

PEACE THROUGH THE CROSS

By PATRICK ROGERS

IT HAS PLEASED the invisible God, through his beloved Son, to reconcile to himself all things, *making peace through the blood of his cross*' (Col 1,20). With the very compact style characteristic of his Epistle to the Colossians, St Paul gives us three major truths about salvation — that 'Peace' (*Shalom; Eirēnē*) which the first generation of Christians, following on their jewish inheritance, so fervently wished for themselves and for each other: (a) This peace is God's gift of *reconciliation*, given to those once separated from him. (b) It was given through *Jesus*, the beloved Son, and (c) specifically through his act of *sacrifice*.

Before concentrating on each of these three principles of St Paul's theology of redemption, it will be useful to set them in context within the Epistle to the Colossians, by recalling the occasion, contents and tone of this letter, one of the shortest but most powerful texts in the whole of Paul's apostolic correspondence. It is hardly necessary to rehearse here the occasional debate that has surrounded the authorship of the epistle. A minority of exegetes, mainly writing in German (such as Rudolf Bultmann, Eduard Lohse, Edward Schweizer and Ernst Käsemann) have preferred to treat Colossians as pseudepigraphical, on grounds of literary style, the gnostic-type heresy it presupposes and the highly-developed christology it presents. However, it remains more likely that the epistle is what it claims to be, one written by Paul himself while in prison (4,10.18). Very probably it was written early in the roman imprisonment reported at the conclusion of the Acts (28,30), when recent hardships were fresh in Paul's mind (Col 1,24).

The colossian christian community was one that Paul had not personally visited, though no doubt his influence had been felt there, especially during his lengthy stay at Ephesus, about a hundred miles away. Quite possibly the colossian Church originated indirectly from Paul, through the missionary initiative of his friend Epaphras, 'a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf' (1,7). At any rate, the

apostle felt a special interest in the members of this little community, causing him to pray 'constantly' for their welfare (1,3) and to be seriously alarmed at the danger of heresy which threatened their christian faith.

He feels it necessary to warn the Colossians not to be led astray by pseudo-philosophy and vain deceit (*dia philosophias kai kenēs apatēs*) which are of mere human origin; or are 'according to the elemental spirits of the world (*stoicheia tou kosmou*) and not according to Christ' (2,8). They must not yield to any pressures brought to bear on them to worship angels, nor abase themselves towards these elemental spirits (2,18-20). Neither would their salvation be assured by submitting to the rigid ascetical rules which some religious teachers were propounding (2,16-20). It seems that the colossian Christians wanted to 'hedge their bets': professing trust in Jesus Christ as Saviour, yet lending a willing ear to other doctrines, offering alternative formulae for religious security and legalistic ways of achieving union with God.

Paul's main response to the danger is his resounding statement of faith in Jesus, the supreme and unique mediator of God's peace to man. Rather than elaborating precisely what was erroneous in the contrary formulae, he concentrates upon painting a splendid, sweeping picture of Christ-centred faith, confident that true Christians will resonate to the true gospel and thereby be guarded against all counterfeit claims. His pedagogy is to accent the positive doctrine of redemption in such glowing terms that all the erroneous alternatives will be seen as enslavements of mind and conscience. Beyond this, he makes no attempt to silence authoritatively the false teachers. The colossian community's faith will benefit more by persuasion than by dictate or threat, the more so when the appeal comes from one so obviously concerned for their spiritual development, who is cheerfully enduring severe civil penalties for having preached the message of Christ. It is a pedagogy worthy of the message itself, relying on the persuasive power of truth, love and endurance, to present the gospel of peace.

Accordingly, the tone of this epistle is remarkable for its serenity. We have good reason to think that Paul's earlier temperament had been emotionally intense, sometimes exploding into indignation as with the Galatians (Gal 3,1), with his colleagues Mark and Barnabas (Acts 15,39) with Peter (Gal 2,11) or the turbulent Corinthians (1 Cor 4,21; 2 Cor 10,10, etc.) A new level of serenity emerges in his captivity epistles. As symptomatic of this in Colossians we have his

warm appreciation of friends and colleagues including Mark (4,10) with whom Paul has been reconciled. His appeals for gentleness and patience within the community (1,12; 3,12-15) are the more impressive in so far as he has had to learn these same virtues through his own personal experience. That gift of peace which Paul attributes to the Cross of Christ (1,20) now so pervades the apostles own demeanour, that he claims even to rejoice in his sufferings (prison, shipwreck, illness, dangers) in order to 'fulfil in my flesh what was lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of his body, the Church' (1,24 — we shall return later to the problematic aspect of this verse; for the moment we need only underline its positive tone). Paul's account of salvation is not limited to cerebral theorizing. He is not among those whose style of preaching is so beset by tension and grimness that it negates the very joy they wish to advocate. On the contrary, everything in this epistle indicates an author who *felt* redeemed and reconciled. Thus, his message to others was simply what he had personally experienced: the reconciling influence of Christ in his life.

Being *in chains* (4,18) has not dampened his zest for life, nor his interest in others' welfare. Indeed, it is in the captivity letters that his belief in spiritual growth is most vigorously expressed (Eph 1,15-23; 3,18-19; 4,1-16; Phil 1,8-11; 2,1-11; 3,7-14; 4,4-9). Idealistic hopes on behalf of the Colossians pour from his pen. They should be 'filled with the knowledge of God's will', in all spiritual wisdom and understanding; 'leading a life worthy of the Lord . . . bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God' (1,9-10). He prays they may have strength, patience, joy and thankfulness — a life-style in harmony with the fundamental gift of salvation. For 'the Father . . . has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son' (1,13). Paul's guiding ideal is to promote spiritual growth, by revealing the potential which Christ gives to every human person: a potential for sharing in the divine life. This glorious 'mystery', long hidden in the mind of God but now preached as good news, is 'Christ in you, the hope of glory' (1,27). But in order to come to fruition in people's lives, the saving message must be vigorously imparted. Hence 'Him we proclaim, warning and teaching everyone in all wisdom, that we may proclaim everyone mature in Christ' (1,28). Christ provides such a total formula for salvation that there is no need to supplement their faith with angel-worship, misplaced ascetical regulations or superstitious abasement to the elemental spirits. Mature faith displaces all these aberrations.

What ethical form this redeemed maturity should take is spelt out more concretely in the second half of the epistle, where the apostle applies his mysticism to morals. 'If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above' (3,1) — such as compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, mutual forgiveness, thankfulness and love. 'And let the peace of Christ reign in your hearts, to which indeed you were called, in the one body' (3,15). This reference to *peace* brings us back to our specific theme: that peace was given us 'Through the blood of his cross' (Col 1,20). We must now enquire what this peace signifies, how it relates to Christ and how it emerges from his sacrifice.

A. Peace is God's gift of reconciliation to those once separated from him

Paul sees a radical difference between mankind under sin, and redeemed mankind under the grace of Christ. Our natural condition, without Christ, is estrangement, enmity, the way of the flesh (*sarx*) as opposed to the way of the spirit (*pneuma*). This conviction of man's natural estrangement from God, which receives such lengthy treatment in Romans (1,18-3,26; and 5,12-21) and which later theology developed into the doctrine of original sin, underlies the whole pauline understanding of redemption. Man is born into a state of sin from which he must be rescued and reconciled (Rom 5,18-21; 1 Thess 5,4-9; Gal 3,19-29). Nowhere is this more emphatically stated than in Colossians: 'He has delivered us from the kingdom of darkness and transformed us to the kingdom of his beloved Son' (1,13); 'and you, who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled . . . in order to present you holy, blameless and irreproachable before him' (1,21-22).

Reflective Christians today can sometimes feel embarrassed by so stark a contrast between redeemed and unredeemed humanity. We are continually reminded of the shadow side which remains within ourselves and of the very real human virtues of many who are outside the visible, redemptive community of the Church. We might prefer other ways of expressing our deep feeling of human limitation and sinfulness, the conflict between egotism and reverence, and our radical unworthiness to draw near to God and be accepted by him in love. Recalling what Vatican II said about the dignity of the human person and the community of mankind, we are properly reluctant to regard the baptized as 'children of light' and all others as belonging to the kingdom of darkness. Perhaps the contrast should rather be

applied to the tension within ourselves, between temptation to sin and aspirations to holiness. In this light, we can well appreciate the meaning of 'distance' from God and the need for reconciliation with him. Paul declares not only that such reconciliation is possible, but that it has already been radically achieved for us in the Beloved Son 'in whom we *have* redemption, the forgiveness of sins'. While individuals and groups continue in sinful attitudes and actions, a powerful reconciling force has also entered our history, drawing us to repentance and re-union. God's action for us is underlined by a series of verbs: 'qualified' (*hikanosanti* v. 12), 'delivered' (*errusato*), 'transferred' (*metestēsen*, v. 13) and 'reconciled' (v. 20).

The verb 'to reconcile' (*apokatallassein*) of which the subject is God the Father, recurs two verses later as though to underline the transition from a state of hostility to one of harmony, peace and holiness. 'You who were once estranged and hostile in mind doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled' (or, passively, 'you have now been reconciled') . . . 'in order to present you holy, blameless and irreproachable' (1,21-22). The only other New Testament occurrence of this verb (Eph 2,16) tells of Christ breaking down the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile 'that he might make peace, and reconcile us both to God . . .'. This reconciliation is not just a future possibility open to men of good will, but something already given and requiring to be personally appropriated by each one of us. Primarily it unites us with God, while simultaneously it binds us in a new depth of harmony with our fellow-men (3,12-14) and brings peace into our own heart as well (3,15).

B. Peace comes through Jesus Christ the Son of God

Belief in the mediating power of Jesus for our redemption is, of course, shared by all the New Testament writings. If it receives particular emphasis in Colossians, the obvious reason is because Christ's role was being jeopardized and relativized by rival mediators of another kind: those angels and elemental powers to whom superstitious worship was paid by some members of the community. Such a threat stimulated Paul to express, more fully than ever before, his understanding of the Saviour.

In earlier epistles, Jesus Christ is regularly called 'Son of God' (for example Gal 2,20; 2 Cor 1,19); 'his Son' (1 Thess 1, 10; 1 Cor 1,9; Rom 1,9; 8,3) and *Kyrios* ('Lord': for example 1 Cor 8,5-6; 12,3; Rom 10,9). In 2 Corinthians we read that Christ is 'the likeness (*eikōn*) of God' (4,4) and 'The light of the knowledge of the glory of

God has shone in the face of Christ' (4,6). So, 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself' (5,19). But the Christ-hymn of Colossians (1,15-20) goes even further, to establish the unique mediating identity of the beloved Son. The first strophe describes his part in the creation of the world (vv 15-18):

He is the *Image* of the invisible God,
 The *First-Born* of all creation.
 For *in him* all things were created
 In heaven and on earth, visible and invisible —
 Whether thrones or dominations or principalities or powers —
 All things were created *through him* and *for him*.
 He is before all things
 And in him all things hold together.

The second strophe deals with his role as redeemer, source of restoration and reconciliation (vv 19-20):

He is the *Head* of the body, the Church.
 He is the *Beginning*, the *First Born* from the dead,
 That in everything he might be pre-eminent.
 For *in him* the fulness of God was pleased to dwell,
 And *through him* to reconcile to himself all things —
 Whether on earth or in heaven —
 Making peace by the blood of his cross.

In order to show that there is no need for Christians to have recourse to any intermediary spirits, Paul insists that all of them, under whatever title ('thrones', 'principalities', 'elemental spirits'), were subordinate to Christ from the beginning. He holds primacy as 'First Born' both of the original creation and of restored, redeemed creation, of which the Church is the most immediate beneficiary. The twin titles 'First-Born of all creation' (*prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs*) and 'First-Born from the dead' (*prōtotokos ek tōn nekron*) go together to illustrate the conviction of the apostolic Church that 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven whereby we must be saved' (Acts 4,12). If we are to receive the gift of reconciling peace with God, it can only be through his Son, redeemer of all things.

Here again we may pause to wonder whether we can or should make extreme Christo-centrism fully our own. Is it, as Rudolf Bultmann maintained, too deeply influenced by mythology to be a suitable expression for modern christian belief? Bultmann, who regarded Colossians and Ephesians as post-apostolic writings that

were influenced by gnostic mythology and terminology as well as by the pauline message, wrote:

When Col 1,20 characterizes the work of Christ as *reconciling all things in himself* it presupposes that prior to Christ the world had fallen into disorder and contention; here biblical tradition has been forsaken and gnostic mythology is at work. . . . When he describes the *cosmic* status of Christ (1,15-20) . . . and calls him *head of every principality and power* (2,10), it is clear that a mythological cosmology has been taken over, in order to describe the stature and work of Christ in comprehensive fashion.¹

But we may fully accept the 'comprehensiveness' of Christ, the mediator of creation as well as of re-creation or redemption, without taking literally the kind of world-view which Colossians presupposes. One may be severely sceptical about the existence of invisible super-human powers such as 'Thrones' and 'Dominations', and yet find the expression 'First-Born of all creation' a highly meaningful description for Christ, just as one can resonate to the prologue of the Fourth Gospel without over-stating the darkness which reigned in the world before the enfleshment of the Word.

Whatever reservations we may want to make about outmoded cosmological tenets underlying some of the New Testament statements about Christ, it remains basic to the gospel that through him is channelled all the power and benevolence of God the Father to mankind. The idea that the whole of creation is also estranged from God through man's sin, and therefore needs reconciliation through Christ, remains problematical. Yet it is surely in accord with the creation account in Genesis to see this world at least as subject to man's influence for good or ill (Gen 1,28-30) and therefore as needing the redemptive influence of the new and faithful Adam, through whom all human trespasses were repaired (cf Rom 5,12-17).

C. *Peace comes through the Cross*

The Father's benevolent, reconciling concern for us, operative at all times through the Son, was focused in one great loving action, the Passion, to which Paul repeatedly calls attention. 'God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' (Rom 5,8). 'We preach Christ crucified . . . the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor 1,23ff). 'Christ died for all, that those who

¹ Bultmann, Rudolf: *Theology of the New Testament* (London, 1953), vol 2, pp 149-50.

live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sakes died and was raised' (2 Cor 5,15). 'God forbid I should glory, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Gal 6,14). 'Obedient unto death' (Phil 2,8) Jesus achieved the supreme act of Love. This then becomes the saving event *par excellence* and the abiding symbol of divine mercy and reconciliation. Therefore, Paul's christological hymn builds up to the ringing phrase: *eirēnopoīēsas dia tou haimatos tou staurou autou* ('Making peace through the blood of his cross', Col 1,20).

Reference to the *blood* shows the explicitly *sacrificial* interpretation of the Passion, which the apostolic Church inherited from Jesus himself (Mk 14,24; 10,45 and parallels). Another sacrificial metaphor follows in 1,22, this time applying to the christian faithful whom Christ will present 'holy and blameless and irreproachable' before the Father. Behind these metaphors stands the Old Testament sacrificial system, with its peace-offerings and sin-offerings, unblemished victims and the outpouring of blood as symbolic of submitting all of life to Yahweh, author of life. 'The blood of his cross' is covenant blood (1 Cor 11,25; Exod 24,6ff), setting up a new bond of acceptance and favour between God and man. It is blood outpoured as propitiation (Rom 3,25), through which we are justified (Rom 5,9) and draw near to God (Eph 2,13).

But can we attribute such definitive reconciling power to the cross of Christ, when there is so much alienation between man and God, and between ourselves, both at local and international level? Is there not a huge task of reconciliation yet to be completed? Paul remains keenly aware of this side of things. His categorical statement about what has *already* been achieved is no formula for quietism but a stirring call to action. The redemptive death of Jesus calls for positive results in christian lives. In order to benefit from his sacrifice, we must ourselves become a pure living sacrifice (cf Rom 12,1; Phil 2,17) sharing in his loving obedience to the Father's will. There is no reconciliation without co-operation. What we could not do for ourselves to begin the redemptive process, Christ has done (and continues to do) on our behalf. This is the grace of forgiveness and renewal to be received in faith. But that still leaves us with the vital task of 'entering in'. so that we personally appropriate the mind of Christ and are led by his reconciling Spirit. So the work of redemption continues throughout the history of the Church.

St Paul sees himself as co-operating with the Redeemer not only by preaching the gospel message, but also by the sufferings endured

in the process. This ideal, already mentioned in earlier epistles (2 Cor 4,10-12; Phil 3,8-10; Gal 1,20), has its strongest statement in Colossians; 'In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, that is, the Church' (1,24). This verse may not sit easily alongside statements about the once-for-all quality and total sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice (e.g. Heb 9,26; 1 Pet 3,18) but neither does it contradict them. While as a historical event the sacrifice of the cross was the unique, unrepeatable and all-sufficient expiation for human sinfulness, there remains a sense whereby it is incomplete, inviting believers to share and supplement it until the end of historical time. As a symbol of incompleteness, the cross challenges people of every generation to interpret their quest for integrity amid the set-backs and obstacles of life, as 'filling out what is lacking' and therefore as participation in the work of redemption, for the Church as well as ourselves.

Redemption is being restored to peace with God, with others and within ourselves — is, therefore, an ongoing process, though radically opened up for us by the cross of Jesus. Faith in him can establish us in a spirit of peace even while still surrounded at surface level by problems, limitations, perplexities or imprisonment. A very special kind of logic imbues this process, which Paul experienced even as he wrote. By the fact that he could 'rejoice' while sharing the afflictions of Christ (1,24), the apostle shows how fully he had been 'transferred' to the kingdom of the Beloved Son (1,13) and how truly God has 'made peace' within the believer's heart, through the blood of the cross (1,20).

Conclusion: an open-ended stimulus

Paul's reconciling message of the cross was never exhausted in the mystery of what God *has* done, fundamental though that undoubtedly is. Equally important is the continuing work of loving, serving, communicating this mystery to others in patient hope, co-operating in bringing God's peace to our world. What a gracious, providential wisdom, that each person contributes to the reconciliation of others precisely in the measure that we are ourselves reconciled, through the cross of Christ!