

IF ANY MAN WILL COME AFTER ME

By THOMAS HAND

ABOUT A YEAR AGO a seven year old youngster was killed at a railroad crossing in Kamakura, Japan. For some reason he did not notice the speeding electric car and was hit and killed instantly. To add to the tragedy, he was an only son and, since he had been born with great difficulty, there was little hope that there could be other children. His parents, a good Catholic couple, accepted their loss heroically; but yet, for everyone who knows them, there still remains the ache and the mystery . . . the mystery of suffering.

Tragedies like this, some lesser and some greater, are happening in thousands of places, causing pain to hundreds of thousands of human persons every day and hour. Man is constantly being confronted with suffering and is being forced to adopt some kind of attitude and conduct in relation to it.

Most people, it would seem, adopt the attitude expressed in such sayings as *C'est la vie*; *Què sera, sera*; *That's life*; or the japanese, *Shikata ga nai* – there's nothing that can be done. All these are expressions of the ordinary man's existential acceptance of suffering. Such an attitude contains real wisdom, in as much as it accepts the actual situation and, to some degree, contains the hope that it is all for the good, that somehow there is a meaning beneath the mystery. However, since the death of Christ on the cross, all has changed. A whole new attitude toward human suffering has taken root in mankind. The acceptance of the fact remains, but it is even more realistic. The mystery also remains but has been incomparably reduced by the almost blinding light of the resurrection. For the man of faith, fully accepted sufferings can issue into such a profound experience of resurrectional union even in this life, that it is a commonplace for christians to speak of joy in suffering. And some holy people have even prayed either to suffer or to die. This article, then, will examine the attitude and conduct of a true christian in time of suffering.

THE CHRISTIAN CALL TO SUFFERING

In the synoptics

The first challenging fact is that suffering is our vocation. Nothing is clearer in the New Testament than the call of every disciple of Christ to follow him in suffering and death. The importance our Lord gives to this call is inescapable. At Caesarea Philippi, when the Lord asked what people and what the apostles thought of him, Peter answered from his heart, 'You are the Messiah'. Our Lord accepted this identification of himself; and 'From that time Jesus began to make it clear to his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem, and there to suffer much from the elders, chief priests, and lawyers; to be put to death and to be raised again on the third day'.¹ The impact of these words on the apostles was shattering. Such words demanded a complete re-identification of the Messiah and of themselves as his disciples.

At this Peter took him by the arm and began to rebuke him; Heaven forbid, he said. No, Lord, this shall never happen to you. Then Jesus turned and said to Peter, Away with you, Satan; you are a stumbling-block to me. You think as men think, not as God thinks.²

Having insisted in the strongest terms on the picture of a Messiah who is to accomplish his mission through suffering and death, Christ goes on to demand the same of his disciples.

Jesus then said to his disciples, If anyone wishes to be a follower of mine, he must leave self behind; he must take up his cross and come with me. Whoever cares for his own safety is lost; but if a man will let himself be lost for my sake, he will find his true self. What will a man gain by winning the whole world, at the cost of his true self? Or what can he give that will buy that self back? For the Son of Man is to come in the glory of his Father with his angels, and then he will give each man the due reward for what he has done.³

All three synoptics record this important passage with only slight differences. In fact, 'The language suggests that Jesus frequently spoke in this way'.⁴ Certainly the same idea, even in the same phrases,

¹ Mt 16, 21.

² Mt 16, 22-23.

³ Mt 16, 24-27.

⁴ According to a note in the *Oxford Annotated Bible* (RSV p 1256).

occurs repeatedly in the synoptics.¹ In Luke, however, there is a very significant addition to the phrase 'he must take up his cross': Luke adds, 'day after day', which clearly shows that the following of Christ in suffering and death is not just a question of martyrdom, but is quite legitimately extended to all dying to self through suffering, and to the rising to a higher degree of unity with God and man.

In St John

The fundamental call to suffering is made just as clearly in St John, with typical johannine imagery.

Then Jesus replied: The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. In truth, in very truth I tell you, a grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies; but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest. The man who loves himself is lost, but he who hates himself in this world will be kept safe for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; where I am, my servant will be. Whoever serves me will be honoured by my Father.²

Jesus is here replying to the request that some greeks have made to meet him. This request at once reminds him of his appointed task as Messiah of the greeks and all men. This task is 'his hour' of suffering, death, and resurrection. He then goes on to say: 'And I shall draw all men to myself when I am lifted up from the earth. This he said to indicate the kind of death he was to die'.³ It is in this context that Christ calls upon each of us to be his servants. We are to follow him in service. His service was to die and to become perfectly open to union with all. Our service, too, is to die to the closed self and thus open out our true selves to perfect union with him and all others. Christian service is always to create the conditions for an ever more perfect union.

In the epistles

One of the purposes of the First Letter of St Peter was to give courage to the christians in Asia Minor who were undergoing persecution. Again, the call to follow Christ in suffering is forceful and clear.

¹ Cf Mt 10, 30; Mk 10, 32-34; Lk 14, 25-33.

³ Jn 12, 32-33.

² Jn 12, 23-26.

Remembering that Christ endured bodily suffering, you must arm yourselves with a temper of mind like his. When a man has thus endured bodily suffering, he has finished with sin, and for the rest of his days on earth he may live, not for the things that men desire, but for what God wills.¹ My dear friends, do not be bewildered by the fiery ordeal that is upon you, as though it were something extraordinary. It gives you a share in Christ's suffering, and that is cause for joy; and when his glory is revealed, your joy will be triumphant.²

The Letter to the Hebrews, after recalling a long list of heroes and heroines of the faith, exhorts all to persevere in following Christ in the very path he laboured along.

And what of ourselves? With all these witnesses to faith around us like a cloud, we must throw off every encumbrance, every sin to which we cling, and run with resolution the race for which we are entered, our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom faith depends from start to finish: Jesus who, for the sake of the joy that lay ahead of him, endured the cross, making light of its disgrace, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.³

For St Paul, the identification of the christian with the Christ who suffered, died and rose is absolutely fundamental and pervades all his writings. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, for example, after writing about the daily martyrdom of his apostolic life, he writes:

Wherever we go we carry death with us in our body, the death that Jesus died, that in this body also life may reveal itself, the life that Jesus lives. For continually, while still alive, we are being surrendered into the hands of death, for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be revealed in this mortal body of ours.⁴

Then, starting from his own experience, Paul clearly teaches that all men are called to die with Christ and rise even now to the new order of resurrectional unity.

For the love of Christ leaves us no choice, when once we have reached the conclusion that one man died for all and there-

¹ 1 Pet 4, 1-2.

² *Ibid.*, 4, 12-13.

³ Heb 12, 1-2.

⁴ 2 Cor 4, 10-11.

fore all mankind has died. His purpose in dying for all was that men, while still in life, should cease to live for themselves, and should live for him who for their sake died and was raised to life. With us therefore worldly standards have ceased to count in our estimate of any man; even if once they counted in our understanding of Christ, they do so now no longer. When anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; the old order has gone, and a new order has already begun.¹

Conclusion

In all the texts given here we have the basic theme of the whole New Testament: the risen Christ, Christ, the Lord, is the suffering servant who died and rose so that all might follow him in dying to this-world-isolation and in rising to perfect human-divine union. The theme of St Peter's first sermon, the first sermon of the newly born Church,² was the risen Lord who saved us from the evil of disunity by suffering, death, and resurrection. The message is always the same, but the means used to proclaim it are different. The gospels preach the risen Christ through the events of his human life and death and rising. St Paul preaches the same, using the actual situation of the people to whom he was preaching, and the writings of the Old Testament. But this same gospel was first proclaimed by Christ himself immediately after his resurrection. This proclamation also stresses the same conclusion, that suffering is integral to the vocation of a christian. Personal commitment to Christ is unthinkable without unconditional acceptance of all that was integral to his own living out, in human terms, of his divine personality, his sonship.

THE PASCHAL PATTERN

Christ's use of scripture

To the two desolate disciples walking to Emmaus, our Lord exclaimed: 'How dull you are! How slow to believe all that the prophets said! Was the Messiah not bound to suffer thus before entering upon his glory? Then he began with Moses and all the prophets, and explained to them the passages which referred to himself in every part of the scriptures'.³ And the Lord continued this method of proclaiming his great tidings that same evening when he appeared to the 'eleven and the rest of the company'.

¹ *Ibid.*, 5, 14-17.

² Acts 2.

³ Lk 24, 25-27.

And he said to them, This is what I meant by saying, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and the psalms was bound to be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. This, he said, is what is written: that the Messiah is to suffer death and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that in his name repentance bringing the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations. Begin from Jerusalem: it is you who are the witnesses to all this.¹

One thing that stands out in these passages is the importance our Lord gives to the scriptures. He turns to them for his whole explanation of his death and resurrection. Many years ago this writer used to wonder about all this concern for fulfilling the scriptures. Maybe it was important for the feelings of the jews, but it hardly seemed of importance to the twentieth century 'me'. But, as modern insights into salvation history point out so well, the scriptures have to be fulfilled; not merely because something is written there, but because what is written there is the revelation of the great plan of God. It would be wonderful if we had the full text of our Lord's scriptural explanation of the salvation event, but it would seem that we know its basic theme: the paschal mystery.

The first pasch

Man must proceed from death at one level of existence to a more perfect life at a higher level. Throughout all the scriptures, in a thousand different types and prophecies, this basic pattern is proclaimed. It is clearly an evolutionary process in which creatures move from one degree of unity to a higher, more extensive union. The price is always that the merging elements die to their former state as they rise to the higher level. The greatest of all the prototypes of this life-giving pattern is the *pasch*. This is the name given to the whole event in which jews were led from life in Egypt to a new life as God's people in the promised land. The process started with a state of suffering. In the days of Joseph, who rose to be the man who ranked second in all the land to the Pharaoh, the jews must have felt right at home in Egypt. But with the passage of centuries their condition became so bad that they could no longer identify them-

¹ Lk 24, 44-47.

selves as having a real place in Egypt. It was this suffering that made them ready to follow Moses out into the desert and seek God there. Moses was the leader, the evolutionary prototype who first fled to the desert and there met God and experienced his peace. Then, again, after the people had followed him to the foot of Sinai, it was Moses who experienced the great theophany on top of the mountain and who came down to establish the solemn covenant whereby Israel became God's people. During the time of trial in the desert, while the people were being taught what it meant to be God's people, they sometimes lost their trust and identification with him. They even began to yearn for the fleshpots of Egypt. But at last they made the final passage through the Jordan and entered into a new life of union with God and each other.

The new and definitive Moses

Here is the great prototype which gives its name to every repetition of the pattern. Is it not quite valid to assert that it was this paschal pattern that Christ traced when he 'began with Moses and all the prophets and explained to them the passages which referred to himself in every part of the scriptures'? His own passage to the Father is the actual event which gives full reality to all the previous and future repetitions of the pattern. In the flow of time there had to be an event which pierced through to the permanence of eternity. Out of the limited condition of matter there had to be a break-through into the limited world of 'spiritual' matter. It is this event that gives meaning to all the countless repetitions in time and place of the paschal pattern. So it was precisely in the context of the annual commemoration of the pasch that the Saviour died to his life in this-world-flesh and rose to stand as man in the relationship of the Son to the Father in the unity of the holy Spirit. In the ancient passage from suffering in Egypt to the joy of new life with God in Israel, it was Moses who was the light and leader, who first sought God and entered into union with him. Now, in the definitively real passage, it is the new Moses who has gone ahead. This is why he is truly the 'light of the world'.

'The world' here does not merely mean the whole world in a kind of quantitative and numerical sense. For St John, the word has a more qualitative meaning. It means creation in as much as it is separated from God and is in terrible need of dying to its present state of being in order to rise to a higher form of unity. Christ is the

light leading us all along this path of progress. But a light, to be of any use, must go in front of us, though not too far ahead. And so the Son became man and, as man, told us clearly about the need to suffer and die in order to enter into a state of union far beyond the wildest, most visceral, most over-powering longing of the human spirit. And then he took the step into the providence of the Father and rose to the new life. It is this light that reassures us in all our sufferings during this desert time of preparation for the final definitive passage to life.

An act of love

The whole paschal process must be seen in terms of love, for love is the drive for union. One of St Paul's most beautiful expressions of Christ's love for us is: 'The Son of God, who loved me and sacrificed himself for me'.¹ Let us paraphrase it in the terms we have developed here. *Who loved me*: He wanted to take me and all mankind into a perfect human unity. Therefore, he came and took flesh. He entered this state of flesh, this state of disunion. He identified himself with me. *And sacrificed himself for me*: He encountered and bore all the forces of disunion: insults, rejection, bodily pain, interior sufferings. He bore all that could close the human heart against God, man, and lower creatures. He trod the path of the fallen man even to the very disuniting of his own human composite into body and soul. But through it all he remained open to the Father, to man, to all creation. He loved to the end and to the utmost. For this reason, because of the perfect fidelity of his love, he was raised to a new life. He passed on into a state of total openness, total love, total readiness for perfect union. 'Because of his humble submission his prayer was heard: son though he was, he learned obedience in the school of suffering, and, once perfected, became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him'.² When he rose from the dead, the state of his body was matched to the state of his heart. Just as his heart was completely open and in a state of love toward all beings, so now his body is ready to unite with all matter to form a perfect unity. It is precisely this unity that brings us into that eternal unity with the Father in the Spirit that is his from all eternity.

¹ Gal 2, 20.

² Heb 5, 7-8.

THE CHRISTIAN AND SUFFERING

In the context of love

So far, we have been trying to sketch out the christian attitude toward suffering. In this final section we will stress the fundamental point of charity, and then conclude with one practical application of all that has been said. Every human being shares in the common drive for unity. Love is the basic drive in man. In a larger sense it is the basic drive in all being. Suffering can only make sense within the integrating movement of love. Pain actually arises out of this basic drive in as much as pain is man's conscious reaction to disorder and disunion. Suffering is nothing but love reacting to a state of being that is contrary to the union it is seeking. To love in the here and now must mean suffering. Therefore Christ in his love for us says: 'Leave self behind, take up your cross day by day, and follow me'. We must put to death the false self which is driving toward isolation and disunion. This can be done only in suffering, since pain arises from love's movement toward perfect unity as it collides with all the forces of sin and disunion. But the key to all is the Lord's 'Follow me'. Personal love for him will bring us even to rejoice in suffering; for pain is the spur which agitates the drive of love to reach out to always greater unity. We know that the power of disunion will ultimately destroy our very physical composite, but if we suffer this with him, it will be the final passage from this-world-loneliness into the perfect union of his risen humanity.

Even though we know it to be true somehow, we still cannot but wonder how all human suffering can truly be an actual part of the evolutionary progress towards union. How, for example, does the tragic death of that youngster to which we referred at the beginning fit into such an optimistic vision of human life? One reason that we will never be able fully to fathom this is that we are not able to see the deep relationship between all creatures. What happens to one affects all. This person – I – will only be complete when I am in perfect union with all creation in Christ. All suffering does work towards this final death of the human race to this-world-isolation and its resurrection to the final union in Christ. I cannot fully understand all this but I must begin where I can – in my own life – consciously, joyfully to die to self and to enter into resurrectional union with the Son before the Father in the holy Spirit.

Psychological suffering

Each of us lives in his own private world. We cannot help but see things in relation to ourselves, and all reality is coloured by our own self-concept. Everyone has areas of falsity in his self-concept and I will only be perfect when my self-consciousness is identical with that of the true Son of God made man. For the sake of example, suffice my self-concept to be shot through with a guilt complex. Suffice that, in the course of a very strict unbringing, I gradually came to identify myself as never performing adequately, as never achieving what was demanded. This may have been reinforced by some actual sins and culpable failures, so that now I live constantly, though largely unconsciously, in a feeling of guilt and inferiority. I cannot take myself or my ideas seriously. This complex will always produce at least a dull suffering, but it will happen that sometimes I get into situations in which the flaws in my personality cause acute pain. I realize that there is something wrong with the pattern of my response to reality. I have a terrible sense of this not being the 'true me'. Because I am not in order and do not possess myself correctly, I cannot freely and openly enter into communion with others, even with Christ. A psychologist can help me to see my actual state, to see its causes, to see it as evil. But the deepest and ultimate salvation can only come from my encounter with Christ. To experience his acceptance and that of the Father, this is what will create the true image of myself. This will recreate my private world into a world that is no longer private. I must go into the desert of trust and follow Christ into a new world of resurrectional union. Perfect human union must be bodily. Therefore, while still in this-world-flesh, I must always suffer because of disunion. But I rejoice in this saving pain which spurs me on to put to death the self of disorder and isolation. The final goal, the new life, still remains a mystery; but the revelation of its reality has been made in the actual event, the historical resurrection of the Son of Man. The glory of God shining in the face of the risen Christ: with this our gospel begins and ends. Christ is risen and alive! He is totally open to us, even in his Body. Our relationship to him is deeper and more real than to any other person. Union with him is the actual goal of all human striving, of all human suffering.