WE REJOICE IN OUR SUFFERINGS

By JOSEPH BLENKINSOPP

'MAN', as Eliphaz remarked to Job, 'is born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards'.[1] He cannot avoid it even by remaining completely immobile. He has to put up with it, but if he is a religious man he can hardly avoid reflecting on why God permits it, especially when its incidence is so often apparently casual and arbitrary. For most of the Old Testament suffering is regarded as a passivity, with the emphasis on how the faithful man is to integrate it into his world of inner conviction and cope with it. There was the so-called 'classical' doctrine on suffering according to which its infliction is part of God's moral government of the world, by which he punished sinners and, at the same time, 'encourages the others'. 'Man and boy', says the psalmist, 'I have never seen the righteous abandoned nor his descendants having to beg for their bread'.[2] Maybe he hadn't, but this would not have been everyone's experience, and as we get further into the Old Testament we can see this view wearing progressively thinner. More consistent was the idea that suffering is the lot of all, just and unjust indifferently, but that the just man, by the very fact of his being just, would have the strength of spirit to survive rather than to curse God and die.

Perhaps the most typical jewish contribution to this attempt to cope with suffering by giving it some intelligibility is the view that suffering is God's way of educating his people. It is the road away from unreality and inauthentic living. The hungering and thirsting in the desert was to lead them to see what man lives by. Suffering is not directly willed by God, but he allows it in order that we may grow strong, as he left the nations in the land of promise for the sake of his people. But even here, suffering is something that merely happens to people; it is not seen as having a positive role.

With the prophetic mission and the opposition which it stirred up, we find a different situation. Here suffering takes on a definite form

[1] Job 5, 7. [2] Ps 37, 25.

and features. The clearest case of this is the career of Jeremiah, commissioned to 'pluck up and break down, destroy and overthrow'.[1] Maybe thinking over the place of suffering in Jeremiah's mission played a part in preparing for the isaian Servant's mission, which is carried out not in spite of or merely accompanied by suffering, but by means of it. Here we find the roots not just of the peculiar jewish mystique of suffering but the christian paradox of fulfilment through suffering, life through death and rejoicing in suffering. And this brings us to Paul.

Paul, in the first place, remains true to the biblical insight of suffering as essential towards authentic living. He lays down the pattern in his Letter to the Romans: 'suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character and character produces hope'.[2] This endurance, *hypomone*,[3] is, literally, the quality of a man who remains unmoving and silent beneath the lash. It is a positive endurance of life in the world with all the contrarieties which it brings, a refusal to complain or to seek easy options. The man who, over a long period has shown this quality of positive endurance, can be said to be approved, *dokimos*, like precious metal tried and purified in the crucible. We should note here that Paul does not provide his christians with theological alibis for suffering. There is no short cut. The sufferings of life in the world, life as body, are not regarded as illusory, though he will go on to say later that they are not worthy to be compared to the glory that shall be revealed in us.[4] They are not sidestepped by some process of sublimation. Life as it is has to be gone through and not around, lived out, sweated out. It is only when he has reached the stage of approval as a man[5] that the theological virtue of hope is mentioned. There is, moreover, no discontinuity between the real, lived-out experience and the part of God: '. . . character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit which has been given to us'.[6]

In common with Old Testament prophetic figures like Jeremiah, Paul speaks almost always of suffering within the context of his missionary vocation. The story told in Acts speaks for itself. If we are told that it was an integral part of missionary preaching to the churches of the first hour that 'through many tribulations we must

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[1] Jer 1, 10.
[2] Rom 5, 3–4.
[3] Cf Walsh, James, 'The Patience of Christ', *The Way*, Vol 5 October 1965, p 293 note 1.
[4] Rom 8, 12 ff.
[5] The RSV uses here the word character. Rom 5, 4.
[6] Rom 5, 5.

enter the kingdom of God',[1] this is certainly a reflexion of experience and, in fact, comes immediately after we read of Paul being stoned and left for dead at Lystra. A little later, in the address on the seashore at Miletus, we read how 'the holy Spirit testifies to me in every city (through prophets like Agabus) that imprisonment and afflictions await me'.[2] The catalogue of sufferings enumerated in Paul's well-known *historia calamitatum*[3] deals with the mission, and is set in a context which has to do with establishing his authentic apostolic status. It is not just the constant physical hardship involved but 'the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches'.[4] The implication is obvious. For the apostle, suffering is inescapable: since he, like Jeremiah, is called to witness to a strange and, for many, unwelcome new presence in the world, he too is commissioned to 'pluck up and break down, destroy and overthrow'. The words of Jesus in the eschatological discourse of greek Matthew are, as is generally recognized, the reflexion of the missionary experience, a partial chronicle of which is found in Acts: 'they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death; and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake'.[5] And more specifically: 'they will deliver you up to councils and you will be beaten in synagogues'.[6] This is precisely what happened to the apostles who were imprisoned and beaten and who, we are told, 'left the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the Name'.[7] Here the suffering is not only borne positively, endured, but rejoiced in. The suffering is part of the enduring witness which issues in the total witness of martyrdom, and martyrdom was the lot of all the apostles, as it was of Paul.

The pattern of apostolic suffering was set, as we saw, in the first missionary tour. It is repeated in the second during which Paul was almost lynched at Philippi, then beaten and imprisoned. It is part of the christian paradox of suffering with joy that we find the prisoners praying and singing hymns during that long dark and uncomfortable night in a strange town.[8] Signed with the mark of the cross and sealed with the Spirit, they took suffering to be the sign of apostolic authenticity and therefore could rejoice. We should note, moreover, how this also excluded any slightest sign of the self-pity which suffering often induces. On the contrary, Paul preserved the ability to react vigorously by demanding an apology for the indignity

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[1] Acts 14, 22. [2] Acts 20, 23. [3] 2 Cor 11–12. [4] 2 Cor 11, 28.
[5] Mt 24, 9. [6] Mt 10, 17. [7] Acts 5, 41. [8] Acts 16, 25.

inflicted on a roman citizen and gave an example to all persecuted minorities by continuing to speak out '. . . though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had confidence in our God to speak out the gospel to you in the face of great opposition'.[1]

It was no accident that the main burden of Paul's preaching to the thessalonians was the necessity of suffering for Christ and the christian,[2] since this church had received the Word 'in much affliction, with joy inspired by the holy Spirit'[3] and had been instructed from the start on the role of suffering in the building up of the christian life. For them, as for the first apostles and the 'churches of God which are in Judaea', suffering was the mark of those chosen by God, the sign of approval.[4] The consistency of Paul's thinking can be seen in the recurrence, throughout the two letters, of vocabulary elsewhere commonly used in this context, especially the pattern: suffering – endurance – approval – hope. This will remain throughout, but experience will fill out the words with an ever increasing depth of meaning.

In the next stage, at Athens, it seems that Paul experienced a new form of suffering, that of disillusionment, coming to terms with one's own limitations. His first over-optimistic assessment of the apostolic mission to the gentiles received a hard knock, and he went on to Corinth a bitterly disappointed man. We can assess his state of mind on arrival from the opening chapter of his first letter;[5] though this has no doubt been coloured by the even deeper inner darkness in which he was plunged for some time during his three-year mission at Ephesus. It was during this time that the correspondence to the corinthian church was written: 'we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead'.[6] For a man of Paul's temperament, this feeling of absolute impotence, of being entirely unable to cope with a situation, must have been particularly excruciating. The same no doubt for the inner torment, the 'thorn in the flesh', which afflicted him for so long and from which he sought in vain to be freed.[7] From this kind of situation which makes or breaks, and to which no serious and mature person is immune, there is only

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1 1 Thess 2, 2. 2 Acts 17, 3. 3 1 Thess 1, 6. 4 1 Thess 1, 4; 2, 4.
5 1 Cor 1. 6 2 Cor 1, 8–9. 7 2 Cor 12, 7.

one issue – at least for the christian: 'my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'. This is in the pattern of him who was crucified in weakness but lives by the power of God.

Of Paul's almost daily consorting with death during the stay in Jerusalem after the three missionary tours we hear at length from Luke, who was with him for part of the time. This writer's habit of describing vividly and at length selected key-scenes in the story, and passing rapidly over the intervals, must not lead us to forget the two years spent in prison at Caesarea, only fleetingly referred to in a subordinate clause.[1] Two years is a long time for a man with Paul's sense of urgency. Then the voyage, shipwreck, contrarieties in Rome and another two years of house arrest, at which point Luke's story ends. If the pastoral letters are from his hand, or even reflect faithfully his condition during the last years, we see that he suffered what Simone Weil described as the only evil – absence, in this case, the absence of friends, a sense of isolation and abandonment: 'Demas in love with the present world has deserted me . . . Crescens has gone . . . Luke alone is with me'.[2] He may well have died almost alone.

Examined from this point of view, therefore, Paul's life is in line with that of Jeremiah, or any of the other prophets, whose mission was accomplished only at the cost of a mounting experience of suffering. But Paul, in the text from which we began, goes beyond what any of the prophets could claim when he asserts that he and all christians rejoice in their sufferings. The word which he uses here really means to boast, a point which has to be made in that Paul began in this letter with the purpose of removing any human ground for boasting, since all are under the power of sin.[3] No one can achieve the end of existence, which is to share in the glory of God;[4] this has been made possible only through what God has done in Christ. By entering into a faith-relationship with Christ in his great death-to-life act, this possibility can be actualized in a man's life; but it has to be translated into the hard currency of real experience, making the right decisions, endurance issuing in approval or character. This provides the mainspring for a new forward-movement, the direction or sense of which is the christian hope. This is not just an illusion, since 'God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit which has been given to us'. At the same time, hope is not

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[1] Acts 24, 27. [2] 2 Tim 4, 10. [3] Rom 3, 9; 3, 19; 2, 27.
[4] Rom 5, 2.

certainty, since the future depends on our decisions in the face of emerging circumstances. We can make the wrong choices, we can sin.

The substantive that Paul uses when he speaks of boasting in his sufferings is *thlipsis*, which means literally 'a being crushed', as if by a great weight. This corresponds to what was in effect a technical term in the vocabulary of contemporary jewish apocalyptic. In these apocalyptic milieux, it was often believed that a period of oppression and suffering would precede the new age of the Messiah. This transitional period would witness at the same time the death throes of the 'present age', dominated by evil forces, and the birth pangs of 'the age to come'. This last metaphor goes back perhaps to Micah, who speaks of Zion as a mother seized by pangs in her labour of giving birth to the Messiah.[1] It is, at any rate, found frequently in the Old Testament and was familiar at the time of Paul. It is explicit in the saying of the johannine Christ, about the disciples weeping and lamenting while the world rejoices: 'when a woman is in travail she has sorrow because her hour is come; but when she is delivered of the child she no longer remembers the anguish for joy that a child is born into the world'.[2] The same way of thinking is implicit in what Paul says about their present afflictions to the christians of Salonika among whom the parousiac hope was particularly strong. They had received the word 'in much affliction', but had already been told that this was necessary if the new life was to be born in them. Timothy had been sent specially to remind them 'that no one be moved by these afflictions. You yourselves know that this is to be our lot'[3] – understood in the present crucial passage of salvation history. In the second letter their present afflictions are even more explicitly associated with the expectation of the Lord's perhaps imminent parousia.[4] We find a parallel case with the christians addressed in the Epistle to the Hebrews, who had received the gift of faith amid much suffering, including the loss of their temporal goods, and had to be reminded that this period is transitional and must be endured if the end is to be reached.[5]

Paul's way of coming to terms with his own sufferings was possible only within this eschatological, forward-looking perspective. While this is mostly clearly attached to the purely temporal aspect of the parousia expectation in the earlier correspondence, we can trace, as

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1 Mic 4, 9–10. 2 Jn 16, 20–21. 3 1 Thess 3, 1–6.
4 2 Thess 1, 5–10. 5 Heb 10, 32–36.

time went on, a gradual detachment from this limiting point of view. This came about in the first place with the realization of the magnitude of the missionary task he had set himself. The fulfilment of God's plan, involving the bringing together in a new family both those who were near (the jews) and those who were far (the gentiles), was still far from complete. But this did not prevent him from seeing the sufferings involved in the apostolate as part of the preparation for the in-breaking kingdom, as God's authenticating mark and the assurance that some day he would show his hand. It is precisely for this reason that he can rejoice or boast of his sufferings, as he does in the well-known autobiographical passage referred to earlier: 'What I am saying I say not with the Lord's authority but as a fool, in this boasting confidence . . . Whatever anyone dares to boast of – I am speaking as a fool – I also dare to boast of . . . I must boast; there is nothing to be gained by it, but I will go on . . .'[1]

This rejoicing, even boasting in suffering, is the strange and eccentric element in the christian attitude. For many it can hardly fail also to be one of the most repellent, and when we remember some forms this attitude has taken in christian history, there must be some justification for this. An especially clear case is Calvin, for whom *la souffrance est meilleure que la joie;* and the one-sided calvinist teaching has seeped through into the lives of thousands of people, as widely differing as van Gogh brought up in an avid calvinist atmosphere, and Pascal, who believed that sickness was the natural state of the christian. For Paul, on the contrary, the christian does not just suffer, both in his general humanity and in the particularity of his being a christian; he rejoices in his sufferings. When we suffer and no longer know why, when we suffer without rejoicing, then we are outside of the genuine christian experience. That is the simple test. At the same time, this shows up all other explanations of human suffering as insufficient – whether we speak of suffering helping us towards approaching others in sympathy, or building up our own character, or contributing to the building up of the cosmos which, as Teilhard de Chardin has reminded us, involves many failures and casualties; though this last calls for a degree of faith in the cosmic process which, one suspects, only very few are capable of.

In itself, however, rejoicing in one's sufferings might be just another version of the banal injunction to grin and bear it. What Paul shows us through his correspondence, which is the mirror of

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[1] 2 Cor 11–12.

the high period of his mission, is how this rejoicing is possible. The answer is simply that the christian suffers in union with Christ. Not just in the sense that Christ, as the supreme artist of living – the phrase is van Gogh's – gives us an example which we are called on to follow; that above all in Gethsemane and on Calvary he showed us how to face 'the double agony' of suffering and death which is the lot of all of us. This is already of tremendous significance for us today, as it was for Paul's catechumens 'before whose eyes Jesus Christ was portrayed as crucified';[1] but Paul goes beyond this. By his baptism, the christian is immersed in the redemptive death-to-life of Jesus; he is con-crucified with him.[2] The sufferings and death of Jesus did not just happen to him, but formed a positive act accepted in advance and thereby became an event. This acceptance, this event-character, is expressed by speaking of Christ's obedience – 'he learned obedience through what he suffered'.[3] But this loving act of submission is not simply the archetype of the redemptive process establishing the christian pattern of existence – through death to life. Out of the baptismal faith-relationship of the community with Christ a new and deep level of communication is created. This implies also a *koinonia* in suffering which both links together the sufferings of the individual christian with those of Christ and binds the sufferings of the whole body together. Paul therefore can declare that he shares abundantly in Christ's sufferings during his mission, and goes on at once to say:

> If we are afflicted it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.[4]

This implies that the christian suffers not so much with Christ as in Christ, that he has to appropriate his sufferings in the suffering Christ and thus reproduce on the hard-grain material of concrete existence in this kind of world the pattern of Christ's death. The key-phrase here comes from Paul, writing in prison to the philippians: '. . . that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain to the resurrection from the dead'.[5]

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[1] Gal 3, 1. [2] Rom 6, 3. [3] Heb 5, 8.
[4] 2 Cor 1, 5–7. [5] Phil 3, 10–11.

This is the constant point of reference for Paul in bearing the crushing burden of the mission. The union between Paul and Christ is so intimate that, when Paul suffers, the sufferings of Christ are renewed as a present reality. This truth, so often presented to us homiletically in a banal way, is in itself so strange that he can express it in its pure state, its native intensity, only by a sort of dislocation of language. He speaks of a con-crucifixion, of carrying about in one's body the dying of Jesus, of making up what is lacking in Christ's sufferings for the Body which is the Church, of the sufferings of Christ overflowing into the christian. Linked with this is the equally new and strange truth that suffering, the most acute form of which is isolation, can become, if experienced within the new Christ-reality, intercommunicable and interavailable. There is hardly any letter of Paul in which he does not speak of himself sharing in the sufferings of his readers or of them in his. There is therefore no abstract solution to suffering as a problem, only an experience we are invited to share. The experience of the risen Lord is at the root of the christian mission or apostolate, and the christian life in general. If this experience is a delusion, then the whole thing falls through and we are left to cope with the pain in our own life in isolation, as well as we can. If however Christ is risen, there is this great possibility of which Paul speaks to the philippians, that we may attain the resurrection from the dead. But if we do, it will only be at the price of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.