SORROWFUL UNTO DEATH

By JACQUES GUILLET

As we read the gospels, we can see that Jesus had two different ways of speaking about his death before it came to take him. He often spoke of it as a decisive event for himself and for the world, the event whereby God's design and man's fate would be accomplished. In this context he adopted the language of the prophets, of the apocalyptic visionaries. Less often, when emotion was too deep to be controlled, he uttered a kind of cry, more a call for help than a confession of weakness, a fleeting glimpse of a secret he could not confide to anyone, and yet one he felt he would like to share with his friends.

These two ways of speaking, the objective biblical expression of what must come to pass, and the subjective outburst of a living human being drawn towards death by the weight of destiny: these ways of speaking blend and overlap at times. This blending or overlapping reveals to us one feature of the mystery in Jesus Christ. He was the heir to the tradition of Israel, with its vocabulary, imagery and perspectives. Through this tradition he visualized the future awaiting him and the meaning of his death. He also had a heart that was sensitive to every kind of attack, so that he could be gripped and overwhelmed, a defenceless victim. This struggle with death was to form the climax of world history.

'*The Son of Man must be delivered and be put to death*'.

In the tradition of the synoptic gospels the first explicit prophecies of the passion are clearly dated, beginning with Peter's confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi.[1] These prophecies are related to the needs of Jesus's teaching and are destined to enlighten and correct the apostles' faith. Peter needed remarkable faith to dare to proclaim Jesus as the Messiah in the situation at that time. On the evening of the feeding of the five thousand, amid the enthusiasm of the crowd amazed at the miracle, no doubt the apostles were the

[1] Mt 16, 13–23; Mk 8, 27–33; Lk 9, 18–22.

most enthusiastic to make their master the King that Israel was looking for.[2] But Jesus was even more quick to prick the bubble of their enthusiasm. He had made them get back into the boat and row away.[3] It was a cruel disappointment, but a salutary one. This miracle on the grand scale was to have no follow-up. In fact, Jesus showed his disregard for popular acclaim and public opinion by quitting jewish territory. The apostles continued to follow him, puzzled in many ways, but still faithful. It was this fidelity to him that Jesus appealed to and raised to the level of explicit faith in him when he put to his followers the decisive question: 'Who do people say the Son of Man is? . . . Who do you say I am?' The experiment was a success. The right answer came. In the person of this prophet away from his own land, in this surprising figure endowed with such extraordinary gifts but so reluctant to make the most of them, the apostles saw him for what he was. Not some prophet risen from the grave, or other fantastic and miraculous personage, but the real and true Messiah, the Saviour whom God was giving to his people and to the world. It was a real act of faith, committing the apostles and their whole life to the actual person there before them.

Their act of faith was still groping and mingled with worldly dreams. It had scarcely been expressed when Jesus had to enlighten it and give it more depth by confronting it with real life as it was to be for him. 'The Son of Man must suffer and must be delivered up to death . . .' 'If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, he must renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me'.[4] A harsh saying, but it must stand with its inflexible demands: we must not water it down. We shall not be mistaken about it if we try to give it its full meaning by weighing every word and setting each phrase in its original context.

It is a *must*, in the sense of an inescapable demand, a categorical imperative. Jesus was not just stating a theoretical principle of a duty to be accomplished; he meant an event that had to happen, a future that could not fail to take place. Where did this necessity come from? Was it just some irresistible destiny? Some divine decree that allowed no appeal? God is certainly involved; as Jesus says: 'Everything is possible for God'.[5] So all such necessities could yield to God's will. But the imperative formulated above is not stated as the expression of God's will as such. It remains impersonal:

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[2] Jn 6, 15. [3] Mk 6, 45–48. [4] Mk 8, 35.
[5] Mk 14, 36; and cf 9, 23.

though God is involved, he is not seen as intervening personally.

'The Son of Man must be *delivered into the hands of men*':[6] still put impersonally, with the verb in the passive (no agent mentioned), with a 'passion' (no action mentioned). Those who were to do the action were men seizing hold of their victim and submitting him to every kind of cruelty they could devise. The verb *delivered* features in every prophecy of the passion and covers the successive moments in it (the betrayal of Judas, the arrest of Jesus, and his being bandied about from one group of men to another, from tribunal to tribunal, from the Praetorium to the crucifixion). In the idea of being 'delivered' there is perhaps an echo of the initial horror and shrinking Jesus felt before the abyss of hatred, baseness and cruelty into which he was to be plunged. But there is also the long tradition of biblical prophecies: God's promises of salvation, delivering Israel's enemies into her hands, and the threats that, because of her sins, she would be delivered into the hands of her enemies. It is this fate of total powerlessness to escape, when one finds oneself at the mercy of an enemy who has every means to wreak vengeance and will exhaust it to the full: such defeat and discomfiture are the images with which Jesus confronts his hearers. More than just dying, it means the utter ruin of life, the most complete failure and dishonour. The enemy remains triumphant.

The Son of Man. The use of this name and this personage makes everything take on a new meaning. It is of course Jesus himself who was to be delivered into the hands of his enemies and die; but this necessity tied in with the rôle he had to play in life. 'The Son of Man', as understood by Jesus, was admittedly himself: but first and foremost it was the personage whose past he had come to play on the stage of this world. For the 'Son of Man' is not merely Jesus the carpenter of Nazareth, now become the prophet and witness to the Kingdom of God: it is a figure featuring in the apocalyptic visions of the Old Testament. They taught not just a hope, but a hope expressed in a symbolic figure. The various apocalyptics use visions to describe the coming of the Kingdom; they obviously could not describe in advance the real details of the process. In these visions, the coming of the Kingdom was associated with the appearance in the heavens of the 'Son of Man'.

Jesus gave concrete and direct shape to these visions. This he did, not by filling in the details of these pictures, nor their exact corres-

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[6] Mk 8, 31.

pondence with events to come, but rather by identifying himself with the figure of the Son of Man, giving this symbolic personage the actual content of his own life and impending death.

Even in Old Testament times, there was, in the apocalyptic tradition, a kind of imperative attached to this figure. The Son of Man *must* appear on the clouds of heaven. At that stage, the imperative was only the necessity attached to a prophetic message that could not fail to be realized. But when Jesus said of the Son of Man that he *must* suffer, the necessity was certainly that of an inspired prophetic message: but it also had something doomlike about it – the iron necessity of fate. This coincidence between the fatality of evil and the ineluctable demands of God forms the scandal of the universe, 'the scandal of the cross'. Are we to say that God wills this evil? How can it be tolerated that God should will it for his Messiah, his Son?

We can only see daylight in all this if we firmly grasp the truth that seems a scandal to us, and if we agree to face up to it as fully as we can. Given that the Son of Man must be delivered into the power of sinful men, and die a victim of their hatred, this *must*, which derives from God's will and the power of evil, find its ultimate with the person of the Son of Man. For the Son of Man to appear in triumph in the heavens (as portrayed in the apocalypses), for this triumph to be translated from prophecy into real history in the person and work of Jesus, he must go through the experience of sin in all its power and horror. Without this experience, Jesus would have remained on the surface of our human condition, he would only have known its sunshine, its temperate zones; he would never have realized just how far brutality, greed and the lust to kill could disfigure human nature. But then he would not have been the Son of Man, the representative of all humanity; he would not have brought to man the only thing that could save him from his sin – the proof that he is forgiven, the guarantee that in the blackest depths of his decadence and despair, man is still capable of winning God's love, of making it worth God's while to deliver his Son to death.

Such is the mysterious necessity of the cross. It is not just the absolute obligation of a decree of God imposing his will that way: nor is it the irresistible destructive power of evil in the world. It is the necessity that, given the destructive power of sin, there must be set up against it, in the world and its actual unfolding, a power that can overcome that evil and convert it into pardon, reconciliation and love. God is indeed involved, and his will: he cannot allow himself

to be rejected; and sin is involved, with all the deadly consequences that it drags with it. But the law that governs the world is neither the absolute law of a master brooking no opposition, nor the fatal law of sin breeding only evil; it is the law of the cross, the law of God, refusing to let man be lost in his sinfulness and assigning to his Son the only law that he can be sure will be accomplished to perfection, the commandment of love.

The cross, the law of the Son of Man

It is indeed a law: one of the utmost rigour and inexorable in its demands. For him to break or evade it would mean irremediable disaster for humanity, abandoning it to its all-powerful sinfulness, condemning it to final everlasting death. It is a law which, like all laws, seems imposed from outside, dictated arbitrarily by the nature of things, because of the incurable wickedness of men and the fundamental 'absurdity' of the universe.

But at the same time it is the law of the Son of Man, a law that is quite peculiar to him, an exigency resulting from what he is, his deepest identity. Every man, every creature coming into the world, has his law written into every fibre of his being; it is the very meaning of his existence and his personality. It is a law that he does not set up; it comes to him from some other source; it is the sign that his existence comes from an Other, his Creator. But is is *his* law, the need to be himself, to bring to being what he really is; to fail in this would mean the loss of everything. So it is with the law of the Son of Man, by which Jesus came to be the Son of Man: if he were to miss fulfilling this law to the absolute limit, he would not be himself and his existence would not make sense.

That, of course, would be an inconceivable hypothesis, and it could not make sense. How could Jesus have failed to achieve his destiny, ceased even for a moment to be the witness to the Kingdom, the one sent by God, the Son of the Father? There precisely lies the rôle of 'Son of Man' described in the gospels: it could not be fulfilled in any other way. He was subjected to a law, like the rest of us, involved in a life-story, conditioned by man and events, confronted with a task and exposed to all the risks of life. But he lived out this law with perfect lucidity. Events came upon him as they do on us, but he was never taken unawares, always on an even keel, immediately able to give events their full meaning, weaving them into his life. Nowhere did this perfect mastery appear more clearly than in accepting the law of the cross. It had to be that Jesus should be

delivered, that he should know the mortal anguish of falling into the hands of sin, of finding himself defenceless and overwhelmed in the awful unfathomable abyss of our sinfulness. He knew this and could foretell it: not by composing a script that he had to keep to point by point, but just by living out, in his own way and to the full, his own life and the world he lived in. Every day he could witness and experience the sinfulness of men, their power to hate and reject, their power to inflict suffering and self-destruction. On the occasion of his first miracles, the pharisees and herodians held council to destroy him,[7] and already there was conspiracy afoot between religious and political leaders that would lead him to Calvary in the end. Already he could see this, without the help of informants in high places and without exceptional revelations. He knew it all, thanks to his insight, his sensitivity to all the movements of men's hearts, his eye for everything in the men and crowds about him. Their perversity in rejecting him, the fickleness of the mob, the frailty of the disciples, the exploitation of religion and the treachery in politics: he knew it all from the outset, he encountered it every day, he realized that it was all leading up to his death. What did he know of the exact details of this death in advance? Not much really, judging by the amount he confided in the apostles; but no matter. He saw things falling into shape as the conspiracy implacably wove its net around him.

We should not call this exactly a tragic fate: the gospels are not tragic, and fate is finally overcome. All seemed combined to make his fate a supreme case of tragedy: an ineluctable fate whose approach was foreseen and foretold bit by bit, an encounter which confronted an exceptional human being with God's decree and humanity at its most sinister. Such are men, such was the greatest of their race, such was the one they now realize was God. Nothing is more foreign to the gospels than any note of despair, even when men are shown to be what they are, capable of anything. But men in the gospel story are not seen in the light of despair, but of pardon, and the law that finally prevails in the world is such as to spotlight the person of Jesus and the secret of the Son of Man. Humanity had to carry its sinfulness to its absolute limit: Jesus had to experience the full horror of it, to be seized and stricken by it to the limit, looking its most sinister aspect full in the face, and yet to be capable of loving man, of clasping him in his arms and rescuing him from his sin.

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[7] Mk 3, 14.

Then he could restore humanity to his Father; then his mission would be completed, then would the Son of Man be glorified and the secret achieving it all would be revealed: the love that the Son receives from the Father enabling him to embrace fallen humanity.

'Sorrowful to the point of death'

All that we have said is contained in the gospels, either in so many words or the equivalent. Jesus said it all to his disciples; at first in a modified form, because they were unable to take it in and events themselves were only gradually taking shape; then in a more definite form of expression as the outcome grew nearer and the details were being filled in. Jesus said it all once more, in a remarkably solemn form, though very simply, at the last supper, at the very time that Judas, one of his own, had made his compact with the chief priests, but before he was arrested and while all could yet change, Jesus, in the fulness of awareness and freedom of action, delivered himself to death for his followers. He gave them his body and blood. In this he proved that the greatest sin of all, putting to death the Son of Man, resulted precisely in his being glorified, the victory of his love and forgiveness. It needed this treachery, and all the ignominies it released and revealed, for the secret of Jesus to appear, the meaning of the law that gives meaning to his whole life: loving his enemies infinitely more than they could ever hate him. God could now accept this victory that was so precious that for its sake he had let sin come into the world. So God was right to assign this law to his Son: Jesus was indeed equal to the task of being faithful to him to the very limit.

'One fight more' remained to be fought, and it was the most fearsome. In a sense it was already all over. Jesus had given his word; with his word he had made his body something 'delivered', and his blood something 'poured out'. He could not go back on his word; he could not take back the gift that already contained his death. It contained it in the actual form that was to come to him: the treachery, the betrayal, the hatred, the cruelty, the fear. He gave himself up to all that by giving up his body; he died for all his enemies. But at the last it was as though his strength was failing him; he could not master his fear, he called his friends to his help, he besought his Father to spare him an ordeal that was too much for him, that no man could endure.

Of all the mysteries of the Son of God made man, his agony in Gethsemane is the most precious and the most profound. His closest

disciples did not have the strength even to look at him, but the admission that they failed so badly is a unique piece of evidence for us. If they failed, it was because the strength sustaining and leading them on had suddenly failed them: their Master himself proved to be paralysed with fear. Was it fear of physical tortures, revulsion from human beings or powerlessness against a task that was beyond endurance, or realization of the failure of all his efforts? All these factors must be taken into account, and we must realize that they will always be beyond our power to grasp. One thing is certain: at that moment Christ reached the depths, the ultimate in suffering, and he was crushed by the most overwhelming weight of it all. The deadly weariness that falls every night on all men wherever they be, the despair of the poor, the tears of innocent women and children, sickness with life and anguish of death, all the distress of all men, Jesus experienced it in that hour and almost succumbed to it. But he did endure, he picked himself up to go and meet his betrayer and his death. He endured because that horrible and revolting experience to come was the cup that his Father was holding out to him, the law that his Father had given him, which he could only evade by ceasing to be the Son. And here we catch the word in the gospel that Jesus no doubt used in speaking to his Father at all times, but which is only now let out in confidence, the word the child uses to his father: '*Abba* . . . Not what I want, but what you want'.[8] In the deepest anguish and in the darkest night, Father and Son meet and are united. Jesus could go on and complete his passion; stricken humanity could now go on too: the Father was waiting.

[8] Mk 14, 36.