

# SALVATION THROUGH SUFFERING

By JOSEPH P. WHELAN

**T**HE PRIMARY and the finally important things that ought to be said about man, and about each one of us, are not problems. What man fundamentally is, what he does, what happens to him – these are not problems. For they are not available to man for adequate analysis or definitive solution. They lie too deep for that. Man, at the roots of his being and his activity, where he stands partner to his world, his fellows and his God, is a mystery. We ponder mystery, we entertain it, we try to formulate and structure it ever and anew. We criticize our past attempts to do so and begin again, or further build on what seems adequate. The aim and the task is to keep the mystery whole and immediate, so that the mind may recognize its importance and the heart may become involved in its beauty, that man may experience the reality of which the mystery speaks, and respond to the mystery of himself, his world and his God.

No mystery assails the heart of man so immediately, or so scandalizes his faith in his God and in himself, as does the mystery of suffering. And none has cast more doubt upon the nature of salvation or the value of this world. Every man finds the mystery of suffering thrust upon him, carved into the marrow of his own bone and spirit. And if he loves, he is likely to confront it even more fearfully in the tears of others. Man may not opt for or against suffering. It is there: a battering experience whose history man fears and whose future he can count on.

At the same time, there are ways of taking thought or action against the mystery of pain. For example, it can be denied that suffering is mysterious at all by reducing it to one of those human problems as yet unsolved; an incredibly formidable problem, of course, which may never be answered or controlled completely. But on this view, the answers are theoretically within man's reach if he will persevere. Such a view is probably not a common one. The inner reaches of the heart give the lie to such a hope, in spite of what our philosophers tell us.

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There is another view which also denies to suffering the quality of mystery. Here suffering is seen, not as a problem to be explored, but as a question to which there is no answer, anywhere. Suffering is experienced not as mysterious or problematic, but as absurd. And man and world, through whom pain makes its mute and grimacing way, are nonsense too. The appropriate response to such a chaos will be endurance or despair. One can only argue about which response is the more apposite, but about nothing else. There need be nothing superficial in this view; the courage of its unbelief, the integrity with which it lives with its conclusions, contains a wisdom which should give the christian pause.

A further view of suffering, one which demands some degree of faith, however primitive, fully affirms the unanswerable mystery. But there is little insight into the relationship of suffering and love. It is at this point that christianity can explode within the spirit of the man of faith: it may darken his mind further to the mystery by the very fullness of its revelation, but it will enliven his heart by the beauty of its promise. What is affirmed in this inchoate revelation, and what has to be fought for, is the conviction that the answer to the mystery of suffering does exist, that it is contained within the wisdom of Another, and that this Other can be trusted. The splendid effort of the heart involved upon this trust is classically displayed in that most impatient of the scriptures, the Book of Job. Man fairly shouts there for a further revelation and for a greater mystery that will deepen even as it clarifies. Man asks for justice in the Book of Job, as he seeks escape from pain. But it will be his good fortune if the request is swept aside; for that way lies only death. The Lord of life, in his own good time, will reply instead with that deepest love which is self-giving. This will mark a second, and specifically christian, reception of the mystery of suffering: Life that dies in agony, that we may die no more; Joy that grieves unbearably, for the building of our peace.

Sin, the sin of the world, the sins of each man and his responsibility for them, his experience of sin and his belief in it: all this is not a topic for discussion here. We simply accept it as fact. Sin, especially for St John, is hate.<sup>1</sup> It is disunity, rupture, it is to be at odds, apart from, to walk another way. It is the distance and estrangement Adam knew at once and to his shame, before God and towards his wife. It is the decision of Cain to walk apart from Abel.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf 1 Jn *passim*; Jn 5, 38; 8, 34ff.

And man's instinct ever since has been to classify his world in order to divide and separate it, whether by colour, creed, or economics. Sin is also the rupture within the man himself, the lie the mind tells to the heart, the betrayal of the spirit by the flesh. Even in the beauty of our human loves we catch the rhythm and the footfall of this sickness unto death. The very goodness of our lives is shadowed by the curse that has been dealt us. Sin that even stalks our innocence, taxing it with suffering, with loneliness, and death.

In the person of Jesus Christ, the Godhead enters history and the world: not to destroy that world, but to confront it with himself, as he is. God is that condition of Persons who are completely at one, perfectly and endlessly together, present to one another in mutual self-surrender. Thus, the revelation of Christ's divinity is specified. He is not thrust into our history simply as our God. He is revealed to us and for us as our God the Son, the Son of a most loving Father. And the love, the self-donation, that is given and received between them, is a gift so joyous and complete that it is a Person like and equal to themselves: the holy Spirit of Father and Son.

This is the love affair that breaks in upon our history of sin, upon our world of shattered loyalties, our land of Cain that lies far east of Eden. Our world, in a word, of hate. We would expect the confrontation of hate and unconditioned love to be drastic and explosive. And so it is. In one man, one of our own, Jesus Christ, this love affair assumes our world of hate, not to contract its guilt, but to forgive it: to assume its grievous aftermath of suffering, loneliness and death. In becoming man, he took on our flesh of sin,<sup>1</sup> and then forgave it in himself. He forgave us in and through his Christ, that we might then forgive ourselves, bless one another, and our world. This is the atonement; it is the walking together, the being at one, of God and man: and so, too, of man and man, the brothers of Christ. As man had given Christ his flesh, so Christ gives man his Spirit; the brothers become sons, who can say, with the Son, *abba*, Father!<sup>2</sup>

This is salvation. It is a fact for one man, Jesus Christ. For the rest, it is a possibility. The salvation of Jesus Christ reaches its victorious conclusion in the enactment of his passage to the Father. But it was a road to travel, a passage to be made. The salvation of the Son of God who is now also Son of Man, the coming together

<sup>1</sup> Cf 2 Cor 5, 21; Rom 8, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Rom 8, 1-17.

of lover and beloved, the end of loneliness and hate: all this occurs at the very moment of dereliction and of death. He was alone, and the loneliness became union. And then he died; and the death turned out to be life and perfect love. 'He handed over his spirit';<sup>1</sup> he gave his Father all the love he had: the holy Spirit. And with his Father he poured out that Spirit upon all men, bringing to birth his bride the Church in a community of love with himself and of all men with each other.

This happened to the Man. He suffered and was saved. This salvation is available to all men; but there is a road to travel, a passage to be made. This is the suffering through which lies the entrance into glory. Salvation is an exodus, a journey from the isolated self into community. There are no options here; there is only his way to walk, his truth to trust, his life to live. There is but one altar, one victim, one priest. Christ's work is done, and its effect remains: salvation wrought by pain. We are bidden in both liturgy and life to follow and repeat it in effective commemoration.

And here we face our fact. Christ's salvation of the world was won through suffering and loneliness, death and resurrection. This alone is what saved us; not life alone, nor death alone, but pain and death for the sake of life. We are taught here, yet with no questions asked or answered, what is and shall be the meaning of love, and what the cost of hate. It is a pierced and gloriously risen Christ who is and will remain forever the apple of his Father's eye.<sup>2</sup>

And still this suffering and loneliness, this death and resurrection remain an impenetrable mystery. Why could not love forgive, and then let be? Why could not love astonish and defeat our petty hate, except by suffering, by loneliness and tears, by sorrow unto death? Why could not life conquer death except by dying? The Old Testament is crowded with shadows of what Christ will do: with Isaac,<sup>3</sup> and the covenant made by Yahweh with Israel when Moses sprinkled blood on the altar and the people, to signify the union and new friendship of the living God and man.<sup>4</sup> It tells what Christ will do and what his deed effects. But it does not finally tell us why Christ had to suffer. We are left with the mystery of a divine and suffering messiah who died for love. I do not understand this love, or why he had to die, I know it, I experience it, and I am asked to follow. 'Master, where do you live?' 'Come and see'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jn 19, 30.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Jn 19, 37.

<sup>3</sup> Gen 22, 1-18.

<sup>4</sup> Exod 24, 3-8.

<sup>5</sup> Jn 1, 38-9.

He died for our sins, and rose for our justification. And Paul goes on: We are baptized into his death, buried with him by baptism into death, and by his resurrection, we walk in newness of life.<sup>1</sup> The deed of God in Christ, and our baptism into it, transforms the world, the world of men and trees, of the city and the tomb. It is a new creation, alive to God, become one in the human flesh of Christ. The baptismal waters of death and life build us into that victory of Christ, and through him, into one another.

But baptism is not a magic moment that destroys our history and time, nor does it shatter our psychology. Salvation kills our sin, our hate, but not its consequences. Our sin and hate took time; they have a history and a structure in our flesh and our psychology, and in the world about us. Our love must have a history too, as did Christ's. The victory of Christ will never be gainsaid, but it, too, will have a history. Our evil shall be allowed to test it, and our suffering augment it, as Paul says.<sup>2</sup>

Salvation is Christ's love for us; it is his holy Spirit offered to our freedom. In that Spirit, in each one of us, Christ makes his passage once again, as many times as there are men to make it, if we will have it so: through suffering and loneliness, to death and resurrection.

Suffering, then, is integral to the mystery of Christ. Yet we must not sentimentalize his suffering; it is a thing to fear and dread. Christ was a teacher in Israel, with powerful gifts of mind and heart and personality, who wanted to succeed and to find happiness as a man. We mock the man if we say less than that. And suffering sent him grovelling to the earth in sweating panic in the very hour of his glory.<sup>3</sup> Suffering is an evil, the aftermath of hate. Yet the intelligence of God in Christ found in its irrational terrors a fruitful passage back to his own love.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ, his coming to life again in his Father's love, is our salvation. It is the term of a passage that we have briefly sketched: suffering, loneliness, death – and resurrection. And we follow Christ in this. But what of Christ's history as a man who loved and ate and slept, who grieved for Lazarus? What of the work of the carpenter who lent his hands and strength, as all are called to do, to the building of man's city here on earth? Was this salvific for himself, for us? The question is not: Did his life contribute to the salvation that was perfectly wrought in his death

<sup>1</sup> Rom 6, 3-5.

<sup>2</sup> Col 1, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Mt 26, 37ff; Mk 14, 32ff; Lk 22, 41ff.

and resurrection? We know that it did. The question is rather: Was work well done worth doing for itself, was his grief and laughter part of the kingdom of God, or only a preparation for it? If so, then the passage itself, the suffering and loneliness and death, is only a means, and not itself a part of the love which is salvation.

We who live in the gift-time of the resurrection, the *kairos* of the Spirit, must ask ourselves the same questions. What of our world, our material world, a part of which is forever the risen flesh of the only son of God? Is life only a time of waiting and of suffering – a waiting strengthened by the Spirit, with love and unity – salvation – appended as a hope? Is the world till now simply a place to test and baffle us, the battleground of a victory that lies completely beyond history? What is salvation and when?

There are three kinds of answers which christians have given throughout history: answers that often differ in emphasis rather than substance. One which has never ceased to be stressed in our history sees salvation substantially as a reality of the future life alone. Baptism is not 'experienced' as salvation, but rather as a pledge of it, the promise of the means to acquire it. Salvation is a goal to be attained; it is not immediately available. This world and all our human loves are good, but they are shot through with peril. Experience will largely show them to be ashes in the mouth. The eternal God of the vision of the blessed is man's one true desire. He is salvation, or rather he will be in the future, when he awaits us at death with his reward. The world and all our human powers are opportunities and temptations. They are effectively means: occasions for penitence, for suffering, and for merit. By and large, the world is that for which St John's Christ refused to pray.<sup>1</sup> In this view, suffering tends to be seen as a punishment for sin, or a penance that precedes forgiveness and reward. The objects of our pain and toil, the work we do and suffer for, are of little or no moment in themselves. It is will, the intention of the worker, which is significant.

The defect in this view is not that it denies the humanity of Christ, but that it fails to experience effectively, to understand the seriousness with which he took our history and his own. Some but relatively few men have built their entire lives on this principle; and they, in God's mercy, have become saints. Considerably more live half their lives this way: building their world, taking their joys and sorrows as they come, and planning for heaven on the side. It is a

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<sup>1</sup> Cf Jn 17, 14-17.

blueprint for the divided man: a deficient humanism.

Another answer, which appears to be the opposite of the first, is that the time of salvation is now. The humanity of God, and our incorporation into this God-man at baptism, is even now renewing the face of the earth. The teaching of the greek Fathers, that when God becomes man, man begins to become like God, is taken at its word. The flesh of the historical Christ is part of the world, and all creation shares its splendour, or at least its possibilities. The redemptive act of Christ is operating to its full effect throughout the whole creation. History and time are now directed, almost entirely, by the dynamism of the risen Christ communicated to man. Redemptive contact with the flesh of Christ is actually and not merely potentially a universal quality, rather than being specifically christian, however hidden. Pushed to its logical extremes, this answer would imply that the incarnation was the permanent death of God: a trinitarian death which leaves us with a man, not with that Son whose very manhood and whole delight is in his Father's will. Tabor would reveal the Jesus of human history only, the transfigured Christ of Peter's faith. In this kind of humanism, the mystery of sin and of sinful man is reduced to an object of psychology, though one admittedly difficult to analyze and master; and suffering becomes an anomaly and a scandal.

In spite of its glaring deficiencies, this humanist answer has perhaps stronger links with salvation than the simple 'contempt of the world' view. It has an optimism, a hope in the present and in the immediate future. Salvation is brotherhood in a prosperous city of man. It lies within reach, if not of this generation, then the next, if only there be sufficient men free and courageous enough to grow to their full stature. Yet salvation here is not the triumph of love over hate through suffering and death. It is the destruction of suffering by a free mankind that does not need, or at least no longer needs, redemption. This humanism takes both salvation and suffering very seriously, but stamps them as antagonists; so that, eventually, salvation lies not through the cross but in its destruction.

The third view seeks to unite all that is best in the other two. It is a middle way, but is none the less adventurous for that. It allows for man's continuing dependance, acknowledging that the profound divinization worked in him by baptism remains sheer gift: the indwelling, not simply of the spirit of the historical Christ, but of the holy Spirit of the risen Lord, who is in man and for him, but not of him. Again, it is the body of the historical and risen Christ which the

Father has made the cornerstone of the now intrinsically valuable city of man. This is why the worker in this city, whether he throws rivets or a baseball, whether he cries out because a child is born or screams in suffering from cancer, or lives with tough nobility in the confines of neurosis: this worker is doing something that need never die. For if it is fully human, it can become a part of Christ. In this view, the world is both religious and profane, and that is the way it should be. But it remains a road to travel, a passage to be made; one that leads beyond history to the risen Lord, who draws all creation to himself, to the honour of his Father, who shall then be all in all. And yet, paradoxically, the acceptable time is now, for the kingdom of God is among us, and the God-man shows himself in every corner of the world we live in. It is often a dark and seemingly chaotic epiphany in which bulldozers do a work that is needed, but one that need not pass. It need hardly be said that such a view is nonsensical except in the light of faith. But salvation is here: the death of hate, and the birth in us of the Father's love for his only Son, and for all Christ's scattered brothers.

It is still a difficult enterprise. Hate is allowed to test the victory in us, for human love takes time. The building blocks of our city are recalcitrant and hard, and at the same time exposed to the eroding elements of a humanism that insists it is its own, and not the gift of the risen Lord's humanity. There will be, for many, the constant temptation to believe that there is nothing here worth doing, except to be tempted and to wait. It remains true, as Paul insists, that we are diminished by our struggle and our pain;<sup>1</sup> but the Christ in us grows great by it. Our love of Christ, of our fellow men, and of our world, will be death of us. That is God's own truth, and our way to life: salvation in and through suffering, loneliness, and death. It was a broken body in the tomb that marked the moment and occasion when a young man strode across the sunrise. Since then, salvation has always been in the present moment, and will be as long as the Father loves his son, the Son of Man, our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ, and in him all his brothers, who are now also sons.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf 2 Cor 5, 16.