

# Life of the Spirit

Volume VI

APRIL 1952

Number 70

## THE WAY OF THE CROSS

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IT is three o'clock, Good Friday afternoon. Coaches and cars, cyclists and hikers, pour from the cities into the countryside; it is the first day of the holidays. Within the cities it is a non-descript sort of day; the shops, theatres, cinemas are closed, but (such at least are the *mores* of the British), there are crowds at the football grounds and the 'dogs'.

There are unusually large crowds in the Catholic churches too. One wonders what has brought them. This is no day of 'obligation'; absence from *this* service will bring no reproach and incur no guilt. Yet, besides the regular congregation, there are rows of unfamiliar faces; faces one seldom or never sees at Sunday Mass.

What, then, is the attraction? *I, if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all men.* . . . But haven't these people enough troubles in their own lives? Don't they know that human beings are being crucified daily all around them, that they have to come and ponder on just one such misery of nearly two thousand years ago? But perhaps it is just this that draws them—and perhaps those most of all who are less protected in the ivory tower of more punctilious devotion. What they have come to witness speaks to them, perhaps, of life and death as they themselves know it.

And, this afternoon, the priest is not remote in the sanctuary, clad in vestments which, however colourful and attractive in their way, seem quite out of this world; nor is he talking a learned tongue, and performing an ancient, royal ritual. He is moving among the people, in *their* part of the church, talking *their* language about pictures they can see and understand. They are pictures which, however execrable, tell of the mighty deeds of one who—whatever their forgetfulness and infidelity—is somehow still at least their Hero.

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The proceedings begin. 'The First Station: *Jesus is condemned to Death.*' What!—at three o'clock in the afternoon? Is not this precisely 'the ninth hour' when Jesus himself had said that it was finished, and gave up the ghost? And just when he has done, are we to begin?—to go back to Pilate's court and through the whole sorrowful Way all over again? Yes; precisely that, and over and over again, beginning where he finishes, finishing where he begins—daily. *If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.* (Matt. 16, 24.)

For his Way is our way—the human way. He is not just a lone figure, treading the streets of Jerusalem long ago, but also the head of a procession through the cities of the world throughout the centuries. He is at the head of the procession because first he had chosen the tail; he can lead us because first he had followed us. The tragic Hero, whose mighty exploits 'purify the emotions' (as Aristotle put it) of the gaping multitude, is not he whose life is strange to them, not one to whom unusual things happen, but one who lives their own lives heroically and divinely; and in so doing shows what their life really is, and what can be made of it. He reflects everyman, and every man is portrayed in him.

But *this* tragedy is ruthlessly realistic; it is stripped of all the myth and symbol which might obscure the essential humanity and everyday relevance of Greek tragedy. Years before, in the desert, our Hero had chosen his Way—*our* way—and had battled with the alternatives. He could have saved us as a superman; he could have lured us with bread made of cold stone, could have descended from the sky into the streets (instead of treading them), could have come to terms with the actual power which rules men's minds and hearts—flattering their egotism instead of calling them to deny it daily. He saw all these 'ways' for what they are: satanic illusions that veil the realities of human existence and destroy it. We cannot follow a superman. So he will follow the human way—*our* way—right through to the end.

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'In our beginning is our end.' *Jesus is condemned to death.* We are all condemned to death at the very beginning of the Way; already in the womb we are condemned to the tomb: there is no other beginning, no other way, and no other destination. We, personally, have done nothing to deserve it. We are condemned

*innocents*. Our way and our destiny are shaped by society and history, alike indifferent to our individual fate. Pilate, the Stoic representative of the *Pax Romana*, is himself the creature as well as the embodiment of society and history. He bears no malice, but law, order and tranquillity (his own and society's) make claims which over-ride justice or compassion for the individual. His wife has had a dream warning him to have nothing to do with this righteous man. So he washes his hands of the whole affair, but lets the fanatical mob take over and lead the Way. But not till he has shown that he recognises the Wayfarer: *Ecce Homo, Behold the Man*—the Human Being.

Out of the judgment hall, and into the street: among the masses of men swayed by mass emotions, group interests and inherited prejudices—in short, 'the world'. There, *Jesus is made to bear the Cross*. Ancient legend had it that the Cross had been made of the Tree of Life from Paradise. If historically false, the legend is symbolically true. And anyway the Cross had been fashioned from a living tree: a living thing of nature, cut down, stripped and fashioned by human art to be the burden of the Way. And such is our life. We cannot fashion it for ourselves, it is laid upon us to carry. Neither can we select its natural ingredients, nor choose the form which men have imposed upon it. For each it is a cross, yet for each it is fashioned differently. He carries *his* cross, but bids each of us carry *his own*—only in carrying our own can we be *his* followers.

Jesus is *made to carry*. So is every tragic hero: everyone, that is to say, who carries life fair and square in full awareness, and is not (as most of us) carried only *by* it, and only half awake. *Made to carry*: we note the strong blend of compulsion and free acceptance: our Hero and Leader embraces fateful necessity, for in the Garden he has experienced that his tragic fate is not only the human way of all flesh, but also his Father's way to its redemption and resurrection. In agony he has fought and prayed it all out in sweat and tears. He has counted the cost of bowing to necessity and *force majeure*, and he will pay the price. He bids us follow; so cheerfully we embrace our cross, and suppose we can take it.

We can not; *he* can not. *Jesus falls*. Then, do we believe we are always upright, and bravely carrying on with stiff upper lip or a song in our hearts? It is a dangerous delusion, the pride that goes before a graver, because more involuntary, fall. We have to come

back to earth (the *humus* of that violated word, *humility*) if we are to stand and walk again, to continue, to carry through to the end of the Way. If we do not fall, it is not *him* we follow. Only by returning to embrace the earth again and again could the Greeks' Antaeus regain his strength to deal with life's encounters. So it is with *our* Hero too.

Life's first encounter is with our *parents*. *Jesus meets his Mother*. It is hard really to *meet* mother, even to see her as she is. She gave us life and food; all we are comes from her. Perhaps consciously she determined our upbringing and environment; unconsciously she certainly determined our heredity. Once we were part of her; and for ever, consciously or unconsciously, must her image and her influence be part of us. Whenever we are confronted with life's difficulties we crave to return to 'mother', to go back to infancy when she was the all-provider and we did not have to carry life, but she carried it for us: even to curl up again in the warm unconsciousness of the womb. Perhaps we no longer seek 'mother' in our actual mother, but in some person or institution which we secretly demand shall take her place. Yet, secretly or overtly, we hate her too; for until we have truly *met* her, her image (if not herself) is holding us back, thwarting our independence, smothering our will to be ourselves and to grow up and continue on our Way. We wildly rebel, till we find that without her we cannot be ourselves, nor advance. There are no logical rules which will enable us to solve the dilemma; there is only the example of the way of the Hero. The finding in the Temple (*Did you not know I must be about my Father's business?*), the affair at Cana (*What is that to me and to thee?*), the interruption of the ministry (*Who is my mother and my brethren?*)—each had been a moment of tension between the hearts of Jesus and Mary which, faced boldly, realistically and lovingly, had united them with all the deeper understanding. Only by the separation of mother and child can each see the other, and can both find themselves; only by separation from family attachment can life go on. This leaving of father and mother is the old wisdom of Genesis 2, 24—*this* wrench from the claim of the parental family. Now Mother and Son confront each other again: he *knows* his, and her, mutual attraction. He looks, understands, loves—but does not linger.

He goes on, as we must go on, alone in the crowd, through the winding, narrow streets. One cannot see far ahead, or what help

or hindrance lies round the corner. He is no superman, but of the same nature as each individual in the milling, jeering or indifferent crowd around him. He is unique and alone, not because his way is different, but because he knows what the crowd forgets, and so shows their own way to each and all. He is tired and weakened; he needs help. We need help, and though it is more blessed to give than to receive, it is more humbling to be helped than to help. We have left the family-attachment now; strangers enter our lives to help carry the cross. It may be freely and lovingly, it may be from a chance encounter, it may be to earn their own living or in fulfilment of their calling (schoolmasters, doctors, writers, priests), it may be under compulsion. Chance and compulsion combined to bring it about that one unknown *Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to carry the Cross*.

But the Way brings more intimate encounters and relationships. In the half-conscious or unconscious mass there are individuals with minds and hearts and courage of their own. One such detaches herself (as she can only if she is already detached) from the amorphous, hostile mob: one who loves him, and whose brave love he will reciprocate with the impress of his own image. *Veronica wipes the face of Jesus*. Perhaps we have thought too well of ourselves: only deep love of a fellow-human-being, and the way we respond to it, will show our *verum eikon*, our real likeness as others see it; what we are, and not what we would like to be. It is often hideous. It is often hard to face our own face. Of him it had been written that *we saw no beauty in him . . . that we should desire him* (Isaias, 53). Thus, *Jesus falls the second time*.

There are other sympathisers: a group of women who weep but do not act. They are local inhabitants, who are perhaps used to these processions of criminals to the gallows, and make a practice (not unknown in our own day) of watching macabre proceedings 'to enjoy a good cry'. Perhaps, unknown to them, they are continuing the practice of former women of Jerusalem who, in spite of the protests of the priests and prophets of Jehovah, still wept for the 'dying god' of the old fertility cults (Ezechiel 8, 14). If so, perhaps we can understand more clearly when *Jesus speaks to the daughters of Jerusalem*. For he says, *Weep not for me, but for yourselves and for your children*, and he talks about a barrenness that is blessed, and of green wood and dry (Luke 23, 28-3). Vicarious, ritual tears for the dying will no longer avail; nor will

merely outer sacrifices; attention must now be turned inward, to our own selves, lives and destinies. For the Way now shown is the Way of *self-sacrifice*; the doom of dying must be faced within, no longer projected without.

He falls, and rises; and yet again. *Jesus falls the third time*. The rhythm of dying and rising is not only at the end, but all through the Way.

He has left his mother, his helper, his Veronica; he has left the city now, and the dwellings and ways of men. The last covering must now be taken from him; *Jesus is stripped of his garments*, for here is the place of death, and he has come to show death, not as an involuntary event, but as a voluntary achievement of love. And, *Naked came I out of my mother's womb and naked shall I return thither* (Job. 1, 21). *They were naked, Adam and his wife, and they were not ashamed* (Gen. 2, 25). He is not ashamed; he, the lover of all, has nothing to hide from any, as he comes to his bride.

He has carried life to the end, now his life must carry him to death: *Jesus is nailed to the Cross*. Like Odysseus tied to the mast (the Fathers of the Church relished the comparison), he must be fixed to his own cross if it is to carry him through to his goal; it must be raised, and he must be suspended, between heaven and earth. On either side are thieves; he will die, even as he has lived, among them, those who know not how to live and labour for themselves but appropriate the lives and labours of those who refuse to give. Above, the natural light of the sky is withdrawn; below, the solid earth which has supported him trembles; within, the sense of the presence of God forsakes him. Such is our sister Death for all of us, when we embrace her in full awareness without illusion, and with neither material nor spiritual anaesthetic. For him, death can be no unconscious or half-conscious happening, but an alert, even a triumphant, accomplishment: *Tetelestai, It is consummated*.

*Jesus is taken down from the Cross. Jesus is laid in the Tomb*. Earth we are, and to earth return. In the end is the beginning, for this tomb is the womb of another and deathless life. It is the last fall, this time not on to, but *into* the earth which is the mother of us all. The living must bear us there in our own helplessness, as once they bore us into life. We too have helped to make or mar the lives we have left behind. Our own future lies wholly in the hands of God now, and as the tree has fallen, so must it eternally lie.

'And all withdrew.' The service is over; this afternoon there is not even the glitter of Benediction to round it off. The Way is at an end, yet only now it begins. The cross awaits us, as it awaited him, outside in the street: *our* High Street, Acacia Avenue, slum alleys, country lanes, the grey ribbons between the prefabs, the housing estates. Outside the church the cross awaits us, life is to be laid upon us, to be taken up and lived to the full and to the end. The often rival claims of family and friends, lovers and enemies; the demands of love and duty, activity and rest, earnestness and triviality, sickness and poverty, the individual and the mass, heart and head, the results of our own and others' mistakes and cowardices. *He* leads the Way between them, himself *in all things like to his brethren . . . tempted in all things like as we are* (Heb. 2, 17; 4, 15).

But we are *only* human; was he not God? Yes; but the same *God in Christ, reconciling the world to himself* (2 Cor. 5, 19) is in us too; and that 'most intimately . . . closer than we to ourselves', as St Thomas will say. God not only leads, but takes the Way—if we will let him; and he, the Wayfarer, *is the Way* (John 14, 6). It is the *only* Way, for *No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son hath declared him* (John 1, 18).

He goes our way: for the divine way is now the human way. We go his: because the human way, through all its meanness and squalor, is now God's. Its yoke, being his, is easy, and its burden light. To be human, and to live humanly and to the full, is heroic and tragic, but it is also divine. Therein lies its glory and its splendour. The End of the Way is not only at its end, but also at its beginning and through the Way. And its Beginning is with us and in us throughout, and awaits us at the end. For he is Alpha and Omega, our first Beginning and our last End.