

THE CHALLENGE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

By TAD W. GUZIE

ISAY ONE THING, you write another', says Jesus angrily to Matthew, 'and those who read you understand still something else! I say: cross, death, kingdom of heaven, God – and what do you understand? Each of you attaches his own suffering, interests and desires to each of these sacred words, and my words disappear, my soul is lost'.¹

In his novel *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Kazantzakis describes Matthew as following Jesus around and writing down his words and deeds, trying his best to make sense of them even before the resurrection. Of course, it didn't happen this way. It took generations for the gospels to be written, and many more pens were engaged in the whole task than those of the four evangelists alone.

But Kazantzakis' fictional words to Matthew speak another kind of truth. The gospels themselves give us a good many indications that Jesus' followers were unable or unwilling to see what Jesus saw: that his ministry and preaching were leading him straight to his death. We also know something of Jesus' trust in the Spirit of God, who would help his disciples to clarify in their own minds what he himself must have seen before he died. He was not just a victim of external circumstances, suddenly done to death like a John or Robert Kennedy or a Martin Luther King. He freely accepted his death, which he saw as the ineluctable result of the kind of kingdom and God he was preaching. There is no reason to assume that Jesus knew exactly how he would triumph over death; if this were so, his agony in Gethsemane would in the last analysis have been just so much play-acting. But in accepting death as his Father's will, he would have realized that this death was somehow the Father's answer to his own search for life and proclamation of the kingdom of God.

So the words Kazantzakis puts on Jesus' lips suggest what might well have been the fact: and perhaps a sensitive novelist has as much to say about the consciousness of Christ as most theologians. The

¹ Kazantzakis, Nikos: *The Last Temptation of Christ* (New York, 1960), p 408.

gospels are consistent about the disciples' failure to understand what Jesus was trying to do, and he would have needed no divine foreknowledge to realize how much his followers would have to grow and how complex the Spirit's work of clarification was going to be. But he could also have had definite premonitions about how his 'words would disappear' and his 'soul be lost' in the interpretations that would be made of his life and death. The writings that were eventually judged as apocryphal give us an idea of the vapid and even silly interpretations of Jesus which must have been in circulation in those early days alongside the authentic New Testament materials. The latter writings were not finally sifted out until many generations had passed; and though we accept them as normative and authoritative, they hardly exhaust the subject of Christ's 'words' and 'soul'. Who knows for certain if they are even the *best possible* interpretations of his life and death?

But we have no reason to be hard on Jesus' first followers. His words to Matthew in *The Last Temptation* suggest what is probably the central difficulty for Christians in *any* age: that of accepting death as the way to life. The disciples found the whole idea of his death unintelligible *before* the fact: how in the world could anything like the kingdom of God come out of the master's death? We find it unintelligible *after* the fact: or at least we back away from his death no less than the disciples did, and we do it in ways that are sometimes quite sophisticated. We know how it all turned out. We have a risen saviour, a super-hero, a great worker of miracles who did marvellous things for people, and we proclaim his glory.

But we cannot simply presume the cross, then set it aside as we go about the business of proclaiming his glory. This has certainly been a tendency during the past decade, when we have rightly corrected a false understanding of the resurrection (it 'proves Christ's divinity'), but often with a new form of triumphalism. 'Look, everybody, Christ is alive!': and his *way* to glory is soft-pedalled in favour of the result, which is much too cutely proclaimed on banners throughout the land. 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again': the last two clauses have absolutely no content apart from the first and cannot be detached from it. In the language of the Fourth Gospel, it is precisely in Jesus' being 'lifted up' and nailed to a cross that he is glorified. He is proclaimed king not simply *because* of the cross but *on* the cross; this, for St John, is the real point of the sign tacked above Jesus' head, and of Pilate's insistence that the sign be left as he wrote it. Jesus 'draws all men to himself' not just because he is

victorious *over* death but first of all because he is victorious *in* his death.²

Christians at times conceive of Jesus' life as a kind of horizontal line that starts with his birth and runs through his ministry, then is interrupted or becomes a dotted line for three days between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, after which the solid line is resumed and the cosmic Christ picks up where the historical Jesus left off. This conception is illustrated by the kind of questions sometimes asked about the resurrection. One reads that the risen body of Jesus is a unique body that passes through closed doors or suddenly appears out of nowhere; from this theologians have gone on to speculate on the qualities of glorified flesh and of the heavenly life that awaits us. This is the mentality of the horizontal line interrupted and resumed; for the question implicitly being asked here is how Jesus' new bodily life (or our future life) compares with the bodily life we now experience. It is probably human enough to ask such questions now and again. The trouble is that such speculations have made their way into a good many catechisms and conveyed to Christians a basically materialistic notion of the resurrection.

The horizontal line will not do. Life as we know it and *Jesus'* life as *he* knew it came to a crashing end on the cross, and that is where the line ends. If Christ draws men to himself, he does so not because he picked up the line of life after a three-day parenthesis, but because the cross at the end of the line becomes a point from which flow out into history the rays of a totally *new* sort of life. There are many things to be debated and still to be clarified about the nature and intent of the resurrection narratives, but one would have a difficult time maintaining that the material details of Jesus' risen life concerned the gospel writers. It is risky exegesis to try to show that the resurrection narratives do much more than 'enflesh' the basic kerygma already preached by St Paul: Jesus was established Lord, raised up and given the name that is above all names, precisely because he accepted *death*.³ The trouble with the whole horizontal-line view of Jesus is that in such a perspective the cross itself tends to be put into parentheses, as just one more event which is part of the whole package labelled 'Christ'. We miss the point entirely unless we ask our questions with the understanding that the cross *is* the package.

This includes the questions we ask about Jesus' historical ministry.

² Jn 12, 32.

³ Phil 2, 6-11; cf Rom 1, 4.

St John is quite explicit about seeing Jesus' miracles and cures as having a meaning for the christian only in relation to the cross. The healing of the blind man, the feeding of the multitude, and the raising of Lazarus had, as Dodd puts it, no lasting effect in history.⁴ These miracles involved the giving of bodily light, bodily food, bodily resurrection. But the sight of the man born blind would have deteriorated as he got older, the multitude would have been hungry again a day later, and Lazarus had to die again. The *point* of these stories is that Jesus is the true light, the true bread, the true life; and these events in his historical ministry are signs of what Christ does for the believer now. These signs are true *for us*, true as present and not past realities, only because of the cross which is *the* life-giving event and the only sign that points to nothing beyond itself: Jesus' crucifixion is both his complete surrender into the hands of men and his exaltation. So the miracles and cures are unintelligible *as signs for the believer today* apart from the death of Jesus, the event that alone enables him to be true light, true bread, true life.

Now a physical understanding of death and resurrection is as limiting as a physical understanding of the light or bread or life that Jesus gives. Christian faith does not affirm that life is resumed after death. It affirms something much more profound, namely that life comes out of death. This is the point of the scriptural image which says that a rich harvest will come only if the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies.⁵ True, the living harvest comes *after* the death of the grain; but this is so only because it comes *out of* the death of the grain.

The idea that the gospel writers relate the events of Jesus' life in the light of the resurrection is standard teaching these days. But 'resurrection' is capable of various interpretations; and if we take it to mean that Jesus' life was resumed after his death – a conception implying what I have called the horizontal-line view of life – we will inevitably keep asking superficial and even unanswerable questions about him: Exactly what did Jesus do when he multiplied the loaves, or when he healed the blind man? What was his risen body like? It cannot be shown that the gospel writers were interested in answering such questions about Jesus or those for whom he did great things. It is true that the authors of the New Testament wrote in the perspective of the resurrection. But their notion of the life

⁴ Dodd, C. H.: *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, 1968), p 439.

⁵ Jn 12, 24.

given by Jesus – in whatever form, before or after Calvary – remains so wrapped up with Calvary that the word ‘life’ simply has no distinctive christian meaning apart from death.

Life out of death, not life after death. And if we should take the latter idea as a primary affirmation of what christianity is about, we will be left not only with a mistaken notion of what the gospels say about Jesus, but with a superficial view of our own christian lives. Christians have always taken the moment of physical death seriously; Jesus’ own preaching talks about the need to make something of our lives before God requires our souls of us. The Good News, however, is much less concerned with the final crunch of physical death than it is with giving us an interpretation of life. It is much less concerned with the material facts of Jesus’ own death than it is with his *acceptance* of death as the meaning of his life and of the kingdom he was preaching.

Or we can put this in terms of those who follow Christ. The gospels do not essentially present life as a matter of living according to the book in order to have one’s reward after death. The men of the Old Testament knew they had to love their neighbour; that was what the book was about, as Jesus himself summed it up when he said it was all a matter of doing unto others what you would have them do unto you.⁶ But what if they *don’t* do it unto you? Jesus must have seen his death somehow as an answer to this question; otherwise it is hard to see how he could have given any content in his own mind to the idea of ‘doing his Father’s will’. This is the meaning of the new commandment precisely insofar as it is *new*: you must love one another as I have loved you, namely, to the extent of laying down your lives as I have done.⁷

When Jesus washed his disciples’ feet the night before he died, he was explaining what typified his own ministry and what kind of service should distinguish his followers; but at the same time he was explaining his death, his final act of service. His physical death was his last lesson to his disciples. But since his death gave meaning to the whole of his life, it was much more than a lesson in what to do in the face of total rejection by men – this would take us back to a merely physicalist view of Jesus’ death. What Jesus’ whole ministry says to men is that life and the essential activities of human life – like being with other people, relating to them, loving and serving them – are tied up with dying. The Good News is that we have a new way

⁶ Mt 7, 12.

⁷ Jn 13, 34; 15, 13.

of interpreting our lives. The Good News is an invitation to die, not just once at the end of our lives but constantly. It is an invitation to experience the fulness of being alive by seeing that living and loving are a matter of dying. For life, the life that Jesus offers, comes only out of death.

Analogues for most ideas and practices we know as christian can be found outside christianity. Ancient stoicism had much to say about how evil and hardship should be borne; and almost any man who is successful in the world's ventures will be an eloquent preacher of the need for self-discipline. There are far more complicated codes of behaviour than any which christians have ever devised even in their most code-minded moments. Rituals like baptism and the eucharist not only have similarities to non-christian rituals but in fact grow out of them. The Lord's supper, in which bread and wine become signs of Jesus' passing-over from this world to his Father,⁸ is a transformation of the passover ritual, just as the passover ritual itself, with its sacrificial lamb and unleavened bread, was a reformation of earlier pastoral rites involving the first fruits of flock and field.

Even the belief in life after death exists outside christianity: and indeed christian faith is much less explicit than many other religions about what that life will be like. Various non-christian beliefs about the reincarnation of souls, for instance, are much more *definite* about the next life than the simple christian image of a new heaven and a new earth where every tear will be wiped away.⁹ And if one is going to believe in the immortality of the human spirit, the theories about absorption into a world-soul are probably more satisfying from a purely rational viewpoint than the overwhelming notion of a personal existence in a world of perfect happiness.

Codes of morality, worship and ritual, and belief in an after-life are thus all aspects of an attitude toward life that christianity shares with other religions. If there is anything distinctive about these elements as they are found in christian faith, it is because they are related to the folly of the cross. Now there is nothing particularly singular about a man who dies for others: all systems and philosophies of life have their martyrs, many of whom are extremely admirable people. The *folly* of the cross lies in seeing death as any kind of positive wisdom, much less as an interpretation of life.

The experience christians have been living on is the experience of Jesus. Ever since the apostles had their experience of the risen Lord,

⁸ Jn 13, 1.

⁹ Rev 21, 1-4.

christians have been using Jesus' experience as a key for interpreting life itself. Now when christian faith, looking at the Christ-event, issues the invitation to die in order to be alive, it is not saying we should simply make the best of death, whether as physical death or as daily self-sacrifice. This is hardly folly. Everyday human wisdom tells us that we have to make the best of a bad job. What christian faith is saying is that death to self is the precise means through which we experience being alive. We are invited to die to ourselves precisely so that life can be experienced as life. This is the principle that allows our personal faith to be founded not just on hearsay *about* the resurrection but on concrete experience *of* the kind of life Jesus now lives and offers to us through the Spirit.

Death to self might be thought of as coming from those experiences in which we put ourselves out for others, sacrificing our time and energy and talent in order to help other people. But this is not the *basic* christian experience of death to self. Only when our service is utterly rejected do we have to do much real 'dying'. Expending ourselves on behalf of others can certainly involve self-sacrifice. But being at our generous best is in itself a satisfying thing, sometimes so satisfying that it produces in us a certain feeling of righteousness. A far more basic experience of death to self comes in the experience of our own inadequacy, the awareness of being an interior washout, incapable of doing what needs to be done. This is the experience St Paul develops in Romans 7 and 8.

'My own behaviour baffles me', writes Paul. 'I find myself not doing what I really want to do but doing what I really loathe'. The cause of this tension is an interior impotence which is actually experienced. 'I often find that I have the will to do good, but not the power. That is, I don't accomplish the good I set out to do, and the evil I don't really want to do I find I am always doing'. The conscious mind wants one thing, but the 'sin which has made its home within me' leads me to do another. The Law tells me what I *ought* to be doing, and 'my conscious mind wholeheartedly endorses the Law, yet I observe an entirely different principle at work in my nature'. All of this produces the experience of radical inadequacy in the face of good to be done. 'In my mind I am God's willing servant, but in my own nature I am bound fast to the law of sin and death'.¹⁰

We make wrong moral judgments, and this is sin; but even more fundamentally, sin is a condition in which we find ourselves, a con-

¹⁰ Rom 7, 15-23. Trans. Phillips, J. B.

dition of weakness which we constantly experience. And no human principle *outside* ourselves is capable of handling the fragility we experience *within* ourselves. The judaic law is Paul's example of such an exterior principle. We can see other examples not just in formal moral codes of a more modern sort, but in any collection of social conventions which keep our various inadequacies from becoming too apparent to others, or in the various psychological devices we set up for ourselves in order to cope with our inadequacies. None of these things ultimately work, and the experience of weakness remains with us.

We usually look upon our weakness as something that interferes with our living the gospel; and so it is. But Paul implies that the experience of inadequacy, which is an experience of death not imposed on us from outside but existing within ourselves, can become the stuff of our most basic experience of life. The awareness of impotence 'is an agonizing situation, and who on earth can set me free from the clutches of my own sinful nature? I thank God there *is* a way out through Jesus Christ our Lord'.¹¹ The christian fact of a 'way out' gives us a new way of interpreting the fact of our inner weakness. 'No condemnation now hangs over the head of those who are "in" Christ Jesus. For the new spiritual principle of life "in" Christ Jesus lifts me out of the old vicious circle of sin and death'.¹² This new principle of life is not an abstraction; it is something christians are meant to experience. 'You have been adopted into the very family circle of God and you can say with a full heart, "Father, my Father". The Spirit himself endorses our inward conviction that we really are the children of God'.¹³

Awareness of what our talents and energies can and do bring to other people is an experience of *our own* life: of a God-given life, to be sure, but nonetheless an experience of interior adequacy and strength. The life of *the Spirit* can be experienced most radically in the experience of our *inadequacy* and weakness. Isn't it on these occasions that we can cry 'Father!' and truly *know* ourselves to be his children, in the knowledge that only he can bring forth fruit from our barrenness? It is this experience of life coming out of death, the death we carry around within ourselves, that founds our hope for the future and gives us an intimation of the full life to come, when we who have a foretaste of the Spirit and who now live in a state of painful tension will finally realize our full sonship in him.¹⁴

¹¹ Rom 7, 24-25.

¹² Rom 8, 1-2.

¹³ Rom 8, 15-16.

¹⁴ Rom 8, 23.

'The Spirit of God not only maintains this hope within us, but helps us in our present limitations. For example, we do not know how to pray worthily as sons of God, but his Spirit within us is actually praying for us in those agonizing longings which never find words'.¹⁵ Isn't it again in the really intense *experiences* of 'our present limitations' that the prayers we utter lose their taste, so that there is no one left to pray *but* the Spirit? 'And God who knows the heart's secrets understands the Spirit's intention as he prays for those who love God'.¹⁶ If an awareness of the Spirit's life in us emerges from our consciousness of inadequacy, we may be in a better position to learn something about prayer and about Jesus' promise that the Father will not hand us a stone when we ask for bread:¹⁷ a promise that can probably be understood only when we are stripped of our sense of self-sufficiency.

The invitation to die is thus, before all else, an invitation to discern our most basic experiences in the light of Jesus' death. We usually think of the 'discernment of the Spirit' as a matter of discerning choices, of choosing between a Spirit-ed course and a less desirable or perhaps sinful one. But everything that has been said here suggests that the *first* function of the Spirit in our lives is to enable us to develop a christian interpretation of the experience of weakness which is ours in the face of *any* choice. The Fourth Gospel suggests this in Jesus' saying that the Spirit of truth will come to lead his followers to 'the complete truth':¹⁸ that is, to the complete truth about the meaning of his death and all that it implies about life. The Spirit was sent to form in christians a new kind of self-awareness and to issue the same interior challenge that Jesus did when he calmed the storm at sea. He did not criticize the disciples for their inability to cope. Rather he rebuked them for their lack of faith, which consisted precisely in their being frightened or despondent in the face of their impotence.¹⁹

Discernment thus consists not first in deciding what to *do* but in deciding how one is going to look at oneself. What is true death to myself, and what is mere passivity? When is my deference to others laziness, and when is it the christian death of 'considering the other person to be better than yourself, so that nobody thinks of his own interests first'?²⁰ What is it to let the Spirit transform my fragility and bring fruit from my inadequacy, and what is it to make excuses

¹⁵ Rom 8, 26.

¹⁶ Rom 8, 27.

¹⁷ Mt 7, 9.

¹⁸ Jn 16, 13.

¹⁹ Mt 8, 23-27 and parallels.

²⁰ Phil 2, 3.

for the defences I put up to protect my weaknesses?

Christians have often practised mortification as a means of fostering a greater commitment to the love and service of others. This should certainly not be condemned. But the mortification that is necessarily involved in a christian interpretation of one's interior experience can be a much more powerful incentive than that which is sought through an induced experience like 'extra' penance. If our christian interpretation of the simple experience of weakness were constant, we would be pushed to the limit in finding better ways to serve and to become more vulnerable to others. For in this perspective our very vulnerability becomes a positive thing, even psychologically. Our defences would be down and done away with because we would see there is nothing to defend. Our weaknesses would become life-bearing, insofar as out of them would come an awareness of the life of the Spirit which is in fact ours to call upon.

When christians celebrate the eucharist, they proclaim the death of the Lord; and they do it with signs that refer at once to death and to life. For the people of Israel, the feast of the passover commemorated the time when Yahweh 'passed over' their children in the slaying of the firstborn;²¹ the blood of the lamb and the unleavened bread thus celebrate the life Yahweh gives in the face of death. For christians, 'sharing in the body and blood of Christ makes us "pass over" into what we receive; everywhere, both spiritually and bodily, we carry him with whom we are dead, buried, and raised to life'.²² Seen in this way, the eucharistic presence is no longer a silent presence. Its very symbolism – bread broken, wine poured out, Christ's flesh and blood shared as a sign of life out of death and strength out of weakness – shouts out the challenge of christian faith.

²¹ Exod 12, 27.

²² Leo the Great, *Serm.* 63. 7.