

THE COST OF JUSTICE

By JOHN DALRYMPLE

A POPULAR HYMN, much sung in parishes, declares that God the Father 'his Son not sparing, sent him to die . . . to take away my sin'. I sing this hymn reluctantly and with reservations, because it seems to me to encourage a false emphasis in our understanding of Jesus's mission. It encourages the idea that the sacrificial death of Jesus, divorced from his life and teaching, is the only thing that matters — as if God was merely looking for a victim to be sacrificed in his honour, an 'unblemished lamb' for the altar, before he decreed the redemption of the world. This sort of thinking is dangerously unhistorical. It ignores the life of Jesus of Nazareth and his teaching, which were the historical causes of his death. It encourages us to think that the work of redemption performed by Jesus began in Gethsemane, or even on Calvary, and that the impact that Jesus made on his generation by his appearance in Galilee and his proclamation of the reign of God was of little importance to God, who was merely looking for a pretext for his Son to be victimized by men and so have a sacrifice worthy of mankind's being redeemed. Out of this 'God sent Jesus to die' mentality comes a further false understanding: that Jesus was 'meant' to fail, that he was a divinely predestined failure, committed from the beginning to run a course which would never succeed, simply in order that he should end up on the cross providing that necessary victim for the sacrifice. I have heard sermons and been at retreats where this divine pessimism was preached, and have seen it lead to a spirituality which turns its back on the world and courts failure and rejection, before any effort is made to give the gospel to the world.

The truth is almost the opposite of the above. Jesus was not sent to die, but to live. He was sent to live in a certain way which would usher in a whole new way of living, and introduce a new quality of existence intended to serve as a standard for mankind thereafter. Jesus's life in other words was important. It was a message from God about how men and women should live in this world. Followers of Jesus are meant to take his life, his miracles, his parables, his message, extremely seriously. They are no mere pretext of provocation to get Jesus to Calvary. They are the message of God for mankind. As St John saw, Jesus's life, teaching and death were

God's 'word' to us. John of the Cross goes further and says they were God's 'Last Word' to us, because no further revelation was needed after Jesus Christ.¹

The Father did not mean Jesus to fail, to be rejected. He meant him to be accepted and to succeed. Jesus's message for mankind was a message from God about life itself. It was and is, in fact, the only hope for men and women to be really human. We must not think of God as waiting wearily for the public life to come to an end in order to begin the 'real business' of Calvary. We must think of the Father watching over every phase of his Son Jesus's life on earth, intending every word and action of Jesus to have an impact first of all upon the actual hearers of Jesus's generation and after that upon every generation until the end of the world. Jesus's teaching, furthermore, was not an academic corpus, a body of doctrine and ethics bequeathed for subsequent generations to study. Jesus meant action. The teaching came as the thinking behind the action that Jesus desired to take place. He taught because he wanted change to take place in his society. Jesus called this the reign of God. This reign was beginning. He, Jesus, was sent to usher it in. John the Baptist had foretold it. Jesus was its beginning. Neither he nor his Father meant it to fail. It was meant to be accepted and to succeed, not just later by 'all mankind', but there and then in the politics of the day. There was a current political dimension to Jesus's message, and therefore to the intentions of the Father who sent him.

I am wary of talk about Jesus being political, because I know how easy it is to read into the gospel justification for many things today which are 'political' but which were not part of what Jesus was trying to do. Do not think, for instance, that the political stir that tended to take place around university chaplaincies fifteen years ago had much to do with the gospel. It had more to do with adolescent growing up and middle-aged clerics wanting to keep abreast. Malcolm Bradbury's 'History man' was never much like Jesus Christ. I am, nevertheless, even more wary of the current reaction to that secular Christianity which proclaims that Christianity is private and chiefly about the next world. For Jesus those distinctions between private and public religion had not been made. In the Old and New Testaments religion is about the whole of life, public and private, this world chiefly but also about the next. So, when Jesus spoke about the reign of God, he did not mean a spiritual transformation in the hearts of his hearers without direct effect on society. He meant a transformation of society, which would indeed begin in the hearts of

men with *metanoia*, but which he intended to be a change in the way society (politics, if you like) was organized and lived. He accompanied his teaching on the Kingdom with actions which were by no means private. They were actions which spoke his message of social transformation (justice) louder than words. He healed people who were put outside the Law, like lepers; he befriended the Samaritans with whom the scribes forbade relations; he mixed with sinners in direct contradiction to the teaching of the religious powers that be. In fact he challenged the public religious practice of his day, and was quickly understood as so doing. He was unpopular from the start with the religious leaders in Jerusalem, not only because he was working for public change, but especially because he claimed that he was doing so in the name of God. He was announcing not only a Kingdom, but the Kingdom *of God*. For Jesus the teaching of love for all which he proclaimed was by no means a message about private living. It was, on the contrary, a really disturbing call for justice in society which threatened many contemporary vested interests and accepted compromises. As we know, it cost him his life.

Jesus's life and teaching ended with his death. The former led to the latter. The cross was the result of Jesus's proclamation of the Kingdom. Jesus's teaching did not fall on deaf ears, but on wide-awake ones, which discerned accurately what this message was, but could not accept that it came from God. The Sanhedrin knew that they were in the place of God and were not prepared to listen to the disturbing prophet from Galilee. So they determined on his death. My remarks earlier on the death of Jesus were not meant to diminish its significance in favour of his life, but to magnify its significance by showing how Jesus's death was the ultimate proof of the seriousness and conviction of his life. He was so in earnest about the reign of God which he proclaimed that he was prepared to die for it. God had laid the task upon him of inaugurating the Kingdom. He went to his death in the attempt to do so. He was faithful to his Father up to the end, even when doubting whether perhaps the Father had forsaken him. Perhaps we should re-word that hymn by saying that God, his Son not sparing, sent him to live and teach at the risk of death, to take away our sins. No prophet can do more for his message.

The cross of Jesus, then, is not an isolated sacrifice to redeem the world in some metaphysical way, but the actual historical result of Jesus's life, the grim proof of the impact he made on his own generation. Can we say that God willed the bloody death of Jesus? Certainly, if we mean it in the same way that we say that God wills

all human disasters. He wills them, yes, in the sense of permitting them to happen because of human freedom. He does not will them to take place, simply and absolutely wanting them to happen. In other words, the death of Jesus is a supreme example of God 'permitting' a horrendous evil to happen in this world of free, sinful men and women. But also it is a supreme example of God then allowing a good 'greater than was originally imaginable' to emerge from the permitted evil. In Christ's case the supreme good which emerged from the cross of Calvary was the redemption of the world. In some way, which we can leave to the theologians to explain, the historical failure of Jesus to inaugurate the Kingdom of God in his own society was transformed into the trans-historical success of redeeming all mankind, not just Jesus, from sin, opening the divine life of God to them in eternity.

Two preliminary truths emerge from these reflections. The first is the observable christian fact that out of evil often comes good: that evil even seems to be necessary for good to come. The prodigal son has to abandon his family and behave atrociously before he understands what family love is. Married couples have to quarrel before they come more deeply together. Hitler and Stalin have to happen before Christianity rediscovers its political dimension. The bomb has to drop before a generation is shocked into working for peace. The second emerging truth from reflection on Calvary is the mysterious one about human failure. It seems that when we try to do good in this world the forces of evil arise on all sides to crush it and frequently succeed. It needs colossal faith, both in the future and in God, to persevere in the practice of good when successful opposition is aroused. It is tempting to retreat into a less challenging, more compromising attitude which will avoid direct confrontation with evil. This was Simon Peter's instinctive advice to Jesus at Caesarea Philippi (Mk 8,32); but we know the answer he received. I fancy many western Christians, along with the author of this article, must fight shy of direct confrontation with the evils of multinational commerce which operate the 'structures of plunder' in the words of Eduardo Galeano and cause untold oppression to the poor of the Third World. We fight shy because we do not like to recognize evil in the respectable surroundings of international business, and also perhaps because we do not want to be the failures we most certainly will be if we start to take up arms against it. We want to be disciples of Jesus Christ, but we do not want to fail publicly as he did. We fight shy of the cross.

The cross of christian disciples

The pattern of Jesus's life was that his gospel aroused evil, and that evil succeeded in suppressing him; that his love made enemies. Jesus was explicit that anyone who wished to be his disciple would receive the same treatment.² The gospel lived and preached in anyone's life would arouse the hostile forces of evil. From our safety in the First World we can look with humble awe at the christian disciples of Jesus working in, say, South and Central America, who have attracted the murderous attentions of Satan because of their love. Sisters working with poor people in the mountains have been labelled subversive and even tortured by military police working for rich landowners. Priests in shanty towns have been killed by the death squads. Lay leaders of both sexes have been attacked by armed murderers and have seen their families killed, because of their involvement in what in our society would be called simple social action. Such people do not need sermons to point out to them that christian discipleship means the cross, or that saving their lives means losing them. They are living the reality of what it is to be followers of Jesus's full gospel, and their lives are sufficient sermons to themselves and others that the cost of justice is the cross.

What about us, comfortable readers of *The Way* in university common-rooms, monastic calefactories and the rest? Where is the cross in our lives? Where is our badge of christian discipleship? Each reader must answer for himself and herself. What follows are a few reflections upon discipleship from the point of view of one limited life. We undergo the cross whenever our christian endeavours arouse the hostility of people. Sometimes this is hostility from people we unhesitatingly call 'bad'. More often than not the hostility we arouse comes from people who are good, nay better than ourselves. This can be bewildering. Jesus perhaps was bewildered when his friends said he was mad and came to Capernaum to take him home (Mk 3,21). How often priests have aroused hostility from their fellow priests by simply doing kind acts like giving a bed to a down-and-out or befriending a prostitute. (Mad, imprudent, fanatical. . . .) How often lay people have aroused the hostility of their parish priest by simply starting a prayer group, or for instance, attempting to implement the resolutions of the 1980 Liverpool National Pastoral Congress in their parish!

Another cross which Jesus's disciples undergo is physical hardship. In dramatic spots christian disciples undergo crosses like torture. In our less dramatic society I have known ordinary

Christians undergoing prolonged physical hardship because of their understanding of the gospel: parents of hyper-active children who refuse to give up, night after night, day after day, loving their child; relatives and friends who have nursed a sick person for months and years without a break; wives and husbands who, because of their marriage vows, have not abandoned an 'impossible' partner in spite of advice to be 'sensible' from all sides, secular and christian. People like this cannot boast like Paul of shipwrecks and beatings in the cause of Christ, but they most certainly have received parallel hardships for his sake.

A third cross is one which it is difficult to put into words. I refer to the inner misgivings, tensions, doubts, misunderstandings which we undergo when we take up Christianity as our life's cause. There is nothing external about this cross. It is all inside. Sometimes it takes the form of misgivings about other people hitherto trusted but now doubted; sometimes it is an institution, especially the institution of the Church, which is the cause of this cross; sometimes, more painfully, it is oneself which is the object and subject of the inner pain of doubt. I have listed such crosses without classification, because I think they are all manifestations of the same thing: doubt. Doubt is a fearful inner tension which committed disciples are asked to suffer. It takes many forms, as I have suggested, but basically it is the same experience — an experience of being corroded at the heart of one's commitment, of having the foundations of one's life knocked away like trestles from under a table. It may not be physical torture, but it can be mental torture, stemming directly from one's following of Jesus Christ, because one knows that to give him up would immediately ease the tension. This is a cross which many enclosed contemplatives in communities have to bear. The nature of the life, and the sharpened discipleship which they embrace, lead to entirely hidden hardships. Sometimes the hiddenness itself accentuates the pain. In my experience, too, the post Vatican II Church has presented not a few active priests and religious with this cross. Inner tension is almost a mark of today's priests and religious. We look with envy sometimes at our predecessors who built churches, schools, and spiritual empires with robust optimism and apparently no doubts. They had never heard of *angst*. It had not yet been discovered.

Compassion, too, can amount to a cross. We can be swept by pity like a flood and almost drown in it. We seem sometimes to have no defences against it. A theme of Graham Greene's novels is the

danger and damage that uncontrolled pity can cause. Scobie in *The heart of the matter* risked eternal damnation because of pity. But do we not experience that risk? I find that compassion can overwhelm at times, especially when it is accompanied by impotence. The sufferings of the poor all over the world, the down-and-outs at our door, those terrible victims of drugs on the margins of our big cities, the despair of families living in depressed urban wastelands, all these and more can be a real cross to accompany a comfortable life and jolt us into action. When all possible action seems so trivial in comparison with the extent of the evil, the pain of the cross is greatly increased. The worst (because unchristian) outcome is when the enormity of the evil so overwhelms one that one lies down and does nothing. Then we have to remember that Jesus, though swept by pity for the poor of his day, those sheep without a shepherd, did not give way to despair, but carried on. He went to Jerusalem, always in the hope that his cause was from the Father and would prevail. Pity then should not lead us to inaction or despair, in spite of the reality and sheer power of evil in the world. We have to hope in the victory of Christ. The hope against hope can itself be a cross. It is so much easier and more logical to despair. To give up fighting evil can appear such an attractive and 'wise' course. We may be sure it did for Jesus, too. But he persevered, and only through and after death was he vindicated. Resurrection came after the cross, not till after the end. Perhaps the specifically christian contribution to the struggle against evil in today's world, a struggle which after all is not conducted by Christians only, is hope. 'It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness'. Followers of Christ have a sure foundation for that belief.

The crosses of natural life

There is a long catholic tradition of referring to all the sufferings of life, not just those stemming directly from following the gospel, as 'crosses'. An old lady with arthritis will see it as a cross to be borne for Jesus's sake. It has nothing particular to do with following the gospel; it is just one of the many sufferings which life brings, which can be made the subject of christian discipline and prayer. Most readers will have been brought up to see natural sufferings like physical pain, chance accidents, the ups and downs of life, in this way. When we attach the word 'cross' to events not directly connected with following Christ's gospel we are extending the meaning of the cross beyond that given it by Jesus in the New

Testament. Is it legitimate to do so? Some radical protestant writers do not think so. Howard Yoder writes:

The cross of Christ was not an inexplicable or chance event, which happened to strike him, like illness or accident. . . . The cross of Calvary was not a difficult family situation, not a frustration of visions of personal fulfilment, a crushing debt or a nagging in-law; it was the political, legally to be expected, result of a clash with the powers ruling his society.³

Yoder concludes that it is illegitimate to extend the meaning of the cross in one's personal life beyond that used in the gospel, that it is a fundamental trivialization to label personal difficulties like debts or in-laws 'the cross', when they have nothing to do with one's personal following out of the precepts of Christ, have not occurred because of one's christian witness, but have simply happened in the natural course of events. Let me say immediately that I have much sympathy with this strict viewpoint precisely because it preserves the cross from trivialization. It *is* trivial to call a small personal setback by the majestic title of Calvary, especially when in other parts of the world Christians are being tortured for their Christianity. A priest colleague who spent ten months in Latin America found this particular aspect of re-entry into our parish life difficult. He was irritated by comfortable Mass-goers singing 'Do not be afraid', when they had little to be afraid of from being followers of Jesus Christ.

Yet the catholic tradition is there and has nourished countless people in their spiritual lives. They have taken comfort from the fact that by baptism we are united with the risen Christ so closely that we can boldly claim that everything we do and, significantly, everything we suffer is now done 'in Christ'. Hence it is legitimate to claim for the natural events, chance accidents, illnesses, and ups and downs of everyday living that they can be mystically united with Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. The basis of this belief is the doctrine of the Body of Christ, an admittedly mystical idea, but one rooted in Paul's epistles and, for instance, in Jesus's parable of the vine in John (ch 15). Because we are in Christ all we do, *however trivial*, can be made part of the redemptive process begun by the historical Jesus but continued now in the risen Christ and his Body. Thérèse of Lisieux saw this and made it the basis of her Little Way: nothing we do or suffer is too small to offer to God. If we are faithful in little things God will see to it that we are faithful in the big things. Thérèse would have

seen a certain spiritual pride in maintaining that only the big sufferings of life like torture and starvation were worthy of being called christian. She taught that picking up a pin for the love of God could be an act of love, fruitful for the world's redemption. Behind Thérèse there is the catholic anglican tradition which also chooses little things to offer to God. George Herbert's famous hymn puts it beautifully:

All may of Thee partake;
 Nothing can be so mean,
 Which with this tincture 'for thy sake',
 Will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause
 Makes drudgery divine,
 Who sweeps a room, as for Thy laws,
 Makes that and the action fine.

This is the famous stone
 That turneth all to gold. . . .

Both Thérèse and George Herbert emphasize, of course, that it is necessary for the follower of Christ to make the effort to unite his or her suffering to that of Jesus. It does not happen automatically. We have consciously to 'connect up' with Christ, otherwise our little sufferings just remain little sufferings. They become important, not in themselves, but by being united to the cross of Christ. That is the 'clause' that makes drudgery, while remaining drudgery, divine; the famous stone turning all our life to gold.

The catholic mystical tradition represented by Thérèse and behind her de Caussade, Francis de Sales . . . does not contradict to the radical protestant view voiced by Yoder. Thérèse does not claim that the small pinpricks of daily life are in themselves great crosses. She knows them to be small. She does claim, however, that they can *be given* the significance of Calvary by an act of love on our part, taking advantage of our ever-present union with Jesus Christ by baptism. She would be the first to agree that in her carmelite monastery she was not in the front line of the christian struggle with evil. In her letter to Marie she says as much, but characteristically sees value in being behind the lines, because then she can be at the 'heart of the Church', where love, not deeds, matters most.

The truth is that not only do both viewpoints need each other, but

in the Church today both groups of people need each other. In my relatively comfortable life in a parish in the United Kingdom I need to be aware of the life and death struggle being fought by my brothers and sisters in other parts of the world village. It helps to jolt me out of complacency. Likewise those in the midst of the struggle, where to be christian is to live dangerously, need to know that they have the love, prayers and support of us, their brothers and sisters, whom they call upon in their danger. Such 'connecting up' is not meant to be a mere paper effort. It is meant to be real, personal communication. It is heartening that more and more parishes and christian communities are engaged in it. This helps the whole Church together to shoulder the cross of Christ, to bear the cost of justice.

NOTES

¹ *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, ch 22, no 3-5.

² Mt 16,24-27; Mk 8,34-38; Lk 9,23-26.

³ Yoder, Howard: *The politics of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 1972), p 132.