THE CROSS—SIGN OF HOPE

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IT IS A tribute to the power of custom and distance that we can hear the cross described as a sign of hope without shock. The description belongs to the areas of theology and piety, and does not evoke the naked and writhing body of a man left to die in as degrading and tortured way as human ingenuity could achieve within the limits of a simple technology. To contemporaries of the early Christians who were familiar with death by crucifixion, the description of it as a sign of hope must have sounded as offensively paradoxical as it would for us to hear AIDS characterized as a sign of hope.

Such offence, of course, was accepted by the early Christians, and indeed for Paul it characteristically became a title for boasting. But theologians will usually try to soften any unnecessary offence. The cross is capitalized and becomes the Cross, which is identified with the whole paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. So, it is not death by crucifixion as a human fate which is a sign of hope, but the unique death of Christ on the cross. And this death is a sign of hope because Christ rose from the dead. By his resurrection he enabled us to find hope in our own lives, even in the paths which led us fearfully close to the suffering and abandonment of his death on the cross.

That is the received understanding of the way in which the cross is a sign of hope. It is a reasonable understanding, which enables us to enter Christ's passion in prayer and to identify with him in our own path towards death. So it is not to be dismissed. In this article however I do not wish to develop it, but to explore another understanding of the way in which the cross might be said to be a sign of hope. This is a more dangerous understanding, open to serious objections which I shall outline, but nevertheless illuminating.

This alternative position holds that the cross is a sign of hope as a human event in all its awfulness, and that Christ took on the human experience of the cross as a sign of hope. Consequently,

the cross does not become a sign of hope simply because Christ assumes it or because after dying he rises from the dead. The resurrection certainly guarantees the hope of which the cross is a sign, but it does not create the hope of which the cross speaks. So, this radical understanding of the cross holds that the places in human lives where there is great suffering and the threat to everything that is human are privileged places of God's presence, and are in fact signs of hope. If in becoming man, God assumes such experience in the passion, that shows that this experience is open to God. If this is true, then the public experiences of massive suffering and inhumanity, like the Holocaust and the Pol Pot years, are inherently signs of hope and of God's presence even without explicit reference to Christ's death on the cross.

The understanding of the cross I have outlined is open to many serious objections. It can be argued that it is offensive to make the massive and personal suffering of so many people the object of theological speculation. We may try to enter the evil which people suffer, and if we come to some appreciation of it, we can then only be silent before it. To incorporate it into a coherent vision of the world is to trivialize it.

This argument can be put in another way. To try to build experiences of such passive evil into a theological framework, and especially to see positive value in them, is to direct our attention away from the victim of this evil, and on to the person who is concerned to make sense of it. To give it an intelligible place in the world inevitably weakens our uncomprehending revulsion, and makes it the more likely that it can be repeated and once again tolerated. For the evil becomes the object of our curiosity, and in placing it we cannot but soften its horror in order to comprehend it.

Alternatively, it has often been urged against Christian faith that it leads to the morbid contemplation, and even masochistic enjoyment, of suffering. The position which I have sketched appears to find life in the living death of suffering, oppression and torture. This belief that pain purifies may not romanticize the reality of human suffering and evil, as does the reduction of it to an element of a theological theory, but it is equally damaging and improper.

These are formidable arguments. The success of my enterprise must be judged by the extent to which it avoids their force. I shall return later to justify it, but at this point I would like simply to

assert that any theological reflection which incorporates an account of human evil, without giving full weight to the suffering and degradation which is involved in it, is deeply flawed. It is vital to grasp imaginatively to some extent how human beings suffer, and not to treat it in ways that soften or sentimentalize suffering and evil. So, I would like first to describe one situation of massive human evil, the life which is forced on many of the millions of refugees around the world. Compared to what they have fled from, their plight is often blessed, but its details give some flesh to what we mean when we describe the cross as a human event.

Refugees live with bitter recent memories. They have fled from oppression or hunger that became intolerable. They have often left behind parents and friends to endure the hardship from which they themselves have fled, and have no reliable information about their fate. In their flight, they have faced dangers, may well have been betrayed, abused or lost their companions, and have arrived at a temporarily safe place without resources.

In their life as refugees they often find their dignity unrecognized. They come into a world that finds 'nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human'. They depend on charity for their survival, for their clothing and their shelter. Their own hands are unproductive and their ideas without practical outcome. Where they are kept together in camps, they are the prey to their own demoralization and boredom, as well as to the venality of their own leaders and of the soldiers and forces assigned to them for their protection. So they live in constant insecurity, with no tangible hope of return to their own countries or resettlement in other lands, frequently shaken by rumours of their impending doom or salvation.

But that is by no means the worst of their situation. For refugees are not merely victims of evil; they are also doers of evil, who have often had to deny their conscience in order to survive. Many women have to sell themselves to get food for their families. If they resent the foreign soldiers who guard them, they are more at risk from the violent and desperate people among themselves. If they develop leadership, that leadership often works for its own interests and not for the common good. One man, often seen in camps associated with guerilla groups, may act as the emblem of the evil which is both done and suffered wherever there are refugees. He is an armless boy, whose hands were blown off by

the mine which he was making in order to blow off the legs of another.

For many refugees this kind of life is an improvement on what they had lived through. We move into a further and almost unimaginable hell when we try to enter the experience of the Jews under Nazism or the Cambodians under Pol Pot, where the philosophy and technology of nations were devoted seriously to murder, and any conversation was pregnant with the possibility of betrayal. Our imagination can enter these worlds only with difficulty. In *The killing fields*, the extras who played the Khmer peasants carried too much flesh on their faces, the lines of workers were too symmetrical, and the action moved too quickly to convey the suffering of people for whom each day of the year seemed like a month. In extreme situations like this, extraordinary courage is required simply to support ordinary human goodness, and many who survived say that they did so to their shame. Abandonment, betrayal and the silence of the heavens wore down the conventions of humanity. People learned to keep their mouth shut, to steal to stay alive, and came to recognize that collaboration with the powers which controlled life and death could take ever more demonic and corrupting forms.

Words fail to describe the horror of such experiences. The silence of the survivors who cannot bear to speak of them even forty years later is more eloquent. But I have described them fully enough to show the apparent absurdity of describing them as signs of hope.

Yet as we enter the experience more fully, it becomes more paradoxical, and almost begs to be described as a sign of hope. We recognize, in the first place, the heroism with which many people responded in it. When they had to choose between life and death, they chose life even when it entailed their own death. The Khmer woman with five children who stole, not in order to support her children who surely would have died with her had she been caught, but to feed the starving old people in the village is only one example. So is the courage of the many people who starved in order to feed others and went to their death in place of others. Christians are rightly proud of their brothers and sisters who lived and died heroically, but they are sisters and brothers also of the Jews and Buddhists who behaved with equal heroism. Such heroism makes of the events in which these people lived a sign of hope.

It may be argued, of course, that heroism was rare, and that it ought not to distract us from the moral diminishment which was

the common experience of these situations. The fact is true, but it is surely to be expected. What is strange, though, is that in conditions which are so totally inimical to the assertion of human dignity, there should be any instances of the affirmation of that dignity, particularly when the affirmation leads to death. This affirmation makes of the situations signs of hope.

If human heroism makes of situations where evil is loosed signs of hope, so in a mysterious way does the common impulse to record and tell stories about what took place. Many of those who survived the Holocaust and some of those who died in it were driven by the need to record accurately and without exaggeration all that they saw and lived through. Their stories have the same character as many of the stories told by those who lived through the Pol Pot years in Cambodia. Both exhibit a shortness and baldness of narrative, in which the story teller's personal involvement in the events is subordinated to the need to narrate clearly and accurately the character of the events. Moreover, the need to record and retell the story outweighs the pain which memories bring.

This story-telling affirms the hope that life will win over death, and that human values which are presently denied will be again taken for granted by the readers of the stories. And people who tell the stories after the horror has ended affirm that, despite the pain which telling the story brings, life and humanity proved victorious over all the things that make for death. The events which had threatened to crush all humanity then become a sign of hope.

If this is true, then we cannot say that we can find hope in such events only through the death and resurrection of Christ. It is true that Christians will see such events through the lens of Christ's death and victory, and that the signs of hope found in such human catastrophe are ambiguous without the guarantee given by God in Christ, but the evidence is there to be seen by others as well. Moreover, the evidence is provided by others as well as by Christians. The courage and simple humanity which make of inhuman events signs of hope is found among all people who are made in God's image. Jesus died as a Jew for Jews and Christians alike; Edith Stein died as a Jew for Jews and Christians alike, and as a Christian for Christians and Jews alike. Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Moslems, animists and atheists have all built signs of hope by shaping human lives out of unpromising circumstances.

Nor is the urge to remember confined to Jews and Christians for whom it is so central in their religious tradition. While memory gains strength and depth when it can associate contemporary disaster with the sufferings in Egypt, with the exile, or with Christ's passion, and can recall also the liberations which followed these events, the sacred and creative place of memory is in practice asserted by people of all cultures and beliefs. It is an instinctive and life-giving response to evil events.

What does it mean to say that such situations of extreme human suffering are signs of hope? In the first instance, they are signs, and so can be interpreted in different ways. They can be seen simply to confirm the absurdity of the world, or they can be seen to confirm the affirmation of human dignity in the face of all that tears at it. As signs, they do not impose themselves, but if we wish to see these situations as simply arguing for the absence of God and for the hopelessness of the human condition, we must give an account of the tenacious hope which inspires many people during their suffering.

Secondly, although it is the heroism of individuals and the tenacity of hope shown by individuals which make these situations signs of hope, it is nevertheless proper to speak of the situation in which they suffer as the sign of hope. For people who survive such events and show heroism in them are defined by reference to what they suffer and to the evil which they resist. They are seen as significant because of the events they have lived through and risen above, and they bless those events.

The interest which people have in events which involve massive suffering and evil also says something of the kind of signs they are. Sometimes such interest betrays a morbid curiosity, but more often it reflects a concern to know how human beings live in extreme situations. We want to know what will be left of humanity when all seems taken away—job, possessions, family, esteem and perhaps even life. The example of heroism in great loss is so significant because it answers the question which those of us who live in easier times instinctively ask ourselves—whether the values we hold are superficial or conventional, a comfortable illusion. If people reflect an exalted image of humanity when conventions and comfort have been stripped away and there is no longer any room for illusion, then we may believe that a mystery of goodness lies behind the image. When writers refer to a symbiosis between torturer and victim, they may refer to the desire we have in our

evil to test the good. Even the torturer wants in a perverted way to find out what is left when all grounds for hope are taken away, to see if goodness can survive. He is committed to explore what he loves by destroying it.

Finally, to find in these catastrophic situations signs of hope is to be committed to ensure that they are set right and never recur. If we discover in humanity torn by great evil a dignity reflected in heroism, then we appreciate clearly the horror of treating people like animals. We may suspect in our untested moments that it is perhaps not inconceivable to cage and kill human beings like chickens, but when we have seen human dignity displayed when they are caged and killed, we can no longer hesitate to try to eradicate the evil.

The attempt to say that situations of great evil are signs of hope raises many questions, some of them the classical questions, asked about the cross as God's work. For it is as difficult to see how God can be behind Jesus's death on the cross as it is to see how God can be active and present in the Holocaust. Whether we see every desperate situation as a sign of God's presence or only the cross, we face the same challenge to explain why God should choose such places to reveal himself and to engender hope. The same delicate exploration of the relationship between human freedom, sin and divine responsibility is required. Equally, the place of the resurrection in our salvation must be safeguarded in ways that are difficult to articulate clearly in either way of looking at the cross.

The argument that events which involve great suffering and great evil are signs of hope, however, has many implications. First, we cannot simply use such events to point to the hopelessness of the world without Christ or to the pervasiveness of sin, in any straightforward way. It is precisely there that we find signs of hope and of the presence of God which is vindicated in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. So, our attitude to the suffering of the world should not be one which sees it only as the story of the need for Christ, but one which recognizes there the face of Christ. This is a more modest form of apologetic, and more persuasive because it presents a more substantially true picture of suffering.

Secondly, this way of looking at these events draws further connections between God and human experience. The incarnation of Christ means that the humanity which God takes on is holy, and that there is in humanity something capable of receiving God.

The incarnation affirms the dignity of the world and of the people whom God made. To say that God is present in situations of great evil and suffering asserts a value in the experience even of these situations, which makes them an appropriate focus for God's action. His own suffering affirms the value of what others have suffered, so that there is continuity between the sufferings of non-Christians, of Christ and of Christians. Christians in their life through hard times make explicit the link between their sufferings and hope and the hope which Christ brings in the sufferings, but the way in which they build hope out of hopelessness does not differ from the way in which others do by their heroism. Edith Stein is as much a sign of hope whether she dies as Christian or as Jew.

Thirdly, reflection on the relationship between the cross of Christ and other apparently totally evil events indicates that it is important to enter imaginatively into the circumstances of Christ's death. It is not enough to say that he dies for our sins. We are called to appreciate the horror of his abandonment by his friends, the cynicism of the legal authorities, the betrayal of their trust by the religious authorities, and the silence of God. The Marcan passion account takes care to describe Christ's death in this way. He is successively abandoned and humiliated, deprived of all the lesser resources from which he might have built his hope. His death becomes a sign precisely as he is deprived of all that might help it to signify, and at the point of total resourcelessness and disillusion, the centurion is made to remark, 'Truly this was the Son of God'. We do not appreciate the character of his death, any more than we appreciate the life of refugees or of those caught in the pogroms and persecutions of our century, if we spiritualize it too soon, dwelling on its significance while bypassing the horror of the events which shape that significance. There has been a constant tendency to present Christian martyrdom as an event isolated from the horror of its context, in an almost bloodless way. This masks its quality as a sign of hope in the face of all that takes away hope. Like all spiritualization, it masks the desire to shape the world in a form different from that in which Christ lived and died, and shows little trust in the power of Christ's death.

Finally, if we reflect on the relationship between the cross and other suffering, we can understand why Ignatius Loyola, in common with many other saints, saw sickness as 'no less a gift than health'. It is an event which involves great suffering, tends easily

to demoralize and diminish human dignity, but it is nonetheless a sign of hope because of the courage and affirmation of life which so many people show. It is a gift, because it has the shape of the experience which Christ took on. He assumed this experience because it was transparent to God.

To what kind of God is the experience transparent? It is to a God who is compassionate. He is not in evil events as a God who has a taste for suffering and who feeds on human blood, but as one whose own compassion is shown in the love of people who rise above their own pain and need, to give themselves to others. The God who is met is a God of hope, who is with us in suffering, builds courage out of the straw of despair, affirms the dignity and destiny of human beings, and enables the vision and courage needed to overcome the conditions that lead to monstrous evil. Because this is the kind of God who is recognized, his presence is a sign of hope.

So if it is proper to say, as the argument leads us to conclude, that the AIDS epidemic is a sign of hope, we are committed to recognize the great suffering which it represents, the despair which suffering so often engenders, and the evil which it involves, both that which drives people to the desperate lives which favour the spread of the disease, and the evil embodied in the cowardice and rejection of the wider community, which intensifies the suffering of the victims. But in the courage, fidelity and friendship of so many victims, friends and helpers, we may claim to recognize a sign of hope. For God is seen to be with the victims as a suffering and comforting God. And as we recognize the dignity of being human, and the ways in which suffering and ostracism diminish that dignity, we shall be committed to find a cure for the illness, and persuasively to commend a way of living our sexuality that is a celebration of our human dignity.