'IF WE ENDURE WITH HIM'

By WILLIAM LAWSON

SUFFERING is a fact of every human life. Pain of body, mind and heart have been with the human race from the beginning and will be with it to the end. Yet for all his centuries of experience man still cannot reconcile himself to suffering. He is shocked when it grips him. He has to think out his life afresh and make it admit an element which is foreign to it. Often he fails to find an acceptable meaning in pain, and he endures it hopelessly, or rails against fate, or charges God with cruelty and injustice.

Pain is a problem. Some small part of it can be explained as the warning of a sensitive nature that the body requires care. So, the pangs of hunger lead to nourishment of the body, and sensations of heat and cold to its protection. Physical excess brings fatigue, soreness, perhaps serious damage. But beyond the body's warning system, and its response to ill-treatment, there is pain that is unmerited yet unavoidable, pain that is crippling and intractable. We can all understand hunger and thirst, bruises, indigestion, and the disabilities of advancing years. We could see the reasonableness of great physical evils, were they an immediate result of wickedness. 'Master, was this man guilty of sin, or was it his parents, that he should have been born blind?'[1] But the worst pains of life do not result from the sin of the sufferer. 'Neither he nor his parents were guilty'. Those pains have a meaning and purpose 'that God's action might declare itself in him'; but if they are punishment why do they fall on the innocent rather than the guilty? 'What of those eighteen men on whom the tower fell in Siloe, and killed them; do you suppose that there was a heavier account against them than against any others who then dwelt at Jerusalem? I tell you it was not so: you will all perish as they did, if you do not repent'.[2] Is there carelessness in God so that he passes just judgement and then executes sentence haphazard? In the modern jargon, 'victimisation' means taking revenge on offenders, or striking the innocent because of their 'solidarity' with the guilty. By referring all evil back to original sin, do we not attribute to God the abhorred practice of victimisation?

[1] Jn 9, 2–3. [2] Lk 13, 4–5.

But why should there be suffering at all? If there were no God, we might adopt a blindly optimistic theory of evolution and say that matter was gradually purging itself of imperfection, progressing steadily towards a state of faultless efficiency. The problem of pain would be one merely of ways and means. But the fact of God's existence, infinite in wisdom and love and mercy, makes pain a contradiction that is hard to resolve. It is because we know God's goodness that we have the problem of pain at its worst in the conflict between the human right to happiness and the seeming impossibility of reaching it.

The proper setting for a new-born child is a garden of Eden. Here is a work of God – perfect of its kind, you would be inclined to say. He comes into another work of God, also perfect of its kind. His goodness is progressive, the realization or actualization of his potentialities, both physical and spiritual. He is fully equipped in body and mind, and the world is there to supply all he needs for growth – air, space, light, food, knowledge, human relations in family and society. A complete present leads through continuous fulfilments into a future of boundless possibility and mounting achievement.

As a dream of a young married couple with their first baby, that would be smiled away as romanticism. But their dreams are like that; and they are not a mere reminiscence of a golden age, but a recognition that God made the world and mankind and saw that they were good. How else should human beings look at their future but with hope? And what is hope but the confident expectation of a satisfying conclusion to the desires of a nature created by God? Man is alive; ought not his life to be full? The very condition of human living is an inner demand for perfection, reached, from one stage of completeness to the next, by the satisfying of needs, the taking of opportunities, the transmuting of every new potential into actuality. It would be grossly unnatural not to have an insatiable appetite for life. Romanticism of that kind is genuine realism.

But there is a shock and a problem when that realism encounters reality.

The child is born to the hopeful parents. They expect the perfect baby; but doctors and midwives would not think the world had changed overnight if the baby were not fully human. Physical and mental defects are frequent enough for the birth of a good baby to be an occasion for sighs of relief.

Where should hope look when there is desire for life but no capacity of it? What is hope of health and vigour when the phy-

sically handicapped child can barely survive or can only drag himself painfully through successive stages of frustration? The lame, the blind, the deaf... it is only the senile defects which cannot be found in children. Can a natural and blameless romanticism survive in the presence of defect of mind, of children who should open eyes and spirit to all the promise of the world and of human relations and who must remain blank and lonely behind an impenetrable veil?

But would they be better off if they could see the world and if they had a full capacity for life? Of the nine hundred million children in the world, five hundred million will live and die in want. Half the children of black Africa will die of hunger or disease before they are fifteen. Is it any wonder if the rosiness of hope changes to the grey of resignation or the blackness of melancholy and despair? Life is not a secure possession from which man at his ease can enjoy a surrounding plenty, and grow to full stature. It is an imperfect reality, precariously held, beset with dangers and always on the defensive.

It needs defence against people. Man's inhumanity to man is an endless and gruesome story. Every year in England there are tens of thousands of new cases of cruelty to children, mostly by their parents. There is still slavery in the world, and sweated labour, and greed for wealth and power and security at the expense of people. Race hatred is in full fury in some countries, and in others it threatens to spread from sporadic outbreaks. The two halves of the world are irreconcilably opposed, and each possesses the means of destroying both.

What are ill-treated children to make of their natural need for happiness? You can see shock and bewilderment in their faces. Do they ever get beyond the recognition of an insoluble problem? Do they live and die in desperate puzzlement? What sense is there in hope for the inhabitants of a country admittedly insufficient for the good life? 'In process of development'... how many millions will die before the process will be far enough advanced to provide the bare necessaries of life? All over the world what can parents depend on for themselves and their children? Safety and security are essentials of the good life, and they do not exist. Hope falters in face of so appalling a future; and with hope gone human nature is monstrous.

Something is terribly wrong with the world, or with human nature, or both.

Out-and-out evolutionists would say that we live at a stage in the development of matter which is a long way from perfection, but all we need is time. A state of complete happiness will inevitably be reached. Present unhappiness is not due to radical defects in human nature. The material for perfection is all there, but it must work itself out by its inner dialectic.

Milder versions of the doctrine are many. The present defects are admitted but they are attributed not to human nature but to the external conditions of human life. Human nature is thoroughly good, like, for example, a perfect seed. Give the seed everything it requires for perfect development – the right soil, fertilizers, weather and the rest – and it will come to perfect maturity. Put a human being into perfect material and social circumstances and he or she will arrive at a physical and spiritual completeness which will mean happiness for self and society. In the long run a united effort will free mankind from want, from the provocations to selfishness, from national and international unrest, and from the fears they breed.

There is a widespread reluctance to admit the presence in man of a spiritual, that is, a non-material element. Yet it is the spirit of man which makes him what everyone in practice expects him to be – self-possessed, free, responsible for his own acts.

It is the spirit in man which is the dominant element; and, when we find the conflict between rooted aspirations towards happiness and endless obstacles to their realization, it is in the spirit that we should seek for causes.

The revealed infallible teaching of the Church gives the full explanation. It is logical; it fits the facts of external history and of the inner history of every man, woman and child; and it shows why life is what we find it to be, and how we can make it what it ought to be. It reconciles the apparent contradition between a natural desire for happiness and a natural inability to achieve it. It gives an acceptable solution to the problem of pain, and offers to everyone a way to happiness both present and future.

God made the world and all the creatures in it. It is an ordered world, where order depends on every creature being what it was made to be. That is understandable from our human affairs; a machine works when all its parts are what they should be and in their proper place; a play can be put on only if each actor takes his own part; life would be unlivable if nothing were according to its nature, if bread were stone, and fishes were serpents, and bricks were soluble in water. St. Augustine says 'The will of the sublime

creator makes itself known in the nature of every created being. According to God's law the poles of heaven turn and the stars follow their course, the sun lights up the day and the moon the night, and the great universe keeps its order through days, months, years, sun-years and star-years in the steady change of the seasons'.[1]

Man, like all other creatures, has his nature from God, and his nature shows God's will for him. The will of God is that man should be what he was made to be. Man knows God's will, for he is rational and self-conscious.

> It is not above thy reach, it is not beyond thy compass, this duty which I am now enjoining upon thee. It is not a secret laid up in heaven, that thou must needs find someone to scale heaven and bring it down to thee before thou canst hear what it is, and obey it. It is not an art, practised far overseas, that thou must wait for someone to go voyaging and bring it back to thee before thou canst learn to live by it. No, this message of mine is close to thy side; it rises to thy lips, it is printed on thy memory; thou hast only to fulfil it.[2]

Man is in command of himself by free will, and he must make his will coincide with God's. He must obey the law of God, the law of his being, and so fulfil himself in an ordered universe.

At the root of all the disorder in the world is a disorder in the spirit of man, the only creature in the visible creation capable of refusing to accept the order in which he was set. The human spirit is free to accept the divine plan or to reject it for a plan of its own. At the beginning of human history stands the rejection by man of the will of his creator, and history unfolds itself consequently in disorder. 'It was through one man that guilt came into the world; and, since death came owing to guilt, death was handed on to all mankind by one man'.[3]

The good life for man cannot be other than the fulfilment of his God-given nature. The first disobedience, in the allegory of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, was to refuse the limits of nature, and to wish to establish codes of good and evil outside them, as though man were his own maker, and could say, regardless of God, what his purpose was and what his perfection.

By that disobedience man rejected God, and God's gift of supernatural life. His happiness is what it alway was – to be himself.

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[1] *The City of God*, 21, 8. [2] Deut 30, 11–14. [3] Rom 5, 12.

He has still that inner demand for full being, and he must respond to it. But because of the original disobedience he not only lacks sanctification, but he is uneasy within himself and out of balance. Having withdrawn himself from submission to God, which his nature requires, he has lost his bearings. Instead of having a sure direction of his life to God, and so, necessarily, to the people of God, he tends to turn inwards upon himself, to be ingrowing – selfish. Hope stays in man; it is part of his nature that he cannot lose. It becomes reasonable, because realizable, only when the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity takes on himself the leadership of the human race.

The fact of the 'solidarity' of the human race is inescapable. The history which we are enduring and making today links all the centuries of the past with whatever remains of the future. Man's present achievements are built on the studies and inventions of earlier ages; his present troubles can be seen in the mistakes or malice of his forbears. Our very health, stature, energy and longevity can be traced to the habits and circumstances of ancestors. It is inevitable that we should feel the effects of man's most important decision, the rejection of God's will and of supernatural life. That is not just a theological proposition unrelated to human nature; it is a statement of a natural relationship admitted by everybody until there is mention of original sin. Hereditary diseases and deficiencies surprise nobody. Our lack of supernatural life, and our proneness to evil, are inherited defects.

The World of God, the second Person of the blessed Trinity, entered into human solidarity when he became man. He is like unto us in all things, except sin. Christ our Lord, the Son of God, must be not only one of us but our head. He draws all men to himself, by the force of his divine personality. His purpose in the Incarnation is to be our mediator with God, to represent us, to sum us all up in himself, to make us part of his mystical body, to bring back to all mankind the life which they lost in Adam. 'Just as all have died with Adam, so with Christ all will be brought to life'.[1] Instead of a solidarity with fallen man we now have a solidarity with the risen Christ.

Before our Lord's coming, every human being had the task that falls to every creature: to live according to his nature and so to do the will of God. Without the preserving and transforming power

[1] 1 Cor 15, 22.

of sanctifying grace, man still had to use intelligence and will in an effort to know, love, and serve God. The effort had to be individual, against the direction given to humanity by its first head. With the Incarnation mankind is turned again in the right direction by Christ who is Head of the race. Man's personal obligation of fulfilling his nature by doing the will of God is met in solidarity with Christ and with all those who acknowledge him as their leader. The whole of life in co-operation with God's providence must now be 'through him, and with him, and in him'.

Christ is our Way. Not only does he show us how to live: he invites us to live with him, to share his purpose of doing the will of God, to join with him in love of God and of God's people.

Goodness and happiness begin, continue and end with obedience to the will of God. Man's whole purpose in living is to do God's will. Now especially obedience is necessary so that man may wipe out for himself and the race the disobedience which stands to man's account. The reparation is made first of all by Christ, but, as beings who possess themselves and are his members, we have to unite our obedience with his. 'See then, I said, I am coming to fulfil what is written of me, where the book lies unrolled; to do thy will, O my God. First he says, Thou didst not demand victim or offering, the burnt sacrifice, the sacrifice for sin, nor hast thou found any pleasure in them; in anything that is, which the law has to offer, and then: – I said, See, my God, I am coming to do thy will'.[1] What is true of Christ is true of ourselves: that we come to do the will of God. 'Christ's mortal nature, then, has been crucified, and you must arm yourselves with the same intention; he whose mortal nature has been crucified is quit, now, of sin. The rest of your mortal life must be ordered by God's will, not by human appetites'.[2] We should make his purpose ours, and by uniting ourselves with him who is our head we should achieve by obedience our own happiness and the healthiness of the whole world.

This also is true, that we owe obedience precisely in our own time and our own place. We are beings of history. Under the providence of God we have our historical setting. It is there and nowhere else that we can and must love and serve God. Let the circumstances be what they may, our obligation is always the same.

Our Lord came at his chosen moment into the world. But once the Incarnation was a fact he had to do God's will in the world as he

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[1] Heb 10, 7–9. [2] 1 Pet 4, 1–2.

found it and in a man-made history. He was born into a people prepared for his coming, and in the fullness of time, when there was an air of expectancy in the world. He gave his revelation of the restoration of hope to mankind, patiently, assiduously, skilfully, with all the warmth of his love. But 'his own received him not'. There were good ordinary people in his world, and bad ordinary people, 'extortioners, unjust, adulterers' like the publican. There were also the ever-present rich and powerful, statesmen, politicians, bureaucrats, leaders of the people who had power and had been corrupted by it. They rejected Christ, and charity, and the will of God; and to make sure of their power they subjected Christ to torture and took his life.

The moment of our coming into the world is not of our choice; but as soon as we arrive we have the exact time in which we must make history which is pleasing to God. Nowadays the voices of the young are sometimes heard raised in protest at the chaos and terror into which they have been born – problems of hunger and disease on a world scale, racialism, the head-on collision of ideologies, nuclear warfare. If they think there ever was a golden age into which to be born they cannot have read their history. In any case, their task is no different from Our Lord's, to live and die for the will of God, and so to achieve their purpose and happiness and to help to recover happiness for the world. Die they must. What is important is to die doing God's will, whether they die worn out with charity or crushed by Mammon for opposing him. 'Blessed are those who suffer persecution in the cause of right; the kingdom of heaven is theirs'.[1] 'As God's ministers, we must do everything to make ourselves acceptable. We have to show great patience, in times of affliction, of need, of difficulty; under the lash, in prison, in the midst of tumult; when we are tired out, sleepless, and fasting'.[2]

We are historical persons in this age and no other. With the certainty that we shall suffer and die we should learn how to do both 'through him, and with him, and in him'.

We should make up our mind firstly whether or not we consider pain an unmitigated evil. After the fact of original sin it can be a blessing. The human race has had experience of a perfect existence which ended with man and woman so contented, so pleased with themselves, that they could not see God. Our own experience warns us that times of peace and prosperity are those when man feels he

[1] Mt 5, 10. [2] 2 Cor 6, 4–5.

can do without God's kingdom easily. 'And once again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye than for a man to enter the kingdom of heaven when he is rich'.[1] We can say 'Out of the depths I have cried to thee, O Lord'. If we were on top of the world, should we cry to him? Dependent as we are, we support ourselves on wealth, comfort, power, security, 'happiness' in all its minor manifestations. It is a blessing to have these supports kicked away and to find that we depend solely on God. 'As it is, the Lord judges us and chastises us, so that we may not incur, as this world incurs, damnation'.[2] Sometimes the depths are so profound that the sufferer cries with Our Lord: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' learning in his complete helplessness to cling to the strong, living God.

Pain, therefore, is not an unmixed evil in our present state. But it is not good in itself; and it is never an end in itself. Pain that can be avoided or removed has to justify its presence by the good resulting from it. If there is no good result, there is no justification for bearing pain. It is then a bad means to a bad end.

The Christian should base his decisions on the two purposes taught him by our Lord, obedience to the will of God, and charity. Suffering in others demands compassion. We are one people, naturally and supernaturally. We should suffer from the unsatisfied hunger and thirst of mankind, and have an appetite which will stimulate us to supply the necessaries of life to those in need. Our final examination is in the charity with which we responded to the sufferings of Christ and his people. 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat: I was thirsty and you gave me to drink . . .'

To the sufferings of others the only satisfactory response is that of the good Samaritan. As we make our way through life we shall certainly see at the roadside the victims of injustice and cruelty, heredity and accident, sufferers in body and mind. They can be as near as our own home and as far as the unapproachable countries under communism; but whatever the distance, they are our neighbours. We are drawn and directed to them by membership of the one human family and by sharing with them the one condemnation our family disobedience, and also by a common hope in Christ who has come into the family as its head. Fellow-feeling, compassion and charity ought to be universal, as suffering is universal. The suffering of others is our responsibility, which we meet out of our

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[1] Mt 19, 23–24. [2] 2 Cor 11, 32.

union with Christ. 'The sufferings of Christ, it is true, overflow into our lives; but there is overflowing comfort, too, which Christ brings to us. Have we trials to endure? It all makes for your encouragement, for your salvation. Are we comforted? It is so that you may be comforted. (Are we encouraged? It is for your encouragement, for your salvation). And the effect of this appears in your willingness to undergo the sufferings we too undergo'.[1]

The conclusion is the same if we describe the condition of mankind in terms of happiness. Christians can enjoy life, because in Christ their desire for completeness and fulfilment makes sense. It is reasonable because it is clearly satisfied in union with Christ from whom they have the more abundant life that meets their needs now and can continue into eternity. This fact in human history is the best news that the frustrated and the hopeless can hear. Christians should feel an irresistible impulse to pass on the good news, and to do it in the way our Lord brought it to them.

'The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the poor have the gospel preached to them'.[2] Cries of suffering should be heard and answered.

This history of mankind, above all in Christian times, has endless examples of pity and compassion; but there are always Christians deaf to the call made on them by want and pain. It is only a small proportion of Christians who choose a career for its content of charity. The first consideration with most is the satisfaction of a selfish need for status, security, repute, power or wealth. Christian living should start from our Lord's teaching that the whole of Christian life is dedicated love and service of God and of God's family. Judgement on individual Christian lives is an examination of their content of charity. Any Christian life should be a response to Christ's insistent and urgent call to charity, and should therefore be a 'vocation' – in religious life, or marriage, or a profession, or a way of making a living. Whether service of the needy is immediate or remote, it can and should be the conscious purpose of the Christian. It is that above all which will make a right distribution of the world's burden of suffering and privation.

The Christian's attitude to his own pain should be formed also on the example of our Lord and on the principles of obedience and charity which are to be found there.

The sufferings of our Lord, once he had undertaken the work of

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[1] 2 Cor 1, 5–6. [2] Mt 11, 5.

our salvation by entering into human history, were indeed sought, but within the historical pattern of his times. He accepted them under the Providence of God and for the benefit of mankind. There have always been Christians who added sufferings of their own choosing to those they could not avoid. But for them, as for everybody, it is the unavoidable hardships that most clearly indicate the will of God; and normally they make a full life of obedience and charity when they are borne in union with Christ. They are the essential of that painful progress towards unselfishness which is also the way to happiness for self and others.

Our Lord was always deliberately in the presence of God the Father, evaluating the events of his life from that point of view, and in all circumstances doing his Father's will. The Christian intent on doing God's will takes up the same position and tries in all situations to adopt divine values and to form his attitudes according to them. Martyrs, Thomas More for example, die because they will not purchase their life by disobedience to God. By keeping to Christian standards in spite of hardship the Christian submits himself to God's law. Like our Lord, he learns obedience by the things he suffers.

The simple-minded hope with which people enter into life and into states of life is always disappointed. The sort of happiness which just presents and unfolds itself belongs to fairy stories. In human history no-one lives happily ever after. The Christian has to build his life and his happiness on the performance of duty – the obligation of doing the will of God and of entering into a relationship of charity with God and his people. Return to paradise is by obedience, in company with Christ who is the way back to God and to happiness.

We should face life from a determination to do God's will. If the doing of God's will brings suffering and even death, we must endure as Christ endured. 'He is led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before his shearer he opens not his mouth'. Instead of being disobediently a law unto ourselves we must obey the law of our nature. The Christian decision must be for poverty of spirit in a grossly materialistic world, for chastity in the midst of sensuality, for a loyal honouring of contract in spite of the betrayals and dishonesties of politics, commerce and industry, for selfless dedication to the partner in marriage though marriage may have disappointed hopes of happiness. We must make our life in this time, in a corrupt society, with inevitable pain, and by union with Christ in his life, death and resurrection, help him to purify ourselves and our race from man's original and continuous disobedience.