

# OUR PEACE AND RECONCILIATION

By GERALD O'COLLINS

IT HAS frequently been remarked that the passion-narratives of our gospels are most sparing in their description of Jesus's physical sufferings. There is, in fact, only one reference to Christ's shedding of his blood — if we leave aside Luke's allusion to the sweat which was 'like' drops of blood in the garden of Gethsemane (Lk 22,44): this is to Jesus hanging on the cross, his side pierced by the soldier's lance in order to make certain that he was already dead; 'and immediately there flowed out blood and water' (Jn 19,34). So runs the litany, from which the title of this article is taken:

Heart of Jesus, pierced with a lance;  
 . . . source of all consolation;  
 . . . our life and resurrection;  
 . . . our peace and reconciliation

Thus the invocations associate the world's 'peace and reconciliation' with a particular reality and symbol; the Sacred Heart of our Lord. St Paul's letter to the Colossians is the clear biblical foundation for the litany here — stating what it is that Christ has done as Saviour:

Through him . . . God chose to *reconcile* the whole universe to himself, making peace through the shedding of his blood on the cross: to *reconcile* all things, whether on earth or in heaven through him alone (Col 1,20).

God reconciled the entire universe (Paul repeats the assertion in Ephesians: 'Now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near through the blood of Christ . . . our peace . . . through his cross' [2,13-17]) through an historical execution which took the *specific* form of crucifixion: a death which, unlike many other forms of dying, involves a massive loss of blood. Universal redemption was achieved when a man from Nazareth suffered a

bloody execution on a particular day outside Jerusalem, 'the city of peace' (cf Lk 19,41ff). I stress this link between the universal and particular because of a noticeable unwillingness, both in recent translations of the New Testament and some theological writings, to mention the blood of Jesus. *Good News for Modern Man*, the New Testament in *Today's English Version*, repeatedly refuses to translate exactly references to Jesus's blood and often introduces a vaguer term, death. The version renders Colossians 1,20 as follows:

Through the Son, then, God decided to bring the whole universe back to himself. God made peace through his Son's death on the cross, and so brought back to himself all both on earth and in heaven.

A key pauline passage about the nature of redemption speaks of Jesus expiating sins through his blood (Rom 3,25). The *New English Bible* modifies Paul's concreteness and calls Jesus 'the means of expiating sin by his sacrificial death'.

When contemporary theological works deal with the suffering and death of Jesus, they regularly fail to discuss how he made peace 'through the shedding of his blood upon the cross'. An easy way of verifying this apparently sweeping judgment is to review the chapter (or sections) devoted to Jesus's death in the christologies of Kasper, Küng, Moltmann, Pannenberg, Schillebeeckx, Schoonenberg and others. Let me cite two recent examples: James Mackey and Jon Sobrino. The former has one passing reference to the spilling of Jesus's blood.<sup>1</sup> Jon Sobrino also seems reluctant to do more than merely touch the theme.<sup>2</sup>

I wonder whether bible translators and theologians are losing something of great religious importance when they downplay or even ignore the blood of Jesus shed for us on Good Friday. We have here a theme which runs through the New Testament. At the Last Supper Jesus takes the cup and says, 'This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many' (Mk 14,24 and parallels). St Paul teaches that we are 'justified' by the blood of Christ who 'died for us' (Rom 5,8ff). The first letter of Peter assures its readers that they have been 'ransomed' by 'the precious blood of Christ' (1,18ff). The letter to the Hebrews expounds the priestly service of Christ whose blood purifies us 'to serve the living God'

<sup>1</sup> *Jesus the Man and the Myth* (London, 1979), p 74.

<sup>2</sup> *Christology at the Crossroads* (London, 1978), p 189.

(9,12,14;13,12). The Apocalypse pushes language to its limits when it 'explains' that the heavenly multitude in white garments 'have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (7,14).

In our own day the Shroud of Turin has strongly reminded the world that Jesus died a very bloody death on Calvary. The remarkable photographs which illustrated the *National Geographic Magazine's*, June 1980 article, 'The Mystery of the Shroud', clearly showed two kinds of images on the burial cloth: the 'body' images and the 'blood' images. Unlike the 'body' images which are found only on the top fibrils of the threads, the latter penetrate the material, spread through the threads and are trapped in the crevices. Some scientists have identified these images as haemoglobin, the oxygen-carrying substance containing iron which is present in red blood-cells.

Similarly, no one who saw them has remained unmoved at the sight of the pictures of Archbishop Oscar Romero assassinated at the altar, his priestly vestments stained with his life's blood. Again, in St Peter's Square, on 13 May 1980, the white of the Pope's cassock contrasted with the red blood issuing from the bullet wounds. It needed ten pints of blood to save his life. People wanted to know these details about the operation. Like water, milk and other fluids, blood is a natural symbol expressing a wide range of social and religious meanings. The press, radio and television appreciate that blood and what it symbolizes have a stronger hold on the popular imagination than some theologians and bible translators would apparently like to think.

The current scholarly and theological 'distaste' for the blood of Christ is understandable: one is reminded, for example, of the annual 'performance' over the liquefaction of the blood of St Januarius in Naples. The Dominican, M. D. Chenu, was one of the distinguished theological architects of the second Vatican Council. Yet his article *Sang du Christ* indicates what might be called a morbid not to say unscientific approach to 'theological haematology' up to the recent past.<sup>3</sup> Chenu describes how the generality of theologians agree that Christ's blood was personally united to the Word of God. He then lists the questions which remain open: Was the precious blood separated from the Word during the passion? If so, did it merit adoration? If Christ's blood has in fact been preserved as a relic, should we adore such a relic? Devotion to the blood of Christ

<sup>3</sup> *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique*, vol XIV (Paris, 1939).

had somehow become separated from the reality of his humanity and his historical life and death. We had devotion to the 'five wounds', the Sacred Head as well as the Sacred Heart: as though those were separate objects of a quaint and primitive piety rather than integral to the entire mystery of Christ's redemption.

Yet in spite of these exaggerations, and the reactions to which they have given rise in recent years (for example, the feast of the Precious Blood, raised to a double of the first class in 1934 was suppressed altogether in 1969), it is important for us to appreciate what it originally meant, and still must mean today when it is proclaimed that Jesus effected 'our peace and reconciliation' with God through 'shedding his blood on the cross'. Certainly there is ample biblical and theological justification for addressing the Sacred Heart of Jesus as 'our peace and reconciliation'. What I wish to do is to show the special foundation for the reconciliation by taking our cue from the pauline statement (Col 1,20) and restricting our reflections to this shedding of his life's blood during the passion.

#### *Our jewish heritage*

It is hardly possible, however, to comprehend the symbolism of blood in the Old Testament and early christian thought without some recognizable typology. Otherwise the information is so complex and culturally conditioned that it threatens to frustrate any attempt at clear understanding and interpretation. So much diverse material is at hand to provide answers to the basic question: How did the Israelites think about blood in their relationship with God? It is true that pure or ideal types do not exist in our world: they belong, as the philosophers say, to an exaggerated realism. Nonetheless, typology can be useful, inasmuch as it helps both to classify the data on the religious symbolism of blood and to elaborate some kind of ordered understanding. For example, it is simple enough to discern a threefold typology of blood-symbolism employed by the Israelites in a religious setting.

First, there is the sign which brought deliverance from death. Before leaving Egypt the Israelites smeared their doorposts with the blood of a lamb (Exod 12,7.13.22ff). This sign delivered them from the destruction which afflicted the homes of the Egyptians. The blood of the paschal lamb saved the Israelites from losing their first-born. There were other ways, too, in which blood was closely associated with *life*. The Israelites understood life to be 'in the blood'

(Lev 17,11ff; cf Deut 12,23). Since life was sacred, they regarded blood also as sacred. Yahweh was the God of life. Hence blood, the seat of life, belonged to God alone. In the ancient near and middle east, the Israelites appear to have differed from all their neighbours *in linking blood with life, and hence with what was sacred and divine*: at least in the symbolism dealing with sacrifice.<sup>4</sup> In its own way, modern science has more than vindicated the Old Testament conviction that life, the divine and sacred gift *par excellence*, is 'in the blood'. Oxygen, nutrients, hormones and other items essential for life are carried by our blood. Its complex structure enables us to endure wide variations of temperature and changes of diet. Every day around the world massive transfusions of blood save lives that are slipping away. Medical discoveries and practice have dramatically associated the miracle of life with the miracle of blood.

Besides expressing deliverance and life, blood was believed to cleanse the stains of human sin. On the Day of Atonement the high priest sprinkled blood as part of a ritual recalling God's willingness to purify the Israelites from their sins. Yahweh wished to remove human guilt, destroy sin and effect reconciliation with his people. The ceremony of sprinkling blood on the 'mercy seat' symbolized the divine desire to wipe away the contamination of sin (Lev 16). Today, of course, we may not appreciate the practice of slaughtering bulls and goats to release and use their blood. But we should still be able to recognize the religious logic of the Israelites. In so far as it was the element in which life resided, blood enjoyed a peculiarly divine and sacred character. Hence it appropriately served and stood for the purification of sin and the restoration of loving relations between Yahweh and his people.

Thirdly, blood sealed the covenant at Sinai (Exod 24,3-8). Even today some cultures and sub-cultures maintain this symbolism. Rituals involving blood bind together formerly hostile groups and bring new relationships of peace, friendship and love. In the desert, the Israelites solemnly accepted Yahweh's offer of a special relationship with them and used blood to represent this loving union with their God. The sacrificial blood was shared by the people and their God (represented by the altar).

Here then are three perspectives on blood recorded in the Old Testament: as a sign of deliverance and life, a ritual means of expiating human guilt, and a way of sealing and expressing a new

<sup>4</sup> Cf McCarthy, Dennis S.J.: in *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1969, 1973).

relationship of friendship. Even in the advanced industrial culture of the late twentieth century this triple typology persists at least dimly. When a society lacks life, we call it anaemic. Parents show alarm when their children suffer cuts. There is a danger that blood will be lost and dangerous infection will set in. The blood-stained seat of a car can speak very powerfully of a precious life being terminated by terrorists. Blood donors literally give new life to others. The point does not need to be laboured. Both positive and negative associations of ideas link blood with deliverance from death to life. Admittedly we have become sadly used to the fact that noble people — the J. F. Kennedys, the Romeros, the Sadats — may dedicate themselves in heroic service only to be murdered and soon forgotten. So much bloodshed seems irrelevant for the purifying and healing of a contaminated world. Yet there always remains the hope that the love inherent in the true sacrifice of a Martin Luther King or an Oscar Romero will somehow make its impact: that in some way the deaths of these victims work to cleanse and atone for the sins of our society? Though it remains true that the call to give one's life for others has been introduced in a thousand evil causes, no abuse can rob Jesus's words of their truth: 'Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends' (Jn 15,13). Whether in fiction or in real life, there can be no more powerful way of symbolizing and enacting a relationship of love than by shedding one's blood for others. True love always makes people vulnerable. Sometimes it literally turns them into targets for killers.

### *The blood of Jesus*

It takes no great imaginative leap to see how this triple typology is supremely realized in the case of Jesus's bloody crucifixion. As our paschal lamb (1 Cor 5,7), he freely accepted death to deliver us from the power of sin and bring us life and freedom. To eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood is to receive eternal life (Jn 6,53-56). Secondly, the first Letter of John witnesses to 'the blood of Jesus' which 'cleanses us from all sin' (1,7). Finally, the shedding of his blood effected a new covenant of love between God and the whole human race (Mk 14,24 and parallels). This death expresses the divine love towards us (Rom 8,31-39), and aims at bringing a loving reconciliation between God and all people (Rom 5,10ff).

The Litany of the Sacred Heart rightly calls Jesus '*our* peace and reconciliation'. His crucifixion was not a death which changed God,

but an act of loving self-sacrifice directed at changing us and reconciling us with God. The shedding of Jesus's blood in no way means that he is punished in our place, placating, so to speak, the divine anger at human sin. On the contrary, this death offers us life and invites us to dwell with our God in peace. As Sebastian Moore puts it: 'God uses the crucifixion of Jesus to convince us that, even at our worst, as crucifiers of the good, we are accepted by him'.<sup>5</sup> The victim gave his life for the crucifiers, and his blood called down upon them infinite love, not vengeance. It is, however, a sorrowful fact that even now many Christians continue to think that through his suffering and death Jesus propitiated an angry God, turned away the divine wrath, and in that sense won us peace and reconciliation through shedding his blood. It is a heresy that dies a slow death, that the Father treated the Son as a sinner, judging and punishing him in our place as a substitute for guilty humanity. In the past we find such a view reiterated and endorsed by Bishop Bossuet (1627-1704) in one of his sermons on the passion:

The man, Jesus Christ, has been thrown under the multiple and redoubled blows of divine vengeance. . . . As it vented itself, so his [God's] anger diminished; he struck his innocent Son as he wrestled with the wrath of God. . . . When an avenging God waged war upon his Son, the mystery of our peace was accomplished.

Such language of anger, punishment and propitiation has flourished down to our own day. Theologians, preachers and hymn-writers continue to represent the suffering Christ as being punished in substitution for sinful men and women. We find it, for example, in the writings of Jürgen Moltmann, who interprets Jesus's cry of abandonment (Mk 15,34) as revealing his 'rejection' by the Father, becoming 'the accursed of God', divided from his Father by 'the utmost degree of enmity', and suffering 'the torment of hell'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Hans Urs von Balthasar: 'Hell is . . . a reality that Christ knew fully in his dereliction'; and Easter meant raising 'the already stinking body of *the sinner* from the grave'.<sup>7</sup>

It would certainly appear to be stepping beyond the bounds of poetic licence to represent Jesus as a criminal condemned in our place to appease the divine anger and thus to reconcile the world

<sup>5</sup> *The Crucified is no stranger* (London, 1977), p 8.

<sup>6</sup> *The Crucified God* (London, 1974).

<sup>7</sup> *Love alone* (New York, 1969), pp 76 and 120.

with God. There is nothing in the great servant-songs of Isaiah, for example, to justify the portrayal of the Father acting with such extreme cruelty towards his Son, treating him as a sinner and demanding his life's blood, from one utterly innocent. Any image of God as an angry punisher requiring such propitiation has nothing in common with the parable of the Prodigal Son. In that story the Father does not need to change from anger to gracious love. He is not waiting to be appeased; he is simply waiting for the return of his son. When that happens, he runs to fling his arms around the boy and kiss him.

The New Testament does not allow us to construe the passion and crucifixion as punishment from God. When hostility is shown him from Pharisees, Herodians or priests, Jesus never interprets this as indicating divine displeasure, let alone a desire to punish him as a substitute for sinners. On the contrary, he associates himself with the fate of persecuted prophets (Lk 13,33ff). In their case and in his, suffering and death in no way implied condemnation by God. Such persecution was due to the hardness of heart of those to whom they were sent.

Supporters of this penal substitution view are quick to point out a detail of the agony in the garden: the 'cup' which Jesus prayed to be taken from him (Mk 14,36 and parallels). Undoubtedly, in the Old Testament a 'cup' can not only be 'the cup of salvation', but also can symbolize the divine anger: that wounded love of God which tries to win human beings back from their sins. In the Apocalypse the guilty must drink the cup of God's anger (14,10; 16,19; 18,6). However, the 'cup' in Gethsemane stands for the suffering and representative death which Jesus *freely accepted* (Mk 14,23 and parallels). His followers would also be invited to accept freely similar suffering and even martyrdom. That would be to share in the cup which Jesus himself drank (Mk 10,38ff). In the description of the arrest given in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus's rebuke to Peter coheres with what Mark reports: 'Shall I not drink the cup which the Father has given me?' (18,11). Jesus does not ask, 'Shall I not drink the cup which the Father has *imposed* on me and with which the Father is *punishing* me?' Rather, here, as in Mark, he freely accepts the violent and bloody death he is to undergo.

To understand and interpret the redemption Jesus brought, we can do no better than to turn to a classic passage where St Paul proclaims that 'through his blood' Jesus became 'the means of expiating sin for all who believe' (Rom 3,25). The three perspectives



mentioned above stand behind the apostle's words. This blood delivered us from death and bondage, like the blood smeared on the doorways of the Israelites at the time of their liberation from Egypt. Jesus died on a new Day of Atonement, which was not simply valid for a year (Lev 16) or even for half a century (Lev 25); his act of expiation concerned all men and women for all time. Finally, his blood sealed a relationship which went beyond the covenant made with the Israelites at Sinai: a new covenant of love was established with all men and women for all time.

*The symbol of blood*

Undoubtedly there are ample biblical reasons for acknowledging that Jesus gave his heart's blood to bring reconciliation and peace to the world. But we are dealing here with a symbolic reality. Something further needs to be added about the power and meaning of this symbol. Symbols enter our imagination, affect our feelings and influence our behaviour by making things present. Symbols are felt to be powerful and important even before we consciously perceive their possible meanings. Further, over and above those meanings which society generally associates with given symbols, different people will recognize and appreciate different meanings for themselves. Cultural and historical conditioning brings it about that the perception of symbols vary from period to period and from place to place. In all cases, rational explanations will always fall short of the potential range of meanings expressed by given symbols. Particularly when we take up religious symbols, like the precious blood of Christ, which point to ultimate, transcendent realities, we can expect these symbols to prove inexhaustible.

Small but precious details in the passion story suggest the richness of the symbol we are examining. For instance, Jesus shed his heart's blood before *and after* death. In a brutal act of aggression, a roman soldier ran a spear through the side of the corpse on the cross. At once water and blood flowed from this final wound (Jn 19,34). The memory of this symbolic episode evokes the sense that in life, at death, and even beyond death, Jesus gave himself *totally*, even as his crucifixion and resurrection aimed to reconcile the entire universe with the Father. Further, the opened side of Jesus released grace into the world under the signs of blood and water. The dead victim offered life, cleansing and love to his crucifiers, and to the sinful humanity they represented. Earlier I sketched the jewish

understanding which, as we have said, links blood with all three. Here we might catch the nuances better by associating life and love with the blood, and cleansing with the water, which flowed from the wounded side of Jesus. In re-reading the Litany of the Sacred Heart before writing these words, I was intrigued to find that the litany makes no explicit reference to the blood of Jesus, even though it contains such invocations as 'Heart of Jesus, pierced with a lance'. Does it need the addition, 'Heart of Jesus, giver of your life's blood for us'? The blood which issued from Christ's wounded side and flowed down the body on the cross was blood which had passed through the heart of the Crucified.

From the outset I have argued that, as a symbolic reality, blood maintains its hold on the popular mind and feelings. We can still hear the message of Colossians: by shedding his blood on the cross Jesus brought peace and reconciliation to the whole world. At the same time, however, the symbol has its distasteful, cruel aspect. But consummately, as a symbol touching the divine-human relationship it exemplifies wonderfully well the 'frightening and fascinating mystery' (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*) that we encounter in God. To reflect on Jesus's blood is to think of something which concerns and evokes both desire and dread.

Not far from where I live in Rome there are two crucifixes which belonged to an alumnus of the Gregorian University, St Vincent Pallotti (1795-1850). He was dissatisfied with the way he found them and dabbed on them some red paint to represent the blood which issued from Jesus's wounds. St Vincent was moved to emphasize this specific detail for his personal meditation on Christ crucified. To the cultured and cultivated his action might seem a 'stumbling block' and 'folly' (1 Cor 1,23). Yet so too in its own way was the faith expressed by the letter to the Colossians; that Jesus issued in the time of cosmic peace and reconciliation 'through shedding his blood upon the cross'.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For assistance in writing this article, I wish to thank Bernard Garman S.A.C., Sr Cosma Resta S.A.S.C., George Sullivan, and two religious communities in Australia: the Jesuits of Parkville and the Good Samaritan Sisters of Belgrave.