

# CHRISTO CONFIXUS<sup>1</sup>

By C. C. MARTINDALE

*'I am co-crucified with Christ . . . and I live, no longer I, but Christ is living in me'.<sup>2</sup>*

TO ENTER THE CONVENT of San Marco at Florence on one of the last days of holy week is an experience which cannot be forgotten. From the noisy famous street, and the piazza thronged with holiday crowds and seething with ragamuffins hawking their easter pieties and their pastry made according to good lenten rules, you pass into that silence peopled with little enough save spirits. Even the great Church of the Annunziata, hard by, is full of trampling and of hubbub; and the besieged sepulchre, the daily performances of tenebrae, make you wonder whether the miraculous picture, there behind its curtain, will ever succeed in re-imposing its spell of peace upon the agitated Church. But I have passed some Good Friday hours of incomparable quiet in the cells and corridors of the dis-affected convent.

It is a dominican convent; and one might have expected that the kennel of those hounds of the Lord, who bayed their way through the world in Christ's great hunt for souls, would not have been restful in its psychic influences. The ubiquitous memory, too, of Savonarola might have been trusted to prevail, and to put fierce elements of passion and of fire into that atmosphere.

But even before you saw the actual paintings of Angelico, you were aware of some great guardian present, like the Angel of Fano, 'smoothing distortion down, till every nerve found soothing.'

The 'Bird of God' broods there with outspread wings, and presses the brow of the most anxious against the warm feathers of its breast.

It remains that nothing is in the wonderful paintings which, in so many cells, Fra Angelico made to glow for his brethren and compa-

<sup>1</sup> Though this meditative essay on the passion of Christ was written over fifty years ago, it is remarkably modern in its theological and social overtones. Fr Martindale was one of those catholic thinkers who helped to prepare many of us for doctrinal and social developments within the Church. May he rest in peace. The lesson that the doctrine and the prayer of the Church now are rooted in the Church of the past is one that is hard to learn in these days of change. But our peace depends on it. *Ed.*

<sup>2</sup> Gal 2, 20.

nions' sake, save what is pacifying and serene. Not that he feared to draw the terrible episodes of our Lord's passion, nor that the scourge, the smiting hand, the terrible crown, or the nails are absent. Over there in Florence, pictures exist alive with an uncapturable spirit, which no one who has not seen them in their own home, on their own walls, can ever realize in imagination. Yet even reproductions, for those of us who have seen the originals, can set rising upwards once more through the accumulated layers of more recent consciousness, those stored vital impressions which none but genuine life can ever introduce beneath the outer sheathings of the soul. And one of them – perhaps the dominant among them – is, as I said, a great serenity and peace.

Our Lord himself, in his most tragic hours, has a dignity and repose incomparable and undisturbed. Around him stand and kneel his disciples, his mother, his saints of all the ages, his monks and nuns and friars; and on the face of all of them, despite their pain, is to be recognized (to my feeling) a calm and a control, even a certain radiance of content, which will astonish those who feel that some violence of emotion, some corresponding display of turbulence, is proper in response to the solicitation of this terrible history of the passion. At most a certain grave enquiry, a careful humbling of the soul and covering of the face before that which is so far beyond all understanding and all emotion, is to be perceived in these Magdalens and Peters and Dominics who surround the crucifix. Why, even Pilate, even the pharisees and the soldiers, seem to be grown symbolical, ritualized, hierarchized, like priests engaged in some tremendous ceremony of Death, where no personal or original contribution, so to say, could for a moment be tolerated. The houses of priest or governor, Gethsemanes, Calvary, are become so many sanctuaries; and the whole passion, with all its infinity of meaning and of power, moves, none the less, with a gentle gravity, like a solemn mass.

This surely is the way in which to contemplate so august a mystery, however terrific in actual happening its incidents may have been.

All really great things – joys, sins, loves, doctrines – are far beyond the explosions of ordinary emotion. Even in daily life, what is really 'serious' calls for no noisy tears, no tossing about of words or violent gesture. The poet who spoke of thoughts too deep for tears, spoke words of truthfulness which a universal recognition has made almost hackneyed. And the less 'well-bred', the more superficial, that is, feebler in fibre, are precisely those who greet disaster with the loud-

est outcry. Simplicity, therefore, should be our attitude in face of the most tremendous tragedy, even human, which the world has ever seen, or can see; a simplicity which is really utter humility, for it knows itself belied by artificial manifestations of emotions deemed dramatically 'appropriate' by a grosser sense; for humility is little else but truthfulness in one's own regard, under the light of God. In all consideration of Christ's passion, therefore, to my feeling, should be preserved great 'recollection', great control of the imagination, great calm and honesty; there must be no lashing of sluggish emotion into turbulence; no recourse to conventional formulae or effort to copy what saints' lives have told us of; better is it to acknowledge ourselves, before this terrible story, dumb, blind, and impotent, than to insult what was so utterly real for Christ with anything of unreality in ourselves. In complete simplicity, therefore, let us sit down by the foot of the cross, or walk with Jesus along his sorrowful way, truthfully ourselves, asking to understand more wisely, to love more warmly, to imitate more courageously, no doubt; but leaving the Power which spreads from that cross to act upon us as it chooses, and not striving to wrest from it those spiritual results we may ourselves deem suitable.

Two views of the passion of our Lord may be taken which are, I imagine, of special importance to those who in this generation are so apt to miss the whole substance of christianity in their attention to what are but its decorations, so to say, or at best its secondary properties. The first is what may be called the social force of the passion; and the second, its resurrectional, or re-creative force.

The passion is not, to begin with, merely an example; merely spectacular, or a stimulus to behaviour and feeling as a sermon might be, or as a crucifix is. Doubtless it is a unique display, deliberately chosen by God, of the meaning of man's sin, and of God's redemptive love; for Christ never need have suffered thus, nor need the atonement have been made in all the terrible setting that we read of. Yet it 'behoved' Christ so to suffer, as himself he said upon the Emmaus road; else we never would have realized the astounding facts of what we had lost, and what has been restored to us. We have the right, then, and indeed the duty, of bringing home to ourselves by every means the physical details of Christ's sufferings: and the stations of the cross, the creeping to the cross, the 'reproaches', the pathetic pomp of Maria Desolata – all that, is again and again legitimate to make us realize what has happened in this world and in Christ's flesh, because of what happens in the sinful souls of men.

Yet nothing of all this goes to the real roots of the thing; so to contemplate the history of holy week is but to sail, as a saint has said, upon the surface of that Red Sea.

Again, the passion is no external event, merely, of which the results are to our immense advantage. Christ's merits are not, of course – and no catholic is tempted so to think of them – a kind of cloak, white and gold and crimson, which the christian throws over his own black sinfulness, uncleansed beneath. This, strange perverted sects would once have had us think. But we know that Christ's blood not only covers, but cleanses; and the soul 'in grace' is not only robed in stainlessness, but is clean, is fragrant and lovely in personal fact. Nor is Christ's blood, again, as it were mere money, whereby the debt that never we could pay is paid in full by One, who, though man, was yet true God, and of infinite value in his every sigh. But the passion is part and parcel of that divine scheme whereby the human race is better than restored to the unity and fellowship which once it had in Adam, is caught up into and made integral part of that mystic Christ without whose 'completing' even the Christ of Nazareth were deprived of his full meaning.

It is of the essence of the christian revelation that we are made one with Christ, and through him with God; and this unity is by no means metaphorical and less real than that of which each single man is conscious in his own soul. Anything of which in this visible world, or in the world of imagination or of thought, we can conceive, is on the contrary, less real than the union between Christ and the christian soul in grace. This is, as I said, the christian revelation: it is what St Paul in every key triumphantly proclaims; it is the special utterance of St John, who in chapter after chapter tells of the Bread, the Light, the Vine with its springing sap, the pillars built into God's temple, so that they are part of it and it consists of them.

But not here, perhaps, should the general mystery of incorporation be dwelt upon. It is of the consequences of our being incorporate in a suffering Christ that I am speaking; and of these, I choose only two of the more directly obvious. For it is the simplest notions of christianity which are the most powerful; and of what is very simple, little can be said. Many words are in place, chiefly where elaborate and human-wrought consequences and parallels and arguments are involved. What, then, simpler, and yet more far – reaching than the reflection that being incorporate with the crucified we ought ourselves to suffer? In a body not numbed or paralysed, every limb and every nerve should feel at least the reverberation of pain situated,

in reality, only here or there within its organism. The suffering flashed upward to the brain goes spreading forth once more, transformed, it may be, and unlike itself, yet always suffering, into every extremity of hands and feet; and the more delicately interknit within itself and nervously alert the body is, the more exquisitely all of it responds to the challenge of its several parts.

At this hour in England, so awakened has our social consciousness become, it has grown difficult for any one of us to tolerate *not* suffering with those whose wounds are one long agony in the hospitals of Europe, or whose tears are flowing in so many homes.<sup>1</sup> We in our comfort look up and see the self-same stars on which so many weary eyes out there are fastened; and the contrast becomes too great to bear. Mental suffering at least has reached us; and we feel it over-poignant if we may not translate it at once into some work, some physical hardship or sacrifice which shall relieve its pang. So proved is it that the torment of the body is as nothing compared with the suffering of the soul. But what here is to be insisted on till our imagination grips it well, is, that where in an organism one part suffers, the whole should be in sympathy with it – ‘suffering-with’, the greek word means – else, it were dead or at best but half alive. And the marvel grows, that christians can ever say, not only ‘*Why* should I suffer this or that?’ but, ‘*Why* should *I* suffer so . . .?’ as though the better the christian, the less he might expect to suffer.

Yet our altogether sinless Lord suffered the most. The more his life is ours, the more is suffering bound to be ours. If indeed we think ourselves to be serving Christ, and still do not suffer, then should our astonishment begin. ‘I am like Christ’, argues the soul conscious of no sin, and of a good will to follow Jesus, ‘and yet I do not suffer. How can that be? Is it, indeed, here that I am meriting my reward? Is life so much an ease and an enjoyment because all that should tremble with pain in sympathy with my Head’s pain, has somehow been anaesthetized and cannot feel?’ Utterly inappropriate ought he to feel his life if it be painless and yet, in profession, christian.

Such, then, is the most trite yet most probing consideration which flows from the belief in the solidarity of Christ’s Church with Christ; and the social meaning of the passion implies, first and most directly, that, if Jesus suffered, we, in proportion as we are really incorporate with him, must suffer too.

<sup>1</sup> This meditation was written in England during the first world war. We feel that the sentiments are wonderfully apt when applied to Vietnam, Biafra and so on.

With this primal fact of our incorporation with our Lord goes its complementary truth that we are one each with the other, and that if his suffering is in a true sense ours, our suffering has become, since it is mystically his, vicarious and redemptive. Christian suffering is not sterile. There is no hint in christianity of the cult of suffering for its own sake. We are not in love with pain even when our great protagonists – saints like Teresa of Avila, or Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi – cry that they must suffer or must die or ask, even, not to die, provided they may suffer. There is no such thing as christian suffering which is not really active; and this is a new thing in the world, and no greek recognition that suffering brought wisdom in its train ever rose to the paradox that to undergo might be to do, and that to submit was to achieve. Yet so it is for the christian. Nothing in christianity is quite negative. Just as the catholic Church is, by very force of definition, universal, and includes in a way in which no most 'comprehensive' sect can ever hope to do; just as, say, the chastity of her priests and nuns is no mere abdication of a whole sphere of sacred human energy, but a laying hold of a creative power – spiritual, and therefore far more real and universal than what is merely physical – so every pain suffered by the christian is co-operative of salvation, and is part of the great travail of creation which still continues unto the formation of the perfect Christ.

That is why Christ's entry into Jerusalem is a triumph, and the disciples who go with him carry, they too, the palms of victory and the olive branch of peace. True, they had no notion, on the first Palm Sunday, how that triumph was to be won, and their entry was exultant and confident after a fashion doomed to disillusionment. But now that his christians have learnt their lesson, the world is full of men and women following Christ into the Holy City, not excitedly, not confused by visions of earthlier elements, but with the calm concentration of those saints of Fra Angelico, who move unhurriedly, their brows serene and even radiant, though their eyes are tearful; their hands, at most, uplifted in gentle astonishment at the great love and abnegation of their example; their gaze, if not fixed upon himself or on their goal, is turned quietly towards their neighbours, as though trusting to find in each an echo of their thoughts, which are, that Christ, such is his love for men, 'must' suffer, and, with him, themselves must suffer, and enter thus into their joy. They follow, understanding; and forthwith he links them closer still to his willing condescension; he serves; he washes their feet; the same hands are uplifted in simple wonderment; the same

eyes are turned to the neighbouring face in appeal for some silent expression that heart has spoken to heart, and that all there are thinking with one thought. That thought is evident behind the forehead of each of these apostles; so evident, that the artist finds no realism of incident, even as he seeks no violence of detail: One apostle wipes his feet; another leans from a little stool to fasten on his sandal; another ministers the water. Even Peter, recalcitrant, finding the incident still intolerable, has not alienated himself from the spirit of Christ's service and humiliation. He is not contemptuous; not hostile; he will be readily convinced, that so his Lord must stoop, and will be, in a moment, admitted to a full communion. See, then, that picture of the supper, where the humble artist has made these grown men kneel and watch so simply, like children at some naive communion, familiar, yet not, for that, held cheap; a mystery, but treated so serenely; just an entering, with all the humility of trust, into the deepest experiences of the Incarnate God.

It is seen then that with perfect truth christianity may be declared to be a religion of suffering and pain. It is rebuked for being so by those who have never troubled to think out the matter of their rebuke. For they have allowed the only *raison d'être* of christian suffering to escape them, which is, the incorporation of the christian with a suffering God. They regard christianity as a kind of pessimism; a gloomy dis-esteem of all that the world holds bright and happy; a savage condemnation, as bad, of all that human nature prizes as its congenial occupation or nutriment. They identify christianity with those sombre forms of ancient heresies which decried the body as essentially evil, its pleasures as in nature degrading to the soul and wrong; or with the calvinism which, misinterpreting the catholic dogma of original sin, sees in that withdrawal of God's supernatural grace a blow so dealt to nature itself as to cripple and taint it, and make its essence, and so its whole history, all of sin. We know that this is all of it untrue. We choose and welcome pain, not in the least because we love itself, but because we, loving him, clasp to us all that is in him, for his sake; and he, whom we so clasp, is suffering. But suffering or not, we know our suffering to be redemptive and vivifying, for it is his, who is Redeemer because he is the Life. It is this which makes the second point to which we will attend.

The last of these pictures of Christ's passion is not the entombment. In the garden of that new Eden which the new Adam made, the risen Christ stands, and speaks to Magdalen, and gently bids her never cling to him, as though he were only by grip of hands and

fastened fingers to be held down upon earth's surface. To begin with, he was there; he was not dead; and he had not utterly gone away: and even when he should depart, it would be to a God and Father who was God and Father too of his elect. '*Il s'est éteint*', says the sad french phrase, when a soul passes: 'It is all over', we say in english, when we close the body's eyes. Unhappy words! Neither for Christ nor for us does the material death bring with it any such full-stop. Rather, all begins: rather the poor torch which struggled so to burn in this crass atmosphere of ours, fed by so thin an oil, will, in that air of heaven, shine with a steady and a splendid flame, able at last to identify its beams with his, who, on coming into the world, made light for every man.

It is an astounding fact, and would be incredible were it not so patent, that those who abuse the Church as preaching a cult of calvary, as outshone so easily by the sunny worship of the greek, and as entangling the feet of all men, even before their funeral, in a shroud, insist on shutting their eyes to the culminating dogma of Christ's history which is the resurrection. We may at least claim that these philosophers should read the gospel through. They may not, indeed, believe the miracle of the resurrection; but we do: and if for them Christ's death on Golgotha is a 'dreadful doom', an incomparable defeat, it is not so for us. And after all, it is the christian who believes in his religion, and it is on him it exercises its effect. It is he who alone can judge where the operative consummation occurs.

And neither Christ nor christendom admits the passion to be that consummation. If indeed Christ, upon the cross, cried *Consummatum est*, that is not, in truth, to be translated, as we so often see it, 'It is finished' — that is, a kind of sigh of relief that no more suffering is left to be gone through; nor even a purely negative recognition that nothing more remains to be done. It means it has been made perfect. It is completed. All that has been hoped and prayed for, and foreseen, and foretold, and contributed through so many ages, has been gathered and concentrated, and combined and inspired, and made perfect, and the new creation has revealed itself as ready for instant birth. Now is the morning; now the spring; the splendid leap into the Truth, the Spirit, and the Eternal, ready to alchemize and transmute the illusory, the material, and the passing. Christ never hesitated to strengthen his human soul with that vision. 'For the joy set before him', he despised the cross, enduring the shame. What else did the angel of Gethsemane put before his eyes, into which the hideous shapes of sin were crowding themselves to the exclusion of



the spectacle of its conquest? 'I am the resurrection and the life', he proclaimed; never 'the death and the inexorable tomb'. True, on Good Friday evening there is a terrible desolation when we have communicated for the last time, and the tabernacle door stands, as though after some strange sacrilege, flung wide upon sheer emptiness; true, no doubt, that a harsh misery makes itself heard in *tenebrae*, and the stripping of the altar has no pity, and the 'reproaches' strike the note of hopelessness; still, the hymn of the cross is all of triumph; and throughout the Saturday of the entombment, the irrepressible certainty of her imminent triumph keeps forcing the catholic Church into anticipating easter: her vigil comes thrusting its way into the last hours of the night; her white and purple vestments alternate; she exults in the night that was no night, but was more brilliant than the day, when Christ invisibly did rise; and so she lights lamps and branching candles even before the sun rises.

Here then are two considerations singularly in harmony with modern aspiration, as they reveal themselves – the social instinct, that is, and the tendency to seek in all living things, and in the world at large, development. The whole doctrine of the Church is one of interacting parts, of social interplay and of vital unity ever more perfect. When one part suffers, all suffers; and when one part suffers aright, its suffering is of value to all the rest. How splendidly substantial and positive is all this doctrine; how utterly lacking any hint of the sterile life of sorrow, or of separation from one's fellowmen, or of any kind of suicide or nihilism. The whole doctrine, again, of the enduring Church is one of growth. We are imperfect, it is true; we are 'unfinished', unsatisfactory this far; worse, we are dead, of ourselves, in what should be the highest life within us. Then comes our Lord, and relights that extinguished fire; re-implants the eradicated germ; bids the dry bones live again. And growth begins, and change, and sacrifice of the old for the new; yet no loss is there implied, no squandering, no real room for regret. All increases, all spreads forward and upward, and intensifies and realizes its hitherto ghostly self; all grows from the tiny individual into the massive Church, the mystic Christ made perfect. And if here too be a mystery recognized by us as too great for our capture and comprehension, that is, once more, no cause for excited effort doomed certainly to be succeeded by despair and abandonment of so high an enterprise. Just as the passion demanded a very great quietness of approach, and a concentrated attention utterly alien to any violent up-churning of the soul, so too the resurrection and the risen life within

ourselves demand no anxious peering and prying, and tearing open of the soul's secret places that we should find them and subject them and the spiritual things by which we live to the lenses of the intellect and the crucible of the emotions. Faith is required of us, to grasp the fact; and hopeful love, to use it in daily practice. Life cannot be analyzed; scarcely defined: but it can be developed, or wasted; and nurtured or stinted; and by pruning of this and restraining of that, guided to its fullest destiny, that 'more abundant' life which Christ came to give us.

Far on the opposite side of the river Arno stands the Pitti Palace, and from its garden terraces can be seen the huddled city of Florence, with its glorious towers and domes and its russet roofs, among which, somewhere, lie lost the modest buildings of San Marco. Down from the terraces, on the further side of the hill, hiding as it were from the christian town, sink the wonderful pagan gardens of the Boboli. Stone gods and goddesses, nymphs and fauns, crusted with lichen and green with the staining damp, lurk dimly among the holm-oak hedges and alcoves cut deep within the thick-set foliage. A whole riot of 'life' is there frozen into immobility. An animal life, for all that these statues are gods and goddesses and super-human things; an offering of immediate pleasure and play, and all that is not Calvary. Yet they are dead, the Poseidons and Apollos and the delicious Aphrodite; and no seeing soul dare hesitate to affirm that what still breathes and lives are the monks and nuns and apostles, the Madonnas and the Christs of Fra Angelico. A leaden melancholy broods over the garden, if you will give yourself time to feel it, that no open sky can exorcize; a joyous serenity smiles in the convent, that no plastered vault can suffocate. Even so, the radiant temples of the capitol had no gaiety to match the catacombs. There then is the open choice: the world with all its promise and its unfulfilment and its root of death; and the Christ whom no crucifixion can ever slay. To whom else than to him, then, should we go, who has the words of eternal life?