individual offences, however heinous, but a reality or condition of cosmic dimensions affecting man and the universe in their relation to God. It is a state of disorder, rebellion, estrangement from God, in which all men, Jews and Gentiles, are held prisoner³ and from which there is no human escape.⁴ Left to himself, man no longer has the liberty to choose between God and Satan, but only between one sin and another.

In all of this, St. Paul brings his theological prowess to bear upon his own experience of salvation in Christ. As a Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus considered himself irreproachable by the standard of the Mosaic Law. But his conversion led him to realise that he was foremost of sinners,⁵ and that his blindness consisted precisely in believing that there could be any sinlessness apart from Christ. It is in this sense that he writes to the Galatians that the Jewish Law was powerless to bring life and justification,⁶ that in fact the Law imprisoned man in his sin.⁷

What is the cause of this inescapable estrangement from God which has overtaken all of mankind? St. Paul traces it to the sin of Adam. The account of man's sin in the book of Genesis is the beginning of a drama or historical process in which two opposing forces will be constantly at play – man and God. Once fallen from

¹ Eph 2, 13–18.

² Col 1, 19–22.

³ Rom 3, 9, 23.

⁴ Rom 7, 23–25.

⁵ 1 Tim 1, 15.

⁶ Gal 3, 22.

⁷ Cf. Rom 3, 20.

God's favour, man's history becomes the history of the inexorable spread of sin, generation after generation repeating for itself the rebellion of our first parents, until 'the Lord saw that the wickedness of man on earth was great, and that the whole bent of his thinking was never anything but evil'.¹

In tracing man's sinful state to Adam, St. Paul completes the Old Testament belief which saw Adam's rebellion as at least the prototype of every man's sin, and the reason why all men are doomed to die.² For St. Paul sin is that, and much more. For now, he suggests that all men not only come under the curse of Adam's having to die, but that we also share somehow in Adam's rebellion against God by the mere fact of being his sons. Thus, God's curse that woman shall bear her children in pain, and that man shall gain his living in suffering and by the sweat of his brow,³ and that the earth will yield its fruit grudgingly – these visible facts of human existence become, in St. Paul's mind, symbolic of a deeper disorder within man, a disorder mysteriously connected with Adam's sin and touching every man, even before he can consciously and freely ratify by his personal sin the rebellion of his father Adam.

The counter-movement of this progressive spreading of sin, however, is God's gratuitous intervention to save man from his sin. Thus the choice of Noah, of Abraham, of Moses and the Jewish people, become, in St. Paul's view of salvation history, the fore-runners and pledges of the final intervention by God in Christ Jesus, who alone could break the bonds of sin, where even the Old Law was powerless. 'It was faith in Jesus Christ that was to impart the promised blessing to all those who believe in him.'⁴ Sin is the antithesis of that justification and divine life which Christ's death brought to mankind. 'Because the life of Christ is to reach to all mankind, it was necessary, in the plan of God, that one man have been at the origin of the state of sin, and that sin encompass all men by reason of this one man. Thus there will be perfect concordance, in God's plan, between the fall and salvation. Adam will be the 'type' of Christ.⁵ The fall will be patterned on the salvation.⁶ Even though Adam sinned and brought death and suffering into the world, he was 'the type of him who was to come'.⁷

¹ Gen 6, 5.

² Sir 25, 33; Wis 2, 23–24.

³ Gen 3, 16–19.

⁴ Gal 3, 22.

⁵ Rom 5, 14.

⁶ L. Cerfaux, *Le Christ dans la theologie de Saint Paul* (Paris; Cerf, 1954), p. 177.

⁷ Rom 5, 14.

In the joy of Christ's victory, sin loses for the redeemed Christian all its desperate morbidity. 'Pitiable creature that I am, who is to set me free from a nature thus doomed to death? Nothing else than the grace of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord'.¹ In the final analysis, sin has been the occasion of God's greatest manifestation of his mercy. It is seen in all its emptiness and impotency in the face of a God whose power and love were so great that he could bring good out of so evil a thing as sin.

*'They hated me without cause'*²

In the opening scene of the Fourth Gospel, St. John the Baptist calls Jesus the Lamb of God who is to remove the sin of the world.³ In recounting this event, the evangelist introduces a theme which will figure throughout the course of his Gospel. For his purpose is to record the message of salvation wrought in Christ, the message of how the Word of God by his life and death brought Eternal Life to men, and conquered the sin of the world. What is particularly noteworthy about the Gospel according to St. John is that it portrays Christ's work of redemption as a battle of ever mounting intensity between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, life and death. By casting his record of our Lord's earthly career in this framework, the evangelist gives us a deeply theological presentation of what this sin of the world was, which the Lamb of God had come to remove.

The Roman Liturgy of the last three weeks of Lent tries to relive that growing storm of opposition between the Jews and Christ. The Gospel readings during those weeks are taken, with very few exceptions, from the Gospel according to St. John, and particularly from those sections which show Christ in the most open conflict with his enemies. These Gospel readings find their culmination in the solemn chanting of the Passion of our Lord according to St. John, on Good Friday.

We have chosen two passages from the Fourth Gospel to illustrate what St. John calls 'the sin of the world'. The first of these is chapter 9, where Christ, in connection with the cure of a man born blind, reveals himself as the Light of the world⁴. More than that: in this 'sign', Christ shows himself as the Light which has come into the world and been rejected by the world. Because wicked men preferred their own blindness, 'their sin continues'.⁵

¹ Rom 7, 24-25.

² Jn 15, 25.

³ 1, 29.

⁴ 9, 5.

⁵ 9, 41.

At the beginning of this chapter, Christ's disciples are heard questioning him about the man blind from birth. 'Master, for whose sin was this man born blind? For his own or for that of his parents?'¹ The question of sin is introduced from the start. Christ immediately dismisses these conjectures, and, looking not at the cause of the man's blindness but at its purpose, declares that it is to be the sign of 'what God can do'.² Then, imitating the creative gesture of the Father who 'moulded man out of the clay of the ground',³ Christ 'spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva and put the clay on the man's eyes',⁴ as if to show that he was about to exercise a new act of creation on this man, to infuse new life into him. The blind man follows Christ's directions and is cured.

Thus far we have the fact: a man blind from birth has had his sight restored. But now St. John begins to unfold the deeper meaning of this 'sign'. First he recounts the reaction of the people. The effect of Christ's cure is contention and disbelief. First the Pharisees: 'This man does not come from God, for he does not keep the sabbath . . . How can a sinful man show such signs as these?'⁵ Then the parents of the cured man: 'We do not know how he can see now, or who has made him able to see. You must ask him. He is grown up. Let him tell you about himself'.⁶ The blind man, still stunned by his cure, does not yet understand the meaning of Christ's action, and can only respond to his questioners by repeating the bare fact: 'He put some clay on my eyes, and I washed them, and I can see'.⁷ But little by little, the meaning of Christ's sign becomes clear to the man, as the eyes of his spiritual understanding are opened; and, in contrast to him stand the Pharisees whose understanding of this event becomes progressively darker. 'You are a disciple of his yourself', the Pharisees declare, 'but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses, but we do not know where this man came from'.⁸ But the cured man, already reacting to the irony of their words: 'There is something very strange about this! You do not know where he came from, and yet he has made me able to see! We know that God does not listen to sinful people, but if a man is devout and obeys God, God will listen to him. It was never heard of in this world that anyone made a man born blind able to see. If this man were not from God, he could not do anything'.⁹ And then St. John adds, 'So they excluded him from the synagogue'.¹⁰

¹ 9, 2.² 9, 3.³ Gen 2, 7.⁴ Jn 9, 6.⁵ 9, 16.⁶ 9, 21, 23.⁷ 9, 15.⁸ 9, 29.⁹ 9, 30-33.¹⁰ 9, 34.

Already this man has had to pay the price of his loyalty to Christ. He has been called to witness before a world hostile to Christ, to give testimony to the Light. He has seen his own parents retreat in their defence of him, out of fear of that hostile world. He has been insulted, and, last of all, he has been cut off from his people. It is now time for Christ to open the man's eyes completely.

'Dost thou believe in the Son of God? . . . He is one whom thou hast seen; it is he who is speaking to thee'. The cured man's answer is an act of faith in Jesus: 'I do believe, Lord', and an act of adoration: ' . . . and fell down to worship him'.¹

In preference to Jesus of Nazareth, the Light of the world, the world has chosen the darkness of its own empty wisdom, and this, according to St. John is its sin. The sin of the world is its hatred of Christ, its disbelief of him, its calculated rejection of him. 'If you were blind, you would not be guilty. It is because you protest, we can see clearly, that you cannot be rid of your guilt'.²

Our second passage from the fourth Gospel is taken from Christ's discourse at the last supper.³ This time, Christ's words are directed not to a hostile world, but to his own disciples. And yet, there is an unmistakable similarity in the message which Christ gives, almost as if St. John were exposing a new dimension of meaning in the sign of the cured blind man. For now he shows how the sin of the world continues even after Christ's departure from this world.

Once again St. John puts us in the presence of Christ's enemies. In the earlier chapter, it was the Pharisees; now his enemies are introduced as 'the world'. 'If the world hates you, be sure that it hated me before it learned to hate you. If you belonged to the world, the world would know you for its own and love you; it is because you do not belong to the world, because I have singled you out from the midst of the world, that the world hates you'.⁴ Once again there is a beggar whose eyes have been opened to Light and Truth; only now he appears as the disciples: 'They will pay the same attention to your words as to mine'.⁵ Once again Christ is present in the midst of the world exercising 'judgement', that is, division and discrimination. Only now Christ acts through the Paraclete, 'that Spirit of Truth that comes from the Father'.⁶ 'He will come, and it will be for him to prove the world wrong, about sin, and about rightness of heart, and about judging'.⁷ And once again Christ pronounces

¹ 9, 38.

² 9, 41.

³ 15, 18-16, 11.

⁴ 15, 18-19.

⁵ 15, 20.

⁶ 15, 26.

⁷ 16, 8.

judgement on the world for its rejection of his signs, just as earlier he had pronounced judgement on the Pharisees: 'If I had not come and given them my message, they would not have been in fault; as it is, their fault can find no excuse'.¹ Again there is the same appeal to Christ's signs and deeds: 'If I had not done what no one else could have done in their midst they would not have been in fault; as it is, they have hated, with open eyes, both me and my Father. And all this, in fulfilment of the saying which is written in their law, They hated me without cause'.² Finally, there is the same 'I believe' of the enlightened beggar, ever alive in the faithful witness of the apostles and Church: 'You too are to be my witnesses, you who from the first have been in my company'.³

In the earlier passage, Jesus bade the blind man wash his eyes in the pool of Siloam. Here, in the context of the last supper, Christ himself purifies his apostles by the self-effacement of his whole redemptive mission, so beautifully summarised in the sign of the feet-washing. The price of the blind man's loyalty to Jesus was his expulsion from the synagogue; here Christ tells his faithful ones all that they will have to undergo from the world on his account: 'They will persecute you just as they have persecuted me . . . They will forbid you the synagogue; nay, the time is coming when anyone who puts you to death will claim that he is performing an act of worship to God'.⁴ Once again it will be Christ himself who will be put on trial and condemned in his disciples, just as surely as it was Christ himself who was brought before the Pharisees and rejected in the person of the cured blind man. And once again it will be Christ, only this time acting through his Spirit, who will open the eyes of the disciples, and confirm their faith in the midst of all this adversity, just as surely as it was he who was at work in the heart of the beggar, helping him to see that this man was from God,⁵ and prompting his act of faith.⁶ When Christ is gone from this earth, the Paraclete will expose the sin of the world, 'as shown in their not believing in me'.⁷

To sin, then, means to reject Christ in his Church. This sin of the world brings its own condemnation, for apart from the Church there is only darkness and falsehood. And every individual act of ours will be sinful to the extent that it constitutes a rejection of Christ in his Church. If there is any spiritual lesson that we can

¹ 15, 22.

⁵ 9, 33.

² 15, 24-25.

⁶ 9, 38.

³ 15, 27.

⁷ 16, 9.

⁴ 15, 20; 16, 2.

learn from the reading of the fourth Gospel during the last few weeks of Lent, it should be a deeper sense of the ecclesial dimension of sin. St. John brings out in the course of his Gospel that the title Jesus of Nazareth epitomised, so to speak, the very humility and self-effacement of the Incarnate Word that was such a scandal to his enemies, but at the same time prompted the faith of those who believed in him. We can apply the same thought to the Mystical Christ. If the Church is, to those of us who believe, the very Person of Christ living in us who are united to him through faith and the sacraments, it is also, to those who do not believe, a scandal and foolishness. But this very fact of our union with Christ and his members in the Church shows sin to be, in the final analysis, an acquiescence in the world's hatred of the Church, and a contribution toward the disunity and destruction of the Church.

The liturgy of Lent, and of Good Friday in particular, seems to focus our attention upon the crucified Christ exclusively. Yet, even as we venerate the pierced Body of Christ, our thoughts cannot be far from the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church, which is the visible sign of his victory over sin on the cross. St. John records the piercing of Christ's side not only as an historical event which took place upon the dead body of Jesus, but even more significantly, as a sign of the Mystical Body of Christ coming to life. It is the sign of the birth of the Church, of the baptism of all humanity in water and blood, that is, of the purification of mankind from sin through the sacrificial death of the God-Man. It is the sign of Christ sleeping in death on the cross, from whose side flow forth the fountains of eternal life in the sacraments of the Church. For it is through these that the Lamb of God, having removed the *sin* of the world, removes day by day the *sins* of the world.

In the liturgy of Good Friday the Church sings the ancient *Trisagion*, acclaiming in Greek and Latin the holiness of God, as against the reproaches of the crucified Christ to the people who have hated him without cause. These *Improperia* are a true commentary on the sin of the whole world, and not merely on the sins of the Jews who crucified him. 'O my people, what wrong have I done you? When have I ever grieved you? Answer me!' To this complaint of Love, the whole Church answers, in profound and humble faith, with a cry for mercy: 'Thou art the holy God, holy and strong, holy and immortal: have mercy on us'.