

The Suffering God.

AS we are all agreed now that Christ was the Divine Sufferer or He was no Saviour, it seems to follow logically that God was, and is, and ever will be, also the Divine Sufferer. In the very first place, the mere act of Creation must have been a most costly one, not indeed by diminishing but by increasing from our point of view His riches and resourcefulness. He gladly paid the price, because it made the Infinite to us at least more of an Infinite, and enabled God relatively to realise as not before the extent of His own wonderful Nature. Nothing could possibly cost nothing. Extensively and intensively this for us widened and deepened, with the augmentation of spiritual knowledge. Evolution, by which so far as we can see God loves to work, means perpetual Creation (genesis and epigenesis) and therefore perpetual Suffering. The doctrine of the Divine Impassibility, so dear to Pearson and all the ancient and modern "divines" so called, perhaps because they "divine" so little like *lucus a non-lucendo*, has no supporters now. The new doctrine of Divine Passibility holds the field against all comers. No artist, no poet, no painter, no sculptor, has ever wrought a single work, without its taking a great deal out of him. Indeed many human creators have been seriously ill after their arduous productions. Parturition, the labour of bringing a child to birth, is often no worse, and in the case of some comparatively light. But the "Bairns o' the brain," the offspring of the soul, involve a more painful and expansive preparation and incubation. A purely physical process lies on a different and lower plane than the birth of a great book or work of art. This is a really Divine nativity. It taxes the whole man to the uttermost, his mental, moral and spiritual faculties. It is an event, not an ordinary occurrence, and with the greatest authors a cosmical event; like the appearance of a new star in the firmament.

" Then felt I as a watcher of the skies,
When some new planet swims into his ken."

If we reflect a moment, it would be no honour, no credit to God, if His works were entirely painless. The fashioning of the lowliest leaf, the smallest flower, the meanest unicellular organism, through the course of centuries, as it slowly developed to the final and destined

form, as it attained its ultimate shape of perfection, or what we in our ignorance call imperfection—for the bud, no less than the blossom, has a perfection of its own—must have meant a world of suffering. Take for instance what is lightly called a weed, the modest Pimpernel, of which a living poet writes so appositely :

“ Kings dress in purple, Love is clothed with pain,
 And in Diviner fashion
 The Pimpernel is red from cosmic strain ;
 For it hurt God to stamp its bloody stain,
 And He made nothing without cost and passion.
 No agony is there, like giving birth
 To one small flower, as to the heaven and earth.

Let me rejoice to suffer with Him too
 Just in a mortal measure,
 And dare the marvels He can ever do ;
 Let me wax bolder in degree, and woo
 A fiercer furnace—if it be His pleasure.
 The Pimpernel, I know, must give a price
 For scarlet robes of priestly sacrifice.

What though eclipse falls on my land and sky
 Or darken flowers when singing,
 Blow follows blow and will not pass me by ?
 I shall be one of the Great Company,
 To which the roots of every life is clinging,
 And pangs are lighter down in deepest hell,
 For the red robes of Christ's dear Pimpernel.”

We see everywhere scattered about the vegetable universe the clearest marks of the Divine Passion as in the case of the “ Calvary Clover,” nor is the animal world different. The palpable cross on the back of the drudging ass is only one among many. The cruel stigmata of the thorns and nails and spear, the very symbols themselves, can be detected by the smallest amount of observation almost anywhere. There is no tree without a cross, nor does the meanest organism exist which does not carry with it a living Calvary. And since the whole Creation hangs upon the Eternal Cross, it would be strange indeed if its Author did not share in the universal agony, as His is all the responsibility. What did our Lord say, when the woman with an issue of blood touched the hem of His garment ? “ I perceive that virtue is gone out of Me.” And again, “ There went virtue out of Him and healed them all.” And the meaning of “ virtue ” or its Greek equivalent, namely *dynamis*, is of course power. When our Lord wept and groaned in spirit and sweated blood in the Garden of Gethsemane, did it not mean a most painful tragedy to Him, though “ for the joy that was set before Him He

endured the Cross and His life-long Passion—despising the shame? Aye, and every work of Creation inevitably involves travail for the Creator, though Omnipotent and Inviolable Himself. If we pile upon the Deity all the possible attributes that glorify His Greatness, we cannot escape the fact that He always has willingly suffered, and always will and always must willingly suffer. A grain of sand, a blade of grass, a drop of dew, the simplest cell, not that any cell is simple, the invisible micro-organism, imply a certain reaction and more or less pain on the part of the Creator. We do not exalt the Maker by assuming that He is beyond the reach of pain Himself, because He possesses no nervous system. Though there should be something spiritual answering even to this. We rather disparage and depreciate the Supreme Value above and beyond values. To be insensible or indifferent or irresponsive to pain in some sort of refined sense can only arouse the conception of an Unrelated Being completely out of sympathy with His many worlds. Aristotle's idea of God, as expounded in the twelfth book of his *Metaphysics*, however interesting and beautiful to the philosopher, leaves very much to be desired. We cannot extract the vital comfort out of *κινῆι ὡς ἐρώμενον*. Here we have a mere sublime Abstraction entirely out of touch with us and all His creatures, doing duty for and masquerading in a metaphysical garment as a veritable Deity.

In the Acts of the Apostles we have a curious betrayal, so to speak, of the Divine Passibility. "The Church of God, which He hath purchased with His own Blood." And again we read in St. John's First Epistle, "Hereby perceive we the Love of God, because He laid down His life for us." It was and is and ever will be absolutely impossible for God, even if He so wished as He does not, to escape from the logical, the inexorable consequences of His own eternal purposes. For in Creation began that sublime Kenosis, which was at the same time an Anaplerosis. For, as with His creature Man, the more God gives away the more He has. Giving is His innermost Being, and giving in Evolution only opens out fresh storehouses and treasures of Grace or Grandeur. For the Divine limitations mean further and further illuminations in the illimitableness of the Creator. We know that, in our dear Lord's Incarnation, He "emptied" Himself. And so, at the very Creation or the commencement of the Eternal Evolution, which properly had no beginning and can have no end, to speak in human terms,

God emptied Himself in order to fill and fulfil Himself more and yet more. Into the awful mystery of this Self-renunciation for Self-realisation we dare not pretend or presume to enter. But we know and believe that this transcendent and inconceivable act of Grace and condescension must have been as it is now, associated with infinite pain. The idea of a God in travail is a stupendous and unutterable idea, and yet perfectly true. But, this being necessarily the case, we feel assured that God for our unspeakable comfort is our Companion in suffering. "In all their afflictions He was afflicted." For the Creator and the Creation, the Creator and the Creatures, cannot but always go together. That which hurts or injures us, hurts and injures Him. He feels the picking of a flower. We are fellow-workers, fellow-doers and fellow-sufferers. And therefore, whatever the issues, they must be right and happy and good. Besides, God is our Lord, and we His subjects, in acknowledging His rule, do not doubt it is the rule of Universal Love, though appearances may present *prima facie* the very opposite. "Whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth." But also, in the same way and at the same time, He is chastening Himself. It must infallibly be so—"With His stripes we are healed." "Though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered." And the same holds equally true of the Father, who thus fulfils His Fatherhood. As was God in His early manifestations, so is God in His glory. Indeed it constitutes the chief Greatness of God, to endure all that His subjects and servants endure. Insect or elephant, mollusc or man, prince or peasant, all the relations affect the Lord of all, according to their measure in their passion—as they are one with Him. Their pangs, the merest thorn-pricks reverberate faithfully in the Divine Nature. Sympathy, that intimate tie which links together the Ruler and the ruled, the Supreme Employer and the employed, is a very vital bond of union. In pure Pantheism a complete identification takes place, but not of course in this case. For the Ruler and the ruled, the Sovereign and His servants, though closely and tenderly connected, are distinct though never separated. And, when we look upon God as a Father—and have we not all One Father?—the sympathy deepens and broadens out both extensively and intensively. Children and all Creatures both the highest and the lowest are not merely Creatures but Children, possessing definite and decisive claims on their Begetter, which He

would be the last to repudiate. For we should be more than stupid to suppose that no immediate answers to our prayers imply a blank refusal. The apparent negative may simply mean that God, seeing the leanness of a Soul, declines to impoverish it yet more by bestowing exactly what it asks and thinks it needs. And when the response seems a contradictory issue, it may be that such a contradiction is the best possible reply to a blind petition. Children often demand what may not be granted. They seek absurdities and impossibilities, like the moon or the stars. We humour them and answer them, by offering something better and more suitable. And in like manner our Heavenly Father, who as none else sees and understands our vital needs, confers on us other gifts than those we plead for in our extreme ignorance. Till at the last and before very long, when things work themselves out, we discover to our complete satisfaction that the forbidden boon would have been a curse and not a blessing. Yes, and what human father could be such a Particular and Paternal Providence, as Infinite and Everlasting and Universal Love? We must never for a moment doubt the Divine Goodness when affliction or disease or even death approaches us. *Medieus venit mors*. Whatever we may choose to think, who are able to see and know such a very little of the immensity of the Whole, we shall finally confess, if not at first, that all which has happened to us was for the best. For it is certain, and this takes away the darkness and bitterness of the fact, that God the Father suffers in us and with us and for His children. He lives with us and He dies with us. We can never get away from Him, from His invigilating care, from His far-reaching mercies, from His pursuing compassion. We fly from Him and we speedily find that we have only fled to Him. The iron bar, the insurmountable boundary, the impassable gulf—the “great gulf fixed”—the stony-hearted wilderness, the obstructive Jordan with its flooded torrent, the impregnable Jericho walled up to heaven, were really His protecting Arms. The hopeless and utter *impasse*, the abysmal *cul-de-sac* without a single clue to read its riddle, were only betrayals of His very present help. And in the grave itself we just lie down upon His breast.

From every point of view it should be clear, now that God, the Creator, the Preserver, the King, the Master, the Father, does suffer and must for ever suffer, if He is God, since (if we may use such a human expression without irreverence) He has given hostages to

Fortune. By the very primal, the very aboriginal conditions of His Existence as a Friend, and therefore frequently a kind and noble Enemy, God has made Himself liable to the same fate as ours. Nothing is impossible to God. For His flawless and faultless Immortality contains in it the Passion of mortality, and accordingly He dies daily, though each death is but a glorious life. Sin alone is the one infirmity to which He cannot stoop. The essential Holiness of the Divine Nature forbids this one solitary imperfection. All other imperfections, great and small, He gathers up into the affluence of His Character, the opulence of His Conduct. Our poor finitude lies embraced and therefore Divinely tolerable in His Infinitude, our weaknesses are included and therefore fortified in His vast Strength, our faults and follies gain wisdom by His Inerrancy. He finds room for our wildest unreasonablenesses, for our most frivolous uselessnesses, but He has no place or part in Him for the slightest Sin. And if God could cease to exist and love, that and that alone would accomplish His annihilation. As the arch and the wheel were unknown to the ancient Central and South American civilisations, so is Sin unknown to God. "He is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity." This remains as our fundamental consolation and security. We feel that in this respect He becomes a harbour of refuge, a house, a heaven, into which Sin cannot enter, on which Sin can cast no shadow and no stain. But, on the other hand, the presence of this intrusive element must add in some unfathomable degree to the sufferings of Perfect Holiness. We know how our Saviour felt it and agonised when brought into its neighbourhood. Contact, no doubt, actual contact, never occurred and never could have occurred, because there was nothing in Him when Sin was present to represent or reflect it in the faintest way. But who has not felt oppressed, darkened, polluted, by the society if but for a passing moment of some wicked person, in the street or in the room. An evil atmosphere seemed to emanate from him and to poison the very wellsprings of life. We have felt soiled even by a look, a word, a gesture, by a malignant action from a distance. And if we in our measure are capable of such awful affections, what must it be to the Creator, the Father, to apprehend everywhere the contamination of this vile disease? Its presence in the world, in every corner of the world, latent or patent, must be to Him an intolerable pain. We, limited beings as we are, can form no conception of

what such a haunting horror must be, to spotless Purity, and the pangs it must inflict on the Divine Sufferer. If it were possible, it would violate even the Inviolable. And then, if we consider that this plague-spot, this pestilence, this defiling leprosy has been going on ever since man appeared on the surface of the earth, for hundreds and thousands of years, we may well wonder how God, the One Burden-bearer, was able to bear it.

And yet this should help us to see that therefore Suffering is its own cure. For it carries with it the antidote, the specific, for immediate healing. The pain and the remedy grow on the same stalk and rise from the same root. To suffer, is to rejoice and reign with God Himself. Moreover, "the whole Creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now," and consequently we must be the recipients not only of the Creation's weakness but of the Creation's strength that passes into us in the course of the Evolutionary process. It is all one movement. God shares His Passion with us and with every creature, and in obedience to the law we grow partakers of the Life. So we can help the Creator to bear His Sufferings, when we are doing our duty and acting or trying to act as Christ did. He has need of us, as we have need of Him, though the two cases hardly bear comparison and but to an infinitesimal extent. And the Cross, the blessed symbol of Suffering, becomes at once Human and Divine; we accept it with joy, just as we accept the splendour of our spiritual destiny. "But if we be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are we bastards and not sons." A great French writer has said: "S'il y avait un peuple de Dieux, il se gouvernerait démocratiquement." But we have, we are "un peuple de Dieux," in the Christian Church, which is a Suffering and Militant Church without distinction of rank or class before God, and the universality of its passion, its unity in Suffering, makes it a Democracy, since here there can be no feudal divisions, no difference of caste. We are all alike mortal and immortal, we are all rewarded and ennobled through Suffering by the privilege of more Suffering, wherein we enjoy the prerogatives of God Himself. We are created and kept and "bought with a price," and it is God who paid it and pays it still and must pay it for ever. Mercy or Love, if unbounded, in its action passes judgment on its objects. Nothing can be more terrible than this to the unworthy. What did Peter feel, and what did he say, when he first began to realise the Love and the Holiness

of Christ? "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" And so we can form some feeble idea of the Divine Suffering, when we behold the Cross as the measure of God's Love and the measure of man's guilt. We must remember also that, while for us there is occasional respite, for the Creator and Preserver there can be none. His Cross confronts us everywhere as Eternal, and His Passion has none of our alleviations. We may and many do, drink deeply of our Saviour's cup, we must enter His Gethsemane, we must be crucified on His Calvary, but of God's infinite and endless Suffering we know but little or nothing. We can only kneel in awe and adoration at the uttermost fringes of this stupendous Mystery. Were we able to penetrate it, to comprehend it within the compass of the human mind, God and Man would change places. The first and the last provision of grace is Faith. We find it working in the assumptions of science, in the presumptions of theology, and in the subsumptions of metaphysics. The social fabric, social intercourse, trade and traffic, and the organised or unorganised hypocrisies of diplomacy, hang together if they cohere at all by the thread of Faith. And this Faith, this Divine instinct and prevision, assures us that there could be no universe, no Creation, no Creator, unless united by this gossamer which looks as if it could be blown away by the least breath of suspicion and yet supports all that is and will be. What did Kant say? "I was compelled to remove Knowledge that I might make room for Faith." What did Kant teach? That Faith is the ground of all our actions, and validity of all our reasonings. What does Religion, the practical outcome of all our spiritual experience and intuition, tell us? That the world rests upon an elephant, and the elephant upon a tortoise, and the tortoise upon the nothingness and the everythingness of simple Faith, that a child can understand and the deepest thinker cannot ultimately fathom. But, if we once accept the Christotelic life, and endeavour to the best and utmost of our abilities to bear the Cross of Christ daily, we shall soon find that the Cross rather is bearing us and eventually the supreme blessedness, not happiness which only fools and philosophers pursue, will be ours which has been "Made perfect through Suffering, *Pathos mathos.*"

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