

PREACHING CHRIST CRUCIFIED

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IN ST PAUL'S first letter to the Corinthians, he begins with a lively defence of his apostolic activity in their city. In the face of certain opposition, he had insisted in his preaching on the centrality of the death and resurrection of the Lord.¹ This is, in fact, one of the few references to the content of his gospel-message. Though he never gives a deliberate description of his method of proclaiming the good news, as a man of apostolic action he always reacted vigorously to the spiritual dangers which might threaten his communities. It is in these responses that we can detect the structures of his gospel-preaching.

This is particularly evident in his sermons as reported in the Acts of the Apostles, which are delivered to different audiences, Jew and pagan.² At Lystra, for instance, he denounces the worship of Zeus and Hermes, preaching conversion from idolatry to the living God, whom he presents as the creator and giver of good gifts.³ At Athens, his style is more sophisticated; but he mentions the Lord's resurrection only as a sign that Jesus is divinely appointed as judge of all humankind. In sharp contrast are his sermons in Thessalonika and Pisidian Antioch to the Jewish communities there:⁴ 'As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue . . . and argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to rise and suffer from the dead, and saying, this Jesus whom I proclaim to you is the Christ'.⁵ In both these towns, his message is received with enthusiasm, and the people beg for more.⁶ Whatever the precise historical character of these Lucan narratives, the striking contrast and results are clear. To preach Christ and him crucified led to faith in Thessalonika and Antioch, as it seems to have done in Corinth.

¹ Cf Cor 1, 23.

² Cf Acts 13, 26-41; 14, 15-17; 17, 3; 17, 22-31.

³ Cf Acts 14, 15-17. Luke does not say whether the sermon produced any converts.

⁴ Cf Acts 17, 3.

⁵ Acts 17, 3; 13, 26-41.

⁶ Cf Acts 13, 42.

Corinthian experience

Corinth, as an international shipping centre, was a place where all kinds of religion, especially mystery-cults, were practised. It was among the motley population of this city that Paul had worked fruitfully.⁷ He had made converts from among both Jews and Greeks, and had obviously spent some time in instructing them in their new faith.⁸ Now, as he writes to them, we can discern the lines of what he presumes that they already know from his previous preaching. His summary is that 'we knew nothing among you except Jesus and him crucified'.⁹ This teaching is in stark contrast to the doctrine which the Corinthians had been hearing from others. Rumours were rife of a secret way of experiencing God: one which had captured their imagination. In the current terminology, it was the 'true wisdom': a phrase repeated in the opening section of Paul's letter. It is as though he is using their catch-phrase in order to hammer home his own idea against the one in vogue, which seems to have referred to a heavenly revealer, who descended, unknown and unrecognized, down through the angels and the powers of evil. This heavenly Spirit gave the power of recognizing him only to a select few. Paul's Corinthians believed that they belonged to these chosen; and that, in fact, this 'Revealer' was the risen Jesus himself. He was the one who brought the select few to the state of perfection.¹⁰ The Jesus who was born, suffered and died was of no consequence for them: it was 'the Risen Lord' who was of exclusive importance.

In reply to this distortion of the christian religion, Paul turns to his own message: Jesus Crucified. He emphasizes the lowly, suffering human aspect of the Redeemer, in sharp contrast to the glorious mythical figure cherished by the Corinthians. It does not, however, belong to his preaching to paint a detailed picture of the sufferings of the Passion. He certainly lays the stress on the suffering of Jesus, but not to the exclusion of the resurrection. For Paul, these are two inseparable aspects of the one reality.¹¹ In his phrase, 'Christ Crucified', the tension is visible. The glorious Saviour expected by the Jews is the one who suffered a criminal's death. The grammatical form, the perfect participle (*estaurōmenon*), shows that the event of crucifixion has an enduring reality. Jesus is always the 'crucified One'. The continuity between the Redeemer who lives and intercedes

⁷ Cf Acts 18, 4, 8.

⁸ Cf Acts 18, 11.

⁹ 1 Cor 2, 2.

¹⁰ Cf 1 Cor 3, 1.

¹¹ E.g., Rom 4, 25; 6, 1-11; 8, 34.

for us and the One who died for us is a sharp rebuttal of the 'wisdom' of the Corinthians.

Christ crucified is thus presented by Paul as the Wisdom of God, the fulfilment of God's plan. Anything else is false wisdom, folly. Paul quotes Isaiah to prove that in God's design no one could ever come to know God through human ingenuity. Neither the religious discussions of the Jewish scribes nor the philosophical speculation of the Greeks are of any avail once the Cross is revealed. In order to make himself known to man, God's choice fell on that most unlikely of instruments. Nor is this knowledge a matter simply of intellectual reasoning: in the preaching of the Cross, God is to be experienced as the loving Father of Jesus. This mysterious message Paul proposes as the only way of true Wisdom; and he insists that this is the content of what he has taught them from the beginning. Indeed, this point is central to his theology. It is God who always has the initiative in man's salvation; and he is free to choose whatever means he wishes.

The Church at Corinth had been formed of 'little people',¹² a fact which suits Paul's present purposes admirably. The preaching of a crucified Saviour has gathered a community from the poor in spirit, and endowed them richly with eschatological gifts: righteousness, sanctification, redemption and new life.¹³ Paul guards against any compromise of God's liberality and freedom in giving; no one can take any credit for having received them. If any one is to rejoice, he is to rejoice in 'boasting of God's works', in thanksgiving. Acknowledging the gospel, receiving it and responding to it in a practical way, is true thanksgiving to God.¹⁴ Paul's ministry must ensure that God's wonderful works are acknowledged and accepted simply by one's turning in gratitude to the Creator and Redeemer. If only the Corinthians would look at the events of their own conversion, such a response would be inevitable. Nothing could justify any pretensions about themselves. In the eyes of the world they are despicable, nothing.¹⁵ Just as the weakness of Jesus was filled with the power of God, even so has he worked in them. In Paul's own preaching, the same pattern has made itself felt: he came to them 'in weakness, and much fear and trembling'.¹⁶ We can only guess at the circumstances of this weakness. The unsavoury reputation of Corinth may have made him more than a little apprehensive; or possibly he was physically sick, as he had been in Galatia.¹⁷ Whatever the particular

¹² 1 Cor 1, 26.

¹³ 1 Cor 1, 30.

¹⁴ 2 Cor 9, 18; 4, 15.

¹⁵ 1 Cor 1, 28.

¹⁶ 1 Cor 2, 3.

¹⁷ Cf Gal 4, 13.

circumstance, he experienced it as an example of the life of Christ working in him by the power of God.¹⁸ Paul discerns the likeness of the death and resurrection of Jesus in the events of his work in Corinth. The paschal mystery is central to this explanation of his teaching, because it had been the major theme in his first preaching.

Paul's preaching 'method'

We may now ask how Paul set about preaching this message. The word itself, 'preaching', poses a problem. It is an ecclesiastical term and has overtones of worship. The greek word behind it, 'to proclaim' (*kērussein*), does not carry any such shade of meaning. The picture of the town-crier announcing various public events, like the municipal games or a festival or the arrival of a dignitary, would fit in well with the ordinary usage of the word. The New Testament authors, using the vocabulary of the early Christians, employed it to signify the activity of those who announced the most significant event of all time: Jesus's own proclamation of the Kingdom, and hence Paul's announcement of his Gospel. The latter's *kērygma* often took place in the context of the synagogue or some other place of worship,¹⁹ but he also taught in the houses of friends, or wherever he had an attentive audience.²⁰ He even rejoiced that the Lord was preached on those occasions when the motives were far from perfect.²¹

If Paul was so enthusiastic about the preaching of the Lord, why did he make such a strong protest against proclaiming him with eloquent wisdom at Corinth?²² Are there implications here for our preaching? Does he reject the use of philosophy, of other methods of communication and aids in attracting people's attention? Do these empty the Cross of Jesus? Of course not. Paul himself rises to the heights of eloquence in some of his letters,²³ and in his speech he was no mean orator.²⁴ From his practice we can see that the arts of communication are not at all excluded, but rather encouraged, as long as they are appropriate for explaining the mystery of the Cross. So, in the current context, Paul takes up the terminology of the Corinthians, in order to further the lesson that all God's wisdom is in the Cross. He can adapt himself and his message to his audience, without compromising the gospel in any way. But he also insists that the effectiveness of the proclamation should not depend on eloquence, ingenuity or creativity: this would be to build with hay

¹⁸ Cf 2 Cor 13, 4.

¹⁹ Cf Acts 17, 2; 16, 13.

²⁰ Cf Acts 18, 5, 7.

²¹ Cf Phil 1, 18.

²² Cf 1 Cor 1, 17.

²³ E.g. 1 Cor 13.

²⁴ Cf Acts 14, 12.

or stubble.²⁵ Whatever art is used to proclaim the word, it can never be art for its own sake. It dare not veil or hinder man's reception of the truth. Paul's practice in Corinth seems to have been governed by what he thought most suitable to the circumstances. Amongst those who were 'low and nothing', Paul commended himself by the open statement of the truth.²⁶

This plain talking was apparently convincing. The message which seemed incredible was in fact believed. How can one account for this? There is a clue in Paul's description of the message as the power of God. In the New Testament, God's power is associated most closely with the resurrection of Jesus. The great manifestation of God's saving strength was his raising of the Lord.²⁷ In Paul's view, the proclamation of the Salvation Event made that same power operative. The word contained a dynamism that made it effective. God's power worked through the word in the one who received it; and the message effected what it signified. It was experience that convinced Paul of this. In writing to the Thessalonians, he recalls that the gospel came to them not only in word, but in power and in the Holy Spirit.²⁸ It produced a firm conviction in their hearts and bore such fruit that their Church became renowned throughout Greece. Paul attributes the success of his mission there to God's working through him, to the extent that his word became the Word of God. That this statement occurs in the earliest of Paul's letters is most remarkable. He was convinced that his message was God's Word to mankind, so that it was filled with the power of the Father. Paul was aware of the Old Testament concept of the prophetic word as something creative, active, eternal, effecting its purpose.²⁹ He could describe himself in terms reminiscent of Jeremiah or of the Suffering Servant of Second Isaiah.³⁰ He was thus aware that the word entrusted to him was as effective as that given to the Prophets of old. And though he insisted that it had come to him from the Lord,³¹ he was equally aware that it was not his: existing, one might say, of itself — running, speeding, growing, bearing fruit under its own power.³² It defends the faithful,³³ and dwells in their hearts.³⁴

This living, active word communicates power because it effects what it contains: the death and resurrection of Jesus, who is present

²⁵ Cf 1 Cor 3, 12.

²⁶ Cf 2 Cor 4, 2.

²⁷ Cf Rom 1, 4; 1 Cor 6, 14; 2 Cor 13, 4; Phil 3, 10.

²⁸ Cf 1 Thess 1, 5.

²⁹ Cf Gen 1, 3; Isai 40, 8; 45, 23; 55, 10-11.

³⁰ Cf Gal 1, 15; Jer 1, 5; Isai 49, 1.

³¹ Gal 1, 12.

³² Cf 2 Thess 3, 1; Col 1, 6.

³³ Cf Eph 6, 17.

³⁴ Cf Col 3, 16.

in its proclamation.³⁵ In the letter to the Colossians, Paul writes enigmatically that his ministry is 'to make full the word of God'. It is a phrase difficult to translate; but its meaning seems to be: 'My ministry is to make actual and present to you the events that are described in my preaching'. He goes on to say that the purpose of his preaching is this: that the mystery or plan of God might be made known to his listeners. Nor is 'knowing' to be taken in a merely intellectual sense. The Colossians are to be the beneficiaries of God's eternal purpose: a mystery designated as 'Christ in you'.³⁶ The power of God's guiding hand through the ages, obscurely revealing his design through the Old Testament prophets, is now made present to those who believe through the preaching of the Son's Paschal Mystery. In the message of the Resurrection, God's power is active and effective more clearly and dynamically than in the activity of the prophets. Through the human voice of the apostle, the Eternal Word is spoken anew. Man is drawn into God's eternal purpose through the apostle's activity, which is a crucial element in Salvation History. So Luke will say of the divine Will: 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem'.³⁷ Paul himself alludes to the necessity of preaching: 'How can men call upon him in whom they have not believed? . . . And how are they to hear without a preacher? . . . What is heard is the Gospel of Christ' (that is, the Gospel in which Christ is announced).³⁸

Paul attributed the effectiveness of his preaching to God's power working through him. His message of the cross and resurrection contained within itself the power of the Lord. It effected what it signified. Thus Paul was at pains not to be a hindrance in the way of this divine power by his own human wisdom and eloquence. These are useful aids, but the gospel can never depend on them. Indeed, the power of God makes itself felt where there are no pretensions to human wisdom or cleverness.

Spiritual men, or men of the flesh

In his first letter, Paul complains that the Corinthians are still men of the flesh and that he addresses them as such. His emphasis here on the cross and resurrection is certainly set over against their spiritual immaturity as shown by their party spirit and strifes;³⁹ but

³⁵ Cf Col 1, 28.

³⁶ Cf Col 1, 25-27.

³⁷ Luke 24, 47.

³⁸ Rom 10, 14-17.

³⁹ Cf 1 Cor 3, 1-6.

equally he is preaching whatever is of the essence of the christian life. Earlier he has said that he has a hidden wisdom for the mature; but that wisdom is none other than Christ, the power and the wisdom of God.⁴⁰ In this letter he constantly returns to what he had first preached, as a point of departure to answer the various questions of the community.

The problem of meat sacrificed to idols is resolved by the admonition that no one should endanger the conscience of a brother for whom Christ died.⁴¹ In the matter of slavery and freedom he answers that all are slaves of Christ, bought with a great price.⁴² Those who might be tempted to impurity are told that our bodies are meant for the Lord, and that they will rise as Jesus has risen.⁴³ The Eucharist, the memorial of the Lord's death till he comes, is to be the centre of unity in the community, not a source of divisions.⁴⁴ Paul's long discussion on the resurrection of the body is preceded by a summary of his preaching, a formula that appears to have originated in the early palestinian christian communities: 'I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures . . . , that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures'. The formula closely reflects his preaching at Antioch and at Thessalonika.⁴⁵ In the corinthian matters, Paul solves these various types of problem, advances ones about resurrection and eating of meats and, for a Jew, a straightforward question about prostitution: all these from the starting-point of his gospel of Christ Crucified.

In this survey of Paul's preaching, we have concentrated largely on the First Letter to the Corinthians. We must now ask whether the accent on the cross and resurrection is merely a stage in Paul's theological development and exceptionally well-documented in that letter, or whether it is something that endured. In writing to the Thessalonians, he seems to have laid more emphasis on the future coming of the Lord, although there are equally references to the Paschal Mystery. The One who is to come is the Risen Lord; and the question about those Christians who have died sharing in the Parousia is answered in respect of their faith in Jesus, who died and rose again.⁴⁶

Much of the argument in Galatians is based on the gospel Paul had preached there; for there is no other gospel.⁴⁷ Paul placarded

⁴⁰ Cf I Cor 2, 6. ⁴¹ Cf I Cor 8, 11. ⁴² Cf I Cor 7, 22. ⁴³ Cf I Cor 6, 13-14.

⁴⁴ Cf I Cor 11, 17-34. ⁴⁵ Cf I Cor 15, 3-5; Acts 17, 3; 13, 26ff.

⁴⁶ Cf I Thess 1, 9; 4, 14. ⁴⁷ Cf Gal 1, 7.

Christ before them as the Crucified One, and by accepting him they received the gift of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸ To move away from the message of the Cross is to leave the realm of the spirit and to re-enter the realm of the flesh, of enmity with God. One cannot entertain any other means of salvation, such as the Jewish rites or the Law.⁴⁹ Paul, the Hebrew of Hebrews, the Pharisee, has come to look on what had previously been his boast and pride as of no value in comparison with knowledge of Christ. Through the Law he has died to the Law: a death that is an intimate sharing in the death of the Lord.⁵⁰ His one glory now is the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to him and him to the world: for which Cross he is persecuted.⁵¹ At the time of the writing of Galatians and Corinthians, Paul's whole theological edifice was built on the Cross, which had always been the kernel of his gospel.

In the later writings, this edifice never moved on its foundations, even if the cross and resurrection might not always be the central point at issue. Though, for example, in the systematic treatment of the Letter to the Romans there is no impassioned cry about having placarded Christ as crucified, the all-important event in justification remains Christ's death and resurrection;⁵² God's saving love is manifested in the Cross.⁵³ In the Captivity Letters, reconciliation with God is effected by means of the Cross,⁵⁴ and the debt of sin is cancelled.⁵⁵ In these letters, Paul is dealing with more sophisticated problems, as, in course of time, Christians tried to deepen their insight into the designs of God and were tempted to have recourse to various esoteric solutions. Each time, Paul reasserts that the whole mystery of God's plan is revealed in Jesus, who died and rose again.⁵⁶ Though in these later letters, he is not so much at pains to emphasize the Cross as he was earlier, it remains the mainspring of his gospel and of his theological thought. In fact, time and experience integrates it more deeply into his being, and his references to it become more serene and gentle. All life for Paul is a communion with the death of the Lord and in his rising.⁵⁷ Being perfect is knowing him and the power of his resurrection, sharing in his suffering and becoming like him in his death.⁵⁸ Paul's exhortations to those who have been living the Christian life for many years are still based on the same central event of salvation, as are those which he addressed to the new converts of Antioch or Thessalonika.

⁴⁸ Cf Gal 3, 1-5.⁴⁹ Cf Gal 5, 11.⁵⁰ Cf Gal 2, 19-20.⁵¹ Cf Gal 6, 12-14.⁵² Cf Rom 3, 21-25.⁵³ Cf Rom 5, 6-8.⁵⁴ Cf Eph 1, 3-14; 2, 13-16; Col 2, 20-22.⁵⁵ Cf Col 2, 14.⁵⁶ Cf Col 1, 15-20.⁵⁷ Cf 2 Cor 4, 10ff; Col 1, 24.⁵⁸ Cf Phil 3, 10-12.

Conclusion

This brief glimpse at the preaching of Paul encourages us to ask how we can renew our proclamation of the word in the light of his example. What strikes us most forcibly is how Paul focuses all his problems on Jesus, the source of all wisdom and knowledge.⁵⁹ This is the kernel of his message, which he adapts to different situations and presents in various ways, in accordance with the circumstances and thought-patterns of his listeners. In a Jewish community he argues from the Scriptures; in a Hellenistic Church he begins from their current difficulties, whatever these may be. In either case, the point of departure is known and accepted. In the various Christian communities, Paul attempts to build up their faith with a positive presentation of the Word.⁶⁰ Speculations and opinions are not allowed to affect the purity of the word:⁶¹ to do so would be to tamper with the Word of God, and so to rob it of its dynamic effectiveness. Paul prefers open statement of the truth, frank moral exhortation, and sometimes even a rebuke, where this is needed for the appropriate development of faith in Jesus.⁶²

Paul sees a congruity between the manner of proclamation and the content of the message. For him the word of the Cross neither demands nor asks for adornment. If people take offence at a crucified Saviour, then no artful disguise will bring them to faith.

One final question forces itself upon us. Why did Paul emphasize the Cross? He never underlined the physical tortures of the Passion, yet he did insist on the living truths that Jesus gives himself for us. It seems that, far from seeing any negative element in the death of Jesus, he regarded it as the human event which best and most effectively expressed the infinite love of God for man: God's total commitment to man in love expressed in the most eloquently possible human way. The preaching of the Cross placards that love before man. As Paul of the Cross has it: 'The Passion of Jesus is a sea of sorrow, but also an ocean of God's love'.

⁵⁹ Cf Col, 2, 3.

⁶⁰ Cf 1 Cor 3, 5-15.

⁶¹ Cf 2 Tim 1, 14.

⁶² Cf 2 Cor 4, 2; Tit 1, 12.