

THE CROSS OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

By LEONARD JOHNSTON

‘THE ONLY THING I can boast about is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ’.¹ This is a far cry from the first stunned reaction of the apostles: ‘We thought he was to be the one to set Israel free, but our leaders handed him over to be sentenced to death and had him crucified’.² It was not to jews and pagans only that the cross was ‘a scandal, a stupidity’.³ Even after the reality of the resurrection dawned on them, the cross remained a dark and painful shadow in the background; the best they could do by way of human apology was to show that it was unjust, ‘he was handed over by sinful men’; and the best they could do by way of theological justification was the assurance that it happened ‘by divine foreknowledge’, that Christ had to die, according to the scriptures.

The very shame and incomprehensibility of it indeed gives Paul his first insight into the meaning of this great mystery, his first formulation of ‘redemption’. Death is indeed a disgrace and a defeat; but this shows all the more clearly the triumph and glory of the resurrection. ‘You put him to death; but God raised him to life’.⁴ Death is the end; but the resurrection is a new beginning:

That which is sown is perishable; but what is raised is imperishable; the thing that is sown is contemptible, but what is raised is glorious; the thing that is sown is weak, but what is raised is powerful; when it is sown it embodies the soul, but when it is raised it embodies the spirit – it is a spirit-filled body.⁵

Christ, having been raised from the dead, will never die again. Death has no power over him any more. When he died, he died once for all, to sin, so his life now is life with God.⁶

¹ Gal 6, 14.

² Lk 24, 20–21.

³ 1 Cor 1, 23.

⁴ Acts 3, 15.

⁵ 1 Cor 15, 42–44.

⁶ Rom 6, 9–10.

This insight is a valuable acquisition in the Church's understanding. For one thing, it makes it possible to see Christ's work as a *transitus* in the line of God's great work in the Old Testament – the exodus, with all the additional insights that flow from this comparison: that the blood of Christ shed on the cross could be compared to the blood of the lamb sprinkled on the doorposts; that the meal in which christians commemorated Christ's work was a passover meal; that his exodus involved a new covenant, new life, a new community, a new people, new sons of God.

Here is a perfectly valid theology, and one which we hope will never again be lost or overshadowed in our own theological thinking. But valid though it is, we always feel that Paul is never quite satisfied with it. It leaves the death of our Lord in a purely negative role, as simply the jumping-off point for the resurrection: 'He died, yes – a pity, a tragedy, really; but don't worry about this; he rose to a new life, and this is all that counts'. Yet one cannot really dismiss death like this. Granted that this new life is all-important, did not his very union with our human nature achieve this – 'God sent his Son, born of a woman . . . to enable us to be adopted as sons'?¹ And if some further transformation were necessary, could it not have been brought about in some less brutal fashion – simply by a glorious ascension, for example? But between the incarnation and the ascension lies the shadow of the cross. And the death of Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, cannot be so lightly brushed aside, an uncomfortable incident between two great moments. In human existence, death is more important than this.

Of course Paul was not alone in adopting this view. The early Church was heir to the Old Testament attitude that death – physical dissolution and the extinction of the spirit – was the outward mark of an even more radical disorder in the human state which we call sin. So when our Lord accepted our human condition, he accepted death and accepted also a condition marked by sin: 'For our sake God made the sinless one into sin'.² Death and sin are connected; so that the death of Christ is not simply the unfortunate prelude to the glorious resurrection, but somehow plays a positive part in relation to sin: 'He died for our sins and rose to justify us'.³ This found expression in the formula which formed part of Paul's earliest preaching: 'I taught you what I had been taught myself, that Christ died for our sins . . .'⁴

¹ Gal 4, 5.

² 2 Cor 5, 21.

³ Rom 4, 25.

⁴ 1 Cor 15, 3.

The death of Christ was 'for us, for our sins'. But this is really a very vague phrase; and different New Testament writers make different attempts to expand and clarify what it implies.

We have already referred to the concept of redemption as a transition to life from death, with the resulting pattern of passover imagery that this suggests, and in particular the idea of the paschal lamb: 'Christ our passover has been sacrificed . . .'.¹ Closely associated with this image is the idea of covenant, and the blood used in this ceremonial:

The earlier covenant needed something to be killed in order to take effect; Moses took blood and sprinkled the book and all the people; but Christ has entered the sanctuary taking his own blood; he is the mediator of the new covenant.²

On the same night he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took the cup and said: This cup is the new covenant in my blood.³

Almost inevitably this thought broadened out to include the idea of sacrifice in general: 'Jesus Christ was appointed by God to sacrifice his life so as to win reconciliation'.⁴

Yet this is clearly not the complete or final answer. The further question arises of the efficacy of sacrifices. Our Lord's sacrificial death wins salvation for us: but *how*? Paul occasionally speaks of our Lord's death as 'a ransom', as a price he paid for our sins: 'You are not your own property; you have been bought and paid for';⁵ 'You have been bought and paid for; do not become slaves of other men'.⁶ Paul may indeed be influenced here by the custom of manumission, by which a slave could buy his freedom from his master; but the influence goes little further than the formula itself, and certainly cannot be carried through rigorously to determine the full content of Paul's thought – as if Christ's death were the price demanded by a stern God for the freedom of men in the slavery of sin. Paul is simply trying to express his gratitude for this wonderful gift of freedom, achieved at such cost: 'his free gift to us in the beloved, in whom, through his blood, we gain our freedom'.⁷

However, the New Testament writers were much more influenced by the picture of the suffering Servant in second Isaiah:

. . . pierced for our faults, crushed for our sins. Harshly dealt with, he bore it humbly, he never opened his mouth, like a

¹ 1 Cor 5, 7.

² Heb 9, 18, 19, 12, 15.

³ 1 Cor 11, 24-25.

⁴ Rom 3, 25.

⁵ 1 Cor 6, 20.

⁶ 1 Cor 7, 23.

⁷ Eph 1, 23; cf Col 1, 14.

lamb that is led to the slaughter-house, like a sheep that is dumb before its shearers . . . If he offers his life in atonement, he shall have a long life. By his sufferings shall my servant justify many, taking their faults upon himself.¹

This was obviously appropriate to the experience of Jesus, and provided his followers with a way of thinking about his tragic death; it was not simply the negative counterpart to the resurrection – it was an act of self-offering, a sacrifice of atonement for sin.

Here is a great theological advance; but it is still not the only way of thinking about our Lord's death. The fourth gospel has yet another way of looking at it. In this gospel, the key to our Lord's person and work may be summed up in the word 'revelation'. He is the Word of God, fulfilment and completion of all God's words; 'no man has ever seen God; the only-begotten of the Father has revealed him to us'.² Our Lord has come to show God to us – and not merely to show, but to *bring* God to us. The God he shows to us is a God who loves, one whose love expresses itself in giving: 'God so loved the world as to give his only-begotten Son'.³ Christ is the full and perfect expression of God's love. Christ, and Christ's words and actions, was not a sort of visual aid enabling us to understand God better; he was God's own gift of himself to us. And that gift was only complete in our Lord's own complete self-giving, in his death. That is why, for John, the crucifixion is not something shameful, but something glorious, a 'lifting up'; because if in Christ we see God's glory, his manifestation of himself, then nowhere was it seen more perfectly than in the perfect picture of love on the cross.

Here then we have yet another theology of the cross. Our Lord's death is the starting point of a passover, a transition to a new life. His death is like that of the paschal lamb; it is a sacrifice, a sacrifice of vicarious atonement like that of the suffering Servant; and it is supremely the action of God giving himself in love. So many theologies of the cross – so many *different* theologies of the cross; and though Paul shares something of all of them, none of them are peculiarly his.

His own characteristic way of looking at it follows from his nature and temperament: he is a jew, a rabbi, a hebrew of the hebrews. Perhaps the most fruitful part of his work was the result of his attempt to bring his christian life into focus with his jewish faith –

¹ Isai 53, 5-11.

² Jn 1, 18.

³ Jn 3, 16.

an attempt in which his personal anguish is reflected in the tortuousness of his arguments. These qualities are seen most clearly in his efforts to grapple with the profound truths of human existence as seen by a Jew – sin, death, the law. These three factors are obviously inter-related; but what exactly their relationship is is difficult to say, since they seem to fall into a different pattern with each new train of thought. This is particularly true of the law: the law seems to be responsible for sin. By increasing the number of prohibitions, it increases the opportunities for transgression. It makes conscious and wilful, actions which otherwise would have been covered by good faith. By the very fact of prohibition it stimulates the urge to rebel. And yet the law is something good; it brought wayward men by leading reins to Christ.

Paul's thought is indeed inconsistent, the result of intuitive glimpses of partial truths rather than of a logical synthesis. Perhaps the best attempt to form such a synthesis is that of Père Benoit, which may be summed up briefly as follows.¹

'Through sin, death has spread through the whole human race'.² You can say either that death rules men, with sin as the agent of his rule; or that sin rules, with death as the mark of its mastery. It would not be true to Paul's way of thinking to say that this is 'only' original sin, an inherited guilt, or 'only' physical death. In either case, it is a sad state of alienation from the living God. But it is true that this rule is not complete and total as long as men do not personally embrace it; and it is here that the law comes in. The law puts man face to face with sin in all its clarity, and makes it possible for man to accept it for what it is, and therefore to feel the full weight of death: 'Sin used the law to show itself in its true colours and was thus able to exercise all its sinful power'.³ 'The sting of death is sin, and sin gets its power from the law'.⁴

This is the first function of law; but a second follows from this. It shows up sin for what it is; and, as a proclamation of the divine justice, it calls with austere objectivity for the penalty due to sin: 'If you sin, you die'. And it is precisely here that Paul situates the death of Christ. His death was an answer to the call of the law. He identified himself with our human, sinful situation: 'he came in a body of sin',⁵ 'he was made sin for us';⁶ he was 'born of a woman, born under the law',⁷ and therefore accepted the curse, the ban,

¹ *Exegèse et théologie* (Paris, 1961), pp 9-40.

² Rom 7, 13.

³ 2 Cor 5, 21.

⁴ 1 Cor 15, 56.

⁷ Gal 4, 4.

² Rom 5, 12.

⁵ Rom 8, 3.

the condemnation proclaimed by the law.¹ And so he dies. But in his dying he sides with the law in 'condemning sin in the flesh';² he fulfils the law's demands completely, so that the law has no more claim on us. 'He has over-ridden the law and cancelled every record of the debt we had to pay; he has done away with it by nailing it to the cross'.³ His death is the end of the law's demand and the end of the tyranny of sin and death.

This, then, is St Paul's own characteristic approach to the death of Christ. And a very good one too, as far as it goes. Yet one may be excused for not even yet being completely satisfied. In the first place, we may have doubts about the very picturesque way in which it is expressed. Law, Sin, Death, Flesh – all of these are personified and presented as actors in a drama, 'entering onto the scene', 'ruling', 'wielding weapons', 'passing judgment' and so on. We would like to probe further the literal value of such figurative language. In the second place, we would like to see more clearly how this view fits with the other views of the redemptive value of the cross to which we have already referred. For although we readily accept that the full reality of God's work in Christ is richer than any single formulation of it, nevertheless it is the same reality that we are dealing with; and we should not expect the various ways of expressing it to be completely disparate.

Let us therefore see if we can reformulate Paul's own thought in more literal terms, and perhaps in terms which may link up with other theologies.

'The law is sacred and just and good'.⁴ The law is not an arbitrary command designed to secure obedience simply as a sign of our submission. It is the word of God; it is a revelation of God; it is a revelation of God who is himself good and also our best good. It is a revelation of God's character, and of our character as sons of God. It is not simply a veto, still less a juridical enactment of the penalty of non-fulfilment. It is an expression of divine justice, but only in the sense that it expresses the 'righteousness' of God; and to live in accordance with this is to share something of God's own being. It is to live as he would have us live, we who are called to be his sons. The aspect of condemnation which is implied in law is simply a negative statement of the same truth: 'This do and you shall live; to live otherwise is to die'.

The human condition is marked by all the sad consequences of

¹ Gal 3, 13.

² Rom 8, 3.

³ Col 2, 14.

⁴ Rom 7, 12.

our separation from God – discord amongst men, discord within ourselves, discord with our environment: all that the bible calls ‘death’. Death is a punishment, not in the sense that it is an act of God’s vindictiveness, or even of his justice, but simply as the ultimate assertion of our alienation from the living God. But precisely because that is what it is, it is also a recognition of that absence, a proclamation of our wrongfulness. To use a trivial analogy, if you put your hand in the fire, you feel pain; but that pain is also a statement of the folly of your action. And what our Lord did was to give death that value: sinless, he made his death a statement of the wrongfulness of human life and therefore of the righteousness of God. He made death a *metanoia*, a change of heart, and a change expressed exactly in the terms which marked our having strayed. Sin is a choice of ourselves and a rejection of God. Our Lord chose God by offering himself. It is indeed a demonstration of love, as John has it – love patterned on God’s own love, expressed in utter self-giving. It is a sacrifice, as the synoptics see it – an offering of himself to replace the choice of self which sin is. And all of this he does through the very mark of sin, which is death. *Stimulus peccati mors!* The sting of sin is death; but Jesus has twisted sin’s own weapon out of its grasp and used it against itself. In the very act of conquering, sin is defeated and cheated of its prey. This is the power of God and the wisdom of God. In the face of man’s misuse of his freedom, we could imagine various solutions on the part of an all-powerful creator. He might have scrapped the whole scheme and started again. Or he might simply have accepted the situation as it was, and left men to suffer the consequences of their own folly. Or he might have forgiven and forgiven, answering our repeated sins by repeated acts of pardon which released us from the consequences of our falls. But instead of all these, what he has actually done is to accept man’s sinfulness, so as to enter into that sinful state and use that very state as the means of returning to him. The bridge between God and man is broken; but our Lord shows us a painful path among the ruins.

Christ does reign from the cross. The glory of the risen Lord is not just the glory of life from death, but life through death, and even in death. John is right: it is on the cross that the transformation of our Lord takes place, from the state of suffering servant of the Lord to the state of son of man in glory: ‘Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son – give me back the glory that I had with you before the world began’.¹ But though John has it most explicitly, the thought

¹ Jn 17, 1-5.

is not foreign to Paul. 'He emptied himself . . . to death, even the death of the cross: wherefore God has exalted him'.¹ This is not merely the reward for sufferings undergone; it is the statement of what those sufferings really imply. It is the astonishing rider to the argument stated by the law: 'This do and you shall live; to live otherwise is to die – but that death can become a means of life'. Having identified himself fully with our human condition, he did not then discard it, but transformed it: 'Ascending on high, he captured prisoners'.² 'By the cross he overcame the sovereignties and powers and paraded them behind him in triumphal procession'.³ The resurrection and ascension are not just a happy ending to what would otherwise be a tragic story, just as the crucifixion is not just an unfortunate prelude to the real victory of the resurrection. They are the visible demonstration of the reality of the transformation of the human situation achieved in the cross of Christ.

And the christian life is our insertion into this pattern. The christian is not one who shares the reality of the risen state in this life. He is one who by the Spirit of Jesus is able to give the same value to his dying life as Jesus did. 'When we were baptized, we were baptized in his death; we joined him in death so that as Christ was raised from the dead, we too might live a new life'. But that is a life 'free from the slavery of sin', a 'life for God'. Our own resurrection comes later. 'We shall imitate him in his resurrection, we shall return to life with him'.⁴ Meanwhile, we live as Jesus lived: 'Always we carry with us in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be seen in our body', a life of continual self-offering, 'consigned to death every day'.⁵ 'You have died, and the life you have is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ is revealed, you too will be revealed in glory with him'.⁶ Our present life is like that of Jesus, a life of hidden glory, veiled, covered, cloaked by the weakness of our flesh, which is yet also the means by which we express our union with God. 'All I want to know is Christ, and the power of his resurrection, so that later I may share his actual resurrection. Meanwhile I share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death – for I am not perfect yet'.⁷

We reproduce in our lives the pattern of the death of Jesus. We are baptized in water, which symbolizes both the death of Christ and the new life which we share: not by a sudden switch of symbolism, but because this very death is, by the self-offering of Christ, a

¹ Phil 2, 7-9.

² Cf Eph 4, 8-9.

³ Cf Col 2, 9-15.

⁴ Rom 6, 3-11.

⁵ 2 Cor³₄, 10-11.

⁶ Col 3, 3-4.

⁷ Cf Phil 3, 10-12.

means of expressing a new attitude, a turning to God. We are baptized into this death, and this is not simply an incident, a moment in time, a once-and-for-all acquisition of a new life. It *is* a new life, but it is a new life which is a state, a permanent condition. Baptism is not a magical wand-waving. It is an offer by God, a promise, a guarantee that he will do for us what he did in Christ: to make our dying lives a joyful self-offering. Not so as to remove us from the normal conditions of life, but to make it possible for us to give them a different value; not to transform our situation, but to transform ourselves. Our reception of baptism is on our part a pledge that we will live as Christ lived, that we will go into the waters of death and transform them into the waters of life, that we will empty ourselves and take the form of a servant; because it is in this form that God recognizes us as his sons. The cross in the life of a christian is not a bitter reminder of our separation from God, to be accepted only with tears or patient stoicism; it is the means by which we, with Christ, express a permanent *metanoia* – an acknowledgment of our separation from God which is also a proclamation of our will to return to him.

This has obvious relevance also to the sacrament of penance, the sacrament of repentance. For various reasons many more christians today feel more keenly what was always a difficulty about the practice of frequent confession: its inherent danger of ritualism, the mechanical and apparently unavailing recital of sins committed. Various ways of dealing with this are being investigated today, and it is not suggested that what is said here is the solution, or even a solution; it is merely drawing attention to one aspect of the theology in which penance has a place. All the sacraments are the application of Christ's redeeming action to an individual christian in specific circumstances. Baptism applies it to one who newly pledges himself to share the life of the redeemer. The eucharist applies it to the community of the redeemed who become thereby the body of Christ. The sacrament of penance applies the death and resurrection of our Lord to *sinful* christians – to those who have pledged themselves to die to the life of sin; who have failed, and here renew their pledge. It is indeed a renewal of our baptism. But it is also a renewal of our pledge *as sinners* – that is to say, not merely as people who have fallen but as people who will undoubtedly fall again; but in whom equally certainly the will to rise again with Christ is here reaffirmed. Penance is the sacrament of hope. It must have an essential part in the life of a christian who bears daily in his body the death of Christ.