

THE PATTERN OF HIS DEATH

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

CHRIST did not rise from the dead. He simply recovered from his injuries. His 'risen life' was just a time of convalescence. A recent letter in an english paper contained this well-meaning attempt to save christianity by cutting its heart out. The writer quite sincerely thought that if he could explain medically that Christ did not die, he would overcome the great obstacle to the reasonableness of christianity – the resurrection. The author of this throwback to 19th century rationalism was, it appears, a christian of sorts. But the extraordinary thing is that a christian of any sort could so radically misunderstand his faith as to kill it stone dead at its root. For if Christ did not die we cannot live in him.

'God is dead', cried Nietzsche, eliminating the divinity. 'God died', proclaims the christian professing his faith in the living God. For without death there is no resurrection. This is indeed a statement of the obvious: but for all that it is not to be taken merely on its face value. St Paul's affirmation that if Christ did not rise then our faith is an empty thing has its counterpart: it is just as important to remember that if Christ did not die then there can be no talk of resurrection. Death is pointless without resurrection, resurrection meaningless without death; no sound christian spirituality can afford to eliminate either of these aspects of the mystery of Christ.

There is no doubt that today the passion and death of Christ are not the object of popular devotion that they used to be. Religious who make the thirty days' Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola often jib at having to spend a whole week contemplating the passion and death of Christ without reference to the resurrection. They feel that this is out of harmony with the liturgy and modern spirituality. Christianity is life in the Spirit; it is love and joy, permeated with the light of the resurrection dawn. We share in the life of the risen Christ; we worship a living Saviour, not a dead corpse. To spend a week on the passion and death of Christ is morbid and depressing. All this has been said and will be said again. But where it is said

merely as a reaction against a certain way of presenting the mystery of Christ's suffering and death it runs the risk of every reaction: that of suppressing the very truth which makes reaction possible. For any sane and rational reaction must be a movement of reconciliation to save that which is present but is in danger of being lost. Christ reacted against certain abuses of the Old Law, not with the object of suppressing the Old Law, but in order to reveal its real sense and to fulfil it. The modern emphasis on the resurrection is good and healthy as long as it does not lead us to play down the passion and death of Christ. Instead, it should give to these their full theological and spiritual meaning.

That there has been a certain abuse in the consideration of the sufferings and death of Christ is incontestable. We have all heard preachers who have so far departed from the restraint of the gospel as to turn the story of the passion into a horror story or a 'tear-jerker'. Marx's accusation that religion is the opium of the people was one possible interpretation of the way in which the doctrine of redemption through suffering could be presented. The cross has been used, or rather abused, to lull people into a passive acceptance of injustice and oppression. Many have been made to feel that fighting for social justice is almost unchristian. Many a religious superior has used the cross to cover up his own obtuseness and incompetence. Many a religious subject has wasted his life on a cross of his own fashioning. Many a retreat giver has been satisfied with provoking a merely psychological reaction with the story of the passion, forgetting that the reaction of the christian before his crucified Saviour is not the purely human reaction of any good person before suffering innocence.

All this makes the modern reaction understandable. But whilst we proclaim the good news of the resurrection we should not forget that when Christ said: 'I am the resurrection and the life',¹ he signed his own death warrant. Our own profession of faith in the risen Lord will, if it is worth anything, inevitably lead to our being nailed with him to the cross. The doctrine of the cross can be abused as an anodyne for human suffering; and the doctrine of the resurrection can be used as a sort of spiritual 'purple-heart' pill, which transports us into a dream world where we can make light of suffering and death.

There is always a danger of mistaking a purely human reaction

¹ Jn 11, 25.

for a christian one. The embarrassment and human shame aroused by the awareness of sin are often mistaken for christian shame and sorrow. The spectacle of suffering and death provokes an immediate human reaction which most of us take as right and valid without further examination. But for all that it may not be christian. The awareness of the starving millions of the world, sharpened by pictures of skeletal children, arouses a spontaneous reaction in every human being worthy of the name, but it need not arouse the true christian reaction. We may perhaps feel that their hunger is a reproach to us. But we may not realise that there is as much selfishness in turning the misery of others into a reproach and judgement on ourselves as there is in remaining aloof and hard-hearted towards it. If we see the distress of others merely as a reproach against ourselves the danger is, that whilst imagining that we are trying to alleviate their condition, all we are doing in effect is seeking to take away our own reproach. There is nothing particularly christian in finding that millions of starving people make my *filet mignon* lie a little too heavily on my conscience. In this context it is significant that certain famine relief organisations have recently adopted a policy of birth control in an attempt to reduce their work to manageable dimensions. In the old days, when confronted with suffering on a vast scale, some people would eliminate God. In our modern world, whence God has been banished as an effective force by the great mass of men, all we can do is to eliminate the sufferer, who is the skeleton at the feast of the affluent society.

Those who enter the world of suffering enter a nightmare world of contradiction and bewilderment. In the presence of great human suffering there is no one who does not feel crushed and impotent before the unknowable and inexplicable. There is therefore here, more than anywhere else, need to pause and reflect before trusting our instinctive reactions. There was only one man who dared say: 'Come to me all you who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest'.¹ It is from him alone that the christian must learn how to suffer and how to alleviate suffering, by entering with him and through him into the mystery of suffering. For in Christ crucified suffering and death are postulated as the fact not merely of man but of God.

Into this mystery Ignatius leads his retreatant in the Third Week of the Exercises when he tells him to ask for 'sorrow with Christ sorrowful and to be broken with Christ broken'.² This

¹ Mt 11, 28.

² Exx 203.

counsel is given to one who has just made a choice which he is sure is the will of God for him. This has been done at the end of the Second Week. But why, if the object of the Exercises is to enable a man to make a choice which is to direct his life according to the will of God, do they not end once that choice has been made? What is the point of continuing?

In order to answer this question we must first note two things about that choice. First, it is a choice to be with Christ the suffering servant of mankind in poverty, humiliations and humility. It is a decision to follow Christ on the way of the cross, to labour with him so that we may enter with him into glory. Secondly, that choice has for the moment changed nothing. The retreatant has still to implement that decision in his life. During the time of making the choice he has gained a moment of liberty which made the choice possible. But his self-love, self-will and self-interest have not been destroyed. The choice he has made has merely effected a fissure in the hard shell of his human selfishness; and through this crack the force of divine grace must pour and ultimately sweep away entirely the barriers which self-centredness has raised against its workings.

Furthermore, the very fact that this choice has been made in a moment of complete liberty means that it contains a hidden danger. The very fact that the retreatant can say: 'This is my decision', means that the 'my' can predominate, even though this choice is a union of himself with the divine will. Ignatius is well aware of this danger. In the last rule for the discernment of spirits for the Second Week he counsels the retreatant to be most careful in distinguishing between the time of consolation and the immediate aftermath of this consolation. For it is possible that during this latter period he may mistake the products of his own ingrained ways of thought and judgement for the inspirations of the good spirit. Worse still, the evil spirit can at this moment divert him from his true direction.¹ In following Christ it is not enough to put one's hand to the plough; there must be no looking back. Because a man chooses the cross with Christ, this does not give him the right to make his own, however painful it may be. The road of the cross is the path of faith into the unknown. Only Christ can be the guide here. In his Third Week Ignatius puts the retreatant into the school of suffering, so that he may learn from Christ alone what it means to suffer for Christ and to labour with him.

¹ Cf *Exx* 336.

There is here no morbidity, still less any sort of sentimental devotionism. Ignatius takes his stand on an unshakable theological principle of salvation: that without death there is no resurrection. The man who chooses in the Spiritual Exercises to unite himself with the salvific will of God, and thereby to become the seed of resurrection for others in this world, must die to himself first of all if that seed of resurrection is to come to fruition. If he is to rejoin the risen Christ in his apostolate in this world, he must first be fitted into the pattern of his death. Otherwise his apostolate will inevitably be a search for his own personal resurrection: the nourishing of his own pseudo-spiritual life, not the nourishing of others.

Ignatius notes that once the retreatant has made his choice 'he must then put himself into diligent prayer before God our Lord and offer him that choice, so that the divine majesty may be pleased to receive and confirm it, if it is to his greater service and praise'.¹ This confirmation and consolidation of the choice is to come through the Third and Fourth Weeks. This means that the retreatant is going to receive his personal choice as a gift from God, and that he is going to receive the implementing of that choice from God and not from his own ideas. He will see his choice not as the expression of his personal concurrence with the divine will, but as the expression in himself of the divine will making him its instrument. Thus the prayer of the Third Week is one of complete receptivity to Christ in the mystery of his passion and death. It is a prayer which is going to be a labour, as the passion was a labour for Christ,² and which demands a great interior silence and purity which will permit the full engagement of self in attentiveness to Christ. Hence there must be no cheating, no glimpses of the resurrection out of the corner of my eye in an attempt to lighten this dark side of the christian mystery of salvation.³ The retreatant has to watch Christ and ask to accompany him to the depths of that cry: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me', so that he may make his own the cry of hope: 'My soul shall live for Him'.⁴ There must be no reading of this psalm backwards; no attempt to use the resurrection as the spoonful of sugar which helps the bitter medicine of the passion go down. He must, with Christ, resist the insidious temptation to come down from the cross.

Christ's passion and death were not made tolerable for him because they lasted only a short time. It is not the duration of his

¹ Exx 183 and 188.

² Exx 195.

³ Exx 206b.

⁴ Ps 21, 1 and 30.

sufferings which is important but the simple fact of it. Nor were they endurable primarily in view of the resurrection. The primary reason that they were acceptable to Christ was because that was his Father's will. For Christ's acceptance of his passion and death was not first of all rooted in his human will – 'Not my will' was his agonised prayer. Rather he found his acceptance as something which he received, 'but thine', and what is more, which he received from his Father. In Christ there is a positive human will to suffer; but the strength of that will comes from God: 'there appeared to him an angel from heaven strengthening him'.¹ Humanly, Christ feared and shrank from the pain and death to be imposed upon him as something exterior to himself, which he did not of himself desire or bring about. In his prayer in the garden of olives, Christ found the source of his human will to suffer uniquely in the divine will of his Father that all men should be saved. This was the school of suffering in which he learnt obedience: the acceptance of the will of the Father when his own human will rebelled against what history had prepared for him.

This does not mean that Christ became some sort of automaton, or that he merely submitted to an inexorable fate. He laid down his own life; no man took it from him, as the gospel emphasises. In Christ's acceptance of suffering and death there is no trace of fatalism; it was a supreme act of liberty. In order to understand this better, let us suppose for a moment that Christ went to his death hurling defiance at his persecutors, condemning their injustice and vindicating his own innocence. Let us suppose that his life was wrested from him as he died struggling against death. In that hypothesis we would have to say that his death would have been the end; his suffering but another example that innocence cannot prevail against injustice. For his very rebellion against death would have been tantamount to an avowal that his kingdom was commensurate with this world and was being destroyed with him. His resistance to suffering would have been an affirmation that he did not belong to the world of those who were causing that suffering. His refusal of death would have been a rejection of his executioners.

But in willing with his human nature to suffer and die, Christ refused to separate his relationship with the Father (for he received that human will from him), from the treatment meted out to him by men. This is not the same as saying that he accepted as coming

¹ Lk 22, 42-44.

from God the unjust cruelty inflicted upon him by mankind. Christ did not lay at his Father's door the evil of man. But neither did he lay it at the door of his persecutors. On the contrary his prayer was: 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do'.¹ His acceptance of the suffering and death inflicted on him by them made of it his way to the Father. He thus transformed what was meant to be a sign of rejection, his death outside the city, into a sign of his union with the Father and of his union with mankind. His death, far from cutting him off from the land of the living, was the climax of his incarnation, the fullest expression of his *exinanitio*, his pouring out of himself for mankind. Christ was never more a part of human history than when he was dead and descended into the depths of the earth whence he was to rise. His death was his supreme act of human liberty and of solidarity with mankind, and at the same time the perfect expression of his filial relationship with the Father into whose hands he yielded his spirit. In all this the malice of man was indeed unrelenting; but the only thing which was invincible was Christ's human will not to be dissociated either from his Father or from mankind. Thus in crucifying Christ, evil demonstrated only its own impotence and destroyed nothing but itself. For evil is only triumphant when it succeeds in separating man and God. On Calvary, evil worked its worst; but it assured only the permanent presence of God at the heart of the most inexplicable situation of human history: that of the unjust suffering and death of one who was innocent. In Christ God was present, reconciling all things to himself.

This human will of Christ to suffer is the first aspect of the pattern of his death which Ignatius puts to the retreatant for his prayerful consideration. He tells him to look at what 'Christ our Lord suffers in his humanity or wants to suffer'.² The first step in the way of the cross is to find in the Father the strength of will to accept the unjust, unfair treatment we receive from others, as our way to him. This does not mean calling what is wrong, right. Nor does it mean running to God as a refuge from suffering; for it is his will that we should accept it. Rather it is looking at suffering in the spirit of the famous passage from St Paul: 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?'.³ What I have to seek in this point is the firm conviction that being crucified with Christ means accepting to be crucified by history. It is the struggle to accept in full liberty the cross which circumstances impose upon me, the *via dolorosa* which history has

¹ Lk 23, 34.

² Exx 195.

³ Cf Rom 8, 31 ff.

prepared for me. It is a positive will to suffer in history from within.

The second aspect which Ignatius puts before the retreatant is the consideration of 'how the divinity hides itself, that is to say, how it could destroy its enemies and does not do so, and allows the most sacred humanity to suffer such extreme cruelty'.¹ Here, as always, Ignatius chooses his words carefully. It is quite true to say that God suffered and that God died. It is not true to say that the divinity suffered or that the divinity died. In the same way, we may say that Mary is the Mother of God, not the Mother of the divinity. The Son of God died on the cross, but the divinity did not die with him. Ignatius emphasises this point clearly when he says that 'after Christ died on the cross, his body was left separated from his soul but nevertheless always united with the divinity, and his blessed soul, similarly united with the divinity, descended into hell'.² Here we must not personify the divinity and make of it a passive spectator watching the humanity of Christ suffer. Ignatius' thought goes deeper than that. The divinity here in the abstract is the sign of the presence of the active salvific will of God working out the salvation of man in Christ, but working it out through the human acceptance and will of Christ. The divinity is within the suffering and dead body of Christ as the spark of life hidden deep inside the deadness of the seed in the ground. In the measure in which the body of Christ is broken, that divinity comes to birth as it were: not of course in itself but in a new dimension – *for us*, 'This is my body which shall be delivered *for you*'.³ That 'for you' comes not as a *divinitas ex machina* – 'let God deliver him'⁴ – but grows out of the very centre of the earth whence Christ was to ascend as the first-born of the dead. The divinity is present in the suffering Christ as the assurance of resurrection; but a hidden assurance and an unspoken guarantee that this iniquitous situation is not sterile but rather will bear fruit in abundance.

This point becomes clearer when we compare it with the corresponding points in the Fourth Week. There, as we contemplate the risen Christ, we are advised to consider 'how the divinity, which seemed to hide in the passion appears and manifests itself so miraculously in the most holy resurrection'; and then we are to consider: 'the role of consoler which Christ our Lord takes upon himself'.⁵ There is a deliberate and revealing inversion here. In the Third Week the humanity suffers and the divinity seems to hide.

¹ Exx 196.

² Exx 219.

³ Lk 22, 19.

⁴ Mt 23, 43.

⁵ Exx 223–224.

In this Fourth Week the divinity appears and the humanity of Christ becomes actively transparent to its effects, acting as the consoler. The body of Christ, which had to be broken so that the divinity could appear, is now transformed by that same divinity and becomes the effective sign of redemption.

When Ignatius tells the retreatant to seek 'to be broken with Christ broken',¹ he is inspired by the same theological insight as his namesake of Antioch who asked to be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts in his martyrdom, in order that he might become the pure wheat of Christ. Through the passion and death of Christ his human body becomes his eucharistic body; what belonged to him as his becomes the nourishment of mankind and yet at the same time is never more truly his. This is made possible by the presence of the divinity in Christ suffering. The retreatant who has chosen to follow Christ suffering must pass through the same process as Christ, that of refusing to take his situation of crucifixion, whatever it may be, as sterile and barren of all possibility of resurrection. This means believing in the active presence of the salvific will of God in a situation which, humanly speaking, is a flat denial of that presence.

The final point proposed in the meditations of the Third Week is to consider that Christ 'suffers all this for my sins and what I must do and suffer for him'.² This breaking of the body of Christ willed and accepted by him in the presence of the divinity is the destruction of sin, of my sin. In Christ I watch the destruction of my sinful self and I ask the question: 'What ought I to do and suffer for him?' It is vital to notice here that there is no question of what I should do or suffer for my sins. The motive for my carrying my cross with Christ is not the desire to suffer for my sins, but the desire to be, with him and in him, the grain which dies in the earth in order to bring forth fruit for the whole world. In other words, what is going to assure the fruitfulness of any apostolic prayer or activity is the measure in which I will, in Christ, to accept the destruction of my sinful self, that self-love, self-will and self-interest, by the forces of the circumstances into which my decision to follow Christ will lead me; in short, in the measure in which I make my own the cross with which I am burdened by history.

Ignatius ends his Third Week with a contemplation of 'the loneliness of our Lady in such great sorrow and fatigue; and afterwards that of the disciples'.³ Mary is alone; but her solitude is not

¹ Exx 203.

² Exx 197.

³ Exx 208 f.

that of the disciples. She is here as a figure of the Church, the receptacle of the faith and hope of the Church. For Ignatius it goes without saying that Christ's first appearance after his resurrection was to his mother.¹ For her the dead body of Christ was still the body of her son. For her he was still the Christ the Son of God. His death had been for her a second motherhood – 'woman behold your son',² when her acceptance of that title 'woman' marked, on Calvary as at Cana, her acceptance to lose Christ in order to win salvation for the world. Yet it was that complete acceptance to lose Christ that made it possible for her to recognise him first when he was risen. For the apostles, whose solitude was the emptiness of hopelessness, there was to be no immediate recognition of the risen Christ. For the resurrection is only entirely credible and perceptible to those who give the passion and death of Christ their full theological and spiritual dimensions.

One final point, which we can only touch upon since it would require an article in itself to develop fully: the prayer of the Third Week is a prayer for compassion with Christ and a prayer in which the retreatant is given the chance to learn from Christ what true compassion is. By his own sufferings and death Christ has once and for all stamped all human suffering and death with his presence. When he says: 'I was sick and you visited me, hungry and you fed me . . .'³ he is not referring to any sort of vicarious presence of himself. The suffering and dead body of Christ in the world here and now is the suffering and dead body of mankind, in which the passion of Christ continues to the end of time. The christian formed in the Exercises for apostolic prayer or action has to learn first of all to recognise in the sufferer the presence of the suffering Christ and through that to look for the resurrection in just those circumstances which seem to preclude it: the hopeless cases which society cannot incorporate into its tidy structure. Christian compassion demands from the apostle the identification of himself with the sufferer as with Christ. Before the sufferer, he is, as before Christ, in a state of receptivity and helplessness: he must go out to the sufferer first of all to learn again the mystery of suffering. The mystery of Christ's suffering and death is the mystery of all human suffering and death. For the apostle of Christ, who, like his master, is sent to the suffering, a week seems little enough time to spend learning how to have compassion with every sort of infirmity.

¹ Exx 218, 299.

² Jn 19, 26.

³ Mt 25, 35 ff.