

## THE XIX CENTENARY OF THE REDEMPTION

THE beginning of April witnessed the opening of the Holy Year and the proclamation of the extraordinary jubilee. The Redemption is the chief event in history, not only for Catholics, but for everyone for whom Christ is not merely a name, but a living reality. It is out of the Redemption that 'has come this civilisation in which we rejoice and on which we pride ourselves.' This event carries with it 'a wonderful succession of divine *gesta*,' above all 'the institution at the Last Supper of the Holy Eucharist, entrusted to the Apostles, who saw themselves elevated to the priestly order by these words: *Do this in memory of Me*; the Passion of Jesus Christ, His Crucifixion and His death for the salvation of men; the Virgin Mary, constituted, at the foot of the Cross of Her Son, Mother of all men; then the wonderful Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the sign and assurance of our own; presently the dispensation to the Apostles of the power of forgiving sins; the true primacy of jurisdiction given and confirmed to Peter and his successors; and, lastly, the Ascension of Our Lord, the descent of the Holy Spirit, and forthwith the prodigious and triumphant teaching of the Apostles.'<sup>1</sup>

In his Christmas broadcast, the Pope had said that although 1933 is regarded as the centenary year in the common opinion of the faithful, and that in this they have scientific support, scholars have not yet fixed the date of the Crucifixion with absolute certitude. As some controversy has lately arisen on this point, it may be well to review briefly the grounds on which the date has been traditionally established.

The Evangelists are silent as to the year in which Our Lord died. They had but little interest in precise chronology. They were more concerned with Christ's teaching. The only definite synchronism with general history is that of St. Luke, who connects the beginning of the Baptist's ministry, and consequently Christ's baptism, which fol-

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<sup>1</sup> The Bull *Quod Nuper* of Pope Pius XI, Jan. 6th, 1933.

lowed very shortly afterwards, with the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar (Luke, iii, 1).

If we were only certain of the duration of Our Lord's ministry, it would be quite easy to find out the year of His death simply by adding so many years of His public life to the fifteenth year of Tiberius. But the few indications we possess in the Gospels are too slight and vague and subject to too many exegetical difficulties to allow us to define it with certainty. Hence there is among scholars a great variety of opinion on this point.

Since St. Luke's chronological indication is not sufficient to fix the date of the Crucifixion, we must see whether other passages in the Gospels may not possibly throw some light on this vexed problem.

Our starting point must be that, according to the unquestionable evidence of the Gospels, Our Saviour died: (a) on a Friday; (b) which was the 14th or 15th of the Jewish month of Nisan; (c) during the procuratorship of Pontius Pilate and under the High Priest Caiphas.

Pilate succeeded Valerius Gratus, whose retirement from the procuratorship was not earlier than A.D. 25, and he was removed and sent to Rome shortly before Tiberius' death, March 16th, 37. It is therefore beyond dispute that Pilate was ten years governor of Judea from 26 to 36. Again, Caiphas kept the office of High Priest from about the year 18 to 36, when he was deposed at the Passover by Vitellius.

In this way our research is confined to the years 28-35, two extremes outside which the Crucifixion could not have taken place. For A.D. 28 is, as we shall see later on, the earliest possible date for the fifteenth year of Tiberius; Caiphas' deposition, on the other hand, at the Passover of 36, makes it certain that Christ's condemnation was not later than the Passover of 35 A.D.

The next step is to inquire in which year, from A.D. 28 to 35, Nisan 14th or 15th fell on a Friday.

Three promising dates have been proposed by leading scholars: (a) 29, March 18th (or April 15th); (b) 30, April 7th; (c) 33, April 3rd. M. Chaume has advocated a new theory, namely, 35, April 8th.<sup>2</sup> This suggestion, proposed

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<sup>2</sup> *Revue Biblique*, 1918, pp. 215-243, 506-549.

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in the most scholarly way, is indeed very fascinating, but besides being too late, the date involves so many difficulties that it is not easy to accept it.

Let us now examine which of the three proposed dates is more likely to be the correct one.

To begin with, we consider the year 29 as inconsistent with the Gospel narrative. It has been said, and with truth, that this date can claim a good patristic support, the strength of which has been exceedingly well stated by Cardinal Patrizi<sup>3</sup> and C. H. Turner.<sup>4</sup> In fact Tertullian, Lactantius, Hippolytus, and other Fathers tell us that Our Lord died during the consulship of the two Gemini—L. Rubellius Gemini and C. Fusius Gemini, 782 of Rome, and fifteenth of Tiberius—which coincides with the year 29 A.D.

Nevertheless, this statement arose most probably from a misinterpretation of Luke, iv 19: 'To preach the acceptable year of the Lord,' combined with Luke iii, 1, by which combination the fifteenth year of Tiberius has been considered as identical with 'the acceptable year.' The result of this combination and misunderstanding was the widespread view that the whole duration of Christ's public life was confined within the period of a year, from one Passover to the Passover of the following year. Hence the date of Our Saviour's death in 29 A.D., 782 U.C.

St. Luke's statement concerning the fifteenth year of Tiberius, though most definite and exact, yet lends itself to several interpretations, according to the various methods adopted in reckoning the years of the emperor's reign. Hence again many causes of uncertainty.

Tiberius succeeded Augustus, who died August 19th, 767 of Rome, 14 A.D. If we count in the natural and usual way, *i.e.* from the death of his predecessor, the fifteenth year would be from the 19th August 781 of Rome to the 18th August 782, A.D. 28-29. Another way of reckoning was also used, namely from the consuls' tenure of office, January 1st to December 31st, beginning the second year of the reign on the first day of January following that of

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<sup>3</sup> *De Evangeliiis.*

<sup>4</sup> Hastings Dictionary of the Bible.

the succession. If this were the case, the fifteenth year of Tiberius would have been the 781 of Rome, 28 of our era. Sometimes, they used also to reckon each imperial year from a fixed day, either by simply omitting the fractional year, or by reckoning it as the second year of reign. Père Lagrange<sup>5</sup> suggests that in the East, and especially in Syria, an Emperor's reign was reckoned from a fixed day, *i.e.*, October 1st, hence the fractional year from the accession to October 1st was regarded as the first year of the reign. If Luke had followed this reckoning, the second year of Tiberius would begin on October 1st, 14 A.D., and the fifteenth on October 1st, 27. On the contrary, if the fraction were omitted, the fifteenth year would coincide with the year 29 A.D.

Anyhow, whatever system of counting is adopted, it will be found difficult to accept the year 29 as the date of the Crucifixion.

In fact, in the year 28 the Passover occurred on March 29th. Now even on the supposition that the Baptist commenced his ministry from the very beginning of January 28, it would be impossible to place his preaching, Christ's baptism, the forty days in the desert, in such a small space of time as from January to the 29th March of the same year. Consequently the first Pasch of Christ's public life cannot be that of the year 28, and cannot have fallen earlier than April 17th, 29 A.D.

Accordingly the year 29 does not satisfy all the Gospel data. We have therefore to choose between 30 and 33.

As we have already stated, the Crucifixion, according to the unanimous witness of the four Evangelists (Mt. xxvii, 62; Mc. xv, 42; Lc. xxiii, 54; Jo. xix, 14, 31, 42), took place on a Friday, either the 14th or the 15th of the Jewish month Nisan.

Whether the Friday on which Christ died was the 14th or 15th Nisan, has always been a difficult problem and, owing to lack of precise and definite knowledge of Jewish customs, it is considered as insoluble. Leaving therefore aside the discussion of this difficult question—this not being the place for even attempting a solution—we may

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<sup>5</sup> *Évangile selon S. Luc.*

say that if all the evidence, scriptural and patristic, is taken into account, it is rather in favour of the 14th, and we take it here as granted that the Crucifixion took place on the Friday, Nisan 14th.

As chronological dates were little thought of in the Gospel, and only the brief and vague indications just quoted are given, in order to endeavour to fix the date of Christ's death we must seek some help from astronomical observations.

In the time of Our Lord, the Jews did not yet possess a fixed calendar. The first month of the ecclesiastical year was *Nisan* and the last was called *Adar*. The months were lunar months, and the days were reckoned from sunset to sunset. The Passover was celebrated at the full moon of Nisan, after the vernal equinox, when the sun stood in the sign of *Aries*. The beginning of a new month was determined by purely empirical observation, with the appearing of the new moon. When the visibility of the new moon had been proved by trustworthy witnesses before the competent tribunal, the *neomenia*, or new moon was solemnized, and messengers were sent to notify the opening of the new month. After the new moon of Nisan, they counted fourteen days, and on the full moon falling on the 15th, they kept the Passover. But, if towards the close of the year, they noticed that the Passover would fall before the vernal equinox, the intercalation of a month, between Adar and Nisan, was resorted to. The thirteenth month was called, like the last month of the year, *We-Adar*, i.e., the *second Adar*, or Adar again.<sup>6</sup>

Accurate and reliable calculations, made independently by leading astronomers, lead us to the conclusion that of the years 28-35 (within which, as we have already said, Christ's death must have taken place), the only ones in which the 14th and 15th Nisan fell on a Friday are the years 29, 30 and 33. But we have already excluded the year 29, on account of exegetical difficulties, as not admissible; and have regarded the 15th Nisan as less probable.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Schürer, *A History of the Jewish People in the time of Jesus Christ*.

Now, if we adopt the 14th of Nisan as the day of the Crucifixion, the most likely year, according to astronomical observations, is 33, although 30 has just a little chance of success.

If such is the case, it would seem quite easy to determine whether it was in the year 30 or 33, that the full moon of Nisan fell on a Friday. But, as C. H. Turner pointed out, 'the matter is not so simple as it looks; for it is never possible to be certain which day was reckoned as the new moon or first of any given month, and not always possible to be certain which month was reckoned as the Nisan or first of any given year.'

Be that as it may, dealing with a case where precise calculations are impossible, according to astronomical computations, in the year 33, the new moon was visible by observation on the evening of March 20th; if we now add 14 days, we have just the full moon on the evening of Friday, April 3rd, that is, Nisan 14th, and the beginning of the 15th, as the Jewish day commenced at sunset.

We may express this statement in another way. The astronomical full moon in the year 33 fell on April 1st, at 1 p.m., and the astronomical new moon was on March 19th, 1, 12 p.m. But, as the beginning of the new moon was made by empirical observation, that is, by observing the sky with the naked eye, and not by means of instruments, we must give about 24 to 30 hours for the crescent to become visible to the naked eye. The new moon therefore became visible only on March 20th at sunset, and the full moon on April 3rd, fourteen days afterwards. So if the moon was visible on the evening of March 20th, and the Jews followed, as we suppose, the exact computation of the first night of the full moon, we get Friday, Nisan 14th.

There is also a possibility for the year 30. The astronomical new moon fell on March 22nd, at 8.24 p.m. But as the phase occurred so late, it could not possibly be seen before the sunset of March 24th. If we reckon fourteen days we have just April 4th, at 8 p.m., for the astronomical full moon, and April 7th for the visible one. But on ac-

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<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 411.

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count of the late phase, this date has less chance of being the correct one.

Moreover, there is another difficulty against the year 30. St. John explicitly mentions three Passovers, ii, 13, vi, 4, xi, 55. Our Saviour's ministry, therefore, must have covered *at least* three Passovers, which gives two years and a half as the *minimum* length of Christ's public life. Now, if the first Pasch cannot occur earlier than April 17th, 29, and He died on the Passover of the year 30, His public life would have been hardly a year. Such a short time for Christ's ministry is inconsistent not only with St. John's Gospel, but even with the Synoptics.

So, not only for astronomical, but also for exegetical reasons, we consider the year 30 as less probable—unless one accepts Père Lagrange's suggestion, already quoted, that the 15th year of Tiberius was the year 27, and that the first Pasch fell in the year 28 and Our Lord's baptism some time before the same Pasch.

In conclusion we say that the year 33 is the most likely date for Christ's death, if it took place on Nisan 14th, and if the beginning of the new moon was determined by observation, in the exact way stated above.

Our Holy Father the Pope has every reason for proclaiming an extraordinary Holy Year and a great jubilee from the 2nd of April 1933 to the 2nd of April 1934, for the nineteenth Centenary of the Redemption. For, 'indeed, if one is not absolutely certain of the exact date of its place in history,' yet, 'the year 1933 is, in the opinion of the majority of learned men, the nineteenth Centenary of the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ.'

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