

THE MANY DEATHS OF JESUS

By LUCIEN RICHARD

WHILE EVERY CENTURY CAN CLAIM to have been dominated by violence, none more than our century can make such a claim. Our time is marked by Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Everywhere the threat of violence is present. And while the gospels exhort us to non-violence, to love and forgiveness even of our enemies, at the centre of the Christian story lies the violent death of Jesus on the cross. For one cannot simply consider the death of Jesus, but with Paul one must consider the death on the cross: 'even death on a cross' (Phil 2:6ff). Here Paul emphasizes the unusual degrees of suffering and humiliation which accompanied Jesus' death. In Gal 2:19, Paul stresses another element about Jesus' death that cannot be forgotten. According to the Old Testament, the one who dies on the cross dies under a curse, unclean and outside the covenant. Jesus' death was the death of a criminal; not only the death of a criminal, but the death of a godless one.

Dying on a cross had only one connotation in the Roman Empire: upon it dissidents were executed. Crucifixion was a punishment for slaves and criminals. Death on the cross implied marginality in its utmost form. The crucified died the death of someone considered to be less than human. Death on the cross meant not only physical torture of the worst kind, but also terrible social affliction. Death on the cross meant a desecration of the human. According to John Meier:

In Roman eyes, Jesus died the ghastly death of slaves and rebels; in Jewish eyes, he fell under the stricture of Deut 21:23: 'The one hanged [on a tree] is accursed by God.' To both groups Jesus' trial and execution made him marginal in a terrifying and disgusting way. Jesus was a Jew living in a Jewish Palestine directly or indirectly controlled by Romans. In one sense, he belonged to both worlds; in the end, he was ejected from both.¹

Today, two thousand years later, the cross has become a religious symbol and Paul's words about the cross as a 'scandal' and 'folly' have come to lose their aggressiveness. Even in the early Church the death of

Jesus on the cross was resisted, and was swallowed up by the resurrection. The story of the disciples of Emmaus witnesses to this resistance. These two disciples are leaving Jerusalem, i.e. they are abandoning discipleship because of the scandal of the death on the cross. They finally recognize Jesus and regain their discipleship when they understand the meaning of the cross, when they understand how the suffering and death of Jesus are related to the resurrection. Paul had already affirmed in his Letter to the Philippians that Jesus had been exalted *because* (the Greek *dia*) 'he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross' (Phil 2:8–9).

For those disciples and for the early Church, a Messiah does not die and certainly does not die the irreligious, inglorious death of the cross. A crucified Messiah was and remained the great 'stumbling block' of Jews and 'folly' to Gentiles (1 Cor 1:23). The way from Jesus, the innocent victim of sinful people, to the affirmation that 'Christ died for our sins' (1 Cor 15:3) was a long and difficult one. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus on 'the way' to Jerusalem teaches his disciples about suffering and about death (Mk 9:12). On the road to Emmaus Jesus preaches that his death is part of God's providential plan: 'The Son of Man *must* (*dei*) suffer many things and be killed' (Lk 24:26). In God's plan suffering and death have always been the destiny of God's prophets. Jesus remarks how Jerusalem has always 'killed the prophets and stoned those sent to you' (Lk 13:34). This is reaffirmed in Acts 7:51–53:

'You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which one of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One.'

Wis 2:10–20 affirms of the righteous man that he is to be condemned to a 'shameful death'. What is affirmed, though, in the Emmaus narrative is that the one who has been humbled is also the one to be exalted (Lk 14:11; 18: 14). The risen Christ is the one who suffered; the risen Jesus is not recognized until the two disciples shift their gaze from the 'prophet mighty in deeds' onto the memory of Jesus' suffering death. It is in that moment that they finally recognize Jesus for who he truly is.

Every generation of Christians, like the disciples of Emmaus, are on 'the way'. For them as for us Jesus appears in the breaking of the bread; yet we recognize him when we see his story through eyes which have seen him on the cross. For a Christian the mystery of death must be perceived in the context of two stories: the story of Adam and Eve: 'Just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through

sin . . . ' (Rom 5:12), and the story of Jesus: 'For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his' (Rom 6:5). The two stories mesh into one and they 'burden' the Church with the 'dangerous memory' of Jesus' death. This is a 'dangerous memory' because it places the suffering and death of Jesus at the heart of any meaningful understanding of God and of ourselves. Most fundamentally the death of Jesus poses a critical question about God. As Leander Keck writes: 'Jesus dies without a word or a wink from God to reassure him that, whatever the gawking crowd might think, he knew that Jesus was not only innocent but valid where it mattered'.² The death on the cross was a question about God-Abba. What type of God could permit the 'Righteous One', the 'Beloved Son' to die in such an absurd way? For there can hardly be a more convincing symbol of the absurdity of human existence than the cross. What is at stake on the cross is the character of Jesus' God. The death of Jesus on the cross obliges Christianity to be very serious about the theodicy question. Theodicy refers to our attempt to vindicate God's justice in permitting evil to exist. The theodicy question implies that God is perceived as all-powerful, all-loving and that evil is real. The implications of theodicy are well put by C. S. Lewis in his brief narrative *A grief observed* where he describes his personal experiences during the months following his wife's death. As a deeply religious man, Lewis was seeking comfort from God but, instead of a consoling presence, he felt a door was being slammed in his face. This experience transformed his previous understanding of God.

Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about him. The conclusion I dread is not, 'So there's no God after all,' but, 'So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer.'³

The theodicy question has to do with the categories of will and power: God's will and power. Either God wills to take suffering and death away and is not able or he is able and does not will to do so. The theodicy question is most forcefully expressed in Jesus' cry of protest at God's inaction: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (cf Mk 14:34-36). The question about suffering in Mark is really one of theodicy. The reason why the death on the cross is so terrible, such a sign of contradiction, is because it is the will of God who, for Mark, is powerful enough to prevent it. What makes the death of Jesus on the cross so difficult is that it involves the death of someone who participated in the power of God.

I would like to consider the death of Jesus in a fourfold manner: as the death of one of us, as the death of a Jew, as the death of a saviour and ultimately as the death of God. Jesus died the death that all humans die. According to Chalcedon Jesus was truly one of us, consubstantial with us; he was mortal and therefore he participated in our struggle to live and to postpone death. Jesus faced the powerlessness of human existence in the face of death, and the scene at Gethsemane (Mk 14:32–42) is a dramatic expression of such an encounter. In the prayer at Gethsemane we are witness to Jesus' heart-rending struggle to come to terms with death. The verbs in verse 33, 'distressed', 'agitated', vividly express the strength of feeling and consternation which came suddenly upon him. In Mark Jesus feels his suffering deeply and struggles to find an alternative to the path of death. We are presented with a Jesus barely able to control his anxiety at facing death. Jesus prays, 'If it is possible . . .'. Here Jesus is the victim of possibilities. He does not, godlike, have them in his control.

In Pauline and Augustinian teaching, death is a consequence of sin. 'Death is the wages of sin.' Within the context of this theology, then, Jesus the sinless one could not die our death; he could only die the death of sinners and this is vicariously. Yet finitude and mortality are essential components of the finite, embodied human condition; as such these are not sinful although they are the conditions for death. When life becomes the ultimate concern, and not the 'will of God', then death becomes the wages of sin. Yet death itself as a consequence of our mortality and finitude is the last enemy, not simply in a chronological sense, but as the overwhelming source of all our losses and as the poison in all our loves. Jesus' death, like our death, did not represent simply the last moment in his life, but even cast its shadow on the totality of his life: 'Then he began to teach that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, . . . and be killed' (Mk 8:31). Jesus lived in a realistic anticipation of death, accepting the boundaries of his existence. Because Jesus was a free person his death was something active and performed, not simply passive and suffered. As one of us, Jesus had the ability to dispose of himself: he viewed his life and ministry as service for others; he defined his life in terms of love, service, compassion.

In its personal aspect, Jesus' death was the culmination of his personal history of love and service. His dying was an active personal consummation and maturation of what was already present in his life. His death was the ultimate act of his freedom which gathered up and gave meaning to all the individual events that went to make up his life. Jesus' death was not isolated from his life, a human life that was truly historical, unique, unrepeatable and of irrevocable significance. Jesus' death as

precisely a human death is the totality of his life in act, the definitive act of his freedom. While our death and Jesus' death can be defined as 'natural' or even 'appropriate', in reality death is always experienced as a combination of natural boundaries and tragedy. Even when death occurs in the ripeness of old age, it is still felt as an offence against love.

Jesus died the death of a Jew. Such a statement is capable of yielding a surprising amount of information about Jesus' death. The Old Testament, reflecting Israel's experience, has no single view of death. Life and death are not simply presented as logical opposites, for both belong to human existence as it issues from God. In the Rabbinic tradition, death is usually seen as a normal part of created existence; Adam, created out of dust, returns to dust. Death is a natural limitation to existence. Death is one thing when it comes to an elderly person and another when it comes to a young person. In light of the creation story, death can be viewed as the consequence of sin.

Yet the basic concern in the Hebrew scriptures is for life. The God of Israel is the Living One (Deut 5:26; 2 Kgs 19:4; Ps 42:3). God is the source of and giver of life (Ps 36:9). Coming so fully from God, life must be considered as the highest of God's gifts: life is God's original blessing. Life is *shalom* or well-being; it is the good of life in the here and now. Since life issues from God, and from God alone, it is not an autonomous and inherent power of human existence, but it is totally dependent on God. It is God who gives life; it is God who withdraws life; God has authority over both life and death. 'Good and evil, life and death, poverty and riches are from the Lord' (Sir 11:14). An essential dimension of life is the right relationship to God, for life is not understood simply as *bios* but as life-with-God. Death can therefore be understood as opposed to life in all of its manifestations. Death is all the non-life experienced in the course of one's existence: adversity, suffering, oppression, sickness. Death itself, though, is irreversible, for once one is in Sheol, there is no deliverance. 'For there is hope for a tree if it be cut down, that it will sprout again and that its shoots will not cease . . . But man dies and is laid low; man breathes his last, and where is he?' (Job 14:7-10).

The influence of divine power seems to come to an end at the threshold of Sheol. Death is an event that comes between God and the individual, for death sets the seal for separation from God. Death is relationlessness, for Sheol is a realm of God's absence. 'I am like one forsaken among the dead . . . like those whom thou dost remember no more. For they are cut off from thy hand' (Ps 88:5). In the Old Testament there is a certain ambivalence concerning death. On the one

hand, death is a limitation of human existence wanted by God, yet as a situation of unrelatedness to God, of disconnectedness, it can also be understood as a punishment on the part of God, as something unnatural, even as a curse (Gen 2:17; 3:19). And here lies the ambiguity of the Old Testament concept of death: how can God be the source of life, as shalom, and of death, as relationlessness? Since death has no power of its own and dualism plays no role in the Old Testament, death becomes a question about God. Israel was essentially agnostic when it came to questions concerning the afterlife. Immortality was conceived of in the light of Israel's ideas of corporate personality: Israel as the basic unit of existence will remain. Yet the destiny and eternal salvation of the individual was bound to arise. Such questioning begins in the post-exilic period (Dan 12:2; 2 Macc 7). The breakthrough is clearly the result of Israel's ongoing faith in God as the living God whose life-giving presence must overcome death itself. Relationship to God must survive death itself. Jesus died within his Jewish tradition, believing in a God of life and in death as ultimate relationlessness. Jesus died hoping that his God would overcome death itself.

Jesus died the death of a Jew at the hands of the Romans and therefore must be counted as one in the long line of persecuted and murdered Jews. Jesus truly entered the destiny of his people. Jesus experienced what so many Jews before him and afterwards experienced at the hands of Gentiles. He died the death of a poor Mediterranean peasant without power and without rights. As J. Moltmann writes: 'If Jesus died a Jew's death, then the sufferings of Christ are open for solidarity with "the suffering Israel", the Israel of that time and the Israel of today'.⁴ The death of Golgotha and the deaths at Auschwitz may not be disconnected. No matter how much the death of Jesus is exalted, it cannot be forgotten that six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust. Paul van Buren writes:

Surely no word about the death of Jesus will be credible, even to ourselves, if it is spoken unmindful of the deaths of six million of his people after nineteen centuries of preaching redemption, and practising contempt, in his name.⁵

Or again:

Can the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 be taken any longer to refer solely to the suffering Jew on the cross when we have seen photographs of the deadened faces and stacked corpses of God's people in death camps?⁶

In Christianity the death of Jesus is claimed to be the death of the world's saviour. 'God shows his love for us that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' (Rom 5:18). In Mark the meaning of the death of Jesus is understood as a ransom for us: 'For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mk 10:45). A Jew from Nazareth is executed among criminals and two thousand years later more than half a billion people confess this Jesus of Nazareth as their God and saviour. How was it possible that a person crucified as a political criminal could become acknowledged as saviour? Within the context of his life and mission, Jesus' death appears as a collapse, as a dismal failure, and yet it is exactly this death that appears to be salvific. As Pope John Paul II writes: 'Precisely by means of his cross he must accomplish the work of salvation. Christ goes toward his passion and death with full awareness of the mission that he has to fulfill precisely in this way.'⁷ And yet a disturbing question plagues Christianity from the very beginning: why should salvation require the death on the cross, the shedding of blood, the violence? This is a question that has never been satisfactorily answered. To call the death on the cross a ransom, a sacrifice, a substitute punishment, is to raise additional questions.

The death on the cross, a sign of the divine curse, becomes a symbol of atonement. From a sign of curse the death of the abandoned becomes a sign of the new definitive and universal salvific presence of God. God is totally on the side of the one abandoned by God. In his death experienced as abandonment, Jesus becomes the ultimate revelation of the compassionate God. The death of Jesus on the cross is the form in which the reign of God comes to be: fullness in emptiness, life in death. Jesus' death is perceived as transformative. Through Jesus' death God sets the sinner in a right relationship. For Paul the death of Jesus has an apocalyptic, world-transforming character because it effects a complete change in the situation between a sinful world and God.

What is emphasized in the various ways of expressing the salvific nature of Jesus' death is the affirmation that the death of Jesus was a death 'for us'. The 'for us' aspect of Jesus' death is also the fundamental characteristic of Jesus' life and ministry. Jesus lived and died 'for us' in solidarity with us. Jesus' death on the cross was vicarious. 'But God shows God's love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' (Rom 5:8). Vicariousness and representation are basic dimensions of human interdependence, of human inter-subjectivity. All human life is vicarious because it involves basic freedom-for-others. Vicariousness is not something esoteric but the fundamental principle of all personal life.

The self-giving demanded by vicariousness is not something necessitated by the condition of a sinful world, but is characteristic of the interdependence of human existence. Vicarious suffering does not stand above but presupposes the give and take of ordinary relatedness.

In Jesus Christ the saving nearness of God was made present through a historical life of care for men and women. The death of Jesus on the cross was vicarious because it occurred in solidarity with us. Theology cannot neglect the circumstances of Jesus' death and consider death, in and of itself, and ascribe to that death a universal saving meaning. Without the specifics of Jesus' life, his death is deprived of its saving significance and has to be given a meaning elaborated in mythological terms. The salvific meaning of Jesus' death is rooted in the salvific meaning of his life, in the radical dimension of his love. Jesus' love is radical in the sense that he was no longer concerned with the consequences of this love for his own life. The vicarious death of Jesus is an instance of the law of love. Love is a personal relationship; it presupposes the distinctness of the persons concerned. But it is the very nature of love to transcend the boundaries of personal distinctness and to weld the persons together in a unity in which it is the most natural thing for one to act vicariously for another. There is no need to refer Jesus' death to an arbitrary decision on the part of the Godhead; it has its sufficient basis in the love with which and in which Jesus identified himself with us. The very substance of salvation is present to that life and in that sense Jesus' death is tied in with his mission of salvation. In his life Jesus showed what love brings about: relief of physical suffering, the healing of illness, the abolition of hunger and discrimination. Through Jesus' love the depth of interdependence in reality is revealed to us: 'No human has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and God's love is perfected in us' (1 Jn 4:12).

A major claim made by early Christianity was the belief that Jesus' death is of universal significance. 'God was in Christ reconciling the *kosmos* unto himself' (2 Cor 5:17); for John Jesus is the 'lamb of God that takes away the sin of the *kosmos*' (Jn 1:29) and 'God so loved the *kosmos* as to give his only Son' (3:16). What must Jesus have been to justify this enormous confidence that his death had universal validity? This brings us to our fourth affirmation about the death of Jesus. The death of Jesus is the death of God's own Son and according to the Christology of Nicea and Chalcedon, the death of God.

Jesus died accursed by the law and condemned by the political power. Jesus dies in the unbroken silence of God, and God whom he called Abba. Understood in this context the death of Jesus is nothing other

than a theological crisis, a crisis about the silence of God. The Christian answer can only come in light of the resurrection and the light of the resurrection affirms God's presence on the cross. In the fundamental Jewish tradition about death, death is the most intensive experience of God's absence, the final evidence of human powerlessness and finitude. Seen in itself, alone and isolated from Jesus' life and from the resurrection, the death on the cross appears as the ultimate absurdity. In light of the resurrection what appeared to be absence and abandonment on the part of God becomes presence. In light of the resurrection, the utter futility of death as expressed in the Old Testament is shown to be false. Death cannot destroy any authentic living communion with God. Life with God is stronger than death. As Paul proclaimed, 'Death . . . cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom 8:39).

Relative to the question about the presence of God, there is no area of life that now falls outside of the presence and activity of God. The realms of human failure and tragedy are now revealed to be within the compass of divine activity and transformation. The cross captures the paradox in life that those moments in which God seems most absent can be recognized as moments in which God is most present. This dark presence and activity of God in the death of Christ puts an end once and for all to the suggestion that God is indifferent to the pain and suffering of humanity. There can be no apathy in God. To suggest that God suffers in Christ – that God experiences suffering on the cross – is to suggest something that transforms the classical understanding of the mystery of God. The death and resurrection of Jesus is the final answer to Job's dilemma: God did not cause or decree the death of Jesus, rather God participated in it. God is not the executioner but the fellow sufferer.

If we accept with Paul that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself then we cannot draw back from saying that this same God was in Christ suffering on the cross. The removal of God from personal association with the suffering and death of Christ could have the effect of denying the cross of its saving significance. If God was not present on the cross then there is no resurrection.

Christian theology has always wanted to affirm the presence of God in the suffering death of Jesus but its theology of the immutable and unchangeable God makes that impossible. With the two-nature Christology of Chalcedon, it is the human nature of Jesus which suffers and dies on the cross and the divine nature which breaks through in triumph in the resurrection. Following Luther's theology of the cross, recent theologians speak of God as 'defining himself in a dead man, since God identified Godself with the crucified Christ'.⁸ God suffers death in the

sense that God encounters death, God enters the realm of death. To claim that God experienced the most intense kind of human dying on the cross is to suggest that God reached the deepest level of relationlessness. In our experience of death, the negativity of death consists largely in its relationlessness. The revelation of God on the cross is not one of displaying divine power through omnipotence but one of divine power through weakness. In the life, passion and death of Jesus the love of God enters fully into the human condition (at-one-ment) and this divine self-emptying involves a real personal and historical experience of suffering in God.

To grasp most fully the implications of Jesus' death for God is to place this death within the Trinitarian mystery. Contemporary theologians have given new attention to the relation of the cross and the Trinity.⁹ The mystery of the Trinity is a mystery of relationality, of relationships. Here the death of Jesus can be understood as separation entering into the heart of the relational God. The meaning of the death on the cross is the compassionate presence of God in the deepest human isolation. God understands from within what death is.

An apathetic and unrelational view of God such as is found in the Christian tradition simply will not do. In the face of the overwhelming presence of evil in our world, believing in a God who remains unaffected is hardly viable. As Walter Kasper writes of the classical conception of God: 'Because he never changes he can never do anything, no life goes out from him, he is dead. Nietzsche's "God is dead" is therefore only the final implication of this form of Western metaphysics.'¹⁰ For those who in various ways and times have experienced Godforsakenness there can be no other testimony than that Godself is fellow sufferer.

Since the resurrection reveals the triumph of self-giving love, of radical kenosis, in some real and paradoxical way the death of death means the making present of absence. The cross reveals God's nature as one of self-giving love; the resurrection is the vindication and the revelation of this self-giving love. Everything is recapitulated not in the elevation of the world toward God but in the descending of God into the world. In the paschal mystery we have the revelation of God's solidarity with a suffering humanity. Jesus' total participation in our finite powerlessness, suffering and death is the central, interpretive principle of God's nature. In the cross we discover the fundamental law of the divine life itself: 'Power is to be found in weakness'. And when the crucified Jesus is called the image of the invisible God, the meaning here is that the cross is the symbol, the ideograph of God's action and being. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. His glory is the glory of self-surrender; his power, that of helplessness.

Bonhoeffer writes that the cross shows God to be the one who '... is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, the only way, in which he can be with us and help us'.¹¹ The cross must be understood as the most profound symbol of God's being and action; of the fact that God's power is love and therefore that our God is a suffering God. The only God who is trustworthy is the one who does not interfere to protect the pious but who is present in the thick of darkness. Divinity consists supremely and essentially in self-giving and letting-be. God, in the powerlessness, suffering and death of Jesus Christ reveals Godself as against those who use their power to lord it over others and to destroy their freedom.

The death of Jesus as the death of one of us, as the death of a Jew, the death of a saviour and ultimately the death of God issues as forgiveness for humanity. Forgiveness is spoken of in the New Testament as an act of grace which frees or releases us from our bondage. In light of the depth of estrangement marking the human situation, forgiveness becomes a relevant way of expressing the meaning and the nature of Jesus' death on the cross. In our contemporary situation the language of relationships, made and broken and remade, becomes relevant. The notion of forgiveness is given as an attempt to provide answers to the question as to why salvation is connected to Jesus' death.

The journey of forgiveness is at the heart of the paschal mystery. The act of forgiveness does not involve simply a juridical transaction. It demands embarking upon a journey that is costly and which can have powerful effects upon others. H. R. Mackintosh speaks of forgiveness as a 'shattering' experience for the one who forgives as well as for the one forgiven: 'How true it is that in heart and mind the forgiver must set out on voyages of anguish. It is an experience of sacrificial pain.'¹²

Forgiveness is specifically a matter of dealing with pain, with pain inflicted and received. There is no need for forgiveness when no hurt has been inflicted. As Vanstone writes:

Forgiveness describes the positive, redemptive response to pain, in which, for love's sake, the hurt is contained by refusal to return it with anger and in which love and goodwill are maintained unbroken toward the offender.¹³

So forgiveness is the key element in overcoming the vicious circle of hurt – hurt received and returned. The price of forgiveness is the meeting of inflicted pain with love. Divine forgiveness is dependent on the loving nature of God. Forgiveness which is anchored in love is free, always graciously offered, unconditional. But it is not cheap. Forgiveness is

more than excuse, more than simply forgetting. Forgiveness encounters the injured with compassion. Forgiveness is costly because it demands the gift of oneself to the one who has caused suffering. Compassion brings the offended close to the offender. The painful journey of identification is a key element in the process of forgiving. 'Although he was in the form of God, he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself . . . and became obedient unto death . . .' (Phil 2:6-7). The one who forgives must attempt to bring the offended to accept the offer of forgiveness, which is also the self-offer of the forgiver.

While it is costly to forgive, forgiveness is also costly for the forgiven. To be forgiven involves the painful confession of one's wrongdoing. 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you: I am no longer worthy to be called your son' (Lk 15:18-19). As Vanstone writes:

To accept forgiveness from another is a humbling and disturbing matter, and it will only happen if the forgiver is experienced as a certain kind of person, someone of fellow-feeling who has truly drawn alongside the one who is in the wrong.¹⁴

A relationship cannot be mended without participation, without solidarity. In the act of forgiving, the other is invited to see himself or herself as someone worth forgiving.

Salvation is forgiveness. The death on the cross reveals the costliness of forgiveness, of solidarity and compassion. In unity with the Father, Jesus participates in our human estrangement, even the radical estrangement of death, the total breakdown of relationships, having been 'made sin for us' (2 Cor 5:21). In this interpretation of salvation there is no question of God inflicting a penalty upon Jesus, for the Father has entered on the same journey of forgiveness. In Christ God journeys deeply into the human condition and enters into the human experience of death in its most estranging form.

Now God's forgiveness is not a gift simply bestowed or received; it is always empowerment. It opens up possibilities for the forgiveness of others. The experience of forgiveness of God in and through Jesus Christ intensifies and increases one's capacity to love and forgive. The capacity for forgiveness arises out of the experience of being forgiven and leads to reconciliation, mutual acceptance, salvation. As a quality of Christian life forgiveness is a commitment to making the richness of God's forgiveness a reality whenever there is alienation and death. So being forgiven is thus a pre-condition for forgiving.

If forgiveness is what the death of Jesus brought about, forgiveness is also what discipleship is about. Such discipleship will mean that one will

share in Christ's suffering and the cross. The death of Jesus on the cross cannot be the basis of a sadistic concept of God who somehow causes suffering nor of a masochistic concept of religion which somehow encourages people to seek out suffering and death and thus prove themselves before God. In Romans 6, Paul invites his readers to recall the meaning of baptism, i.e. that in being baptized into Christ one is baptized into Christ's death (6:3-4). Baptized persons are 'buried with him'. Christ is present as a corporate person: Christ dies and rises as a corporate figure inclusive of all persons.

Jesus' death is not as a substitution, i.e. Jesus dying in our place, but a participatory event. Solidarity with Christ is not simply solidarity with Christ's death but also with Christ's life of self-giving. Learning that in life laying down one's life for the other is the measure of life itself, makes it easier to face death at the end. Death then is less alien: 'Whoever seeks to safeguard his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it' (Lk 17:33).

For all Christians the death of Jesus becomes a criterion by which other deaths are measured and judged. Again the major point about the death of Jesus is not that simply of a passive victim, for such passivity if imitated can serve to perpetuate oppression. For example, feminists claim that for too long women have been told that Christlikeness demands the passive endurance of suffering. There is not a simple passive dimension to Jesus' death; Jesus chose a way of life that led to suffering and death. The tragic element in Jesus' death is that a life of service and love should end on the cross.

At the heart of Christianity lies the strange paradox that the finished work of salvation in Christ calls for the participation of the body of Christ. Though Christ shares our death in order that we may share his life, the Christian can only share that life if he or she in turn is willing to share Christ's death. In identifying with Christ, the believer entrusts himself or herself to the God of life who is able to raise the dead to life. There is no faith in resurrection without participation in the death of Jesus. Resurrection without cross leads to triumphalism, while the cross without resurrection gives death an overwhelming power.

The death of Jesus on the cross has become *the* symbol which identifies Christians clearly. The symbol is synonymous with negativity, with suffering and violence; yet what is emphasized is the transforming power of Jesus' death. The symbol has re-evaluated death and suffering and transformed failure into success. It is a symbol that has come to affirm that redemption occurs in and through the realm of negativity. Yet the cross cannot be separated from the crucifixion, from the violent death

Jesus suffered. It cannot be an instrument of our passive acceptance of violence and suffering in the world. The temptation of the Christians of the First World is to fall into apathy and superficial belief, and so end with religious answers that are premature and shallow, and so also is the salvation offered by Christianity. Such cheap hope feeds the deadly spiritual disease of our time: apathy. The word apathy has the dual meaning of an absence of feeling and of a state of inability to be affected by others. Apathy leads to the inability to be compassionate. 'Be compassionate as God is compassionate.' In apathy there is no indignation at the violence in the world, no will to commit oneself for the liberation of the world from suffering and bondage.

The full implication of the death of Jesus on the cross can only be grasped when we see it as the passion of God. The death of Jesus reveals a God who chooses to be engaged at the deepest level of the human situation. The dominant cultural values of our times are singularly resistant to the 'dangerous memory' of the cross because such a memory places the suffering and death of Jesus at the heart of any meaningful understanding of God and ourselves. The God of Jesus cannot be an apathetic God incapable of being affected by what happens in the world. Such a God serves only to reinforce our own self-destructive apathy. Only when the power of God is redefined by the powerlessness of the cross can a death freely assumed 'for others' become redemptive, and forgiveness truly possible in our world. Jesus died on the cross not to justify or glorify suffering, but as a consequence of his love and compassion. Our deaths and our dyings have been redefined by his death: what really counts is compassion and love.

NOTES

- ¹ John P. Meier, *A marginal Jew: rethinking the historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p 8.
- ² Leander Keck, *A future for the historical Jesus* (London: SCM, 1972), p 229.
- ³ C. S. Lewis, *A grief observed* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p 5.
- ⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, *The way of Jesus Christ: Christology in messianic dimension* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989), p 160.
- ⁵ Paul van Buren, *A theology of the Jewish-Christian reality. Part III: Christ in context* (San Francisco: Harper Row, 1988), p 137.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.
- ⁷ John Paul II, 'The Christian meaning of human suffering' in *Origins* vol 13, no 37 (February 1984), p 616.
- ⁸ Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the mystery of the world* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), p 362.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (New York: Paulist, 1976), p 82.
- ¹¹ D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and papers from prison* (London, 1967), p 360.
- ¹² H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian experience of forgiveness* (London: Nisbet & Co, 1934), p 191.

¹³ W. Vanstone, *Love's endeavour, love's expense* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977), p 137.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 159.