

The Cross and the Problem of Evil.

FROM the days of the apostles until now the Cross has been central in the faith and message of the Church. "I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified," wrote Paul long ago. And the Church of to-day sings: "In the cross of Christ I glory." Again, the celebration of the Lord's Supper, month by month, if not more often, gives to the cross a place of special prominence in the Church's worship. What clear meaning does it have for the modern mind which, after all, is the one to which we have to minister? From the New Testament, especially the Epistles, from the Fathers, and the many treatises on the Atonement, which have appeared at various times, and from different schools, we may see some measure of its meaning for the past. The question is, what significance does it have for the mind of to-day? Is it a mystery to be accepted by faith, or a central fact and focal point of revelation, wherein the heart of God is unveiled in His relation to the world's waywardness and sin? Only to the extent that we see any truth clearly and believe, are we able to teach it, and win men to its acceptance. We cannot be effective in that concerning which we are misty, and the repetition of old statements and formulae will be of no avail unless our own thought and experience has made them our own.

"The modern mind" is, of course, a very wide phrase, covering very much, and with it some are very impatient; nevertheless, it stands for something which is very real. In its widest extent it includes all sorts and conditions of men, an almost infinite variety of thought and outlook, but in this article we are thinking more especially of those who are under the influence of the higher and wider education of to-day. And the majority of those with whom we have to deal are, to some extent at least, affected by the mental currency of the times. If our work brings us into contact with such we realize the necessity of building upon facts, whether of history of experience, and from them demonstrating the reasonableness and worth of the Christian faith. On the whole it is true to say that the modern mind is not prepared to believe on mere authority. It is impatient of tradition, and asks for reasons and explanations. In the realm of religion it is characterised by open-mindedness and freedom in its attitude to the dogmas and teaching of the Church. It is unwilling to take things for granted. In so far as it is educated and thoughtful its temper

is scientific, and in so far as it is religious it believes that "all facts are God's facts." The breach between the past and present generation is, in many respects, very wide, and it is the fault of neither. Each has been brought up under different conditions and ideas. The modern mind presents a challenge to the Church and her task is to win it for the service of Christ. To do this we must meet the age on its own level, think along with it, and try to lead it up to the great truths of the Christian faith. It may be that, as we think things through concerning the Cross we shall find that we are not at heart very far from our forefathers. Perhaps the fact that so many still love to sing the great hymns of the Church which centre in the cross is evidence of this. Theology is but man's attempt to express the inexpressible, the effort to think God's thoughts after Him as honestly as we can, and every effort of the past to interpret the cross has elements in it of permanent worth if it really sought to tell of what Christ had wrought in the soul.

One begins with the fact of the Cross and asks why that particular cross has been thrust into prominence? Thousands must have perished on a cross, and many, no doubt, innocently. There has been more than one such miscarriage of justice. Yet out of all those crucifixions, man only thinks of one. The Cross for him means Calvary. The explanation is to be found surely in the Person. Jesus was not as other men. That is just what the Gospels tell us. When we have made every allowance for reasonable criticism, we have good grounds for holding that the Gospels give us a substantially true portrait of Jesus as He really was. The stamp of reality is upon the picture; and when we accept the portrait of the Person we can understand the tremendous problem to faith the Cross was at the first to the disciples. Only something beyond it, a resurrection, is sufficient to account for the subsequent recovery of belief. We take that portrait of Christ. We think of the manner and quality of His life, His unique consciousness of God, His love towards God and man, His purity and holiness, all that He did and was; then placing our selves at the Cross we begin to understand something of its darkness and why it shattered for awhile the faith of the disciples. Given the fact of the Cross, and left at that, then we still have a great problem to faith. We are left with evil on the throne. Sin is triumphant. In the Cross we have first of all a revelation of sin, and because of the life and character of the crucified the evil of it is all the more thrown into relief.

The fact of the Cross brings us immediately up against the problem of sin, and God's relation to it. Is there such a thing as a Divine government in this world? If so, what is God's way with sin for its conquest and eradication from the heart of man?

We have to make room for the fact of the Cross. God permitted it as He seems to permit evil every day. What we see in the Cross, looked at as an event, we see right through history, and in the present. We have atrocities and wars, the suffering of the innocent, the apparent triumph of cruelty and wrong. The blundering and the sin of man is still active and working havoc in human life and happiness. As an event the cross takes its place with all those other events wherein evil has its way and the innocent suffer. When, during the war, we were called to minister to those sorely perplexed in faith, and especially those who suffered bitter loss, did we seek to relate what was transpiring to the fact of the Cross? We had the same problem in essence, that of moral evil and God's way with it. If we had found any light at the Cross, then we had light on these things. Apparently, as many thought, God seemed to be doing nothing; but in reality, if the Cross is a place of revelation, He was doing everything. The revelation of God in Christ must be our guiding thought as we essay the great problem of moral evil. We must think of God as somehow involved in the travail of His creation and ever winning victory over wrong.

Granted human freedom, limited though it may be, there must be the possibility of the Cross and moral evil. God permitted the Cross because freedom is a reality, and He deals with man as a moral being. Because free, man may work righteousness or wrong. In the parable of the Prodigal we have the problem put in picture form. The son can go into the far country or stay at home, because he is a son and not a slave. The father only wishes to have the son in the home as he loved to be there. He will not keep him by force, whatever the cost of his son's going may mean. The son chooses the far country, learns the cost of it to himself and his home, then he comes to himself. He realizes the folly, the wickedness, and selfishness of sin. In penitence he returns, and though he knows himself to be unworthy, he is given the place of a son. The father has won his victory. He now has a true son, free to go or to stay; but who remains in his father's house desiring to be nowhere else. The son has learned his lesson. He has discovered there is no true freedom or happiness save in his father's service. All the tragedy of the far country could have been spared had the father withheld his goods and denied the son his freedom. But there would have been no joy in the father's heart and no true son in his home. He suffers him to go and waits to win his heart whilst leaving him free. This victory the father has in the end.

May we not say that we have a somewhat similar problem before us as we think of the Cross? If one may put it so, the problem to God is that of bringing this prodigal world home to

Himself. The victory that He seeks over man is moral and spiritual. He would have man gladly accepting and doing His will. He wants sons, not slaves. Whilst leaving man free He would win him from evil. He not only waits, but works, for man's turning from selfishness and sin, for his penitence and surrender, that in the Father's house he may find forgiveness, renewal, and truest freedom. He wants man to realize the nature of sin, the cost of it to himself and his fellows, and above all to his God and Father. Is it not this we get in the Cross? "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself." Granted freedom, and man as sinful, the Cross must be. It revealed the measure of man's alienation from God. It revealed not only the sinfulness of man, but the cost of it to God. "God was in Christ," and it is that fact which above all gives to the Cross its significance. He suffered His Holy One to be crucified. He let man do his worst to His best, but instead of it proving to be the victory of man it has proved to be the victory of God. Through the Cross God has won many souls unto Himself, and He shall yet see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied. If there had been no resurrection, no assurance that Jesus lived, the last word would have seemed to be with sin, and, it may be, we might have heard no more of the Cross. It was what followed that made men write the story. But with the record of the life which preceded, and with the resurrection on the other side of it, we see the Cross as central and focal. It is the manifestation of God in Christ, paying the price of sin, showing His love to the uttermost, seeking to win man unto Himself. With true insight Studdert Kennedy, in his poem, "The Sorrow of God," makes the soldier say, as he thinks of the horror of the conflict, and then of his son who went astray, in spite of all:

Well, may be, that's 'ow it is with God,
 'Is sons 'ave got to be free;
 Their wills are their own, and their lives their own,
 And that's 'ow it 'as to be.
 So the Father God goes sorrowing still
 For 'Is world what 'as gone to see,
 But 'E runs up a light on Calvary's 'ight
 That beckons to you and me.

That cross which God permitted in a world of sons free to sin seemed to be the crowning hour of evil, but in reality it was the hour of its defeat. It is God known in the whole fact of Christ, and supremely in the Cross, which has drawn men unto Himself and made them His true sons. It is out of that real unity of God and Christ, and the self-identification of Christ with men, we may deduce all the interpretive value of the cross as we think of the problem of sin. There we see the Divine way for the redemption of the world from evil. Whilst God seems to permit

it He is ever opposing it with His own holiness and love. He leaves man free to work that which is dark and sinful, but in the very working of evil man in the long run defeats himself. We turn from the crucifiers to the Crucified. Christ wins through His cross which men intended should end His power. We are won by the love which identifies itself to the uttermost with the cause of man's redemption. "His own Self bare our sins in His own body on the tree," says Peter, "that we being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness." Human sin brought Him there, that the sin of the world might be done away. On the human side this at least we see, the redemptive value of the Cross lies in what it works in us. We behold sin. We see its character and what it can do. We realize the cost of it to God and His world, and as in true surrender we respond to the love manifested we are forgiven, restored to fellowship; made by the surrender of our wills true sons of God, henceforth to be fellow-workers together with Him for the building up of His Kingdom. The Cross turns from sin to righteousness as it becomes to us a place of revelation, and it sets before us a way of life and service wherein is found the liberty of the sons of God. If the vision of sin and its cost will not set up moral revolt in the soul, then men are indeed lost; but where there is that moral revolt, which is true penitence, then God's grace comes to forgive, strengthen, and renew.

Again and again does this great truth of the Cross receive its demonstration. Evil defeats itself, over-reaches itself. God conquers sin whilst apparently permitting it. He does not annihilate human freedom. It is not that He remains passive. His holiness and righteousness and love are ever active. They were incarnate in Christ, who used weapons; but they were the weapons of the Heavenly Kingdom. With them Christ waged warfare, and He could say in the end, "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." And all who take the way of the Cross, serving love and righteousness to the uttermost, are like Paul, "filling up that which is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for His body's sake, which is the Church." They are helping to create the new heavens and the new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. They are helping to set the world free. Tacitus tells us in his Annals that when Nero knew the people suspected him of setting fire to Rome he cast the blame on the Christians and subjected them to terrible torture. "They were not only put to death, but put to death with insult; they were either dressed up in the skins of beasts, to perish by the worrying of dogs, or else put on crosses to be set on fire, and when the daylight failed, to be burnt for use as lights by night." But he goes on to say that hate for the Christians turned to pity, for

men felt "they were not destroyed for the good of the State, but to satisfy the cruelty of an individual." The iniquity of Nero defeated its own end. "The blood of the martyrs" became "the seed of the Church." Centuries afterwards we have the Inquisition. The Papacy by its persecution and cruelty sought to crush the Reformation movement and the struggle of the soul for freedom. She tortured the martyrs but increased their cause. The Inquisition finally sounded its own death-knell. Men arose and said, "This shall not be." The vision and experience of such evil spread revolt, and that form of it was swept away, though at terrible cost.

To-day men look without rather than within. They are concerned with society rather than with the soul. They are thinking more of social and international relationships than of the individual aspects of salvation. This is a phase and reaction due to many causes. There is so much more to engage the attention of men. Knowledge of the world has increased, social unrest has thrust itself forward, the war has made us very conscious of international questions. We do not find that religious introspectiveness the past knew, and which in many cases was carried to excess. There is still the consciousness of sin, but it is less individualistic. The world breaks in upon us more. Nevertheless, amid all our concern with the world we must not forget to look within. Sin is there, as well as in society. Redemption cannot be social unless at the same time it is individual. It is still necessary to remind men of this. In the light of the Cross, what a challenge the problem of society throws out to us. Force may have its place in the affairs of men, but it will never convert the world to the way of God and establish His kingdom. Only penitence, goodwill, a new heart and a new mind will do that. And this is the continual message of God in Christ. God the Spirit uses facts and speaks through facts. His supreme fact is Christ, the whole fact of Christ in His life, death, and resurrection. We endeavour to get at the meaning of it for to-day. The nations have passed through a great and ghastly conflict. We know something of the misery, suffering, and havoc it has wrought, and is still working in poverty and unrest. God permitted it as He permitted the cross of long ago, for freedom to do evil still belongs to man. But what is the Spirit of God saying through such upheavals and catastrophes? Is it not the old word, "Come unto Me"? There is a way of life and a way of death. In place of the old antagonism of nations there must be a true League of Nations. Difficult though the task may be, men must recognize the necessity of co-operation, love, and goodwill. By refusal we may make this cross also of none effect. Men must

be taught to think and work in terms of the common good. The vision of a kingdom of righteousness must be continually held up before them and its moral demands unflinchingly stressed.

The salvation of the world lies in its own hands. If it takes the way of God² revealed in Christ, there will be healing and progress. The future will be better than the past, and God will co-operate with man. The Cross is His way of dealing with selfishness and sin in the heart and in the world. It speaks of the victory of love, the impotence of wrong, the certainty of sin's final defeat. Man must still learn to sicken at the wickedness and harvest of sin. He must learn that he is lost unless he freely and gladly surrenders up his will to God. At the heart of the Cross is Christ's offering of Himself. In the surrender of His will to the Father was His perfect sacrifice. In His name man may also offer up his own will. Wherein he falls short he is "justified by faith."

We may take an old sentence from its context and speak of "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world," and that may mean to us that Christ made manifest in history what has been eternally true of the unseen life of the Father. If love, then the Cross must belong to God whilst sin mars His creation. It is inevitable where men are free and men sin. The cost of sin to Christ was the Cross, and because "God was in Christ" we see also the cost of it to God. If in the light of that we say, "I will arise and go to my Father," then the travail of the Cross is achieved in us. It becomes then not only something to believe in but something also to live upon. So, accepting it, the grace of God works in and through us to end the reign of sin in our heart and the world without. Through surrender and consecration to God in Christ we are "made whole," and become the instruments of righteousness. It is with such who see in Christ what love is, and what sin means, that God builds His kingdom. In them is Christ born again; crucified to sin, they live to righteousness.

"Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good." That is one great part of the message of the Cross. This way Christ took for the world's redemption, and by that way we become His brethren, sharing His life and His victory. The hope of the world lies this way only. Beginning with the fact of Christ and His Cross, we may lead men to realize the call of God to them.

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