SUFFERING AND CHRISTIAN GROWTH

By M. R. TRIPOLE

IT IS only in comparatively recent times that suffering has become a theological problem in the lives of convinced Christians. Hitherto, the promise of joys to come as the 'reward' for the sufferings of this life substantiated belief in human immortality. However, the developing theology of redemption has tended to change all that. It was agreed that Catholic theology had over-emphasized the 'rightfulness' of participation in the life of Christ suffering, to the detriment of the living and victorious Christ who was already offering his risen joy to those he had redeemed. Because of Christ's death, the christian life must be seen as a time for rejoicing — for glorifying God with songs of love and happiness — rather than for penance. 'Mortification' was at bottom otiose: it detracted from the fulness of redemption.

The trouble with this rejoicing in the Lord is that it so easily confuses the call of the gospel with, say, the message of the 'beer commercial' which tells us that we have only one life to live, and that we should live it with gusto: a precept which simply ignores the earlier contention that religion was no more than a drug to deaden the sufferings of this life. So the age-old problem of pain returns in an even more acute form. For so many, suffering is instinctively seen as an unalloyed evil which should have no place in the christian experience, whether on the level of unexpected personal tragedy, or the 'bad news' which daily stuns our senses from every corner of the world: starvation, mindless cruelty, violence, frightening wars, natural disasters. Yet the christian message remains constant: suffering is formative for the individual and the community, every bit as much as is the joy which is the fruit of the Spirit. The two will go hand in hand until Christ is formed in every one of God's children, until at last we reach the fulness of his stature (Eph 4, 13).

If we would look for evidence of the formative role of suffering in the christian faith-experience, we can expect to find it only in the revelation of God in the life of Jesus as proclaimed in the New Testament. If we find a theology of suffering there, then we must

conclude that suffering was of fundamental importance to Christ's understanding of his own role in history, and also of that of his followers.

Suffering in Jesus's own life

The key passages in each of the synoptic Gospels are the three predictions which Jesus makes of his own passion and death. Using Mark's version, generally considered the earliest, we find that Jesus is presented as understanding suffering as a necessary part of his life:

> He began to teach them [his disciples] that the Son of man *had to suffer much*, be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, be put to death, and rise three days later (8, 13).

The text is emphatic in the Greek in all three Synoptics: it is *necessary* (*deî*) that Jesus suffer: an emphasis confirmed in 9, 12, where he is presented as asking 'why does Scripture say of the Son of Man that he must suffer much and be despised?' It follows that Jesus by the end of his life, and the early Church very shortly thereafter on the basis of his teaching, had come to realize it was part of the divine plan for him to suffer.

There was every reason why Jesus should have realized this. He was increasingly aware of the growing alienation between himself and the leading members of his community who were able to do away with him. There was also the prophecy of the Suffering Servant of Second Isaiah (52, 13 — 53, 12) the account of a future redeemer who would be 'a man of suffering, accustomed to infirmity, one of those from whom men hide their faces, spurned, and we held him in no esteem' (53, 3). Though the Gospel text is coloured here by the theology of Mark, we must conclude that the early Church saw itself as making explicit Jesus's own awareness of himself as fulfilling the prophecy, and his subsequent teaching that suffering was a necessary part of his life as determined by God's will for him.

Why did Jesus have to suffer? The clearest indication is given in Mark at the end of his presentation of Jesus's third prediction: 'The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve — *to give his life in ransom for the many*' (10, 45). Referring again to Isaiah, we note the peculiar and fascinating conception of the Suffering Servant as one who suffers because of sin that is not his own:

it was our infirmities that he bore,
our sufferings that he endured . . .
he was pierced for our offences,
crushed for our sins (53, 4-5).

The sacred writer is aware that the guilt of the sin of Israel is being 'laid upon' the Suffering Servant (v 6), and in and through his acceptance of suffering for their sin, they are 'healed' or made 'whole':

Upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole,
by his stripes we were healed (v 5).

The Suffering Redeemer is 'oppressed', 'condemned', slaughtered and buried with the wicked (vv 8-9) but, because he willingly 'gives his life as an offering for sin' (v 10), he is able to 'take away the sins of many' and 'win pardon for their offences' (v 12). John L. McKenzie summarizes the whole in one sentence:

> The passage describes a person of unknown identity who suffers on behalf of others, although he himself is innocent: and by his sufferings those for whom he suffers are relieved from affliction.[1]

It is undoubtedly this conception of the significance of suffering to which Jesus refers when he speaks of his death: 'this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, to be poured out *in behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins* (Mk 10, 45; Mt 26, 28).

It is in the fact that Jesus suffers so that others might be freed from the domination of sin that he performs a supreme act of *service* for the many. In this way, he again fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah: 'Through his suffering, my servant shall justify many, and their guilt he shall bear' (53, 11). Indeed, it is precisely because the suffering One performs this act of service that God rewards him by raising him to heights of nobility: 'Because he surrendered himself to death. . . . Therefore I will give him his portion among the great. . . . See, my servant shall prosper, he shall be raised high and greatly exalted' (53, 12; 52, 13). Little could Isaiah have realized the heights of exaltation he was foretelling or to whom precisely they would be directed. It is only in the New Testament that the exaltation becomes known to the fullest as that of Jesus Christ, to the right hand of the Father (Acts 2, 33). But that exaltation followed upon Jesus's supreme act of service: death on behalf of others, so that they

might be freed from sin. *Exaltation, therefore, follows upon acceptance of an entrance into the ignominy of suffering and death for others*, and not necessarily because of personal sin.

The formative power of suffering

This total orientation of Jesus's life to the service of mankind illustrates the formative power of suffering. Though texts are relatively few, they are significant in their affirmation that Jesus shared in all ways with us in our human frailty (e.g. Heb 4, 15), nor was the frailty of his human nature overpowered by his divinity. In his recent study of the progressive development of the psychology of Jesus in movement toward his final acceptance of the will of God in his life, David Stanley notes that the hymn in Hebrews (5, 7-10), is very likely based on an early christian hymn fragment. It teaches that Jesus had to 'learn obedience', that is, to 'experience personally God's will for himself' in an 'intensely fervent prayer' of priestly sacrifice to God on behalf of others. In this hardly-won reverent 'filial submission', Jesus was able to reach the 'perfection' for which he was destined by God: that is, to attain his goal as 'heavenly intercessor for mankind' (7, 25; 9, 24). It was, indeed, Jesus's act of 'self-oblation' that was 'the heart of his redeeming death'. Only by his arrival at a 'willing acceptance of God's decision' for his death was Jesus able to redeem us.[2]

The Agony in the Garden, as presented in the Synoptics, further indicates how hard it was for Jesus to accept the Father's will. His offering of himself to the Father comes only after struggle and prayer that culminates in his 'majestic acceptance of his capture by his enemies'. Stanley sees this filial submission to God moving through three progressive stages:

> In the course of his prayer Jesus is seen moving from the plea to have his hour of suffering pass him by and from an attitude of revulsion toward the cup, through the realization of the necessity of his redemptive death to win strength for his disciples in their testing, to a dynamic and voluntary acceptance of God's will as he assumes the initiative in going forward to meet his captors.[3]

Jesus initially recoils from the horror of being 'handed over into the power of men' (Mk 9, 31). In the scattering of the little community of believers that alone had remained loyal to him, he experienced the complete failure of his public ministry. It is in his struggle to accept

the Father's will that he learns to realize that only by his acceptance of the awful consequences of the divine judgment upon sinful humanity will his followers ultimately be granted the strength to carry out their mission and to live an authentic christian existence. Jesus then 'prays for that strength for himself to carry out the Father's design, which only God can give'. In the accents of Matthew, Jesus prays that the Father may carry out his will (Mt 26, 42) for the realization of the divine sovereign rule in history through all the concrete circumstances of the Son's death. So Jesus arrives at the perfect surrender of himself to the Father's will for the saving of the world.[4]

Suffering and discipleship

To share in his sufferings was clearly seen by Jesus as a necessary part of discipleship. In Mark's gospel, he closely relates to the life of his disciple with his own role as suffering Redeemer. After each of the three predictions of his suffering and death, mention is made of the consequences that his death has for the life of the disciple; and in each case, some dimension of the nature of discipleship is clarified.

After the first prediction, Jesus turns to 'the crowd with his disciples' and tells them that the cost of discipleship is to enter into his own experience of the cross: 'If a man wishes to come after me [be my disciple], he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and follow in my steps' (Mk 8, 34). There can be no other conclusion: suffering is an essential part of christian discipleship. The first communities would never have dared add such an important and challenging dimension to discipleship of Jesus without its being rooted in his own thought. This participation in his suffering and cross will consitute *losing* one's life for the sake of Jesus and for the realization of the gospel: 'Whoever would preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will preserve it' (8, 35).

How, precisely, does the disciple enter into suffering by losing his life for Jesus's sake and that of the gospel? In becoming identified with Jesus in his redemptive death, by giving one's life in the service of the brethren. Jesus insists upon this point. After both the second and third predictions of his passion, when he underlines the significance of his suffering and death for the lives of his disciples, he refers to them as 'servants'. For example, after the second prediction, Jesus calls the Twelve to him: 'If anyone wishes to rank

first [among my disciples], he must remain the last one of all and the servant of all' (9, 35). Service is exemplified by hospitality toward the poor and the lowly, symbolized by the child: 'Whoever welcomes a child such as this for my sake welcomes me' (9, 37). The child is equally a symbol for the humility of life and poverty of spirit to be found in the christian community as a whole. The service is to be rendered to all the members of his community.

The sequel to the third prediction emphasizes the role of service even more. Here again, Jesus addresses the Twelve: 'Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest; whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all' (10, 43). He then makes clear that this service is a participation in his own supreme service of redemptive suffering and death (10, 45).

For too long it has been taken for granted that Jesus's sayings to the Twelve referred only to the Hierarchy or to those 'consecrated' to service in the Church. Whilst it is true that Jesus's words here are intended for those who would exercise authority among his disciples, the point surely is that he is stressing that a new kind of authority is to be exercised amongst his followers: one deriving from the degree of *service* to the community, and not from the position of power or hierarchical rank. Furthermore, it is clear from other sayings that the life of service is in no way restricted to those in authority. Redemptive discipleship is to be characteristic of his community as a whole. Those who enter the kingdom 'when the Son of Man comes in his glory' are the ones who have served the needs of others on every level (Mt 25, 31-46). The same point is vividly illustrated in the story of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10, 25-37); whilst the insistence on the great commandment of the love of God and of neighbour indicates that service of both God and man were understood to constitute the new and supreme form of life for Jesus and all his followers. The fact that such service soon became understood by the early community as involving a total sacrifice of one's life for others — if necessary to the point of death, in imitation of Jesus's own supreme sacrifice — is perhaps nowhere more tersely presented than in John's First Letter: 'The way we came to understand love was that he laid down his life for us; we too must lay down our lives for our brothers' (3, 16).

In the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5, 1-12), Jesus dramatically clarifies the formative role of suffering in the lives of those who would follow him in a life of service. The suffering servants here will feel the pain which arises from their experience of the same conflicts

that arose in Jesus's own life between the ways of God and the ways of the world, an opposition that brought him into head-on clash with the jewish leaders of the community and the roman authorities. Indeed, it is made clear to Peter after the first prediction that Jesus's own suffering and death is to be taken as the standard of opposition to the ways of the world: 'Get out of my sight, you satan! You are not judging by God's standards but by man's' (Mk 8, 33). When these words are related to the teaching of the Beatitudes, one can see that his death was the type of the way of life exemplified in his entire career — of refusing to give way to the will of men and their self-centred conceptions of value. The blessings he promises his disciples will be rooted in all kinds of hostility that will be theirs because of their allegiance to him and their dedication to righteousness (Mt 5, 10-11).

In sum, what Jesus promises his every disciple who is received into Jesus's filial relationship to his Father is a lifetime's dedication to the service of his own mission of love, righteousness, and truth. The power so to live will come to them through faith, prayer, and the strength of the Spirit. Equally, it will entail the same heart-breaking, soul-searing experience of Jesus in the Garden, as he painfully learns to hand himself over to his Father's loving will.

Suffering in St Paul

Paul's theology of suffering is rooted in his conviction that the christian life is a progress towards a complete identification with the person of Christ: 'the life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me' (Gal 2, 20). Jesus suffered and died for the sake of others (Rom 4, 25; Gal 3, 13; 1 Thess 5, 19; 2 Cor 5, 14-15. 21); then he was resurrected and exalted to the right hand of the Father in accepting in obedience the ignominy of death on the cross. For Jesus, then, resurrection and exaltation were historically consequent upon the obedient sacrifice of his life in suffering and death for the sake of others, as is stressed in his version of the great Christological hymn (Phil 2, 8-9). In other words, the historical process contained within Jesus's life is that he moved to resurrection and exaltation only after he had obediently accepted God's will to enter into suffering and death for the redemptive welfare of others. This process from humble death to resurrection is the prototype of every truly christian life. The disciple shares in Jesus's resurrection in so far as he or she shares in Jesus's suffering and death here and now:

> If we have been united with him through likeness to his death, so shall we be through a like resurrection. . . . If we have died with Christ, we believe that we are also to live with him (Rom 6, 5. 8).
>
> I wish to know Christ and the power flowing from his resurrection; likewise to know how to share in his sufferings by being formed into the pattern of his death. Thus do I hope that I may arrive at resurrection from the dead (Phil 3, 10-11).

In fact, to enter into this 'pattern of his death', is to be guaranteed a share in his resurrection:

> If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead [the Father] dwells in you, then he who raised Christ from the dead will bring your mortal bodies to life also through his Spirit dwelling in you . . . if only we suffer with him so as to be glorified with him (Rom 8, 11. 17; cf 2 Cor 4, 17).

It is a mark of christian living to have 'crucified the flesh with its passions and desires' (Gal 5, 24) in order that we may *already now* be empowered by the life of Jesus:

> Continually we carry about in our bodies the dying of Jesus, so that in our bodies the life of Jesus may also be revealed. While we live we are constantly being delivered to death for Jesus's sake, so that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our mortal flesh (2 Cor 4, 10-11).

He therefore welcomes persecution and ill-treatment at the hands of others for the simple reason that these will display his weakness, and thus demonstrate that his accomplishments are not his own but those of Christ (2 Cor 12, 9-10). He thus relishes any participation in the sufferings of Christ because he is convinced of their unique value for perseverance. The ability to endure, and to endure joyfully in the midst of suffering, is God's way of challenging us to a greater fidelity to him and deeper hope in the fulfilment of his promises. Suffering thus serves to attach him more closely to the person of Christ; it places him on Christ's cross, as one who has abandoned the world and all that it stands for: 'May I never boast of anything but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ: Through it the world has been crucified to me and I to the world' (Gal 6, 14). To be alienated more and more from the spirit of the world means to be attached more and more to the cross of Christ; to become a 'living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God', an embodiment of 'spiritual worship' (Rom 12, 1).

Finally, Paul understands his suffering as an essential ingredient in his service of Christ. In Paul's case, it is a service performed as a minister of the gospel, entailing the same persecution promised by Jesus in the Beatitudes:

> This is the gospel I preach; in preaching it I suffer as a criminal, even to the point of being thrown into chains . . . I bear with all of this for the sake of those whom God has chosen, in order that they may obtain the salvation to be found in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory (2 Tim 2, 8-10).

The ministry of service, if it leads (as it did) to his imprisonment and death, constitutes for Paul a total sacrifice of himself in the service of others — the greatest sacrifice he can make because it typifies the sacrifice of Christ — and he finds his greatest joy in it:

> Even if my life is to be poured out as a libation over the sacrificial service of your faith, I am glad of it and rejoice with all of you. May you be glad on the same score, and rejoice with me (Phil 2, 17-18).

Conclusion

1. Suffering was an intrinsic element in Jesus's life as Messiah. He had come to bring the good news of the kingdom to us, and to lead us to the acceptance of that news. It became clear to him, at least towards the end of his life, and in the reflection of his first followers on his teaching, that it was necessary for him to suffer and die a painful death at the hands of men of authority, in order that he might rise to an exalted state of union with the Father, and overcome the power of sin and death in the lives of others. Jesus, because he shared in the weaknesses of human nature, had to learn to direct all his energies and will towards total obedience and surrender to the saving will of the Father. This he achieved when he recognized that this whole-hearted surrender of himself to death for the saving of the world was indeed his Father's will. In this realization he willingly accepted his role as Messiah, in order to perform this service of redemption for all mankind; and therefore he now lives in an exalted and glorified state of union with the Father, sharing intimately as a human being in the life of the Father, and interceding with the Father on behalf of all mankind.
2. Neither he, nor the early Church taught by his Spirit (Jn 14, 16-17. 26), fail to draw out the historical consequences for all his

disciples of the process contained in the pattern of his suffering-death-resurrection: if they are to share in his resurrection, they must also share in his suffering and death; it is only through this sharing in the suffering of Christ that their lives will be brought into total surrender to God's will, a surrender necessary for attaining a share in Christ's resurrection; and it is only by sharing in Christ's suffering and death that the power of Christ's filial relationship to the Father will even now transform them into effective servants in his ministry. They will then become living sacrifices of spiritual worship of God in the service of humankind, by proclaiming the good news of the gospel to all, and responding to human needs on every level of existence.

The way in which today's disciple is to share in that service is patterned in the Lord's teaching and example, described in the Beatitudes and lived out in his ministry, and specifically in his final confrontation with the jewish and roman authorities. The call of the Beatitudes is that the disciple of Christ live for the truth and promote justice, equality, mercy and harmony of life in all his daily contacts. Those who strive to respond to such a call will incur persecution, slander, abuse, and alienation from the world, precisely because such behaviour challenges the world's false or shoddy standards. Jesus's life and death exemplifies the single-minded sacrificial love and reverence for the dignity of the human person, and at the same time a welcoming acceptance of surrender to the divine will: itself the proclamation of the good news of the new life of the kingdom. Jesus clearly refused to allow these values to be destroyed or obscured by human desires for power, prestige, personal gain and glory. The right of human beings to attain to the freedom of the children of God, and the right of God to be heard and freely obeyed: these were the values Jesus refused to betray, and that is why he had to die.

Here, then, lies the true understanding and inevitable consequences of suffering in all of Jesus's teaching. If the kingdom is to come into history and transform it from within, it must overcome the destructive force of sin which lingers there. Nowhere will the opposition between sin and God be more powerfully felt than in the human struggle for the rights of God and the dignity of the human person against all the forces which oppose them. It will be on this same battleground that the disciple of Christ will expect to experience suffering today, as he strives to bring himself and his world into harmony with God's will.

It follows, then, that the conception of a Christianity without suffering is inappropriate, spiritually inadequate, and theologically unsound. Rather, the Christian must understand that suffering is integral to the life of the disciple of Christ. Ironically, instead of questioning why we suffer, we should be surprised if we did not suffer. We do not suffer, however, because we have lived a bad life or a good life. We should expect to suffer in that spiritually profound and deeply mysterious sense that is given to suffering in the pattern of Jesus's life, and realize it is only in our suffering that Christ's redemptive life flows into our bodies, so that the Spirit which led to his resurrection may continue its redemptive process in us. The good Christian, then, will not be baffled by or rebellious in the face of suffering, whilst faith seeks understanding. The good Christian suffers at the side of Christ and on the cross with Christ; for he or she knows that the continuing triumph of life over death proclaimed in the earthly existence of Jesus to the very point of resurrection is carried on in the Christian's life. We may rightly speak of the art of christian suffering.

The good Christian suffers in the life of service of Christ on every level of existence. All who respond to the living needs of the brethren, whether psychological, social, intellectual or spiritual, must increasingly lose himself in the process, so that the well-being of the other might be achieved. Again it is this suffering service which uproots the self-centredness and greed which deform our psyches and effectively turn them away from total surrender to the will of God for us and for the saving of the world, so that we truly enter into the filial relationship in Christ. This shifting of the centre of our lives from self to others is devastatingly painful. And even were it not, we would instinctively reject it. But when we willingly commit ourselves to Christ this suffering is something we accept in love. We can no longer so emphasize the positive resurrection — dimension of Christian living that we fail to experience this dying to self as the true way which leads to life. The suffering-death-resurrection process undergone by Jesus was not simply his prerogative. It is equally expressive of the nature of human life redeemed, on its way to divinity. There is no way to life for the Christian except through suffering and death.

This new life begins in submitting to the death of our ego-centred lives. The teaching and experiences of Paul show how the transformed power of life in Christ comes only in and through death and suffering. No longer is suffering a negative thing in christianity.

If it once was so, it no longer is. It is now the passage to life — the only way for a disciple of Christ.

Under these circumstances, we can see why Paul rejoiced in his sufferings. But it must be the prayer of Christians that they may penetrate ever more deeply into the mystery of suffering, and experience ever more fully the mystical joy in suffering known by the saints.

NOTES

[1] J. L. McKenzie, *The Power and the Wisdom* (New York, 1972).
[2] David M. Stanley, *Jesus in Gethsemane* (New York, 1980), pp 99-104.
[3] *Ibid.*, pp 149-50.
[4] *Ibid.*, pp 138-43.

Editor's note

Owing to circumstances quite obviously beyond our control, we have been unable to publish as promised the long-awaited roman document on Formation to consecrated life in the Church. We are assured that it will be promulgated early in 1981, and we intend to present it as soon as possible. Meantime, we believe that this Supplement, on *Formation for Holiness*, will provide a suitable introduction.