

A FRESH LOOK AT THE CROSS

George B. Wilson

AFTER 2,000 YEARS OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY, the suggestion that it might be possible, and fruitful, to approach the reality of Jesus' crucifixion from a new perspective must surely sound presumptuous. After all, legions of faithful Christians, great theologians and, perhaps most important of all, the wisest mystics in our church family have devoted their lives to plumbing the meaning of this central event in the story of God's relation to our world.

Only the very fact that this event is so infinitely evocative as to be impossible to encapsulate in human words can justify such hubris. The overwhelming experience of death and life, the humanity of Jesus and his whole life's relationship with those who brought him to a terrible death, draw us repeatedly back into the question: what really happened at Calvary?

To situate the reflections which follow and forestall some objections to them, let me be clear: our salvation was wrought by the act of Jesus' freely laying down his life for us and the acceptance of his offering by the Father, as manifested in Jesus' resurrection. Nothing which follows should be construed as lessening commitment to that belief. In this sense there is a radical truth in the succinct formulation that 'Jesus died for our sins'.

But we can remain within the circle of Christian belief and still ask a further question: does the expression 'Jesus died for our sins', for all its truth, capture what happened that day? Let me be more pointed: might the facile repetition of that foundational expression of faith actually impede our full awareness of the enormity of the crucifixion, a central object of Christian prayer? Could it even distort what the real challenge to our faith might be?

Jesus' Offering and the Historical Event

The creedal proclamation of the salvific efficacy of Jesus' crucifixion focuses us on the ultimate meaning of the secular event of Calvary, and that is quite appropriate. Jesus' death on the cross is salvific and it is so in virtue of his obedience in accepting the will of his Father.

The ultimacy of that meaning does not, however, exhaust our exploration of the crucifixion as an event in human history.

The Effect of Christian Iconography

The first question we might explore is: was the scene that a passer-by might have seen that day unique? How extraordinary was the deed of crucifixion?

Christian catechesis has conditioned us to focus on the uniqueness of the crucifixion of Jesus. As salvific act the crucifixion is without parallel, certainly. And beyond that unique religious meaning, there is the telling fact that two thousand years of Christian art has conditioned our imagination to think of Jesus and the two thieves who died with him as though they were the only victims of crucifixion. There was only one 'Crucifixion', represented again and again in thousands of images.



Crucifixion, by Pieter Bruegel the younger

As a matter of fact, crucifixion was not uncommon at the time of Jesus. And so an uninvolved traveller, happening along the road outside Jerusalem and passing Golgotha that day, might have found the scene not particularly remarkable. Just another malefactor being punished. (Would it be too far-fetched to imagine the passer-by's reaction to the sight—as a physical fact of history, not in its religious meaning—as similar to the reaction many might have today upon reading about 'one more' execution of a prisoner? I suggest this, not as a statement about capital punishment, but as a way of helping the contemporary reader to enter, honestly, into the experience of someone passing Calvary. It is a cultural context otherwise so far removed from our present world.)

To be true to the event at Golgotha, then, we cannot afford to turn it into an ahistorical tableau. We must rather situate it as someone of the culture and the time might have viewed it. A flesh-and-blood human being is being put to death, to be sure; but this is only one in a series of similar executions that a contemporary might well have heard about or even witnessed. It is the execution of someone who has been judged to be, at the least, a criminal. And the passer-by would not be very surprised to learn that the one hanging there had been deemed an enemy of the state, for that was a common charge leading to this form of punishment.

The Question of Justice

Depending on the passer-by's position in the contemporary social, political and religious systems, he or she might perhaps have wondered if this particular unhappy fellow had been fairly convicted. We, who have the benefit of the fuller record, know the answer to that question. That Jesus did not simply 'die', but was unjustly condemned—murdered—is a conclusion that today even a detached unbeliever would draw from the gospel accounts.

But, once again, a bald statement, however true, may mislead us as to what actually happened at the single dramatic event in which both Jesus and his killers took part. We need to appreciate all the interactions between Jesus and those who brought about his execution, the series of events which preceded and led up to his death.

In turning to the biblical data, I acknowledge that I am not a professional scripture scholar with the full panoply of exegetical skills such people bring to reading the relevant texts. But countless believers down through the ages have been in the same position as I am, as they

brought their faith, critical questioning and prayer to holy texts in search of their meaning for life. It is one thing to reject simplistic biblical literalism in favour of solid critical scholarship; it is quite another to imply that the lack of all the scholarly tools creates an impassable barrier between the meaning of the text and the individual believing Christian.

The Invention of the Gospel

To begin, then, I imagine myself somewhere in Asia Minor in the late 60s of the Common Era. Within the Christian community I would already have been exposed to the fundamental kerygma, through the oral preaching of Jesus' followers and through the reading of letters from Paul and others which had circulated through the local churches. For the first time I am beginning to hear of a new kind of document, written in a brand new genre that requires a new name: a 'Gospel'—the Gospel according to Mark. I might have heard some of the stories or sayings contained within it in oral preaching, but they would not have been packaged this way before, as a single narrative account bearing a strange new name.

Now I have been exposed to enough good biblical criticism to know that this writing, this Gospel, is not some journalistic, factual report of events that took place exactly as they are narrated. Individual actions or words in the Gospel may not have been exactly as they are depicted by the evangelist. But the church community which heralds this Gospel as the revelation of God, then or now, presents the narrative as, at least, *a reliable account of the life of one human individual*. As a believer, then, I do not go astray if—whether in the first or the twenty-first century—I consider the whole as a single drama unfolding in time. It is reasonable to read the account from that perspective, to explore how the narrative depicts the interaction between Jesus and his eventual prosecutors as it unfolds over the course of the Gospel. They are in a relationship which shifts as each party makes new decisions in response to the actions of the other.

A Dramatic Development in Successive Interactions

At the very beginning, when Jesus teaches in the synagogue at Capernaum, the people 'were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, *and not as the scribes*' (1:22). This pointed comparison, evidently a conscious choice of the writer, discloses a

context in which listeners were already disposed to question the adequacy of the religious establishment. This is something that the scribes would presumably not have been pleased to hear.

When Jesus goes on to heal a man with an unclean spirit, the amazement increases and people ask: 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority!' (1:27). His reputation is beginning to spread (1:28). After a leper who has been healed goes out and tells his story widely, Jesus' celebrity becomes such that he cannot enter a town openly, but has to hide in the desert (1:45). And then when he tells a paralyzed man that his sins are forgiven, the ante is raised. For the scribes this is blasphemy, but the ordinary people are positively awestruck and praise God; for both it is unheard of (2:12).

Next, Jesus dines openly with tax collectors and sinners. The scribes from the Pharisee party are shocked and complain to his disciples. Jesus responds by using the occasion to insinuate that his adversaries are inauthentic and self-righteous (2:16–17). He is audacious in challenging their power as the gatekeepers of religious interpretation and practice. And the tension increases as he defends his disciples against the charge of Sabbath-breaking. He even presents himself as one qualified to define what the Sabbath is about (2:27–28).

The Pharisees' level of mistrust for Jesus increases. Once more in the synagogue, Jesus finds a man with a withered hand and 'they watched him to see whether he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him' (3:2). The Pharisees' anger at the challenge to their power now leads them into active steps to bring Jesus down. Jesus knows exactly what is going on. 'He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart.' (3:5) He will not back down, but goes through with the healing, effectively and publicly challenging them to do something about it. And his action produces a response: the Pharisees immediately go out to plot with the Herodians 'how to destroy him' (3:6). The stakes have been raised; it is no longer a matter of merely challenging Jesus, but of actually killing him. But this does not mean that they have given up trying to discredit him publicly: they charge Jesus with using Beelzebul to drive out evil spirits, though he easily turns their attack on its head (3:22–27).

It is no longer a matter of challenging Jesus, but of actually killing him

Meanwhile Jesus' relation to the ordinary people is also evolving. The Gerasenes' awe at his healing of a wild man is so great that they ask



The Cleansing of the Temple, by *El Greco*

him to leave (5:17), while the people of Nazareth are also amazed, but find him too much for them (6:3). At the news that he might be coming, people come out along the roads just seeking to touch the fringe of his cloak (6:56). The guilt-ridden Herod is so frightened at the reports that are circulating that he wonders if the murdered John the Baptist has returned to haunt him (6:14).

By this point the fame of Jesus is such that experts in the law come up from Jerusalem to investigate. And when they complain about his disciples not washing their hands properly, his response becomes a fierce attack on their integrity: they are hypocrites, teaching human precepts as dogma while disregarding God's real ordinances. In fact, with a note of pure sarcasm, he says they have made a fine art of hypocrisy (7:1-2, 5-9). His description of their behaviour could not be more direct and confrontational. And when they challenge his credentials by demanding a sign, he sighs 'deeply in his spirit', says flatly that they will get no sign, and simply leaves (8:11-13). Meekness of heart apparently does not preclude passionate exasperation.

The journey reaches its climax in Jerusalem, where Jesus enters the temple and proceeds physically to throw the furniture around. He even stops other pilgrims from carrying things through the temple courtyard. The itinerant preacher from Galilee now takes command of the most sacred religious shrine of Israel. At this point it should come as no surprise that the chief priests have joined with the scribes in plotting to destroy him. And yet they are terribly divided by fear, 'because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching' (11:15–18).

Taken as a whole the narrative makes clear that Jesus and his enemies are not the only players in the story. There are really three parties engaged in the struggle: there is Jesus; there are the custodians of religious orthodoxy; and there are the ordinary people—the crowds who are observing, forming their assessments, and shaping their allegiances. We must not underestimate the influence of the constantly increasing support for Jesus among the populace. The religious leaders are gradually coming to the realisation that they are losing the contest. Something drastic must be done if they are to retain their power: he must be removed.

Did Jesus Bring about His Crucifixion?

Looking at the whole sequence of events as it increases in intensity and hostility step by step, I would venture the hypothesis that Jesus *consciously provoked his death*. He knew what was happening and where it was heading. And he made choice after choice to expose his opponents and to push them further and further until he—and they—went over the edge. Luke says he 'set his face to go to Jerusalem' (9:51). He himself is quoted as saying he has a baptism ahead of him, and 'what stress I am under until it is completed!' (Luke 12:50). Years later, in the fourth Gospel, John has him say,

I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. (10:17–18)

By the time of John's writing the intent is theological, to be sure: to give expression to Jesus' kingship and radical power over life and death. But the element of conscious intentionality is of a piece with the man in Mark's Gospel who deliberately exasperates his adversaries, and who

not only stands firm in the face of their overt hostility but repeatedly exacerbates the situation.

A Criminal, a Figure of Shame

The perspective I have presented here in no way derogates from the salvific efficacy of the crucifixion. Nor does it diminish in the slightest the injustice of the act, or the culpability of those who murdered Jesus. It may, however, compel us to question the emphasis we give to different facets of the single complex event of Jesus' crucifixion. And that, in turn, has implications for a resulting spirituality.

We might ask a number of questions. How does such a view of the developing dynamics and interactions between Jesus and his opponents affect my view of Jesus, and of them? What do I make of his relentless movement forward in the face of opposition from the religious authorities of his day? How does his apparent aggressiveness relate to my ideas of a suffering servant, or my ideas about meekness and humility? If my spirituality is based on following Jesus, what implications do I draw for my responses to the situations I face within society today? Or within my Church? What do I make of the fact that I am called to follow one who was viewed by the civil society of his day as a criminal, an enemy of the state, and who was viewed as an irreligious blasphemer by its sacral figures?

Where Do We Place the Scandal of the Cross?

And finally: if I had walked past Calvary on the afternoon of the crucifixion, and later I had heard that the common criminal I had seen crucified was reputed to have returned from the dead, and was now presented to me as my saviour, what would my response have been? What is the major element in the story—apart from his reputed return to life—that would have given me the most pause?

It is interesting to note that the early Church apparently did not pay particular attention to the sheer physical suffering of Jesus, to the excruciating agony he endured, as presenting a major obstacle to the possible acceptance of Jesus and commitment to him. When blood is mentioned it is introduced more from the perspective of a baptismal washing than as physical gore. That Jesus suffered greatly is undoubtedly true. But in order to appreciate the scandal of the cross we do not need to magnify, much less to exaggerate, his physical suffering.

To present it as any more agonizing than that of all those others who were crucified at that time is not only an unwarranted expansion of the gospel narrative, it could be a distortion of the truth. The physical reality of Jesus' crucifixion was evil enough simply as narrated by the evangelists and, in a paradoxical sense, it was quite commonplace.

It appears that the aspect on which the early Church focused, rather than Jesus' physical suffering, was the *shamefulness* of it all. The author of Hebrews, in placing the figure of Jesus in the face of the experience he was about to undergo, writes of:

... Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (12:2)

He does not refer to suffering or pain. Apparently the element most likely to have deterred Jesus was for him the ignominy involved in the manner of Jesus' death. Jesus is rejected as a blasphemer by the keepers of religious purity. If I am a Jew seriously committed to the Covenant, how could I ever follow someone as shameful as *that*?

In other places in the New Testament we can sense a similar dynamic at work, although not as explicitly linked to the social stigma of crucifixion. In the Second Letter to Timothy, Paul prays that the



Crucifixion, by Rouault

house of Onesiphorus might experience the Lord's mercy because Onesiphorus 'often refreshed me and *was not ashamed* of my chain' (1:16). When their public proclamation of the gospel message provoked a hostile response from the religious leadership, Peter and the apostles 'rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of the name' (Acts 5:41; see also Romans 1:16; 1 Peter 4:16; Mark 8:38). The early followers of Jesus were viewed by the religious and social establishments in the same way as he was: with ignominy.

The Significance of the Resurrection

The crucifixion is not the end of the story, of course. In the lapidary words that Luke gives to Peter in Acts, 'this Jesus God raised up' (2:32). And, in a later speech, Peter refers to 'Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead' (4:10).

The reality of the resurrection and exaltation of Christ is central to our faith. When we place it alongside the reading of the crucifixion story that I have just presented, the question is raised: might the all-transforming fact of Jesus' resurrection render any effort at understanding the pre-theological event of the cross irrelevant?

A personal experience shows that such a question is not merely academic. I once had a friend who was a bishop (a leader highly esteemed by the people of his diocese for his pastoral orientation, it should be noted). In a conversation he once remarked: 'I want people to come to know and love the Christ who is risen and lives among us, not the pre-resurrection Jesus of Nazareth. It's the risen Christ who makes all the difference.' I suspect that he is not alone.

In the years leading up to Vatican II, and particularly in the catechesis that has become more prominent since the council, the Church has called the faithful to a renewed sense of the central place of the resurrection, and of the continuing presence of Christ in the life of the Christian community. This move has been a necessary one. Prior to the 'rediscovery' of the resurrection, through the work of Durrwell and others, the proclamation of the risen Christ was more muted. Greater attention and emphasis was given to a spirituality based on the *imitatio Christi*. We might profitably ask, however, whether, in the effort to recentre our understanding of the mystery, the connection to the one who drew fishermen to leave all and follow him in the first place has

been inappropriately diminished. To put it glibly, but perhaps also aptly: do we have too much 'Christ' and not enough 'Jesus'?

Karl Rahner frequently observed that in practice, if not in formal belief, most Christians seem really to be Monophysites. The Lord, the one who saves, is simply 'God', and there is apparently no further need to consider or to be challenged—or potentially scandalized—by the enfleshed human nature of Jesus of Nazareth. If such a position were professed formally it would be heretical. As a practical mode of living it allows us to evade the spiritual struggle of coming to terms with a saviour who redeems us through the medium of the same refractory flesh to which every last one of us is heir.

We eviscerate the mystery of the risen Christ, and indeed the cosmic Christ of Colossians, if we reduce him to some ethereal Gnostic ideal. Only if we can recognise him as the Galilean preacher—the one whom Peter called simply 'this Jesus' (Acts 2:32)—do we touch the truth. This is the same Jesus who provoked the wrath of unworthy pretenders to religious leadership and had to be murdered as a loathsome blasphemer outside the holy city. Our redemption was worked, not in spite of the fleshly passion and urgency of Jesus, but through that very reality. Resurrection is not de-incarnation: it allows the fire that is already available in the human to transcend all the barriers of time and space and transform the whole of creation.

We follow one whose obedience to the mission given him by the Father cost him his life. That mission did not permit passivity in the face of the religious hypocrisy that oppressed his people, but was rather a challenge to confront it. The confrontation was conscious and it was pursued with passion. Jesus knew what he was doing and what it would cost: rejection and condemnation by those who were the accepted custodians of religious truth and practice among the people of the Covenant.

The Spirit poured out upon us today as the fruit of Jesus' free entry into death and its acceptance by the Father is the Spirit of that 'same Jesus', carrying forward the same mission, and with the same passion.

George B. Wilson SJ is an ecclesialogist and church consultant working out of Cincinnati, Ohio.